

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Analyzing the Cynical Perspective of Death in *The Book Thief*

A Thesis Submitted

By

Dorothy E. Hollar

In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Presented to the  
Department of English in the  
College of Arts and Sciences at

Liberty University

Lynchburg, Virginia

3 March 2024

Thesis Committee:

Chair: Dr. James Corey Latta

Reader: Dr. Karen Dodson

© 2024

Dorothy Hollar

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

### **Abstract**

In *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, death is used as a theme and a character to convey the plot of the story. The character of death is used as a device to show the life of a young girl living in Nazi Germany through the eyes of something more sinister and pessimistic. The story explores trauma, friendship, and the power of words when it seems all hope is lost. This thesis will explore the aspect of death as a character and will examine how it works in the story. The creative portion of my thesis will examine the themes of *The Book Thief* as I implant them into a different story with a focus on the death perspective. As a result, I will show how this device works in a story that includes the complexity of a death perspective.

## Dedication

*To Jesus Christ, my Lord and my Savior*

*and*

*To my Grandma Nellie, who first read *The Book Thief* with me.*

## Acknowledgments

First, I would like to give a heartfelt thanks to Dr. James Corey Latta for his continuous guidance and unwavering words of encouragement during the process of my writing. Another thanks to Dr. Dodson who has also been a great help during this process with her helpful and thoughtful comments. The insightful suggestions and resources provided by both Dr. Latta and Dr. Dodson played pivotal roles in shaping and making this thesis what it is. I am grateful to them both for their feedback and the challenges they presented to me to do my best.

Second, to my grandmother. She has been more than a grandmother to me throughout my life. She has been a friend when I didn't have one, a confidant when I needed one, and an ear to listen at all times. She introduced me to my love of books, but I introduced her to *The Book Thief*. We have bonded over books, especially *The Book Thief*, since I was a young child. I would not have picked this topic if it weren't for her.

Finally, to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ whom I would be nothing without. He lovingly gave his life for me, so I fully dedicate this thesis to glorify Him. He has been with me through the hard times and the good times, closer than a friend. I hope that my words and story bring Him praise and glorify Him. Through Him, I have eternal life, so in all things I will praise Him.

## Table of Contents

Chapter One: Artist Statement.....	7
Vision for the Thesis.....	8
My Christian Worldview Within the Story.....	12
Intended Impact for the Story .....	13
Chapter Two: Critical Paper.....	15
The History of Markus Zusak and his Novels.....	15
Ironic Candor of Death.....	17
The Book Thief: Young Adult or Adult?.....	18
Cultural Significance in The Book Thief.....	19
The History of Young Adult Novels.....	21
The Impact of Young Adult Literature Within the Publishing Industry.....	23
Conclusion.....	24
Chapter Three: Creative Thesis—"The Color of Death".....	26
Chapter One.....	26
Chapter Two.....	40
Chapter Three.....	56
Chapter Four.....	67
Chapter Five.....	79
Chapter Six.....	89
Chapter Seven.....	100
Chapter Eight.....	110

## INTRODUCTION

My thesis is influenced by *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak and the perspective it gives on the concept of death. The novel views death as an idea thought out by war and necessity. Death is an inevitable concept in the novel because of the geographical location of where the novel is set. World War II in Nazi Germany is one of the most violent and harsh times in the world's history because of the unthinkable things that happened there. The momentum I have for my work is fueled by the novel *The Book Thief* and the story it tells. The storyline of the novel closely emulates the storyline I have in mind for my creative piece. The story of these characters has stayed close to my mind since the first time I read the novel nearly a decade ago because of the impact it left on me as a reader. One of the main reasons it stuck with me was because of how far it pushed me out of my comfort zone. The novel was unusual for me because I was so used to reading young adult books that did not deal with so many important issues and obstacles like *The Book Thief*. Even though *The Book Thief* was classified as young adult, it challenged me as a reader to understand themes and morals that were much more complex than I typically consumed. I remember sitting in my bed in the early hours of the morning, sobbing because I had just finished this fantastic book that shattered my heart but changed me as a person. I have never found a book that affected my being as much as *The Book Thief* did, so my creative piece will be channeling the same themes and literary devices that the novel does.

### Artist Statement

*The Book Thief* has been a part of my life for many years. I first read the novel almost a decade ago when I was nineteen years old. I was enrolled in classes at my local community college and had just begun my first job at Chick-fil-A. I did not have much on my mind other

than school and work, so I was shocked when I read this novel that changed the trajectory of my life. I read *The Book Thief* during the winter break of 2016, and I remember the specific day I read the book. I almost stopped reading the book halfway through because I was not enjoying what I was reading, and I did not want to waste my time with a boring historical fiction novel. The plot was slow, and I felt like we were only seeing Liesel in her monotonous life. Nothing was happening in the book to motivate me to pick it up and finish it, but I decided to keep going. Getting past the midpoint was my saving grace because I devoured the end of the story. The characters spoke to me in ways no others had and thoughts of the book flooded my mind for weeks after I finished. The story touched and impacted me in ways I still think about to this day. My goal for my manuscript is to convey those same feelings to other readers that they can think about for years after consumption. *The Book Thief* altered the way I think about life, and I want to have that impact on someone else. Therefore, I want to explore the aspect of death and how it can be an avid literary device in a piece of literature.

### **My Vision for the Thesis**

My vision for the academic portion of the paper is to examine works of literature that have also utilized death as a main theme. My main source of research will be *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. His book is the inspiration for this topic, so I will utilize the novel as a main source of research. Another novel I will utilize is *Night* by Elie Wiesel because it is a powerful novel featuring the representation of death and the aftermath of its destruction. *Night* looks at death during a time when war was the leading cause of death but follows a storyline during World War II of death being inflicted upon people for other reasons than combat. Both *Night* and *The Book Thief* follow people living during a time of unrest and injustice in their worlds. The death in *Night* is inflicted due to the prejudice of one man against many and the hatred he had for



one group of people. This hatred is practiced on millions of innocent men, women, and children whose crime was living their lives the way they wanted to. Due to the Holocaust being at the forefront of these novels, death is viewed in a much more emotional and raw way than if it were solely revolving around wartime. The Holocaust was a senseless act of hatred that could have been easily avoided. Wartime is a tough topic to breach, but the Holocaust brings out a more emotional response in people than war because of how unnecessary it was. I plan on utilizing this work of literature by examining the specific ways death is used as a plot device through the characters and the atmosphere of the Holocaust.

Another thing I plan to focus on is how COVID-19 changed our view of death as a whole. I will focus on how the death rate increased during the pandemic but during 2020 specifically. The pandemic changed the world in the way it viewed death because of how rampant people were dying and vaccines because of the demand we had for them during COVID-19. People were desperate to save themselves and their loved ones from this unknown disease that seemed a mystery to many people. The last time vaccines and masks were pushed this extensively was during the Influenza Pandemic of 1918 when protecting yourself was the main concern of people. This pandemic is also known as the Spanish Influenza, not because it was brought over from Spain, but because the Spaniards were the first group of people to openly talk about the epidemic. People were dying quickly during the pandemic of 1918, so civilians were taking whatever preventative measures they could to ensure the safety of their peers and family members. COVID-19 changed the outlook on death because the death rate was so high that it became an almost expected thing for someone to die from the virus. There was no urgency from civilians to do whatever was necessary to keep others safe. The people had a mindset of acceptance that there was nothing else to do. So many people were dying from the virus that

death became a normal thing in the lives of people around the world. While death was a normal thing in the lives of people, their reaction to death was becoming detached. Society began to view death in a casual way that showed no reverence for the people suffering or hurting in any way. Death was a severe and saddening phenomenon, but COVID-19 changed that for people everywhere because of how people normalized it.

My idea for the manuscript is to be a creative manuscript set in a futuristic timeline. I want the characters to feel different than *The Book Thief*, but similar at the same time. The story follows the main character, Nylah, an eighteen-year-old girl who has just graduated high school. Graduates are forced to get a job directly out of high school in the place where they live. Due to overpopulation, people are put to death once they reach a certain age and are unable to contribute their part to society. Additionally, if a civilian commits an Elder crime, they are automatically put to death instead of prison. The prisons are overpopulated just like everywhere else, so the Elder crimes are severe crimes that are categorized as unforgivable. Examples of this would be murder, rape, or domestic abuse. If anyone commits one of these crimes, they are executed immediately with no questions asked. Nylah is considered a Novice in the workforce because of her inexperience but she will be well-versed in conflict by the end of the story. Her story begins when she is put into the Healing sector after graduation. This means she will be shadowing another Healer until she is considered competent and can complete her duties sufficiently enough. This sector will be her home for the remainder of the story, and she will learn new things about herself and the government surrounding her throughout the story. Nylah will learn more about herself and the town she has lived in her whole life through this journey in the Healing sector.

Nylah will learn the truth behind her new job and the lies her government has covered up for the sake of saving their reputation. She is a part of the sector that administers these lethal injections and body disposals, so Nylah will learn about the truth in the government she has been exposed to for so long. Death will play a large part in the story as well in leu of *The Book Thief*. Death will have a small perspective in the story and the aspect of banned books will be included as well. I plan on using death's perspective to talk about how this method of death is the easy way out of their overpopulated situation. I think the death perspective is such an interesting avenue to take because of how unique the outlook is for it. Death gives the reader a perspective not shown widely in literature because of its morally gray interpretation of life it pours onto the page. Life is the antithesis of death, so the concept is completely opposite from what literature typically portrays in a story. Death is included in *The Book Thief* because of war and hatred. In my creative piece, death is included due to overpopulation, so they take matters into their own hands. This method of killing is civil and uneventful, so they utilize this method of death for the simple aspect of categorized and organized killings.

I also plan on utilizing colors within my story. My thought process is to have the town be divided into sections or "colors" to define where they are in the chain of civilization. In the way Death does in *The Book Thief*, colors will be mentioned throughout the story and spoken of in detail. Red will be the highest rank and yellow will be the lowest. Various other colors will be ranked between red and yellow, showing how far the lowest position can be held. The colors will show the ranking of everyone in the town and how their position in rank helps decide what they will do as an occupation. The object of the color status is for the people to understand their place in the world and the expectations that are demanded of them. They are expected to do their part in society and their color status will allow the government to monitor them in an organized

means. While the colors are not incorporated into *The Book Thief* in the same way, my story will have the concept included in it in some fashion. I believe this function of inclusion will impact Nylah, but also the reader in their critical thinking skills.

### **My Christian Worldview Within the Story**

My thesis aligns with my personal Christian worldview because of the way it analyzes death and the obstacles that come with it. My personal worldview is that Christ died so that we could have eternal life and live eternally with Him. My story will deal with death, just like Christianity. Therefore, I feel my story aligns with my Christian worldview well. Another thing from my thesis that correlates to my worldview is the aspect of colors within the story. Though used in different capacities, my colors relate to my worldview in the same way colors are used to tell the story of the Bible. For example, many examples of colors used in the Bible are while describing Jesus Christ. A few instances of color include the color red being compared to the blood of Christ, white being compared to purity, and purple being connected to the royalty of Jesus Christ. Black is most notable for being linked to sin and its corruptness. Colors are not a noticeable feature in the Bible other than the few mentioned, but they are substantial enough that they can be compared. The colors in the Bible are usually linked to Jesus Christ and the traits He is known for portraying throughout the Bible. Additionally, other features of the Bible that will be a feature in my thesis will be the corruption of government, isolation, and facing persecution when times get tough.

In the end, I want my thesis to mimic *The Book Thief* and its themes while diverting in its own way to establish a concrete comparison. My creative piece is going to highlight the important themes from *The Book Thief* and incorporate them into my story. Additionally, my creative piece will emphasize the important aspects of my personal Christian worldview and

utilize them to convey my literary intent. The colors will be used in the creative piece to bring the colors of *The Book Thief* to life. Additionally, the colors used will symbolize the colors of the Bible and the things they represent. Purple, red, white, and black are a few of the most notable colors in the Bible. These colors continue to be compared to these traits to this day and we continue to honor them as so. *The Book Thief's* most notable color is yellow, which Liesel compares to fresh lemons on a summer day many times throughout the novel. This color contradicts the solemn theme of the novel due to the happy nature of yellow. Yellow is typically synonymous with summertime: sunshine, lemonade, and happiness. Because of that, the color is considered an unusual one to include. In the end, my hope is that my creative piece will reflect the seriousness and fervor that *The Book Thief* conveyed. As a whole, I want my thesis to convey the facts and observations I may make about the story. My analytical survey of Death in *The Book Thief* will connect the aspect of Death as a main character and my creative piece with Nylah together.

### **Intended Impact for the Story**

My intended impact for my thesis and my creative work is to examine the use of death when used as a literary device or characterization. During *The Book Thief*, Death conducts himself in a style that makes the reader feel bad for him. Death is the offender, but its goal is to be the victim in whatever situation it is in. No matter if Death has just taken another life or if it is innocent, it will always play the victim in all situations. My thesis will examine how Death thinks and carries itself during the course of the novel and how I can emulate that same style in my creative piece. I will have my own Death perspective in my creative work, so *The Book Thief* will be my guiding source during the writing process. I will compare my academic paper to my creative work in hopes I can defend my choices for the content I include in my two separate

works. My sources will assist me in my defense by aiding my claims with research to back them up. My hope is that I can successfully pen my thoughts onto the page with the help of my sources and my instructor.

### **Critical Paper**

The characterization of death in *The Book Thief* (2005) by Markus Zusak is a haunting perspective fueled by the theme of World War II in the background of Germany. The novel follows a young girl named Liesel, a German, who lives in Nazi Germany amidst World War II during the Holocaust. Because Liesel is so young, the story is coming of age and can be viewed as young adult fiction. Personifications of death show up frequently in children and young adult literature. This aspect of finality in literature introduces the harsh truth of reality and real life into the minds of these young readers. The story follows a nine-year-old girl named Liesel, a German, who lives in Nazi Germany amidst World War II during the Holocaust. While Liesel is the main antagonist, one would think Death is the main antagonist. In actuality, Death is the narrator of the story, and he is telling Liesel's story in its entirety. Liesel is forced to have many interactions with the Nazis and Hitler's agenda that was so prevalent at the time through his rallies, rules, and stipulations on Europe at the time. Liesel is traumatized multiple times throughout the story by way of her brother's death, the death of her friend Rudy, and finally by the death of her parents. Liesel feels abandoned many times throughout the story, but Death is always present.

### **The History of Markus Zusak and His Novels**

Markus Zusak was born in 1975 in Sydney, Australia to German and Austrian parents. Neither of his parents was literate in English when he arrived in Australia, but they felt it necessary for their kids to be well-versed in English. Therefore, Zusak and his three older siblings were instructed to communicate and read in English to have a better grasp of the language. Zusak became fond of writing at an early age, writing his first work of fiction at age sixteen. Before his career as a successful author, he was employed as a janitor, a house painter, and a high school English teacher (CPL). In an interview with Zusak, he said his motivation

behind writing *The Book Thief* was thinking back on his childhood. He recounts hearing his mother tell stories involving cities on fire with the ground made of glass and hearing tales of literature being banned for no good reason. Due to his parent's heritage and home, they were well-versed in stories surrounding World War II and the Holocaust. He also said he thought everyone would hate the novel with it being as sad and depressing as it was. He did not think his novel would be as successful and have as many accolades as it received.

Zusak published four separate novels before producing *The Book Thief*. His first published novel was *The Underdog*, despite its many rejections and dismissals. This novel follows Cameron, the underdog in question, as he grows older and must solidify himself within his life and his family. As the youngest in his family, he feels overlooked and neglected. In the sequel, *Flighting Ruben Wolf*, the story follows the brother's involvement in an illegal boxing ring as a means to provide for their family. In the final book of the trilogy, *When Dogs Cry*, the story follows the brothers as they navigate the obstacles of death, grief, and finding love. In Zusak's fourth published novel, *I Am the Messenger*, the story follows a teenage cab driver named Ed. Ed begins receiving cryptic messages through playing cards that point him to help various strangers in need. Through these messages and clues, Ed discovers his ultimate purpose in life. These four novels are vastly different than his fifth novel, but not any less impactful than *The Book Thief*. After his first four novels, *The Book Thief* was a change in pace for Zusak and his career. Once published, *The Book Thief* took the reading world by storm and changed the view on war novels published in the young adult genre. The lives of the German people living in this small town took the bestseller list by storm.



### **Ironic Candor of Death**

Because the story is sad and tragic in tone as it follows the Holocaust, one would think there would be no ironic or comical moments. However, Death's narration brings a light-heartedness to this story that wouldn't have been there otherwise. Death is exceedingly prevalent and vocal in Liesel's story and the people she surrounds herself with. The events of World War II play out in this small German town through the eyes of this young girl but accompanied by the voice of Death. Because of Death's lighter commentary in the novel, it is well-suited for young adults. The tone of the narration helps alleviate some of the story's harsher themes and tragic tones. The ability to tone down these tragic events means Death understands his role in the people's lives. He is a "collector of souls," not a killer. He separates himself from the action of death and places himself in the role of soul collector. The power Death holds over the people in this town is great, but Death does not want that power (Ancy 153). Death fears humans, he cowers under their scrutiny. He does not want to have any power over them or their future, but he does not have a choice. As the collector of souls, he has a large part in deciding someone's future and whether they will have one.

The novel has gained a large readership and has sold over two million copies in the United States alone. The work has been a *New York Times* bestseller and has won numerous awards for its outstanding content and thought-provoking characters. These awards include The Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book and the Michael L. Printz Honor Award. The novel has been decorated throughout the years and will continue to gain those awards throughout the years. Additionally, the novel has been translated into 63 different languages and has sold over 17 million copies around the world. Due to Zusak's nationality, the book has done well for itself all around the world. Of course, this is far from the only reason the book has done so well for

itself. The book deals with hard topics such as death, anti-Semitism, racism, and war. However, the book also deals with happier topics such as friendship, love, and freedom. These topics are harsh, but they intertwine to make a beautiful and enchanting story that will stand out in literature for decades to come. Zusak's popularity and success have transcended the confines of the adult genre and the young adult genre. His novel has moved and reached people of all ages and in all stages of life to think more critically and be thankful for the things you have in your life.

### **The Book Thief: YA or Adult?**

An interesting fact about *The Book Thief* is it was originally marketed for adults in its original country of publication, Australia. The publishers thought there was too much brutal content to be a Young Adult novel, so they labeled it an adult novel. As the novel began making its way into different countries, its label changed, and it was marketed as a young adult novel in America. In Germany, the novel has faced great scrutiny and backlash due to its adult themes and topics. Though not banned entirely, it has continued to be challenged for its harsh content and themes. Death is a complex character in the story because he immediately should feel cold and stoic to the reader, but he really just wants to narrate the story. In the novel, Death says, "I most definitely *can* be cheerful. I can be amiable. Agreeable. Affable" (3). Death has a bleak nature that is synonymous with his name, but Zusak paints him in a different light. However, Death also stays true to that nature when looking at the bigger picture. The novel says, "Just don't ask me to be nice. Nice has nothing to do with me" (3). In an interview with Markus Zusak, he notes that in actuality, Death fears humans and he fears the reader. Death's true purpose is simply to narrate the story.

*The Book Thief* was the first young adult novel to break into the scene and make a difference within the historical fiction subgenre. There were many fiction and fantasy young adult novels to fill the shelves in the 2000s, but historical fiction was not a subgenre producing novels at a fast rate. *The Book Thief* was published in 2005 and has flourished every year since. The demand for historical novels in young adult was not high in the 2000s but grew in popularity for years to come. *The Book Thief* started a trend that is still prevalent within the young adult genre today and that is writing these novels about significant historical times in our history and writing a novel about it. These novels give the readers, especially teenagers, a glimpse into events they may necessarily never learn about in school. For example, the Spanish Civil War, the Holocaust, and the Great Depression are all events that have had books written about them for teenagers to read and learn from. These events give readers a glimpse into those days and hardships, even if they are not fully immersed in the culture of the book. Some books surround topics that many history books do not cover. For example, *Salt to the Sea* by Ruta Sepetys follows a German cruise liner, the Wilhelm Gustloff, that was ferrying wartime personnel and refugees to safety in 1945 from the opposing army and was severely over capacity. The ship's intended capacity was 1,800 but was overcrowded with 10,500 altogether. The ship was sunk by a submarine causing more than 9,000 people, including 5,000 children, to lose their lives in this tragic accident. This was the worst maritime accident documented due to the high number of casualties. The Wilhelm Gustloff suffered five times as many casualties as the more popular Titanic did but did not receive the attention it deserved.

### **Cultural Significance in *The Book Thief***

The relationship between literacy/language and place is closely related in the novel due to location and the cultural significance surrounding them. In *The Book Thief*, the German language

is used profusely throughout the whole story. Words such as Schewigen, Himmel, and Kipferl are used freely in the small German town. On another note, words such as Saumensch and Saukerl are also used enthusiastically by most characters in the book. One reason the novel is so controversial is because these latter curse words are used so freely in the story. In order for the novel to feel authentic, Zusak added these expletives to further enhance the legitimacy of the story. The drawings Death uses to show the way he sees Liesel are another way to feel the atmosphere of the book. On page 6, Death shows the reader a drawing he uses to compare the book thief to colors. He uses red to represent a small dash, white to represent a circle, and black to represent a swastika. Once put on top of each other, this drawing comes together to visualize the way Death sees Liesel. The black color brings the German atmosphere into the story because of the history behind the swastika. Even though Liesel and her family do not support the Nazi's, Death still uses the violent symbol to represent her aura.

Colors are a large part of the novel. Death likes to compare people, feelings, and objects to colors. He says he deliberately tries to notice the colors of people instead of their bodies and personalities. He does this to separate himself from the survivors who he says are more tragic than the dead themselves. Death uses colors as a simile in countless instances. For example, he says "his skin was the color of eggshells" (Zusak 66). In another passage, Death says most people do not consider white a color, but he reassures the reader that white is most assuredly a color. He compares the color to a skeleton, the color of bone (Zusak 5). These are only a couple of instances where Death uses the colors to convey his feelings to the reader. One of the most important times Death uses colors is described in part one of the novel. He describes the blinding white snow in the atmosphere and the picture of a mother and daughter standing in the snow. In addition to the mother and daughter, there is a corpse lying on the ground beside a parked train.

During this moment, death tries his best the focus on the snow, but he is intrigued by the little girl and waits to see what will happen. He describes this girl as the book thief, later discovered to be Liesel.

One of Death's most notable comparisons throughout the novel is his observation of Liesel's young friend, Rudy. During Death's first observation of Rudy, he says, "he had bony legs, sharp teeth, gangly blue eyes, and hair the color of a lemon" (Zusak 16). Almost every time Death is in the presence of Rudy, he brings up the boy with hair the color of lemons. On page 70, Death says, "Perhaps it was Rudy who kept her sane, with the stupidity of his talk, his lemon-soaked hair, and his cockiness." There are many other times Death compares Rudy to lemons, but nothing compares to Death's last observation of Rudy. On page 172, Death says, "Among them, lit like lanterns, were Hans and Rosa Hubermann, her brother, and the boy whose hair remained the color of lemons forever." This last observation occurs after the bombing of the small German town Liesel and Rudy reside in as Rudy faces Death himself. Death seems to follow Liesel wherever she goes, but he never touches her entirely. She may have a few brushes with death, but he simply stands by and acknowledges her. Never fully intercepting but always nearby.

### **The History of Young Adult Novels**

Young adult novels have been around for many decades. *Seventeenth Summer* by Maureen Daly, published in 1942, is widely considered the first young adult novel. However, some say *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton is one of the most popular young adult books that came to fruition in 1967. Readers have found themes in the novel they can relate to and the storylines follow young adults as they face each day. Therefore, they are both known for being some of the first young adult books in the publishing industry. Young adult books became popular in the

2000s but grew to their tallest peak in the 2000s. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was published in 1997, but most of the remaining novels in the series were published in the 2000s. Additionally, the series began to gain popularity in the 2000s and has become one of the biggest book series in the world through the years. These books have appealed to not only young adults but people of varying ages and in different stages of life. They have transcended the young adult genre and plowed through the lives of people of all ages. Young adult books have been an escape for readers of all ages, but particularly teenagers because of the adventures and journeys they take. Young adult literature could be the perfect form of learning material to keep students engaged in a classroom setting because the genre helps them figure out who they are, what they value, and how they want to conduct their lives (Wolk 46). The students learn about issues in ways that are relevant, gripping, and enjoyable for the young students. There are many examples of young adult literature that include themes and topics relevant to a teenager and applicable to the world around them.

Some of the most notable young adult novels have been renowned for their themes involving topics like racism, war, and global awareness. Additionally, the genre also deals with surface-level things like grief, friendship, and love to help convey the message of the story. These topics are valuable for young adults to read about because this may be the only way they feel represented in their feelings. For example, *Cinder* by Marissa Meyer deals with the topics of disabilities, the effects of media and technology, and greed. In *Simon vs. the Homo sapien's Agenda*, Becky Albertalli explores the aspects of sexuality, pressure, and bullying within the setting of a small high school where Simon is exposed to the whole school for being gay. In *The Fountains of Silence* by Ruta Sepetys, historical significance and education stand at the forefront of the story. The story follows Daniel who moves to Madrid in 1957 under the dictatorship of

Francisco Franco at a time when the remnants of the Spanish Civil War are lingering in the air of Spain. The novel follows a storyline most teenagers would not learn about in an educational setting, but they will learn about it from this young adult novel. In addition to *The Fountains of Silence*, *The Book Thief* is a historical novel that also follows a significant time in the world's history that impacted the culture severely.

### **The Impact of Young Adult Literature Within the Publishing Industry**

The impact of young adult literature has been significant over the years. Many readers view the young adult genre as frivolous and discount its significance in the book world, but the stories produced by these authors are impactful and hard-hitting for the readers who consume them. Some of the most culturally influential books of our generation have been classified as young adult books at the time of publication. For example, *Twilight* was a mega series that changed the young adult genre in the 2010s. Even though the novel was published in 2005, the series did not gain popularity until the first movie was released in 2008. Following in its footsteps, *The Hunger Games* was published in 2008. The series changed the view of young adult literature for many readers due to its themes of reality set in a dystopian universe. Many people considered *Twilight* to be one of those frivolous young adult books, but *The Hunger Games* brought a seriousness to the genre that many people had not seen before. The series only gained popularity when the first movie, titled the same as the first book, was released in 2012. The movies incentivized people to pick up the books and see how the two mediums differed from each other. The impact of young adult literature on pop culture has been powerful for the past few decades. Whether the topic be Harry Potter, *The Hunger Games*, or Percy Jackson, the concept of young adult literature has been impactful on children and adults both and will continue to for many years to come.

Young adult literature has been a significant part of the publishing industry for many decades. As of 2022, 4.58% of all book sales have been categorized as young adult. While this does make young adult the smallest category within the group. However, the growth of young adult books over the past years has been rapid and continues to grow every day. In 2018, young adult book sales were a total of 3.43 overall. In total, young adult book sales increased 34% in five years (Craine 114). The young adult market has had significant growth in consumers due to the influx of social media platforms in the past few years, specifically TikTok. The video clip platform has influenced people to pick up these books by creating small video snippets with the premise of books, book quotes, and synopses of books to hook the person watching the video into reading the book. Due to this TikTok phenomenon, young adult books have experienced a resurgence that the genre had not seen in many years. The genre is now to the point that its considered popular fiction in the eyes of readers. The young adult genre does not hold the same stigma that it once held in the eyes of readers. Of course, some people continue to disdain the genre, but it has experienced a growth in popularity due to the resurgence of readers in the past few years.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, *The Book Thief* is a work of art that made a lasting impression on the young adult genre, specifically the historical fiction aspect of it. Zusak uses the themes and devices necessary to convey various feelings that correlate to the content of the novel. Zusak changed the trajectory of historical fiction in young adult with the publication of his impactful novel. Using death as the narrator gave his novel a different feeling than other novels published at the time. Death gave the reader an insight into his perspective that would pave the way for Zusak to make a difference in the genre. While the themes he uses in his novel were used in



other novels too, Zusak manipulated them to conform to his plot and characters for the better. Zusak utilized the skills and knowledge he had in his writing and applied them to his novel to portray a beautiful story, albeit tragic story. *The Book Thief* has only gained popularity in the eighteen years since its publication and will continue to touch the readers who can experience the novel. In the end, Markus Zusak produced a wonderful story that teeters on the line between young adult and adult. *The Book Thief* is a powerful and influential story following the rise and fall of a small German town during a time filled with pain and grief. Liesel learns about war and loss at a young age but learns about power and standing up for herself at the same time. Death is a character the reader feels sorrow for at times, but the knowledge of what happens in the novel grounds them in the reality that he does not deserve our sorrow. Overall, *The Book Thief* is a powerful novel that will continue to touch readers for years to come.

## Creative Thesis— “The Color of Death”

### CHAPTER ONE

I wake up, covered in a sheen of sweat.

Today is the day. Today, I will walk across that stage and accept my diploma from the hands of pure gore. Hands that are infested with greed and power, that thrive off the pain others feel, and smile in the face of hell. The reflective steel floors haunt my dreams as I close my eyes. I remember seeing the shiny floors that reminded me of tall beams standing high in the air beside my house and thinking how weird that they would make floors out of the same things as pipes.

The feeling of dread had been strong in my stomach since my last final examination ended last week. I knew the graduation service was just around the corner. Walking in front of a car sounded better than going to the service. My older sister, Lisa, had attended her graduation service last year and her excitement could be felt in every corner of the house, in every floorboard and tile. I couldn't understand her excitement, but I was happy for her. I could live in school my whole life and be satisfied because of how much I enjoyed it. The learning, the writing, and the reading were all tasks I enjoyed. The application of those systems was my favorite thing to do in school, but others were not so keen on it.

“Are you ready?” My mother's voice floated up to my room. I could hear her rummaging around in the kitchen, no doubt making breakfast. Blueberry pancakes if we were lucky. Mother made Lisa's favorite food before her graduation last year, so I have a sense of hope in the back of my mind.

I look at myself in the mirror: Blond hair, cut short to my shoulders. I have a black dress on, mandatory for the ceremony. I didn't want the long sleeves because the heat gets to me easily. It won't take long for the sweat to form under my arms and on my back. The graduation

will only take thirty minutes, but the ceremony is one of the most serious things the government offers to the civilians.

I walk down the stairs to see my mother making pancakes and a smile blooms over my face. “Good morning, sweetie.” My mother is beautiful with her black hair hanging in soft waves over her shoulders. I always said I never knew where my blond hair came from because of my mom and dad having black hair. All my younger siblings have darker hair, so one day I asked my mother if I was adopted.

“What kind of question is that?” My mother said through her incredulous laugh. She kept laughing like it was the funniest thing she'd heard in her whole life.

I scoffed but smiled at the same time. “A valid one, I think.”

My mother continued to smile. “No, Nylah Abernathy, you are not adopted. You are absolutely, one hundred percent, mine.” She walked over to me, put her arm around my shoulder, and kissed me on the cheek.

That day was years ago. I miss that time of my life when waking up and going to school was my only priority. Now, I had to worry about graduation and the ceremony.

The smell of blueberries brings me back to the kitchen. My father is reading the newspaper at the table, his expression grim. The lines on his face are straight, like he's been frowning all morning. The atmosphere today is different than last year when Lisa could hardly contain her excitement. My house felt like a funeral today.

“Good morning, Mother.” I used the fakest voice I could muster at that moment because I knew my mother was on the verge of tears. She knew I didn't want to do this. Knew I didn't want to participate in the graduation ceremony that would be happening in the next few hours.

My father placed the newspaper beside his plate of pancakes and sighed.

“Nylah, you know this ceremony isn’t optional and I’m sorry you’re having to go through with it.”

I didn’t speak because I knew he wasn’t finished. I stared at him, waiting for him to continue.

“However, this is something you must do. Everyone does, so you have to make the best out of the ceremony and the graduation itself. Tomorrow you will learn about your Pathway, and it will be a new day, so just try to make the best out of this day.” He took a sip of his coffee and grabbed my hand in his own.

I gave him a small smile and squeezed his hand. Mother walked over to the table and placed her hand on my shoulder.

“You’ll do great,” she said.

“Thank you, Mother.” I reached up and touched her hand with mine. I sat there one hand holding my mother’s and one hand holding my father’s, content in the silence of my childhood home.

Walking into the graduation ceremony was nerve-racking. The area was used for various purposes. Concerts, basketball games, and conventions were held here throughout the year, so the venue was multipurpose. The ceilings were like skylines, miles in the air. The venue itself was circular and vast, with its descending rows of seats going all the way to the floor. I wasn’t sure, but it seemed as if our whole town could fit into this one room and still have seats left over. The whole venue was dark blue: the seats, the tiles, the ceiling. Everything in the large room was the color of midnight in winter: dark and cold.

There were hundreds of people on the floor of the venue, with thousands more in the descending seats. Large families, husbands, wives, and siblings all loitered in the walkway

circling the venue at the top of the stairs. The people were laughing, enjoying the day with their graduates. Some graduates were smiling, excited for the prospect of new beginnings while others put in no effort to hide their frowns. I was amazed at how different and varied the graduates were acting at this moment because of how solidified I was in my convictions about the ceremony.

“Attention all graduates!” A booming voice called out from the loudspeakers. “Please report to the holding room within the next twenty minutes. If a graduate arrives after the twenty-minute mark, they will not be allowed into the ceremony and will not graduate.”

*The holding room. Makes it sound like a jail.*

“You better go on,” Mother said.

“We’ll be sitting in the 107 section,” my father pointed to the selected section. He leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek. It felt like a kiss of goodbye. A goodbye to my younger self, my childhood. After I walk across that stage, I will be an adult, at least by the government's standards. I still felt like I should be five years old, sitting in a kindergarten class.

“I’ll try and remember to wave,” I said with a forced smile. By the way my mother looked at me, she could tell.

I started to the holding room, following the other graduates down the long hallway ahead of me. I noticed the small wristbands wrapped around everyone’s wrist. The colors were always something I had envied. They began hundreds of years ago when the government implemented them based on the amount of money a person made every year. The government based it on the breadwinner of the family’s income. My father was categorized as Yellow, making my mother, myself, and my siblings all Yellow as well.

The government was meticulous about the categorization of the colors. The Reds were the highest of the highs because of their status in life. They were millionaires, some even

billionaires. I had never met a Red, but I had seen them on TV in their bedazzled suits and colorful hair. They were the most ridiculous and over the top out of any of the colors. Blues were the next step down from the Reds because they were the next step down financially. They weren't millionaires, but they were better off than my family.

The next color down was the Yellow, where my family resided. I wasn't very sure of the logistics of the money, but I knew we lived comfortably. The Yellows are what the government used to call middle-class years ago and they were the leading industry makers of society. The lowest of the low are the Purple who are the most financially challenged. These colors indicate a person's status in life and the government made that decision hundreds of years before I was born. My parents and even my grandparents had lived life like this. Always.

"Scary looking, huh?" A male voice said to my right.

I glanced over at him, noticing his brown hair, the color of chocolate. "What do you mean?"

We were walking in a coordinated line, not a single person out of place.

The boy nodded to the people in front of us. "The formation, the obedience, the compliance. We just do this without a second thought."

I really looked at the boy now. "You think I want to do this without giving it a second thought? You think any of us want to do this without a second thought?" I knew my face was harsh, but I couldn't believe someone would think we all *wanted* to be there.

The government has been a constant thorn in my side for my whole life. I knew everyone else here felt the same way. They had to feel the same way.

“I just stand amazed, knowing everyone in this city bows to the government. You say jump, I say how high kind of thing.” He was still looking forward to the kids in front of us. They were still walking at a slow pace in front of us.

“I don’t see you jumping out of line to save the day.” I shot him a side-eye. I could feel the anger coursing through my veins. This guy was judging people who were just trying to survive, and he wanted to critique them. He seemed content enough to stay in line with the rest of us without making a move.

I heard him grumble something under his breath that I couldn’t make out as I noticed the hallway we were in grow dimmer. The once-white halls were now dark gray due to the lack of light. There were lanterns lining both sides of the hallways, about ten feet between each other.

“Wanna run now?” The boy asked.

“Shut up.”

The hallway continued to grow darker and darker. We were approaching a room full of seats which I quickly realized were there for the graduation. We had made it to the floor of the arena and there were people piling into the seats everywhere.

“Come on, there are a few seats open there.” The boy said to my side. I felt pressure on my arm and felt someone pulling me toward the seats. I knew it had to be the boy pulling me.

I yanked on my arm to no avail. “I want to sit over here.”

He yanked back just as hard. “But these are better seats.”

He dragged me over to the seats and we plopped down. I was in the aisle seat and the boy was seated beside me.

“Are you following me?” I asked.

The boy shrugged, taking in his surroundings. “Maybe.”

“Well, don’t.” I briefly thought about getting up and going to sit somewhere else, but I didn’t want to chance giving away my seat. Although there were probably over 1,000 seats here, I didn’t want to be the only person standing around when the ceremony began.

“What is your name?” I finally asked him.

The boy with the chocolate hair smirked. “Timothy.”

“Timothy. I’m Nylah.” I stuck my hand out to shake his hand.

“Nice to meet you, Nylah. Luckily the colors aren’t required to sit with each other because I don’t want to be near those obnoxious Red-Heads.”

Did I just hear that right?

“Excuse me?” I’d never met a Red before, but it seemed like that was about to change.

Timothy glanced over at me. “What?”

He was acting so calm for someone who just admitted to being a part of a billionaire's family. “You are a Red?”

“I’m beginning to think that you are insulting me, and I am offended.” Timothy and I both stood to let a girl into our aisle. I wasn’t sure where she would find a seat, but I hoped she did.

“Yeah. I mean, my dad is a billionaire, I was just lucky enough to have his DNA a part of me so I could reap the benefits of this Red status.”

I chuckled. He might be obnoxious, but at least he was funny.

“I should be honored that an esteemed Red would want to sit with a lowly Yellow like me.”

Timothy smiled. “Oh, a Yellow isn’t too bad. Now if you were a Purple...”



I thought he was joking, but I'd only met him ten minutes ago, so he could've been telling the truth.

A sudden tap on a microphone brought my attention to the stage. There were probably fifteen rows between me and the stage, less than I originally thought, so I could see the people sitting on the stage clad in their royal purple robes clearly.

Amazing how one color for them could have a very different meaning for another.

One of the men in robes was standing at the microphone with his hand hovering over the object, waiting for the crowd to notice him.

“Good morning everyone, and welcome to the graduation service for the class of 2098!” The noise began to fill the room as everyone began to clap and cheer.

Even though the ceiling felt miles away, I could feel the lights burning my scalp.

“Today we will honor the graduates who have made it to this momentous occasion and reward them with their given place in society. After today, they will begin to contribute their endeavors to their community and country.” This man had a mellow voice that could probably put me to sleep sitting here in this chair.

The audience and graduates began to clap again while the man at the podium sat down. A woman in the same robe came up to the podium next.

I had seen this lady before, but I wasn't sure where. Maybe she came to school for a visit, or I ran into her at my father's workplace. I couldn't remember, but I knew I had seen her face before.

“Welcome, welcome to the moment you all have been waiting for!” She gestured to the graduates seated in front of her.

I chuckled at the thought of this being the moment we had all been waiting for.

The lady continued. “As Director Briggs has just noted, we will be honoring our graduates this year with the privilege of walking across the stage to receive their Finishing degree. Not all students reach this degree, so you all should be proud of your endeavors and accomplishments.”

If someone did not finish their schooling and failed to complete their graduation duties, they were automatically placed as a Purple and would remain that color for the rest of their lives, even if they did become eligible to be a higher color. That was the punishment for a lack of graduation, and it has never changed. The government was adamant about graduation, and this was a way they could guarantee a high graduation rate. No one wanted to be categorized as a purple for the rest of their lives. They were the bottom feeders of the community, leaching themselves on whoever would help them or give them money.

The lady turned her attention back to address the whole crowd instead of only the graduates. “You all were given itineraries upon arrival, and we will follow them as promptly as we can. There are restrooms all around the arena, just ask an attendant if you can’t find one. We ask that you hold your applause until the end so we may keep the ceremony as swift as possible. We thank you for your cooperation. Now, please enjoy the ceremony.” She went back to her seat.

“So, this is the best day of our lives, but we have to keep it quick so we can go home and go back to work. Cool.” Timothy was barely shaking his head back and forth, letting me know he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“I feel like we’re about to sit back and watch a movie.” I didn’t feel comfortable around this boy, but I did feel like he would laugh at my joke.

Timothy chuckled under his breath. “I forgot to bring the popcorn.”

We sat there in comfortable silence as a new person came to the podium. I knew who this guy was. Dean Murphy. I would go up there and shake his hand soon, we all would. I could feel the butterflies doing cartwheels in my stomach. The earlier lady said this would be the best day of my life, but this was the day I had dreaded since I learned what the graduation ceremony was.

The Dean called the first row of students to the stage, each person holding their name card in hand. The lady from earlier stood at the top of the stairs, taking the name cards, and announcing them as they crossed the stage.

The ceremony dragged on slowly until I wasn't sure how long I'd been sitting there. Timothy and I had spoken to each other periodically, but not actively. He seemed to do most of the talking while I watched the ceremony out of boredom.

Finally, our row was called up. The people to our left began to exit first, so I would be the last person to walk across the stage from our row. I wasn't sure how that made me feel.

Timothy glanced over his shoulder. "You ready for this?"

"I guess I don't really have a choice, do I?" I could feel eyes boring into my side. Anxiety began to fill my soul with dread and uneasiness. I could feel every one of the 115,000 eyes in the ceremony staring straight into me.

Our line stopped, waiting for the next people to go across the stage.

*This is the moment you've all been waiting for. Isn't that what the lady said?*

I wasn't so sure that this truly was the day I had been waiting for.

"Ready or not," Timothy said.

"Here we go."

The walk across the stage was a blur. I handed the name card to the robed lady which stated my name, color, and graduation standing number. I was proud of my standing number

because I was one of the top students in my class. There were only a few people with numbers higher than mine.

It felt like the walk across the stage felt like hours and seconds all at once.

Dean Murphy's hand was clammy and warm, probably from shaking hands with hundreds of people before me. I think I smiled at him, but I couldn't remember. I think my handshake was firm, but I couldn't remember.

And just like that, I was walking down the stairs with the diploma in hand. This diploma I had worked so hard was just a piece of paper that says I'm smart but doesn't actually prove anything. As the robed lady said, this is the moment I've been waiting for.

A man was standing at the bottom of the stairs wearing a robe, but his was black. I wasn't sure what the difference was between the two colors, but it didn't matter at that moment. He guided me to another hallway nestled beside the stage that I hadn't noticed before this moment.

Timothy was long gone. Disappointment rattled me. I guess I had hoped he would be there.

The man stuck out his arm, signaling for me to go down the hallway. When I looked back, he was gone. I was alone, but this hallway was significantly different than the last one. This hallway had electric lights on the ceiling lining the whole thing for as far as I could see. They were square and almost reminded me of the tiles in the big ceremony. There was no semblance of the darkness that lined the previous hall.

This hallway looked like it should have a rainbow painted on it compared to the last hallway.

Eventually, I came up to a sage green door.

*What an odd color,* I thought. The color seemed out of place in this brightly lit hallway.

Slowly pushing the door open, I peeked into the room.

A lady was sitting in a folding chair, flipping through papers. I cleared my throat, signaling my arrival.

Each graduate was assigned a room directly after the graduation and this was mine.

The lady sitting looked up. “Oh, hello there! I didn’t see you come in. I’m Ronda and I’ll be issuing your ritual today.”

I gave her a small smile and nodded my head at her. I was so nervous that I couldn’t muster any other kind of greeting.

“If you will go ahead and have a seat in this seat right here,” she gestured to the chair opposite hers that looked like a dentist’s chair. It was blue, matching the serenity of the hallway before. “And we will go ahead and begin.”

I walked over to the chair and sat. It was comfortable, I could see myself falling asleep in this chair. The room was just like the hallway; bright and cheery.

“I will take a needle and inject your vein which will make you fall asleep. It’ll be like you just shut your eyes for a second and it’ll all be over with!” It took me a while to notice, but the lady had pink hair. Like, *bright* pink hair. She seemed like an interesting lady.

“You won’t feel the injection, but you will feel yourself falling asleep. It is a natural feeling that isn’t scary or anything like that, so you will have nothing to worry about.

The anxiety in my body subsided a bit and I felt more comfortable settling into the seat than I did three minutes ago walking down the cheery hallway.

“Just relax...” the lady with the pink hair said.

I nodded. I hadn’t said a word upon entering. I wasn’t exactly scared anymore; I just didn’t have anything to say.

I wasn't scared about the upcoming mindreading, I just wanted it to be over with so I could go back home, pull a book out of my floor space, and read.

She put some kind of rubber band around my arm. I didn't look down, so I wasn't sure what the purpose of the band was.

"Alright, the needle is entering now..." I could feel it, the pinch of the intrusion in my arm. It felt like a bee sting but didn't hurt.

I know the lady said I would feel myself falling asleep, but I still felt fine. Maybe the serum they used wouldn't work on me. My mother always said I was a stubborn kid, just like my father. Maybe my body was stubborn too, not giving in to the serum's purpose.

My eyes felt bright, giving no indication that the serum was working. I looked over to the lady with the pink hair, questioning what was going on with the serum and why it wasn't working.

She was smiling, nodding as I felt my eyes begin to droop. Maybe this stuff was working...

*The room felt cold, even to me.*

*The amount of light in the room should've made it feel warm, but it felt like an ice storm inside that door.*

*You may wonder who I am. Am I Nylah? What do you think? She probably wouldn't think the things I do, do the things I do, or act like I do, so I'm probably not Nylah.*

*I am as old as time, yet I only touch a person once. They only meet me once in their life, but they know who I am, what I do.*

*I am the notorious villain for some but for others... I am a welcome respite from the tragic world they live in. They yearn to meet me, as skewed as that sounds.*

*They long for a way out of their world. They hate it, resent it, fear it.*

*But here I am, the answer to their prayers.*

*I try not to get a big head about how much I'm needed. I know there are people who fear me too, but I much prefer the people who need me.*

*There is no beginning of the story for me, but rather many endings. Or middles.*

*People are always leaving me, but I guess that's my fault as much as theirs, right? I'm the one who touches them.*

*I promise you'll like me; you just have to give it some time.*

## CHAPTER TWO

I wake up with a gasp. I'm in the light room, still sitting in the chair. The lady is gone, so I assume I can leave.

I don't feel any different than I did before I dozed off.

I guess I'm not as stubborn as I thought because I eventually fell asleep. I don't even remember falling asleep.

My legs feel wobbly, but I stand strong.

I don't think I'm supposed to go back down the hallway that I came from, so I walk the opposite way. I'm in the hallway lit with lanterns down the whole thing and I reach the end quicker than I expected.

"Nylah!" I hear my mother call.

I look around the big room I'm now in. The room is made entirely of glass other than the floor. It's a globe and I look up to see the blue sky above me. Birds are flying around, and the sun is shining brightly. The world didn't stop just because I wanted it to.

I see my mother, father, and sister rushing toward me from the other side of the room with looks of relief on all three of their faces.

"How did it go?" Lisa asked, wrapping her arms around me.

I hugged her back tightly. I can't remember the last time my sister hugged me like this. "I think it went fine?"

Lisa huffed out a breath of air. "I'm so glad. My ritual hurt more than anything I've ever experienced."

I pulled back from her, confused. "I didn't feel any pain at all. Was I supposed to?"



Lisa's smile faltered. "Um, no, I guess not. Some people just have different pain tolerances I guess."

I still didn't know what she meant by that. The admin lady with the pink hair said it wouldn't hurt at all. Now Lisa is telling me hers was painful?

Relief pushed my confusion to the bottom of my mind when my mother wrapped her arms around me. The comfort of my mother's arms was a respite I didn't know I needed. I couldn't remember the last time my mother hugged me, but I was glad she chose that moment to give me that privilege.

"I'm so glad that's over with," my mother said against the side of my head. She took a deep breath in, breathing in *me*.

"Me too," I said. That was an understatement at best.

My mother hasn't released my frame from her tight grip. I can feel her red-painted nails digging into my shoulders. My father wrapped his arms around both my mother and I, making a sandwich out of us.

"Let's go home, shall we?" My dad asked.

My mother and I both nodded. There would be no complaint from either of us.

The car was exactly where we parked it. As if nothing monumental even happened a mere few hundred feet away.

Once we were seated in the car and we were driving far away, I got the nerve up to speak. "So what actually happens now?"

The graduation was so unknown to me. We never spoke about the ceremony, not about Lisa's, my parents, or any other ones we had attended.

My father spoke up first. “Well, we go home and continue to be the family we always were.”

“When will my results come?” I can’t remember anything from Lisa’s graduation ceremony. It’s like the memory has been erased from my mind.

No one answered for a few seconds too long. I sat there, not sure why they weren’t answering until someone did.

“They will deliver it to the house sometime tonight.” My father said.

My whole body froze. *Tonight?*

My voice mirrored my thoughts. “Tonight? I’ll find out the decision before the day is over?”

“Yes, sweetie. You will. The government likes to expedite these things, so all graduates will find out their decision tonight.” My mother said, and I could hear the regret deep within her voice.

This means I will be going to wherever they place me tomorrow. I would be a working girl tomorrow and I suddenly felt like the blueberry pancakes were threatening to make an appearance again.

“It’s okay, Nylah. You are going to be just fine and the job they pick for you will be perfect for you. The job is going to be perfect for your brain. No one else’s, just yours.”

I knew the job would be genetically fit for me, that’s the whole reason for the mind reading, but I still felt anxiety crippling my bones. No one told me I would be receiving an answer this quickly.

I thought I still had a few days left of being a kid, not twelve hours. The government was the most sufficient people I had ever heard of.

Who has a graduation service for hundreds of kids and has the report back to them by the same night?

The ride back to the house was spent in silence, the fields of hay zooming by outside my window. The overwhelming urge to jump out of the car and go live in the hay bales was strong right now.

What kind of job would they assign me? A field worker? A teacher? A Healer? There were so many options and none of them sounded appealing. Maybe a teacher, but *I* wanted to be the student, not the teacher.

The feeling of unease was swamping me, making me feel like my childhood was over.

I guess I felt that way because it *would* be over within the next twelve hours. I would officially be an adult, by the government's standards.

\*\*\*

The knock on the door startled me. I knew it was coming, but I had hoped it wouldn't. Deep down I had hoped they would forget about me or maybe get the wrong house. I wondered if there were more Nylah Abernathy's in the city of Morrigan. Maybe they would visit that one and forget about me.

The knock came again. I didn't move, but my father did. He went to the door and came back with a white envelope with gold foiling.

I didn't see the person delivering the news, but I wished my father would have told them there was no Nylah Abernathy here.

My father thanked the delivery person and brought the letter over to me. The envelope was fancy, so fancy that I almost didn't want to rip it open. Then I remembered this was produced by the government I hated so much.

Ripping into the beautiful envelope, I could feel my parents and Lisa's eyes boring into me. They were anticipating the results almost as much as me, maybe even more than me.

I flattened out the thick paper that was folded in half. The letter had been typed on a computer and said:

*Dear Ms. Nylah Abernathy,*

*We are pleased to announce the completion of your ritual assessment, as performed by Ms. Mariska Pinky at 2:04 pm this afternoon. Ms. Pinky informed us that you were the ideal patient and complied with everything she asked of you.*

*After examining your brain read, the high court deems you most compatible with the healing quadrant effective tomorrow at eight am. You will report there on time and ready for work. When you arrive, someone will assist you with getting started on everything and the knowledge you need to begin in the workforce.*

*We thank you for being such a wonderful participant and role model student in light of the circumstances. We thank you and hope graduation is everything you ever hoped.*

*Good luck and well wishes,*

*Aaron Bradshaw, Administer Chair.*

Well, there it was. I was going to be a Healer. I didn't know what exactly a Healer was, but I would find out soon enough.

My father was sitting on the corner of the chair, looking at me, waiting for a declaration of happiness or anger or something.

"Well?" He asked.

I read it to them and waited for their reactions. I waited, but I didn't see any of them move a muscle. Lisa just kept staring at me while my mother and father didn't look up from the floor.

I couldn't tell if their reactions were good or bad, so I asked them just that.

"We're just processing, dear." My mother said, grief in her voice. What did she know about this that I didn't?

"Lisa's Choosing wasn't quite as dramatic as this, Nylah." My father said with a hint of regret in his voice. What did he mean by that?

I started to slowly shake my head. "I don't understand."

My father exhales deeply. "Do you know what the Healing quadrant does, Nylah?" He was still sitting on the edge of the chair in the corner of the room.

I shook my head.

"They are the administrators of the Offings that occur. This means that being Chosen as a Healer will require you to help in those Offings in whatever way they deem necessary. Even if you don't agree with what they tell you to do, you will have to do it no matter what."

I thought for a moment. I had heard of the Healers, but I didn't know they administered the Offings. I thought those people were just shipped off to the government for their Offings, not to the Healing quadrant.

"Do you know how the Offings are administered?" My father continued.

I shook my head again. I was starting to realize just how little I knew about the place I would be going tomorrow.

"The people are going to come in for their Offings, and their families will be with them to say their farewells. Then, you will take them back to the room designated to them and lay them

down. You will administer a serum to them via a needle through their arm. The needle will pierce their vein and go into their bloodstream, slowly stopping their breathing.”

I learned about the concept of Offings a few years ago in school. The government is known to be secretive about them, so there wasn't much to learn, but my teacher told us the general idea of them.

A few decades ago, the government started to deal with the issue of overpopulation within the country. They constructed the idea of Offings to control this issue in a civilized manner without scaring the citizens of the country. The government wasn't too keen on the idea of Offing just anyone, so they decided there would be a criterion.

Anyone over the age of seventy who was not continuously working for the better of society would be sentenced to an offing. The government decided that if these people had made it to this age, they would have lived a full life. Therefore, they qualified for an Offing.

Others who qualified were criminals who had committed unforgivable violence toward another person. For example, the people who had committed acts such as murder, rape, or domestic violence would be automatically qualified for an Offing with no questions asked.

These rules and Offings had been around for decades, even before my father and mother were alive.

This was the way things had always been and always would be.

“I haven't been taught any of these things.”

My father nodded his head, clasping his hands together. “I know. We don't teach about the Offings in the school system because we don't want the children learning about these things younger than they have to.”

I looked at him with confusion. “Why would that be a good thing? Wouldn’t you want them to understand these things about the country that they live in?”

“I don’t make those decisions, sweetie.”

“But you don’t discourage the government from doing this,” I said it as a statement, not a question.

“I don’t really have a choice. People don’t mess with the government because you just don’t do that. We do what they say and follow the rules accordingly. I have a family to think about, I have *you* to think about, so I can’t afford to disagree with the government without jeopardizing my family.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. My father stayed silent out of the love he held for his family. I loved my father because of how much he loved us.

“I understand that. However, I can’t understand why the government would think this censorship would be a beneficial thing for the younger generation. And how people would willingly go along with this.” I realized my mistake as soon as I said it.

My father stood up and stalked over to the stairs to his and my mother’s room. “Nylah, I hope you never have to make decisions that could jeopardize your family.” And he was gone.

My mother followed him up the stairs. I knew I wouldn’t see them again until tomorrow morning, so I sat with Lisa on the couch.

“I shouldn’t have said that, should I?” I leaned over to my sister's side as we sat side by side.

Lisa sighed. “No, you probably shouldn’t have. But it’s okay because I know you are only trying to stand up for what you believe in. But you must understand where Father is coming

from too. If the government caught wind of him gossiping about them, they would come after our entire family.”

“So you’re saying I have to stay quiet about this for the rest of my life?” I was going to have to work with people I didn’t agree with. It would be different if the disagreement was over something like coffee, but people’s lives were at stake. Millions of kids around the country were being taught only half-truths at a school where there was supposed to be a world of knowledge readily available.

“That’s what I’m saying. You have no idea what this government is capable of.” I think she wanted to say more but held back.

“Enlighten me.”

She sat there, methodically running her fingers through my hair. I loved my sister. She had been a mother to me at many points in my life, so we had grown closer than sisters during those years.

“The government will take anyone who threatens them out of the way. They will take people and make them disappear into thin air without any hesitation. You have to think about what you say, what you do, what you even think. Your job is to go wherever they want you and do whatever they want you to.”

I sat there, taking in what she was saying. I had never heard anyone in my family speak about our government in this manner. Learning about these things made me wonder what other knowledge was being kept from me.

I pushed that thought out of my mind quickly. I didn’t want to think about it too long or I might say something I shouldn’t again.



“Do me a favor and try not to open your mouth tomorrow when you get there. You want to make a good first impression. And you want to make them like you.” Lisa said, sarcasm entering her voice.

I scoffed, immediately feeling the tension disappear. “Oh, and you think that will be a problem?”

Lisa leaned forward and looked me in the eyes. “Yes, I do.”

\*\*\*

The next day was a blur of emotions.

The only words my father spoke to me that morning was “good morning” and “hope your first day goes well.” My mother hugged me tightly, wishing me good luck, and Lisa walked with me to my first day.

Lisa was picked for the Educators last year after her graduation and the school wasn’t too far from the hospital I would be in.

“You’ll be fine.” Lisa was the optimist of us two. She held out hope for a positive outcome on most things, while I had a pessimistic view of life.

“How did your first day of work go last year?” I asked. She had already told me about this last year, but I needed reassurance right now.

“I was nervous, of course, but I dealt with the nerves by realizing I had a family who loved me and I had a home waiting for me after work.

I scoffed. “Really? That’s all you did to calm your nerves?”

“Yes, that was all I did. Once I remembered those two things, it was like my nerves were nonexistent.” Lisa was better than me in every way possible.

“That’s easy for you to say. You went to teach children how to read. I’m going to kill them.”

Lisa’s head jerked in my direction, and she pushed me into the alleyway just beside us. “Shut up, Nylah.” She had put her whole palm over my mouth, shushing me before I could respond to her abrupt attitude.

“You can’t just go around saying things like that. If the government finds out, they will retaliate, I can promise you that. You must mind what you say when you are around these new people today.” The slight breeze forced the sprigs of her blond hair to drift lazily in front of my face.

I pulled her hand off my mouth and I took a deep breath that I exhaled quickly after. “I will, Lisa. I’m sorry. I’ve never had to think about what I say so much before. They were open to anything at school.”

“I know growing up is tough, but it’s something everyone has to do. I had to, Mother had to, even James had to.”

James was her boyfriend whom we never saw. He never came over to our house, never ate with us, never went out with us. It was almost like he didn’t exist. He was lazy and I was surprised the government hadn’t offered him already since he didn’t have a job currently. I guess he was hiding from them well.

I smiled at her. “You never said I couldn’t try and change the rules.”

Lisa clicked her tongue at me. “No, Nylah,” she put her hand on my shoulder. “You aren’t in high school anymore. You are with adults now, some will be twice your age, so you must make them believe you are mature and ready for the workplace. You have to cool this blasé attitude you’ve had for the past few days.”

I knew she was right. I knew I needed to be more serious about this situation, but I was still hurt over the whole truth being hidden from me my whole life.

“Now, you are going to walk into that hospital, you are going to say, “yes ma’am, yes sir,” and you are going to do your job without opening your mouth and ruining everything. Father didn’t say this last night, but he should have. You have a family to think about too, and the decisions you make will affect us.” Lisa’s chest was quickly rising and falling after her rant. Her eyes were blazing.

I nodded my head; all semblance of a smile had disappeared from my face.

Lisa pulled me back onto the busy street. Cars were zooming down the street, presumably on their way to work or dropping their kids off at school. The city was always busy, and people were darting past us consistently.

“You know I love you, right?” Lisa asked after a few minutes of silent walking.

I nodded, but then realized she couldn’t look at me amidst the people walking around us. “Yes, I know.”

“Good. Sometimes I have to make sure.” I peeked a glance at her, and a small smile had formed on her face.

The city was glittering around us. The skyscrapers were miles high with tapestries and posters cluttering the first-floor windows. The sun was shining on the higher-level windows, so they were sparkling like diamonds.

There were retail stores, restaurants, coffee shops, and convenience stores cluttering the streets that were all busy right now with the people lining out some of the doors.

There weren't stamps provided to label who was a Red and who was a Yellow, but we didn't need one. We could differentiate who belonged to what color without it being spelled out for us.

"Wanna stop and get a coffee?" Lisa began toward the one coffee truck parked near the sidewalk that didn't have a dozen people in line.

A vanilla latte sounded spectacular right now, but I knew I had too many nerves to consume anything before my first day. I told Lisa that, so we stood in line to get something for her.

"I'm going to stop and get something since this isn't my first day of work." I shoved her on the arm playfully.

Once we reached the front of the line, Lisa ordered her drink and I looked at all the flyers decorating the coffee truck windows. There were help wanted signs, lost puppy flyers, and a congratulatory sign that especially caught my eye.

*CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR RECENT GRADUATES! We wish you good luck on your first day of your choosing and we at Waterhouse Coffee Truck would like to offer you a free drink of your choice to help prepare you for your exciting day. There's nothing like caffeine to boost your confidence.*

Lisa nudged me with her elbow after placing her money back into her purse. "See, people want to see you succeed! Don't feel so down on yourself and scared about something new. You should get something."

I shook my head. “I still think keeping my stomach empty is a good idea for today. I don’t need coffee today anyway. It will remind me to keep my mouth closed when I feel like speaking.”

Lisa chuckled at my candor, and we kept walking.

The hospital snuck up on us and I didn’t realize we had arrived until I saw the glass door. The hospital was one of the miles-high buildings that had sparkling windows. No flyers were covering the windows like the other stores lining the street.

I loved to pass by the hospital when I was a kid because of the doors. Or should I say *door*? Singular.

The door to the hospital was the largest revolving door I had seen in my entire life. I was pretty sure I could remember my mom telling me about how they had to push the hospital beds through the door sometimes, so they had to make the entryway big enough for the large bed to fit through.

“Remember when we used to run around and around in that door until the desk receptionist would run us off?” Lisa asked.

“You mean last week?” I asked.

“I knew you remembered!”

We stood there a moment more, feeling the sunshine warm our cheeks before I had to go inside.

Lisa grabbed my hand with hers. “Well, good luck.”

I squeezed my sister's hand with all the strength I could.

“Whoa, I don’t want to go inside, but I may have to if you don’t let go of my hand.” I slowly released the grip I had on her hand.

“Sorry,” I looked over to her. “I hope this goes well.”

“You know it will. And then you can come home to tell your favorite big sister all about it.”

We said our goodbyes, hugging before parting. I stood there in front of the door, just staring at the huge building.

I knew waiting would solve nothing, so I summed up all the confidence I could and walked through the front door.

-----

*Well, well, well.*

*If it isn't the day new Life Takers arrive on the job.*

*I am very familiar with these individuals, and I have been for decades without fail. The new age brought these individuals into my world with the most interesting vigor!*

*They have been entertaining me for many years, but somehow it only feels like days because of how mesmerizing these people are.*

*You think I'm twisted, don't you?*

*I won't deny it but don't jump to conclusions about my actions.*

*Yours aren't any better.*

*The new faces are always different. Some enjoy their forced tasks, but some weep. Some fight with their conscience about what they deem right and wrong.*

*Who decides what is right and wrong anyhow?*

*Everyone will die, we know that. Some will die later in life, and some will not make it to speak their first words.*

*I will visit you all, eventually.*

*I will visit you in the form of a young girl, embarking on her first day of death, scared and nervous.*

*She will grow to enjoy it. They all do.*

### CHAPTER THREE

I hesitantly walked through the door, right up to the front desk where a woman was writing vigorously with her pen. Her hand was scribbling things down onto the paper at lightning speed. I wondered if her hand would soon fall off. Her desk was circular, so I really had no idea how she even got to her chair. Maybe she jumped over the side.

I cleared my throat as I approached her desk. She didn't look up from her paper, so I cleared my throat again, louder. Her brown hair was in a messy bun and small pieces were falling out, covering her eyes from view.

She finally looked up from her writing and jumped, almost like I'd snuck up on her when I had been standing there for two minutes.

"Oh, Jesus." She took a few seconds to collect herself and took a deep breath. "Welcome, how may I help you?"

I smiled at her, preparing to say the words that would change my life. "Today is my first day for the Healing quadrant."

Her face changed entirely. She went from barely tolerating me to cheery in two seconds flat. "Oh, why didn't you tell me that in the first place! Welcome, welcome! What is your name?"

I was getting whiplash because of the attitude change. "Nylah Abernathy."

She repeated my name under her breath and began to click on her computer screen at the same time.

"Oh, here you are, eighteen years old, 4824 Cavanaugh Place. Is that correct?"

I nodded and she continued to click. A few moments later she handed me a laminated ID that had my name and my school picture already neatly placed on there.



“The hallway to the left over here will take you to the elevator. Take the elevator up to the seventy-sixth floor and the Healer’s desk will be right off the elevator. They are expecting you any minute now.”

I nodded my thanks and walked down the hallway she pointed to. The elevator was one of the fanciest things I’d ever seen. All of the walls but one looked like they were made of diamonds, but I knew they weren’t. I knew everything in here looked expensive but was probably the cheapest thing out there.

The government was all about looks.

The ride to the seventy-sixth floor took less time than I expected. The last wall of the elevator was a glass window that looked out onto the city as we rose up. I didn’t have much time to enjoy the view and I had arrived.

As the lady at the entrance said, there was a desk identical to the one downstairs as the elevator opened.

A male was sitting at this desk, reading a book. I almost had the breath knocked out of me. He was the prettiest male I had ever laid eyes on. His blond hair fell perfectly across his forehead but wasn’t shaggy. His hair reminded me of sunshine and lemons, bright as the sunrise in the morning. The scrubs that he wore fit nicely around his biceps which looked as big as my head, but it was the glasses on his face that made him seem more approachable. He also looked like he was ten years older than me, but I could appreciate what was in front of me, no matter what age.

He looked up at the ding of the elevator. I was glad I didn’t have to wait for him to look up like I did downstairs. His smile was just as pretty as his face.

He took the glasses off that were resting on his nose. “Good morning, I assume you are Nylah?”

As I got closer, I could see he was holding a half-eaten red apple in his hand. He sat it down on a napkin as I approached.

“That would be me.”

“Cool. I’m going to go get your uniform, so I will be right back. Just hang tight for a few minutes.”

I nodded my acknowledgment and moved into the corner as he walked into a back room.

The lobby was pristine, just like the rest of the building. There was nothing else in the room other than the desk. No chairs, no TVs, not even a plant. The walls were white, and the desk was wooden. There were no other decorations or semblance of life in the room other than the guy at the desk.

A ding from the elevator had me twisting my neck to see who had arrived.

I wished I hadn’t looked.

A familiar head of chocolate curls greeted me as a boy walked out of the elevator. Since I was in the corner, he hadn’t seen me yet. I was hoping he wouldn’t turn around, but his eyes swept the room at that moment, spotting me quickly.

A grin spread across his face when he saw me. I wanted to slap it off him.

“Hold on a second,” he put a finger to his temple. “Let me think about it for just a second... Nylah? Is that right? I’m right, I know I am.”

Timothy still had the obnoxious grin from graduation on his face, raising the hairs on the back of my neck.

“Would you like to take a picture? I hear they last longer.” I pivoted my body away from him and averted my focus back to the desk in front of me.

Timothy sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth. “Yikes. Feeling feisty today?”

I didn’t acknowledge him with an answer. Instead, I felt relief at the sight of the cute guy from earlier making his way back to the desk. He was holding what looked like clothes that were wrapped in a clear plastic bag.

“These are for you,” he handed over the clothes. “The restroom is over there,” he pointed to the corner opposite where I was. “And you can get changed there.”

I grabbed the bag, the plastic cold on my bare arms. “Thanks.”

He smiled at me. “No problem. And I’m Chance, by the way.”

I took off to the restroom to change into my new uniform and I could hear Timothy talking to Chance.

“My name is Timothy Brewers and today is my first day.”

*Of course, he would be placed in the same place I am.*

-----

The tour of the Healers quadrant was long.

Chance took Timothy and me on a trip around the floor with astounding attention to detail. The floor wasn’t large by any standard, but Chance was thorough in his presentation.

There were ten Offing rooms, and the rest were storage and electrical rooms for maintenance needs. In addition to giving us a tour, Chance went into a ten-minute rant about how the floors were originally put in thirty years ago, so they needed new flooring. They also needed new windows because they were permanently scratched and were put in thirty years ago too. We also learned about the history of the building and how long Chance had been working there.

My anxiety rose because Chance didn't speak about my job or what I would be doing in this building.

At the end of our tour, Chance told us to sit in the waiting area outside of Offing Room ten. There were about twenty chairs scattered across the hall with one small room cut out that housed ten or so more chairs. As I took a seat, I hoped he would sit across from me, but he sat right next to me.

"I bet you thought you'd never see me again, huh?" Timothy asked.

He had changed into his scrubs too, so we were matching.

"I've never prayed to the gods more in the past twelve hours than I ever have before. *'Oh god, please don't ever let me see the most self-centered, inconsiderate, and obnoxious person I've ever met again!'*" I clasped my hands together for the last part, pitching my voice higher than normal to really get the point across.

Timothy chuckled. "You're in a good mood today."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. You didn't even know me twenty-four hours ago."

"But you were so nice yesterday." He said in a pouty voice.

I rolled my eyes, but he didn't see them. "And I was so nice yesterday?"

"Super nice. The nicest I'd ever seen you."

He obviously thought he had some jokes.

"If that was my nice, I don't think you want to see my angry."

Chance picked the right time to come back to get us.

"Director Higgens wants to meet you both now. Honestly, it's rare if we get one new Healer, let alone two."

I pondered that for a moment. They don't get new Healers a lot? I wondered if that had anything to do with the secrecy of the whole operation. The less workers they have, the less people who know the truth about them.

Instead of wondering about it, I asked Chance. "Why do you not get many new Healers?"

The look on Chance's face told me that he had revealed too much too soon. We were new. We hadn't been there long enough to know those things.

"Because we don't require as many employees as the other quadrants do, so we don't receive as many as the others." Chance looked impressed with his response.

Nice save.

"The Director will see you now." I could tell Chance was ready to get us out of his hair. He stopped in front of a new door that wasn't part of the previous tour. This door was further down the hall and resided in a corner. I wouldn't even know a door was there if Chance hadn't told us.

The door to the Director's office opened and it took a moment for my eyes to adjust. The office was like the elevator because of its walls. He had three plain walls, but the entirety of the fourth wall was a glass window, looking out on the city. This wall was larger than the elevator, so the view was greater. I could see for miles upon miles, or so it seemed. I didn't even realize we were so close to the ocean in this building, but I could see the ocean from where I stood.

I had never seen the ocean before. My mother was scared of it when I was young and she still was, so she never let me or Lisa go.

My eyes began to fill with water when I saw the splash of blue through the window, but I swallowed those tears before my Director could see them.

He was standing at the window, gazing out onto the streets below him. He didn't look up at our arrival.

“Director Higgens, these are the new Healers.” Chance announced.

Timothy and I were still standing outside the door, anxiously awaiting our audience with the Director. Chance stood inside the office door, trying to get his attention.

I could still see the Director, still gazing out the window. Did he even hear Chance's announcement?

Suddenly, the Director abruptly spun around, a giant smile on his face. He raised both hands slightly above his head in welcome.

“Ah! Thank you, dearest Chance,” the director said. He began toward the door, toward us. His face took on a whole new life than what it was a few seconds ago. While he was looking out the window, he looked angry, rude. Now he looked like nothing could dampen his spirits.

“Chance, don't be rude. Let them in!” He laughed as Chance finally moved out of the way. The Director was in an all-white suit. Even his shoes were white. His head was bald, so when he leaned over to allow us in, the lights bounced off his head, illuminating my peripheral.

He raised his hands up even higher signaling us to come into his office.

Timothy and I walked in slowly, hesitating because of how strange this was. Directors were typically a stoic, more serious type of people. This guy looked like he had been jumping on rainbows when he saw us.

Chance shut the door behind us, sealing us in the office with the Director. I could feel the anxiety begin to creep over me. The invisible hands of doubt swept in to suffocate me in a room full of air.

I felt uncomfortable in my own body, standing there in front of the Director for inspection. I could feel him judging the uniforms we had just put on, ensuring we looked presentable for his establishment.

“Yes, yes, you two will do very nicely.”

I detested the way he said that. Like we were cows being sized up for the slaughtering.

The Director was unsettling, to say the least. The look in his eyes made me cower, scared even. And I could tell he knew the effect he had on me.

“Now, today is your first day, yes?” He addressed both Timothy and me.

We both nodded in unison.

The Director nodded back, that creepy smile still on his face. I think he was trying to be welcoming, but he made me want to shrink into myself and disappear from his lingering gaze.

Two plush chairs were sitting in front of his desk. They both looked like leather and didn't look like anyone had ever sat in them before now. He gestured to the seats, indicating that we should sit.

“Don't be frightened,” he said directly to me. He didn't even look at Timothy as he said the next words. “I don't bite.”

I continued to stare at him, not moving my head or answering.

He went back to addressing both of us. “Now, you will begin here every day at eight AM sharp and you will both report to Regina down the hall. You will both meet her later.”

I would do anything if it meant I didn't have to be in his office ever again.

“Regina is my Head of Staff here in the Healing sector. She will be who you report to if you have any problems or questions during your time here.”

*During your time here.* He made it sound like we were just visiting.

I wished.

He continued. “Do you have any questions for me while you are here?”

We both shook our heads, simultaneously. Didn’t he just tell us to direct our questions to Regina?

“Well, if you have no questions for me, I do have questions for you.” He was still smiling and looking between the two of us.

I silently gulped. The nerves began to fester in me, making themselves known to my otherwise calm exterior.

“I want each of you to tell me a bit about yourself. Where you live, what your hobbies are, about your family... that kind of stuff. Who would like to go first?” The Director leaned forward, both elbows resting on his desk with his hands clasped in front of his mouth.

Neither of us said a word until Timothy cleared his throat and said: “I can go first,” he looked over at me. “Unless you want to.”

I shook my head, and he continued speaking.

“My name is Timothy Brewers and I live in the neighborhood of Yorktown.” I could see the Director take a sharp breath at Timothy’s words. He mustn’t have expected a Red to be reporting for duty today.

Timothy continued. “My father is Mason Brewers, a businessman involved with stocks and bonds. My mother passed away when I was young, so I never knew her. I don’t have many hobbies, but I do love going to play baseball on the weekends with a group of friends. Any other questions?”



The Director nodded. “No, Timothy. Thank you for sharing that. I have met your father before. Many, many years ago I encountered him after a game of poker at a club one night. Lovely fellow.”

Timothy didn’t respond, only nodded with a closed-lip smile.

The Director averted his attention to me. “Your turn, Ms. Abernathy.”

I meant to think of something to talk about while Timothy was talking, but he didn’t give me much time to work with. “My name is Nylah. I just graduated yesterday.” The Director chortled in response. I instantly wanted to stop talking, but I resumed, knowing the Director would force me to finish.

“My parents are Brandon and Sarah Abernathy and we live in Cavanaugh Place with my older sister, Lisa. My mother is a Teacher and my father is a Mailer. Lisa is also a Teacher at the school next door. My sister is my best friend, we do everything together. We go shopping, see movies, and work out together.”

The Director began to filter through the file cabinet under his desk. “Excellent. Now, we have to begin with a few minutes of paperwork to solidify your employment.” He handed a stack of papers to each of us with a pen hooked onto the front page.

“Please take your time and let me know if you have any questions.” He sat back and picked up a book from his desk. He was obviously in no hurry for us to finish, so I took my time and read each question thoroughly. I didn’t want to fill something out wrong and then have to come back to his office for anything ever again.

The questions were easy, but I went slowly, hoping Timothy would finish before me. My wish was granted because Timothy soon placed his stack of papers on the desk in front of him. Once mine was placed atop his, the Director placed his book back on his desk.

“Now, let me be the first to welcome you to your new second home, Brigham Hospital. I hope you will enjoy your time here and make yourselves at home.” The Director said.

I didn't believe he would make us feel welcome for a second. I knew this wouldn't feel like my second home, but I nodded, nonetheless.

\*\*\*

*The Director.*

*I've known him for quite some time now. Him and I go way back, back before most people I've ever known.*

*The Director hasn't always been the same person, but they might as well be.*

*They are all the same, in the end.*

*Killing machines, just waiting for the moment they can pounce on some innocent bystander. They don't care who it is, just so long as they get their fix.*

*I don't like this Director. He doesn't like me either, so I guess we are even in that aspect. He is a special kind of character in our story.*

*Unfortunately, no matter how hard I try, he keeps coming back to me, over and over and over again.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

I spent the walk home in silence.

The loudness of the streets around me blended into my thoughts. I couldn't pay attention to the people around me due to the constant strand of words swirling around in my head.

I had learned so much today already and it was only my first day.

I took the long way home, enjoying the time alone.

Chance was right when he said they didn't have many employees. I had met three other Healers besides Timothy, our supervisor named Regina, and the custodian of our floor.

I didn't want to think about the Director again, so I pushed him into the furthest corner of my mind and turned the light switch off.

The sun was beginning to fall behind the buildings, casting shadows on the street around me.

"Nylah!" I heard my name shouted from afar.

I turned my head, trying to find the voice calling my name. I could see a hand waving frantically toward me from down the street. I could tell it was my best friend Natalia with the glasses resting on her face and the uniform jacket wrapped around her waist.

Natalia has been my best friend since I accidentally spilled her apple juice on her skirt on the first day of kindergarten. She was angry at me because her skirt smelled like apple juice the whole day and her mother couldn't bring her another one, so she was stuck with the smelly skirt until she left.

Natalia ran toward me, weaving through the people on the street. "How was the first day?" She was out of breath from her run.

I shrugged my shoulders. "As good as it could have been."

Natalia swayed back and forth, wiggled her eyebrows. "Did you see any action?"

I shoved her arm and rolled my eyes. “Shut up. And don’t make light of this stuff. You know how anxious I was about this last night.” I had called her before going to sleep, telling her about everything that had happened since I didn’t have the opportunity to see her at the graduation service.

Natalia sobered immediately and laid her hand on my arm. “I know. I’m sorry, Nylah. So how did it actually go?”

“Have you ever met the Director of the Healing quadrant?”

Natalia shook her head.

“Good. I hope you never have to.”

Natalia scrunched her eyebrows together, making a face of disgust. “That bad, huh?” She asked.

I nodded. “That bad. And now I will be working for him for the rest of my life.” I tried not to think about that too much and focused on Natalia.

We had begun to continue down the street, walking toward my house. Natalia always came to my house after school, so I knew she would be coming over now without asking.

“Well, maybe it won’t be too bad. Maybe he’ll come around.” Natalia sounded so hopeful, I knew she was only trying for my sake.

“It’s not that he’s mean or cruel. He just has this strange aura around him that gives me the immense creeps. I don’t like him, and I don’t get a good vibe from him either, Natalia. I don’t think I ever will.” I could feel the goosebumps begin to cover my arms from shoulder to wrist just thinking about the man.

I decided to change the subject immediately and angled my body toward Natalia’s as we walked. “How was your first day?”

Natalia had been Chosen as a Data Writer during her Choosing ritual. I knew of the occupation but didn't exactly know what they did.

Natalia's face lit up. "I loved it. You know I love solitude, and this job is just my dream. I get to sit at a desk all day, *by myself*, and insert data into computers. I only felt like I was at work for an hour today instead of eight." The smile that bloomed on Natalia's face made my heart sing. I was so happy for her, considering the last year of high school was not her best year.

Natalia's mother was Offed unexpectedly in the middle of the school year, and it was an absolute shock for the entirety of her family. The grief for their mother was palpable from their family, even now.

"I'm so happy for you, Nat. Really." I grabbed her hand in my own. Just like we'd done since kindergarten. "Tell me more."

She squeezed my hand as we walked. "Well, the Director of Data is super nice. I really like her, and she seemed to like me when we met." She continued about how the job was just what she wanted, and she couldn't wait to go back tomorrow.

"Did you make any friends today?" She asked me.

Timothy floated into my mind. I just remembered I never got to see him again before I left.

I decided we weren't friends yet, so I shook my head. "No, not yet. I did meet the people I would be working with though and they were nice enough."

Natalia cocked an eyebrow. "What do you mean by 'nice enough'?"

"I mean I could see myself working with them for the rest of my life and not feel like I was missing something or feel like I need something else to feel happy."

Natalia exhaled loudly. "To me, it's starting to sound like you are okay with settling."

“What other choice do I have in the matter?” I wasn’t sure what else I was supposed to do in this situation. “I’m sentenced to this job that I don’t even want because the government says I must take it and I’m going to be at this job until I’m Offed. There really isn’t another choice for me to take, Nat.”

“Have you asked your father if there is a loophole in the Clauses where you could switch jobs if you dislike your that much?” Natalia had a tone of hope in her voice that I knew I was about to crush.

I shook my head. “I’m shut down immediately if I speak about the government,” I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Because it’s too dangerous to speak about such things out in the open or in my house apparently.”

“Maybe you should ask him again, in a different way than the previous times you’ve asked. Try to come across more gently and maybe he will be open to talking about this with you.”

I began to interrupt her, but she held up a finger to stop my words before they even started. “Don’t even try to tell me you were calm when you spoke to him because I know how you are and you feel very passionately about the things you care about. I’m not trying to say that it’s a bad thing, I’m just saying maybe you need to approach your family with the passion of someone who doesn’t care so much.”

I didn’t respond for a moment as I contemplated what she had said. Deep down, I knew she was right. She had known me the longest of someone outside my family, so I could trust that she would be able to tell me these things.

“My father should know how I am.” I finally said.

“Should and does are two different words with two different meanings, Nylah. I think you know that.”

I paused for a moment to look over at her. “Look at you, getting all high and knowledgeable on me.”

We both laughed because we both knew that Natalia was the calm one who thought decisions through, so she was always high and knowledgeable. I was the impulsive, doesn't-think-things-through-before-doing-them one. It's why we worked so well together, and we always had.

We clasped hands again and continued the walk to my house.

\*\*\*

I was welcomed into my home with the same greeting that I got from Natalia. *How was it? Did you like it? Who is your boss? Do I know them? Are you excited for tomorrow? Did you like your co-workers?*

I groaned in response and told them I was going upstairs to take a shower. I would answer their questions when I got out and I needed a few minutes to myself to think after the day I'd had.

Natalia ended up only walking me to my door. She said her father would kill her if she didn't come directly home today. I knew my parents would've felt the same way, so I didn't fight her on it.

I cranked the shower up as hot as it would go before stepping in. I anticipated the hot water running across my skin like I anticipated my next breath.

I didn't look forward to the next day. I knew I would be applying what I learned today to my work tomorrow and I wasn't looking forward to it.

There was a letter waiting on my bed when I walked into my room. I gently squeezed the water out of my hair with a towel and sat on the end of my bed.

The letter was a simple piece of notebook paper, folded in half right down the middle. There is no writing on the front which made me wonder who this could be from. Opening the letter, I was greeted by the loopy handwriting that had been so familiar to me throughout my life.

*Nylah,*

*I wanted to apologize for my outburst last night. I also want to apologize for not having the courage to face you when I say these things, but I feel this is the best way to convey my words to you. You have to understand that I love you, Lisa, and your mother more than anything in this world, so I can't even entertain the idea of losing you three.*

*I want you to come to me if you have any questions about your new position, graduation, or anything you may think of. I don't want you to feel like you can't speak to me about whatever bothers you. You always have a confidant in me. Never forget that my darling girl. I would rather you ask me these questions than anyone else for confidentiality but also because I'm your father. You can confide in me with any problems you may have, and I wanted to make sure you knew this completely. Come to me when you are ready.*

*Father*

I released the breath I had been holding. I didn't realize how much the weight of my father's anger had weighed me down today. My father and I had been close my whole life and the threat of losing that felt like I was drowning.



I read over the note for a second time, just to make sure I didn't hallucinate the first read through. I laid the letter on my nightstand, forgetting about the wet towel now soaking the comforter of my bed.

My father was waiting on me, sitting on the other side of my door. He was resting in one of the lounging chairs set up in the alcove outside my door, reading a newspaper. I liked to come out here to read when I couldn't sleep at night.

I immediately ran to him and threw my arms around him. "I'm sorry, Father."

His arms wrapped around me, holding me tight. I felt his palm on the back of my head, almost like he was petting me. I knew this was for his own comfort, to know I was there and safe.

"I'm the one who should be apologizing, Nillie." Water began to fill my eyes hearing my father's old nickname for me. He hadn't used it in years. "I should've known you would have questions for me after such a demanding trial. I don't think I gave you the attention and answers I should have, do you?"

I didn't answer him, just kept my arms around him. My family didn't hug often, so I liked to take advantage of it when I got the opportunity.

"Do you forgive me, Nillie?" My father spoke against the side of my head. We never fought, so this was uncharted territory for us.

"Of course I do."

We stayed like that a moment longer, basking in the silence and togetherness of each other. My father was the first one to pull back. "Now, now. Let's sit here and talk, shall we?"

My mother and Lisa were already asleep, so the house was silent other than our breathing.

“The government is a tricky and quiet sort of phenomenon. You can’t let them know how you’re feeling on the outside or inside, Nylah. I want to stress that to you. You have to lay low, and you must keep your opinions to yourself.”

This version of my father was different from the one I encountered last night. This one was calmer, more poised, and ready to answer questions. The one from last night was closed off and angry.

“Natalia told me I should ask you if there was a way I could get out of the Healing job if I completely hated it.”

My father shook his head. “Unfortunately, no. The only way to get out of your duties would be if you became deathly ill or if you did something to dishonorably disqualify yourself from the position. If the latter happens, you will be Offed immediately.”

I didn’t think about either of those options, so I simply sat there. The dawning realization of truth washed over me that I would be killing people for the rest of my life.

“I don’t think you want to entertain either of those options, do you.” It wasn’t a question, but a statement.

We finally looked at each other, sharing a look of defeat. “How do I deal with this situation, Father? I feel trapped.”

My father grabbed my hand, rubbing his thumb over my knuckles. “You learn to deal with it without having your conscience eat away at you. You learn to wake up every day, put one foot in front of the other, and make a difference in someone’s life. You can make that difference *good*. I know you believe that the difference will be bad, but it doesn’t have to be that way. You have to wake up and make that choice every day.”

I could feel a lone tear making its way down my face, hugging the curve of my cheek. I could feel my father's thumb wipe the tear away and then wrap a piece of my hair around his fingers.

“Don't cry, sweet girl. The world is your oyster, isn't that what they say? No need to cry over it.”

I nodded. We talked long into the night, just me and my father. He gave me advice for the coming weeks of my new job and told me the tricks to making the Director like me.

I slept soundly that night, much better than the night before my first day.

That next morning, I woke up with a desire in my heart that wasn't there the day before. My father's pep talk put a spunk in my soul that I needed to get through the first days at this new job.

“How was day one?” Timothy asks me as I walk through the front door of the hospital. We walk to the elevator, waiting for it to arrive.

I look over at him as we wait. “What do you mean? You were with me the whole time I was here.”

Timothy smiles. I've noticed he doesn't show his teeth when he smiles, so all of them feel intimate and personal. “I mean after you left. When you were at home. Cry all night?”

“No,” I said. “But in case you were wondering, it's none of your business.”

Timothy grasped for his chest, feigning a wound. “Nylah, how are we supposed to be friends if you shoot me down every time I speak to you? Truly, I'm wounded.”

I rolled my eyes and focused my gaze on the elevator. I decided to give him a little bit of a break. “It was fine, thank you for asking.”

Timothy gave me a side glance as he straightened his posture back to normal. “That’s good. I didn’t get the chance to speak to you again before we left. I hope this friendship—if you want to call it that—is amiable.”

The elevator finally opened in front of us. Timothy gestured with his arm as if to say, “Ladies first” and we entered.

I punched the number seventy-six and resumed our conversation. “I guess we will be working with each other for the unforeseeable future.” I hoped my voice produced the humor beneath my words. I guess I could attempt to be nicer to him considering we would be working together for the rest of our lives.

Timothy turned to me and stuck out his hand. “Let’s start over?”

I stuck my hand out, meeting his in the middle. “Hi, I’m Nylah.”

He gripped my hand in his. “Timothy.”

The elevator doors opened, revealing Chance sitting at the desk like he was the previous morning. Today he was tearing at an orange he would no doubt eat after Timothy and I departed for our duties.

“Morning, guys.” Chance said. I could tell he was a morning person due to the chipper attitude he’d had yesterday and now today.

We both spoke our greetings and moved to the break room. This room was small but big enough for its purpose. There was a table in the middle of the room with six chairs pushed directly under it. There was a small kitchen clad with a microwave, sink, and refrigerator. This was where everyone had lunch or stayed if they had a break some other time during the day. I liked to sit in here and read on my breaks that didn’t involve food.

“What ya got for lunch today?” Timothy asked as he placed his plastic tub in the refrigerator.

I dug my sandwich and tea out of my bag and placed them both in the fridge behind him.  
 “Peanut butter and jelly.”

Timothy made an appreciative sound in the back of his throat. “One of my favorites.”

“Timothy, if you steal my food, I will hurt you.” I hoped I sounded intimidating, but I knew Timothy would laugh at me no matter how menacing I tried to sound.

He threw up both hands in surrender. “I cross my heart.”

\*\*\*

*Dearest Timothy, you better watch what you say around me.*

*I tend to make the unsaid part of that phrase come true for many people. They begin to regret those words, so make sure you are careful around me.*

*And I'm always around. Always listening.*

*When you think you are alone, I am there. Comforting you in your time alone.*

*Watching over you.*

*Caring for you.*

*Aren't I so considerate?*

*I thrive off knowing you can't escape me. If I want to be near you, you can't stop me and you can't run away. No matter how hard I try, I will always be there.*

*Just for you.*

*I know your father isn't one to stick around for you, so I humbly take on that responsibility for you.*

*You'll appreciate it one day.*

*One day...*

## CHAPTER FIVE

After two weeks of shadowing on the job, I found out I would be conducting my very first Offing. I would be in the room alone with the person and I would be in charge of performing a safe and correct Offing.

I was informed by Regina upon arrival today that I would be given this opportunity via the Director's recommendation.

Regina shared the details of the person I would be conducting the Offing on. He was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer last week, so the Director said there was no reason for the man to stick around. Cancer would run its course through his body within the next few weeks and he wouldn't be here much longer anyway.

I paused for a moment after Regina told me the news. "Me...?"

Regina didn't seem to grasp the hesitancy in my tone. "Yes! Aren't you excited for this grand honor that the Director has allowed you to have? Your family will be so proud of you for this!"

I could feel the excitement in her voice and the thrill would have been amiable if it weren't for the fact that I didn't want to do the Offing.

I was hoping I wouldn't be forced to administer one until I had been there a little longer and I would have grown a stronger stomach. I guess the Director wanted me to feel at home in the Healing quadrant early in my career. I wondered if Timothy was subjected to this honor too.

"Thank you so much for this honor." I knew this was the expected response, but it wasn't what I truly felt about the "honor."

"You must directly report to the Director after successfully completing the Offing with a detailed account of the Offing to give to him."

The Director was a strange man. He wanted to hear about my Offing tasks so that he could revel in the completion of the task. I wondered why he didn't assist in the Offings if he enjoyed hearing about them so much.

After sitting in the break room for a few minutes, I decided it was time to begin working. Timothy had just walked into the break room as I stood up.

He gave one short nod. "Nylah." He said my name in welcome, but he seemed guarded like he was gauging how I would react to such a greeting.

I gave him a small nod back, not having the energy to argue with him on this specific day. He seemed different today too because his usual spunk was nowhere in sight.

"What cat peed in your cornflakes?" I asked him.

He didn't respond, but just shrugged his shoulders. He put his lunch in the refrigerator, just like clockwork every day.

I didn't think he was going to respond because the silence had lasted for so long. Then, he surprised me by saying, "I have my first Offing today."

I understood his melancholy mood now because I was feeling the same way. "Did Regina greet you as soon as you walked through the door too?"

His eyes snapped to mine. "You too?"

I nodded. "She told me I should feel excited because of this grand honor. I actually feel like I could go home and sleep for a week."

"Long night?" He asked, arching one eyebrow. His mood seemed to have dimmed to a mere simmer instead of a boil.



“You could say that. My father and I stayed up to talk again. We didn’t finish until late in the night, so I didn’t get much rest last night.” I could feel myself smile as the memory of our conversation came back to my mind. My father had finally answered every question I’d had about my job, the governments, and Offings altogether. I felt like we connected in a way we hadn’t in quite some time last night. Our conversation from a few weeks ago was only the beginning of our healing relationship.

I had told Timothy of the conversation my father and I had a few weeks ago. Timothy and I had grown closer in our friendship since I opened up to him that day, telling him about the sadness and loneliness I had been feeling. I had decided I could begin to show kindness to someone who had listened to me so thoughtfully.

Timothy only nodded in response, with Regina entering the break room at the same moment.

“Well! You both are honored with the esteemed task of conducting your first Offing. If you will both come with me, we will get this show started.”

Regina was a nice lady, but her enthusiasm for her job was disturbing to a point.

We were rewarded with our own Offing room to conduct the Offing. We followed Regina down the hall, Timothy and I sharing a glance at each other before entering our respective rooms.

My room was simple and reminded me of the room I entered after graduation for my Choosing ritual. There was a bed, a small table for instruments I may need with a trash can beside it, and a large plant in the corner. This place loved their plants.

There was a large window to the left of the bed, presumably for the patient to look out of as their serum was administered.

“We will send the patient in once they have finished with their familial goodbyes. You will then have them lie down and you will administer the serum. You may talk to them if you want, but you are not required to converse with them during the appointment. You have the prerogative to choose your actions. Oh, what am I going on and on about? You know what you are doing. I have faith that you will be able to complete this appointment with no issues to be found.” One thing about Regina is she loves to talk. She would talk your ear off if you let her.

I nodded in understanding. I was severely hoping I wouldn't have to perform an Offing until further into my career. I'd silently hoped the appeal of the job would latch onto me once I had been working here for longer, but now I wouldn't have that chance.

Regina left and a few minutes later, the patient was wheeled into the room by one of the other workers. The other employee would stand in the corner and work as a witness once the Offing truly began.

This was typically my job. The person who wheeled the patient in and supervised in the corner. I wished that was my job today.

I glanced at the file lying on the small table. “Good morning, Mr. Bates. My name is Nylah and I will be administering the Offing today. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?”

I knew the only way for me to get through this was by distancing myself from the patient. He was an older man, but he didn't look close to the average Offing age either. The hair around his temples was beginning to turn gray, and the wrinkles around his face were prominent. He looked like he could be my grandfather.

Mr. Bates slowly exhaled a breath, slowly turning his head toward the sound of my voice. His eyes were the bluest in color, close to the color of the ocean I see from the window every day.

He smiled at me, seemingly oblivious to what was about to happen in a few moments. “No, sweetheart. No questions.”

I had been looking at his file, flipping through the many pages recounting his entire life, but his statement made me pause.

Here was this man, about to be put to death due to a disease in his body and he was calling me sweetheart. Now that I truly looked at him, I noticed he didn't seem distressed or anxious about his situation.

In fact, he looked... at peace.

I couldn't grasp my mind around the fact that this man who was about to be Offed was at peace.

Getting Offed is one of the scariest things I could imagine, so I couldn't fathom the attitude this man had.

“I will be inserting this needle into your vein. You shouldn't feel anything at all as I insert it. It will feel as though you are drifting off to sleep.” I felt a brief flashback to my time during my Choosing ceremony.

The man's peaceful eyes raised to mine. “Okay, sweetheart. Thank you for helping me out today. I'm very appreciative of you using your time for me today.”

I nodded my acknowledgement. I was feeling uncomfortable with this whole situation because of how nice and calm this man was being.

“Go ahead and lie back and we will begin.”

The man did as I asked, and I couldn't wait for the room to be silent. No sound other than me working. However, the man wasn't going to allow that to happen.

"Is this your first Offing?" He asked.

My lips turned into a small smile. "Is it that obvious?"

I had to be careful because while there weren't cameras in the room, there were microphones that would capture every word we said.

The man chuckled. "A little bit, yes. I've had some experience in these situations before now. My son was Offed when he was in his teenage years due to a sickness quite like the one I have now. So, I've had to deal with these situations before.

My eyes met his as I began the pre-operative tasks. "I'm so sorry you've had to deal with this before. Especially for your child. That must be one of the most difficult things to experience."

The man nodded. "It was. Now, I don't have anyone left for me. My wife and my son have already moved on from this earth and so have my parents. I don't have anyone left for me here, so I welcome this appointment. I look forward to it, almost. I've not been with or seen my family in some years, and I look forward to seeing them again after so long."

Did this man really look forward to being taken off this planet? I guess I could understand the reasons behind his excitement, but I still couldn't believe that this was his choice.

I looked at the man and I injected the serum into his veins and watched the monitor begin to beep as it tracked the serum as it flowed into the man's body.

"Well, I'm glad you will be able to see them again very soon."

He smiled. "So am I. I've missed them so much and I can't wait to see how different they both look. It has been years since I've seen either of them."

The man closed his eyes, slowly falling asleep. Like I said, he would feel like he was falling asleep into a deep sleep. No other pain would ail him, and the conversations of this life would be left behind.

“Nice knowing you, Mr. Bates.” I paid attention to the monitor to see the exact moment the heart ceases to beat.

I bet Mr. Bates didn’t even have anyone to see him off today since all his family are already gone.

A sharp pain flourished in my chest. I think this pain was the empathy I felt for Mr. Bates bursting forth in my chest.

I knew I would hate being a Healer because of this reason. Almost all of the people who go through the Offing experience have done nothing wrong. They are innocent bystanders who reside in the wrong place at the right time.

The government wants everyone to fear them because they want to be in control of everything. The thought of losing control of the people is a fear the government has never entertained because they know they will always be in charge. And there is nothing we, as citizens, can do about it.

The thought ignites a spark of anger in my mind. I hate that these people I’ve never even seen have this kind of control over me. They get to tell me what job I have, what color I am, and even when I die.

Watching Mr. Bates’ eyes slowly close was a harrowing experience. His life was draining out before my eyes, and it was all because of me.

The assistant in the corner came around me to roll the bed out of the room, leaving me to think about what just happened. I could still smell the chemical scent of the serum lingering in the room.

The man's eyes closing in death keeps running through my mind after the assistant rolled him out of the room. I was the last thing or person that man saw. Was he happy to see someone's face before he left this world? Or would he have rather been completely alone?

I guess I'll never know the answer since I didn't speak to him more than I had to. When Mr. Bates first spoke to me, I couldn't get my tongue to move. It was frozen to the roof of my mouth.

Walking to the break room, I felt like my chest would soon cave in. I reached into the refrigerator to get a water bottle out and drank the whole thing in one go. I could feel a drop of water leak out of my mouth and down my chin, but I didn't care. The cool water felt nice on my feverish skin.

I heard someone walk in the door behind me and sit in one of the chairs lining the table. Turning around, I saw Timothy. "How'd yours go?" I asked him.

He had his arms crossed on the table in front of him with his head laid on top of them. I couldn't see his face, but I could tell he was anxious.

"You okay?" I walked over and sat at the table near him.

He shook his head which was still resting on his arms on the table.

I nodded my head in acknowledgment. I knew how he was feeling.

We sat there basking in the silence of the break room for the next few minutes. Regina nor the Director had found us yet, so the silence was a precious respite in the exciting atmosphere of the Healing quadrant.

All of a sudden, Timothy jumped out of his seat with his hand covering his mouth. He ran through the hallway, and I could hear him retching in the bathroom a few doors down. I didn't know if I should go to him and help him or if I should give him his privacy and leave him alone. I decided to go with the latter of the two options.

Timothy and I had only been working together for a few weeks. I didn't want to embarrass or annoy him by trying to help him in this vulnerable moment.

A few minutes later he walked back into the break room, grabbed a water bottle, and walked back out the door. I wasn't sure if he was going to come back, but my answer appeared in the doorway a few minutes later.

"I have to tell you something." His mouth was red like he had scrubbed it in the bathroom. There was a fear in his voice that hadn't been there before he left. A fear filled my soul because I knew something was wrong. The look of dread was still in his eye, and I asked him what happened.

"You're going to kill me if they don't first."

\*\*\*

*Oh, dear.*

*Timothy has really mucked things up now, hasn't he?*

*You don't know what he's done, but I surely do since it was I he was dealing with.*

*Death isn't something you can play with, dear boy. You have changed the status quo of things, and you aren't high enough to successfully do that.*

*However, some might respect Timothy for this thing he has done. I do not respect him. I believe it to be cowardly on the highest standard.*

*Some will say his sacrifice is commendable, but I say it is spiritless in the most disrespectful manner.*

*Timothy will get his dues, just you wait. I will always be around to ruin the party, as they say.*

*I was there when Timothy was born, you see. I was there visiting with the lady next door to him in the Birthing quadrant, so I got to see baby Timothy firsthand that day. He was a chubby little thing. Dark hair and blue eyes.*

*His mother just doted on him, and his father did too. They were in the private corner of the Birthing quadrant because Timothy's father had the kind of money that allows someone to do that.*

*I thought it a bit obnoxious.*

*But it doesn't matter what I think, now does it?*

*It only matters what I do.*



## CHAPTER SIX

“You did *what?*” I shrieked in a whisper.

Timothy rushed toward me and clasped a palm over my mouth. “Shh!”

I grabbed his wrist near my face and pulled it away. “Get off me, Timothy. Explain to me in detail what exactly you did.”

“I will later, but not here. We can go somewhere after work and talk.” He had been glancing around the room since he told me he smuggled his patient out and snuck an Outcast in to take his spot.

“What makes you think I want to go anywhere with you outside of this building?” I knew I would go with him, but I didn’t want to make this situation easy for him.

“Because you’re the only real friend I have right now, and I need your help. Please, Nylah. I need someone to talk to about this.” The look in his eye was desperation. He knew he had messed things up badly for himself and he needed help. I wasn’t sure if I truly wanted to help, but knew he needed a friend.

“What were you thinking, Timothy?”

He ran a hand through his hair and began to pace around the room. “I don’t even know. I just knew I had to do something. I couldn’t let him go just like that. He was innocent and young, so I just panicked.

I audibly sighed. I wasn’t sure what to tell him because it was a brave thing to do. Reckless and dangerous, but still brave. I wish I had the guts to do what he did, but my father’s words about a decision affecting my family came back to my mind. I knew I couldn’t do much without affecting my family, but I could talk to him.

I knew he needed a friend, and I guess I was that person for him.

“We’ll go to the park, and we can talk safely there after work. Do not speak to anyone about this until we get to the park. Do you understand?” I asked. I didn’t need him to go around blabbing his sins to someone who would tell the Director.

“I’m not stupid, Nylah. I’ll meet you outside at four.”

I nodded and we went our separate ways.

I went the whole day, anxious about the conversation yet to be had. The fact that he’d done something so stupid baffled me. I knew, deep down, that he hated the government because of our conversation at graduation, but I didn’t think he’d go this far.

Staying focused was a problem the rest of the day. Thinking of my after-work plans kept my mind too busy to think about work.

The day went slowly. I assisted in two other Offings that day, but I didn’t have to conduct any myself. Thankfully.

I met Timothy again at the front door, just like we’d planned.

The walk to the park was made in silence. I didn’t trust that we wouldn’t be heard by the people in the city. I wanted us to be completely alone when this conversation happened.

I loved the park. Mother and Father used to take me and Lisa there when we were younger. Mother didn’t like the ocean, but she loved the park. That love was passed down to me because Lisa didn’t come to the park anymore. She thought she was too old and fancy to come back to the place we spent our childhood.

I still came back at least once a week. Sometimes just to sit and people watch, but sometimes I came with a book. There were dozens of benches in the park, so I had plenty to choose from. I loved the ones under the trees because of the shade, but also because of the squirrels.

There were squirrels everywhere in the park and I enjoyed watching them run around with acorns stuffed into their mouths.

Today was a day I would not enjoy the squirrels frolicking around or a book while sitting on the bench. Today, I would listen to this new acquaintance of mine tell me about how he did something illegal for the sake of his conscience.

We found a bench away from the other people and claimed it.

“Now, spill it.” I said, more forcefully than I meant to.

Timothy took a moment to compose himself, clasping his hands together and pivoting his body so that he was facing me.

“I just couldn’t do it. I spoke to the boy like Regina said I could, and he started to cry. The words just spilled out of him about why he is being Offed, what drove him to do the things he did, about his family... It was just too much, and I couldn’t just sit by and let an innocent boy Offed.” I could feel the anxiety rolling off him.

“Why do you think he was innocent?” I asked, wanting to hear the whole story. I knew there had to be more for Timothy to react this way. For anyone to act this way.

“He told me about his parents, how they are working, but most of their money goes to debt collectors. They don’t have much money to use for anything other than absolute necessities, and his sister grows sicker by the day.” Timothy paused, like going on would physically hurt him.

“Go on.” I prodded. I was sensitive to his needs, but I also needed to know the rest of the story.

“He told me of how he is forced to steal food so they can survive. Because of his sister’s sickness, they are starving, and they have no other option but to steal food.”

I nodded my head, understanding. “So that’s why he was being Offed.”

Timothy nodded. “I couldn’t just stand by and watch that serum kill him. I couldn’t live with myself and if his family didn’t have him, they would all perish due to starvation. They would have no other options if they lost him to the government.”

“But do you think sneaking him out would be the best option? What if someone from the government sees him out on the streets? What if they stop him and ask for his identification? They’ll scan it and see that he isn’t dead like he’s supposed to be.” I pivoted my body so that it was facing him on the bench.

“Remember when I said I exchanged him with an outcast? I picked one that still had an identification card.” He smiled like he knew something I didn’t.

“And this means?”

“I gave my patient the Outcasts identification card. So, if someone tries to scan it, he will show up as the Outcast.”

Outcasts were people who had no direction in life or will to live. They *wanted* to be Offed, but the government only allows people to be Offed who are approved by them. If someone wants to be Offed, they can’t unless the government appoints them to be. Many of the Outcasts are working, but it’s only because the government makes them.

If the Outcasts try to purposely do something to provoke the government, they are forced to stay in jail instead of being Offed. Many of the Outcasts will loiter outside of the Healing quadrant, just hoping for something like Timothy described today.

“Did you just go outside and advertise that you needed someone to take a patient’s place?” The sarcasm dripped from my voice, just begging for Timothy to try and be funny in a time like this.

“Kind of, but not exactly. I went out and found one with an identification card and made sure he wasn’t some ex-convict or something. Then I switched them out.”

“How did you do all of that without being seen? Didn’t you have an assistant with you?” I asked.

“No, my assistant wasn’t feeling well, so he rolled my patient in and left. He went to lie down and rest while the Offing was going on. I was alone for the entire thing which gave me the opening to do this.”

“You don’t think this was a bit of a rash decision? Where did your patient go that you helped escape?” I couldn’t believe how nonchalant I was being about the whole thing. Did things like this happen every day?

“I just acted without thinking. I just knew that I couldn’t let him die without trying. He’s just a kid trying to keep his family from starving,” he said.

“Where did he go?”

“I took him out the back door and told him to run wherever he could except his home. I told him to go to another city, change what he looks like, and never come back.” Timothy was so passionate about this; I couldn’t interrupt him.

“I know the Healing quadrant doesn’t believe in cameras, so I felt that the danger would be more outside than inside. I just hope I didn’t screw myself over. I think I got him out and the Outcast in with discretion.”

The Healing quadrant were notorious for their lack of cameras in their department. They felt it disrespectful to show the living being drained of their life, so they kept the security cameras out of the rooms and the assistants in.

“They didn’t give you another assistant for the Offing? They just let your assistant leave?”

Timothy shook his head. “I just told him to leave and not worry about getting another one. I told him it shouldn’t take long, and I shouldn’t need another assistant.”

“Sneaky,” I noted.

“That particular skill came in handy today,” Timothy said. The blood had rushed to his cheeks after his explosive storytelling. “I just hope I didn’t do something astronomically stupid in my quest for justice today.”

I patted his shoulder with my hand. “I guess we’ll see. I’m sure your father could pay your way out if they figure anything out.”

Timothy turned his head toward me, a scowl marring his face. I pulled my hand back, understanding that I had obviously said something wrong. Timothy angled his body away from mine.

“That isn’t even funny, Nylah. You don’t know my father like I do and no, he wouldn’t bail me out if I needed him to. He would pay them to lock me up if he thought about it enough.” The anger in his voice shook me to the core. I could never think about my father that way.

I realized I had hit a nerve with my last comment, unknowingly so. I softened my tone and leaned down so that I could look him in the eye. “I’m sorry, Timothy. I shouldn’t have spoken about something I had no idea about. Please forgive me.” He had been nothing but kind, albeit cocky, to me during the time we’d known each other. I couldn’t rightfully snub him when he was in such a vulnerable spot right now.

“It’s okay, you didn’t know. I would’ve assumed that too about a Red. But no, he wouldn’t bail me out. He doesn’t care much about me, so I’m not too sure he would help me at all.”

I exhaled, trying to think of how to respond. I wasn’t good at comforting people in their times of distress. “Well, that’s his loss,” I said. I stood up, sticking my hand out for him to grab. He stared at it for a few moments before grabbing it. I gave his hand one tight squeeze and released it.

“Let’s go get some ice cream. I feel like the only thing to do right now is to act as normal as possible. Tori’s down the block has really great ice cream. My parents used to take me and my sister all the time when we were younger.”

Timothy smiled, staring at the ground. I took that smile as a silent agreement that ice cream was absolutely necessary for the current situation.

“My favorite is Banana Split,” I said with a smile that surprised me by not being forced.

Timothy still had a sweet smile on his face, but he looked over at me to answer. “Mine is Mint Chocolate Chip.”

The walk to the ice cream shop was conducted in silence. Neither of us felt like talking, but rather basking in the silence of each other.

“My friend from school, Hector, works here after school every day, so we might get a discount.” I wiggled my eyes at him.

“Hector Presnell?”

I nodded.

“You were friends with Hector Presnell?” His incredulous tone confused me.

“Yes? And?”

“He is such a weird guy. And he flirts with half the girls in the school.” Timothy’s scowl was back on his face.

“Well... he’s just nice is all.”

“You could say that, but none of the girls flirt back with him. That makes him weird, not just ‘nice.’” He used little finger quotation marks when saying the last part.

“Well, you could be nice to him instead of the continuous judgment I’m feeling here. What gives you the right to be so judgmental?”

Timothy feigned mock offense, pressing one hand to his chest. “I resent that statement. I am nice to him, but he’s such a creep that no one wants to be nice to him. He doesn’t understand how to function when someone actually speaks back to him.”

I elbowed him, throwing him off balance as we walked. “Get over yourself and pay attention to where you’re walking.”

The shock on Timothy’s face was comical considering the absurdity of the comment. I knew Hector was a bit of a loner because of his social skills. He didn’t flirt with every girl in school, he was just awkward because of his anxiety. Timothy was insensitive to Hector’s problems, and I could tell by this conversation.

“Whatever, just walk,” I said.

Hector was not at the ice cream shop, thankfully. I didn’t feel like dealing with Timothy’s accusations and finger-pointing while trying to eat my ice cream at the same time. We didn’t speak for the first few minutes while we ate, enjoying the sweet taste of the ice cream.

“Mint Chocolate Chip kind of tastes like toothpaste to me,” I finally said as I reached the halfway point of my ice cream cone.

“You take that back.” He pointed his ice cream cone at me like a gun.



I liked this dynamic growing between me and Timothy. I wasn't sure about him at first, but I felt like he was someone I could consider a friend now, especially after the conversations we'd had in the past few days. Since he trusted me enough to tell me something so crucial, I felt I could consider him as a friend.

"Sorry, but it's true." I shrugged my shoulders, taking another bite of my banana split ice cream cone.

Timothy and I were the only people in the ice cream shop other than an older couple in the corner and the teenager working the counter. When the bell above the door rang, indicating someone entering, my eyes drifted in that direction.

Lisa entered with her boyfriend, James. I had met him only a few times in their years of dating, so seeing him anytime was a bit shocking to the system.

Lisa didn't see me, so I said her name loud enough for her to hear me. She turned her head toward the sound of my voice and a smile lit up her face at seeing me.

"What are you doing here? I thought you said you were going home after work today?" Her eyes went back and forth between me and Timothy, face suspicious. I knew she thought we were on a date because Lisa always jumped to conclusions like that.

"Some plans came up after work, so we decided to get some ice cream. What are you guys doing out?" Lisa and James were extremely private about their relationship, so they didn't go out much together.

Lisa grabbed James' hand and smiled. "You know how much I love the banana split, and I've wanted some so badly over the past few days."

I glanced over at Timothy to see him smirk at the banana split comment. Like he was saying *so it runs in the family, huh?*

“We’ll leave you two alone. Come on, James. I want to see if they have those specialty waffle cones I love so much!” Lisa pulled his hand over to the ice cream counter where she began to ask the worker for samples.

I rolled my eyes at her because I knew she was going to get banana split. She just wanted to eat free samples of ice cream.

Timothy and I left while Lisa and James were still at the counter, so she didn’t see me leave. She would ask me about my company when she got home, I was sure of it. I knew she thought we were on a date, but I couldn’t wait to tell her that was the furthest thing from the truth.

\*\*\*

*Isn't that cute?*

*The two new Life Takers are little friends now. More than friends?*

*We shall see.*

*They are both in the crosshairs of my bow now. Timothy has gone and told the little girl all of his sins. First mistake.*

*The Healing quadrant might be in the dark, but I am the dark. And I know everything.*

*The afterlife was ready for that boy, Timothy. He was one step away from being with me, and I love those Purples. They are so ripe.*

*They are always my favorites for the taking.*

*When they come over to me, I get to enjoy their souls. All they have to offer.*

*Sometimes they taste like chocolate. Sometimes they are bitter, just like their souls. Those are the creme de la creme of the souls because of the bitterness.*

*I will not forget this, Timothy.*

*I will not forget the disrespect you have shown to Mother Nature on this day. Mother Nature will take action and I will ensure this mistake is eradicated.*

*You cannot change the status quo of Mother Nature.*

*Or in this case, father nature.*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The hardwood floor is cold on my feet as I lower them from my bed. Sleep didn't come easily for me last night because of the conversation I had with Timothy. I finally dozed off as the sun was starting to rise, so the remnants of sleep still plagued my body. The cold temperature on the bottom of my feet helped to wake me up amid my sleep-induced stupor.

"Good morning, sweetheart." My mother says as I enter the kitchen. She's currently making herself a cup of coffee in her favorite "World's Best Mom" mug. Lisa and I purchased that mug years ago for her birthday and it was still the only cup she used to drink her coffee in the mornings.

"Good morning," I say, yawning. Exhaustion had settled into the thick of my bones, begging me to go back upstairs and fall back into the deep sleep I had just been in.

"I think Father, Lisa, and I are going out to eat tonight, so don't make any plans for yourself." Mother said.

"What's the occasion?" I asked. We didn't typically just go out to eat for the enjoyment of it. We normally went out to eat for special occasions and events only. My curiosity peaked at this news.

Mother shrugged her shoulders, taking a small sip of her steaming coffee. "Father and I just thought we should go out and celebrate the new adventure you're on and the continued journey that Lisa has been on for the past year. It would be a nice night for us all in this time of change."

"Okay, sounds good. I'll make sure I'm home early tomorrow evening." My excitement pushed the exhausted feeling into the back of my mind at the thought of going out.

We aren't the type of family to spend extra money on extravagant things like a restaurant meal. We never hurt for money, but it also didn't grow on trees for us. Our occasional outing always felt like a reward when we made the trip to our favorite restaurant across town.

"I'm so excited. We haven't gone out in so long."

My mother sighed. "I know, that's another reason we decided tonight would be a good time to bring that tradition back around. We've let too much time go by since the last time we went out as a family."

She was right. The last time we went out was a few months after Lisa's graduation. Sure, Lisa and I went out to get coffee and breakfast sometimes, but it was rare that our parents went with us.

I grabbed an apple and headed back up to my room. I felt excited about the day ahead of me. Timothy's friendship had opened a part of me I didn't know was there. I had Natalia, but I didn't see her every day like I used to. Timothy was someone who I could call a friend in a job I didn't like and I knew he felt the same way.

I had been at my job for a little over a month now and I didn't feel any more settled than I had on day one. Conversing with Timothy has been the highlight of my day for the past month because I know we share the same feelings about the government we work for. Speaking to him always made me feel grounded in my beliefs.

The walk to work is uneventful, but I decide to stop at the coffee truck outside the hospital quickly before work. I get my favorite; an iced lavender latte and I decide to get Timothy something too.

I know I'm harsh to him sometimes, but I'm only harsh because he's my friend and I'm worried about him after what he did.

I got Timothy his favorite, an iced matcha latte. The memory of our first time stopping here comes back to me as the barista makes our drinks.

We were walking into the hospital and my stomach growled.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Do you have a monster in your stomach or something?” Timothy’s eyebrows almost shot up to his hairline.

I averted my gaze, embarrassment flooding me. “Um, no. I forgot to eat breakfast this morning. I woke up late, so it slipped my mind.”

Timothy shook his head, laughing under his breath. “Come one,” he nodded toward the coffee truck right outside the hospital door. This truck was always sitting here, but I hadn’t let myself stop to try anything yet. “Let’s go get some breakfast. Are you a coffee person?”

If I’m being honest, I never have the time to stop because I’m almost always running late. Excitement bubbled within me because I hadn’t had coffee in so long.

“That’s like asking me if the sun doesn’t shine. Of *course*, I like coffee. I wish I could drink it more, but the caffeine affects me if I drink it too much.” I hadn’t had coffee in a few weeks, so I knew I would be getting one today.

We both ordered our drinks from the young barista. Timothy surprised me by whipping cash out to the barista before I could realize what he was doing. I tried to grab his arm before the green bill made it to the barista, but they were both too quick for me.

“What are you doing?” I asked him, eyebrows scrunched together in confusion.

Timothy shrugged. “Just call it a thank you for being a good friend to me during our time at the hospital.”

I was briefly touched by his cadence. We hadn't been overly friendly at that point, so I wasn't sure what to say back. I told him my thanks and we moved to the side for the next customers to walk up and order.

"Thank you. It's on me next time."

He didn't answer, just pulled his phone out and focused his attention on the screen. I know he heard me, but I guess he didn't want to answer. Maybe he was uncomfortable with gratitude from someone.

"One medium iced lavender latte!" One of the baristas shouted, placing my cup of brown liquid on the counter of the truck.

"Lavender?" Timothy asked, uncertainty written on his face.

I nodded, taking a sip of the sweet coffee. "It's my favorite. It kind of tastes like a flower is growing in your cup."

Timothy's face went from uncertainty to disgust, and he wasn't trying to hide it. "No, thank you. I will pass on the garden fairy drink."

At that moment, the barista called out another drink and sat it in the same place. My mouth fell open in disbelief. "You're joking, right?"

Timothy looked at me like he didn't understand my words. "What are you talking about?"

The lime green drink in his hand was staring me straight in the face. "You call my drink a garden fairy drink and you get something that looks like the forest threw up in?"

"Are you kidding me? Green is a man color, so that's why I got this drink." Timothy raised his shoulders, trying to look bigger than he was.

“You look like an idiot right now,” I nudged his shoulder with my own. I couldn’t stop the smile forming on my face. He knew how to make me laugh, but he didn’t need to know that. “Matcha is the definition of a girl drink, and it’s what I imagine grass would taste like.”

Timothy clicked his tongue a few times, giving me a look my father had given me many times before. “Language, Nylah. You wouldn’t want Mrs. Davis to hear you, now would you?”

As we began walking into the hospital with our drinks, I looked at Timothy with confusion written on my face. “How do you know Mrs. Davis?”

Mrs. Davis was a new teacher this year at the school and she only taught one class of Honors English. How could he know who Mrs. Davis was?

Timothy smiled with his lips pressed firmly together. “How do you think I know Mrs. Davis?” He obviously found this topic funny.

I took a moment to think. We were standing in front of the elevators, waiting for the doors to open up. “But you weren’t in her class this year.”

Timothy looked over at me and only nodded his head once at me. I took a long sip of my coffee. “You’re telling me I had a class with you for an entire year and I didn’t know it?”

“That’s what I’m saying, sweetheart.” He said the last word with sarcasm.

I scrunch my nose up at hearing it. “Don’t call me that. How did I not see you? Or see you do your presentation at the end of the school year?”

“I sat in the back row and I was quiet. I didn’t like to make noise in that class because of my classmates. I was exempt from the final presentation because I was so sick I couldn’t get out of the bed without vomiting. So, I gave my final presentation at the end of the semester after the students had already left so I didn’t get anyone sick.”



“You’re telling me that I had a class with you for a whole year and I never saw you once?”

“You may have saw me, but you didn’t *see* me.”

There were about thirty people in Mrs. Davis’s Honors English class, so I guess it could’ve been possible to not see someone. But for an entire year? Was I that oblivious to my surroundings?

I still gave Timothy a hard time about keeping our shared class a secret from me at graduation. He said there was no point or reason to tell me when we would probably never see each other again.

The barista calling my drinks out brought me back to reality. The heat of the summer air caused sweat to pool under my arms, so I hurried into the hospital where the air conditioning ran on full blast.

Timothy was already at work when I stepped off the elevator. The cool temperature of the office felt nice to my overheated body. I’ve always loved summer, but it had always been about the time off school in the past. Now, I wasn’t sure if I liked summer ever a little bit.

“Hey. Hope you wanted a man drink today because I stopped and got us drinks at the coffee truck.” Timothy was sitting in his personal Offing room, reading a book. I handed him the drink and wiped the condensation on my pants. They were a part of my uniform, so I didn’t care if they were stained.

The Director would probably give me another uniform which would cost him money. I smiled at causing him any inconvenience at all.

Timothy took the drink and sipped at it. “Ahh. That’s the man stuff I’m talking about.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Thank you, Nillie. I appreciate your kindness very much.”

My head cocked to the side. I probably resembled a dog when they heard a funny noise somewhere. “Nillie?”

“I heard Lisa call you that when she came by the other day. When she dropped off your lunch you forgot?”

“Oh, okay. That’s cool.” I didn’t even remember her calling me the old nickname during her short visit.

“Is it okay that I called you that? Timothy asked, almost shyly. He was staring down at the cup I had handed him, then at the wall behind me. He was looking at everything in the room but me.

I took a moment to think. Was I good with him calling me that name? The only people who had ever used it were my close family and the only one who still used it was Lisa. Mother and Father had only used it a few times in the past few years. The name was almost extinct from my life.

Timothy and I were friends. Friends used special nicknames for each other, right? No need for either of us to feel weird about it.

I decided to put him out of his misery of looking everywhere but at me and said, “Sure, I don’t see why not.”

His eyes locked with mine, and a smile broke out on his face that went all the way into his eyes. Could someone smile with their eyes? I wasn’t sure, but Timothy was smiling with his whole body.

“Alright Nillie, busy day ahead of you?” Timothy looked at me, right in the eyes. I chuckled under my breath. He didn't have a problem looking me in the eyes now.

“I’m not sure. I came over to you first, so I haven’t talked to Regina yet.”

“Aww you wanted to come see me first.” he stood and placed his hand on my shoulder.

“I knew you liked me.”

I shrugged his hand off my shoulder. “Yeah, but don’t make me regret that, Timmy.” If he wanted to do nicknames, I could play the same game.

Timothy smiled, kindness radiating in his eyes. He knew what I was doing. “Never, Nillie.”

I departed from Timothy, walking to my own Offing room. This was where I resided if I wasn’t in the break room during my free time.

Regina was sitting in her office, eating her breakfast. I could smell the strawberry oatmeal she loved to eat most mornings. She may turn into a strawberry soon if she doesn’t slow down on the oatmeal.

I slowly crept into the room, knocking on the open door. “Good morning, Regina.”

She looked up from her food, grunting around the spoon she just put in her mouth. “Good morning, Nylah!” She was trying to swallow the food in her mouth, but it was obvious that the food was hot.

I tried not to giggle as she struggled. She grabbed her water bottle, taking a long swig before gesturing to the seat in front of her desk. “Please, sit.”

I sat in the chair, so similar to what I do most mornings. There were some mornings when Regina would come to my room and give me the orders for the day, but I came to her office most of the time.

“I trust you had a good evening last night?” She raised her eyebrows, waiting for my answer.

“Yes, I did. Thank you, ma’am.”

Regina nodded. “Good, good. Now, the Director has a special task for you to do today.”

She took another bite of her oatmeal.

Anxiety began to seep into my bones. Anything involving the Director couldn’t be good.

“You will be going to the offsite campus of the Healing quadrant in the town of Armony. You’re going to take the Offing serum and other various tools to that location for the Healers stationed there. An assistant will accompany you there and back. You will both return by the end of the workday.”

This was a weird request. I knew the location of Armony was three hours away, but I’d never been there before.

I inwardly groaned because that meant I would be in a car for six hours today with an assistant.

“I know this isn’t an ideal situation for you, but someone has to do it and you are the next person on the list. Plus, the Director specifically wanted you to be the visitor today.” Regina didn’t sound apologetic in the slightest.

“I understand. When will we leave? And will we have a car take us or will I be driving to the location?”

I would do whatever was necessary, but I really did not want to drive to the location. I wasn’t a great driver, especially when it involved six hours of it in one day.

Regina took another sip of her water before answering me. “You will have a driver to escort you and your assistant to the location. All you have to worry about is getting the tools and serum to the head Director of the location.”

That sounded doable. I was nervous, but I knew I must do what the Director wanted, especially if I didn't want to take another trip to his office. That was the last thing I wanted to think about doing.

"When will I leave?" I asked.

"As soon as possible. Considering the drive you must make, the sooner you leave, the better." Regina smiled at me, indicating my dismissal. "Your driver will be waiting for you downstairs at the door. You will know which driver is yours."

"Thank you, ma'am. Will everything already be in the car for me to take?"

"Yes, everything will be ready for you to go." Regina stood, taking her oatmeal bowl to her trash can. "You better get going. Long drive ahead of you."

I nodded. Heading back to the break room, I decided to ditch my lunch and left it in the refrigerator. I didn't have a way to keep the salad cold in the car all day, so hopefully there would be a place to get food while in Armony.

I searched for Timothy, wanting to tell him where I was going for the day, but I couldn't find him anywhere in the building. Before leaving, I asked Regina if she knew where Timothy was, but she informed me she didn't know either.

I decided to go ahead and leave before I had too late of a start to Armony. Someone would tell Timothy where I had gone. If not, I will see him tomorrow.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The drive to Armony went quickly. I always brought a book to work in case there was ever downtime during the day. I was especially happy I had brought it today. A three-hour car ride would have been tortuous with a driver I didn't know and an assistant who didn't seem too excited to speak to me.

The assistant was the same one I'd had for my first—and only—Offing. I had seen him around the hospital since the Offing, but I had never actually spoken to him.

The assistant had been waiting outside of the car when I exited the hospital. He gave a small smile and nod upon seeing me, obviously remembering me from the task we performed so long ago.

Our conversation upon entering the car had been short and sweet.

“Good morning.” I'd said.

He nodded his head again. “Good morning.”

I had just buckled my seatbelt. The car was actually a small limo and there was a cooler in the corner filled with water, sodas, and teas. I could have brought my lunch today. I averted my attention to the assistant who sat in the seat along the side of the car. He was sitting to the left of me, our legs nearly touching at this angle.

“How have you been? I haven't had the chance to speak to you since starting, but I've seen you around the hospital in the past few weeks. I'm Nylah.”

This small smile of his must have been a signature thing for him because he had done it multiple times since I walked outside.

“I'm Matthew.”

I nodded. He was nice, but he obviously didn't want to speak to me.

“It’s so nice to officially meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too.” That was it. I didn’t get anything else from him during the whole car ride.

I pulled my book out and opened it to where I had left off. I couldn’t find a bookmark last night, so I settled with dog-earring the page. Lisa said I was a psychopath for willingly doing that, but I was so sleepy that I couldn’t have found a bookmark if I’d wanted to.

I began reading and didn’t look up until I heard the driver open the divider and call out, “Ten minutes until arrival.” He closed the divider promptly. He didn’t want to talk to me longer than necessary either.

Matthew had been on his phone the whole ride, probably playing games or maybe he was reading too.

“It looks like we are pulling up on the location.” Matthew pocketed his phone, craning his head over the seat opposite him to see outside the window.

“Have you been to this location before?” I asked, hoping to get more than a one-word response out of him by the end of this trip.

He nodded. “Yes, I usually assist the Healer who brings the supplies to this offsite campus. The Director and Regina have requested that I be the one who accompanies all Healers to this campus, but sometimes things come up and I can’t attend. So, most of the time it’s me.”

I knew my mouth was hanging open. This was the most he had said to me all day.

“Is this place like Morrigan in any way?” My home wasn’t perfect, but I did enjoy living there.

“Yes and no. This place is a hundred times stricter on its citizens than Morrigan is. Their border control is insane compared to Morrigan.” Matthew said. He must’ve been telling the truth about coming here frequently because he knew so much about the city.

“They have border control when it’s just a different province? Not a different country?” I asked. Border control for a province did sound a little over the top.

Matthew nodded. “They have a border control unit. They want to know everyone who comes in and everyone who goes out. Do you have your identification card?”

I nodded.

“Good. You have to give it to the border patrol. They scan it to track how many times you visit and enter.” Matthew pulled his phone back out to look at something.

I dug my identification card out of my bag, gripping it tightly in my hand. Matthew somehow already had his out. I could see the border patrol ahead. There were probably fifteen lanes all leading to a small booth where an attendant sat. There was a metal barricade constructed so no one could sneak inside.

The driver pulled up to an empty booth, handing the attendant his identification card.

Matthew rolled the window of the limo down, handing the attendant his card next.

“Where is your destination?” The attendant asked.

“Official Healer business. We are transporting goods from one campus to another. We’re just dropping things off and we will be on our way.”

The attendant handed us all back our identification cards. He was a large man who looked like he spent every waking moment at the gym. I was immediately intimidated by this man who seemed perfectly nice.

“How long do you plan to stay?” The attendant asked.



Matthew answered, “Long enough to drop these things off and get food to eat for our long journey back home.”

He spoke with a level of charm that compelled the attendant to let us through with no further questions.

The campus was only a few minutes’ drive from the border patrol, so it didn’t take us long to reach the location. The winding trees and flourishing flowers were a blur in the window. I tried to watch the colors flash through the windows, but the motion hurt my eyes too much. I looked away from the window and thought about Timothy,

I wished I’d had the chance to tell him where I was going. We always spent many of our days together when we weren’t working. Eating lunch with someone other than him today would be strange. I had eaten lunch with him every day since my first. To my surprise, he had turned out to be a wonderful friend in this time of change in my life.

The car came to a stop, and Matthew opened the door.

I get out of the car, unsure of what will be greeting me until I see it. There is a large brown tent pitched in the middle of a wooded area. We are just off the highway, so it isn’t like we are in the forest.

The tent is huge, bigger than anyone I’ve ever seen. There are people milling around under it, rushing supplies to the others, and tending to their patients.

“Do they do their Healer duties outside like this? Just in the open air?” I leaned over to ask Matthew.

He nodded. “It’s why their location is set up away from prying eyes. There’s no one to see what is happening. If there are wanderers who are snooping around, they have security patrolling the outskirts of the campus.”

“Wow. They really take their patrol seriously here.” I say, still taking in the campus and how different it is from ours.

Matthew guided me to what must be this Director's office. There was a makeshift room built by stacks of crates and boxes. I wouldn't call it a real office, but rather a separation of the Director from everyone else.

He was sitting at his desk. Is that what all Directors did?

This guy looked different than the Healing Director. This guy was young. He didn't look much older than me, but I knew he had to be. No Director would be this young. The government wouldn't allow it.

He spoke when we entered. “Hello, Matthew,” he averted his gaze to me. “Hello, there. I see you've brought someone new today.” He spoke the last part to Matthew but kept his leering eyes on me.

His eyes didn't leave me as he spoke. Was it a requirement to have a spine-chilling aura about you as a Director?

“Yes, this is Nylah. She is relatively new to the Healing quadrant. The Director wanted to send her specifically to learn the operations of one of the off-site campuses.

There were more?

They didn't give me a chance to ask before the Director got up and headed for the door. Matthew and I both followed behind him like trained puppy dogs.

“Well, Nylah. Welcome to the Armony Healing quadrant.” He didn't stop walking. He looked like he was headed to the car Matthew and I had come from. I guess he wanted to see and inspect the goods we had brought with us.

“I trust you both had a good trip? I know Morrigan is quite the drive from Armony. Of course, Matthew here is used to making the trip.” He opened up the trunk of the limo to see what we had brought.

“How often do we bring supplies to this campus?” I asked.

“Once a month,” Matthew answered me.

After the inspection of the supplies, the Director called a few Healers to come and fetch the stash in the trunk. They carried it off into the office we had just come from.

After leaving the offsite campus, Matthew and I decided to stop for lunch. He knew of a diner down the road that had great cheeseburgers, so we stopped. I got a cheeseburger, fries, and a chocolate shake. Even with Lisa, I hadn't been out to eat in so long, so I decided to splurge. Matthew got some kind of burger that had peppers and onions on it that also looked delicious.

I succumbed to a nap on the way home, making the journey home much less than the journey there.

\*\*\*

I awoke to someone shaking me and saying my name gently. Matthew was leaning over me, trying to wake me.

The sunshine had faded since I was last awake. The light now shined haphazardly through the tall buildings around me.

Looking at the clock, I realized the workday wasn't over yet. Timothy would be inside, so I made my way through the door and up the elevator.

The hallway was quieter than usual. At this point in the day, everyone would be excited about heading home for the weekend. Friday evenings were always chaotic and loud around the Healing quadrant.

But today, there was only silence. I didn't even think there was anyone in the building. If Matthew noticed the silence, he didn't acknowledge it.

"Well, I'm going to head out for the day. Riding in a car all day always exhausts me. Have a good weekend, Nylah." I waved and said my goodbyes, then walked to my room.

What I saw when I walked in made me want to turn around and walk right out the door. The Director was sitting in my chair, reading a book.

"Hello, sir. Can I help you?" I asked, warily.

He looked up when he heard me, smiling the sleazy smile that he had done so many times before.

"Hello, Nylah. How was your first trip to the Armony Healing quadrant? I trust you enjoyed yourself?" He didn't even acknowledge my question.

I nodded. "Yes, I did. Thank you for the opportunity to learn about these other communities."

"Of course, of course."

I waited for him to say something else, but he didn't. "Can I help you with something?" I asked, trying not to sound pushy.

"Oh, yes. Please pull you a seat up." He gestured to the chair in the corner that I didn't see. He must've brought it in prior because that hadn't been there before.

I did as he said and pulled the chair over. It felt strange sitting across from him in my own room. I'd done this in his office, but this was *my* room. I didn't want him in here, but there was nothing I could do about it.

I wished Timothy were here with me.

“I wanted to show you how other community Healing quadrants work so that you could see the differences in how we operate from others. They have a much stricter outlook on life than what we do. Isn’t that nice? How we are free to live without the stress of that regime weighing us down.”

I wasn’t sure where he was going with this.

“I just want you to remember what could happen if we stray too far from what is right. Just like how we don’t have cameras here because of the sacred nature of life and how the people don’t deserve to have their Offing captured on film. However, we made the decision a few years ago to install a few cameras to ensure the safety of all involved. We don’t want to be working and something... uncalled for happen, do we?”

Suddenly, my lunch was threatening to make an appearance. The floor felt as if it had fallen out from under me. They *did* have cameras? This was not good. What if they saw Timothy? What if they knew? I needed to find Timothy *now*.

I hoped my face was hiding my feelings. I hoped I wasn’t pale, but I knew I probably was. “We have cameras?” My voice sounded smaller than I intended it to. I cleared my throat, trying to make it stronger.

He nodded at me like I’d just told him a joke. “Of course, silly. Do you think an established place like this wouldn’t have any?”

I tried to catch my breath. “What about the sanctity of life and all that?”

He smiled. “Well, we don’t show anyone the videos. We only keep the files because we worry about everyone's safety. We don’t want anything to happen to anyone while we are working, of course.”

“Of course not,” I said.

“Additionally, we keep the cameras to ensure the hospital's discretion is intact if any... conflict in the quadrant may occur.”

I gulped. “What does that mean exactly?”

“If any of the Healers get any bright ideas to cause destruction, we have evidence of them doing so.”

I felt like I was going to pass out.

“Well, thank you for the talk, sir. I am very appreciative of the atmosphere and community we have here.” I’m not sure how I managed to get those words out of my mouth coherently.

“My pleasure, Nylah. I hope you learned a lot today.” His face told me he knew something. Something I didn’t want him to know.

I ignored his looks and decided to get on with the conversation. I wanted to get away from him as soon as possible. “Do you know if Timothy is still here?”

His smirk grew even more sinister. “I sent everyone home early for the day. It is Friday after all, so why not get the weekend started early?”

I waited for him to answer my original question.

“As for Mr. Brewers, I sent him on very early this morning. He didn’t even get the chance to do his first Offing today.”

The dread built up inside me. I knew something was wrong. “So, he went home.”

The Director still had his smirk. “You could say that. Well, Nylah. Again, I hope you learned how lucky you are.”

I nodded. “Yes, sir.”

He began to walk out the door but paused and turned around to me. The outline of his silhouette stood in the doorway.

“I did lie a bit. Mr. Brewster did get to participate in an Offing today, but not as the Healer.” This man had the audacity to laugh. “Remember, Nylah. Don’t forget.” And he walked out the door.

My eyes widened, understanding sinking in at his words. I felt like I couldn’t breathe. Air was a foreign thing to me right now.

*Timothy.*

The reality of the Director’s words sunk in, and tears began to leak down my face. I cried and cried and cried. However, I didn’t make a sound because I wouldn’t have the Director hearing me right now.

I guess he could watch this back on film later if he wanted to.

I knew what this talk was about now. He was telling me to watch my back or else I would be next.

*Timothy.*

I didn’t even get to say goodbye to him. I don’t even remember the last thing I said to him this morning. Was he even alive when I left?

I clamped a palm over my mouth to muffle the sob that threatened to come out. I picked up my bag and walked out the door. The tears were flowing, but I would not make a sound until I was home and in my bed.

A vision of what our friendship could have been bloomed in my mind. I had made a friend who considered me a friend too and this place I hated had taken him from me.

All for doing the right thing.

The pain blossomed in my chest, making me feel like I couldn't breathe again.

I entered the elevator, wiping the tears from my eyes. I couldn't fall apart right here in the hospital for the Director to see. I would not let him see what his actions had done to me.

He would pay for this eventually.

I would make him pay for this.

For Timothy.

\*\*\*

*Well, here we are, folks.*

*Timothy's actions have finally caught up with him.*

*I don't like the Director, but I do appreciate him letting me come and visit the boy.*

*Place my hands upon his soldiers and say fly high, soldier.*

*Timothy was a stupid little boy who got in over his head.*

*I think I would have left him alone if it weren't for his little heroic stunt, but he didn't give me an option. He did this to himself.*

*I was just the enforcer.*

*Maybe the little girl will learn from his mistakes and do her job correctly. No one needs heroes around this place. Especially the little Life Takers.*

*They always grow to enjoy the job and grow to love the high they get off the power they feel.*

*This little Life Taker will be different though. I think I will leave her alone, just to see what happens. She will be an interesting one to see through the years, I think. When I sat next to her, she had an aura different from all the other Life Takers.*

*Purer.*



*I must leave her alone to see how she repays the Director for this horrid act he inflicted on her dear Timothy.*

*Maybe she will take the wretched Director down.*

*I hate that guy.*

*He has had this power for too long.*

*The little Life Taker will challenge him, show him the true definition of power.*

*I can't wait to watch.*

## Works Cited

Ardagha, Phillip. "It's a Steal." *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/jan/06/featuresreviews.guardianreview26>

nan, Bernadette. "Literature and the Intimate Space of Death." *Antipodes*, vol. 22, no. 2,

2008, pp. 103–09. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41957713>. Accessed 13 Nov.

2023.

Chicago Public Library. <https://www.chipublib.org/markus-zusak-biography/>

Crain, Henrietta. "Basic Concepts of Death in Children's Literature." *Elementary English*, vol.

49, no. 1, 1972, pp. 111–15. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41387048>. Accessed 13

Nov. 2023.

Fincel, Abigayl Christine. "Facing Death in *The Book Thief*: Confronting the Real of the

Holocaust and Morality." 2018, pp. 1-41. Accessed 12 Nov. 2023.

<https://library.ndsu.edu/ir/bitstream/handle/10365/28152/Facing%20Death%20in%20The>

[%20Book%20Thief%20-](https://library.ndsu.edu/ir/bitstream/handle/10365/28152/Facing%20Death%20in%20The)

[%20Confronting%20the%20Real%20of%20the%20Holocaust%20and%20Mortality.pdf?](https://library.ndsu.edu/ir/bitstream/handle/10365/28152/Facing%20Death%20in%20The)

[sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://library.ndsu.edu/ir/bitstream/handle/10365/28152/Facing%20Death%20in%20The)

Hernandez, Alexander A. "Telling the Tale: Sharing Elie Wiesel's 'Night' with Middle School

Readers." *The English Journal*, vol. 91, no. 2, 2001, pp. 54–60. *JSTOR*,

<https://doi.org/10.2307/822346>. Accessed 13 Nov. 2023.

Hillkirk, R. Keith. "Death as a Theme in Literature." *The English Journal*, vol. 71, no. 4, 1982,

pp. 48–49. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/817847>. Accessed 13 Nov. 2023.

Pachmuss, Temira. "The Theme of Love and Death in Tolstoy's the Death of Ivan Ilyich."

*American Slavic and East European Review*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1961, pp. 72–83. *JSTOR*,

<https://doi.org/10.2307/3001246>. Accessed 13 Nov. 2023.

Ronn, Ellen. "Narrative Space: Exploring Death in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*." 2021, pp. 1-33. Accessed 12 Nov. 2023.

<https://www.divaportal.org/smash/get/diva2:1588070/FULLTEXT02>

Schwarz, Daniel R. "The Ethics of Reading Elie Wiesel's 'Night.'" *Style*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1998, pp. 221–42. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42946424>. Accessed 13 Nov. 2023.

Stevenson, Deborah. Review of *The Book Thief*. *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, vol. 59 no. 9, 2006, p. 389-390. *Project MUSE*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/bcc.2006.0355>.

Thresia, Ancy. "Literacy and Power of Words in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*." 2019, pp. 150-155. <https://thematicsjournals.org/index.php/hrj/article/view/7166/3373>

Wolk, Steven. "Reading Democracy: Exploring Ideas That Matter with Middle Grade and Young Adult Literature." *The English Journal*, vol. 103, no. 2, 2013, pp. 45–51. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24484192>. Accessed 29 Nov. 2023.