

In the Heart of Zeena

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My classmates have the problem solved in just seconds. I see holographic models pop up around the room, turning green as Teacher labels them correct. I feel everyone staring at me as I scribble away madly on my e-desk. I am the only one still working. Teacher walks over to me, unable to hide her disappointment.

“Kamila, have you finished yet?”

“Almost, not quite...”

“Kamila,” Teacher says, sounding impatient. I turn.

“Class is dismissed,” she says.

I stand up to go, but teacher calls me back.

“Miss Che.”

I stop, and slowly turn to face her.

“Yes, teacher?”

“How is learning going for you this year?” Teacher asks.

“It is enjoyable.” I respond, knowing that is untrue.

“I’m glad to hear it,” she pauses. “Do you know what your average for the past session is, Kamila?”

“No, Teacher. I don’t.” I respond.

“It is in the 200 range, Miss Che.”

I gasp. This is very low, even for me.

“We need to work on this, Kamila,” she says.

“Yes, Teacher.” I say softly.

She continues, ignoring my comment.

“I don’t want to do this, Kamila, but I have been considering reporting your grade issues. You are about 800 below average, anyway.”

“Oh, no, please don’t, Teacher,” I say, suddenly desperate. I don’t even want to know what will happen to me if the elders find out about my learning failures.

Teacher pauses, as if in consideration.

“Okay, Kamila,” she sighs. “I will give you one month to bring your grades up by at least 200. From there I will expect dramatic improvement. You are dismissed.”

“Thank you, Teacher,” I say gratefully. I step through the Transport set into the south wall of the classroom, feeling a cold shiver pass through my body as I enter the portal.

I step out into the main hall of the U-16 dormitory, under the Transport labeled *Eleventh-Year Learning: Room A-24*. I walk to my dorm room, and scan my Wrist Chip on the door. It beeps, flashing green, and slides open.

“Welcome back, Kamila Che,” says the feminine voice of my room. “I would like to remind you that you have signed up to volunteer at the Committee House at 14:00 today.”

“What time is it now, Monchi?” I ask my room.

“It is currently 13:43. Your volunteering will begin in 17 minutes.” I swear, and quickly change into my Committee House uniform: black tank top dress and gray flats. It is drab and colorless, like all clothing in the city of Zeena.

As I step out of the Transport nearest to the Committee House, the cold December wind hits me like a wave, penetrating my thin dress and sending shivers up my spine, and I wish, once again, that our uniforms came with jackets.

I walk the few blocks to the Committee House, and scan my WristChip at the door. A monotone voice tells me:

“Welcome to the Committee House, otherwise known as the Heart of Zeena, Kamila Che.” The round door then dilates, revealing Mikel, my volunteer guide, standing in the Committee House’s main hall.

“Hello, Kamila.” The holograph greets me. I step in, and the door closes behind me. “So?” I ask.

“Did I...?”

“Yes, Kamila, you have been promoted,” he responds

“Thank you,” I breathe. Mikel glances at me, looking annoyed, as if I have interrupted him.

“To level six,”

I gasp, this time unable to hide my surprise.

“Level...six?” I ask. I cannot believe what Mikel is saying. Level six and above is where the elders work. And I am only a volunteer. Volunteers are never allowed that high up in the Committee House.

“Yes, Kamila, level six.” Mikel says, sounding impatient. “Shall we head up?”

“Yes, Mikel,” I say, taking a deep breath to calm my nerves.

My heart nearly stops as the lift door opens, but the room we step into looks nothing out of the ordinary: A large wooden reception desk sits across from the lift, an e-cabinet on one wall, and a shelf of old-fashioned paper books on the other. Two hallways flank the lift, each leading away. I turn just in time to see a man approaching from the right. He frowns at Mikel, as if a holograph should not be allowed in such an important area. Mikel immediately dissipates, fading until I can see the now-closed doors of the lift behind him. Within seconds, he is gone. I suddenly feel very alone with this stranger whom I know has just introduced himself, but it is beyond me to remember his name.

“...And there will be no use of internet, personal gadgets or items while you reside in level six,” the man says. “And lastly, you are not to talk about anything that happens here with anyone, no matter what the circumstances.”

Though I know the man is still talking, I cannot pay attention to what he is saying. It is as if his words are stuck on replay in my brain, interrupted only by the spiraling of my confused thoughts.

“You are not to talk about anything that happens here.”

Secrecy?

“With anyone.”

Secrecy didn't *happen* in Zeena.

“Not ever.”

Or...did it?

“...You are very lucky to have been promoted to level six, Kamila. It is very unusual, especially for someone your age. We will expect...” he pauses.

“Kamila, are you listening?”

“Yes, Mr. ...” I trail off.

“George,” the man says, sounding annoyed.

“And as I was saying, it is a huge privilege to be working up here, so we will expect...Kamila, are you listening to me?” George sounds more than annoyed now.

“Yeah I uh just...sorry, Mr. George. Um...busy day. I'm kind of tired.” I can't stop stumbling over words, but for some reason George looks relieved.

“George,” he says, smiling “just call me George.”

“Kay,” is all I can manage.

"It's okay, Kamila. Most people react this way when they first come to work here. Not that most people advance three whole levels so quickly! And you're only just volunteering, is that right? Not even 16 yet?"

I nod.

"Well, Kamila, let's take you to the office and introduce you to the rest of the staff!"

I stand stunned for a moment, unable to process anything George has just said. Then, realizing he has already left, I quickly follow him.

The room George shows me to is as bland as the first: white walls surround a circular wooden table, and a group of people sit around the table on small wooden stools. The people look young, not elderly, which surprises me. When we enter, what appears to have been a tense discussion amongst what I can only assume are the elders stops, and everyone jumps to their feet. One woman steps forward. She is dressed the same as the others: white lab coat, white suit pants, and white dress shoes.

"Is she the one?" the woman asks simply.

"Yes," George responds "I think she is."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it," the woman looks relieved

"What did you say her name was?"

"Kamila," I say, butting into their conversation. "my name is Kamila."

"Ah, yes," the woman says "Kamila. Well, do come in," she says, gesturing at the open door at the back of the room.

"I'm afraid I have a lot to tell you," her smile has vanished.

I walk through the open door, trailed closely by the woman, who closes the door behind her. She motions for me to sit. I don't move.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"That does not matter, Kamila," she says.

"Who are you?" I demand. "What is going on here?"

The woman sighs. "I am Dr. Addison Valer. And what we came here to talk about is much more important than my name." She pauses, waiting for me to respond. I say nothing.

"Kamila," the woman starts slowly. "Do you ever struggle with complex schoolwork when no one else does?" she stops, glancing at me. "Do you often feel empathy for someone or something when no one else does?" Another pause. "Do you ever question the way things are? Do you ever question the way *Zeena* is?"

There is a brief pause as I attempt to block out what Dr. Valer is saying.

“No, no, no,” I whisper, eventually, “it can’t be.”

“So you knew, then?” she asks.

“No!” I say, still indignant. “But... yes. Well, sometimes-I... I don’t *know!*” I collapse into a chair, covering my face with my arms

“It’s all right, Kamila, just tell me what you do know.”

I realize that Dr. Valer is taking notes on a workpad, but I know I have nothing to lose, so I speak anyways.

“There would be times...” I stop when my voice cracks. I’m trying hard not to cry. “Times when something would be so unfair and... and... The tears come.

“I would want them to change... ask them to change... b-but no one else would listen. No one would care it would... it would... everyone would...” I’m sobbing now.

“They would say it’s...it’s ‘just the way it is, just the way it is, Kamila. D-don’t... don’t fight it’ and when... when people would get hurt they... I-I would almost have more s-sympathy for them then they had for... for themselves and-“

“Quiet, Kamila, quiet.” Dr. Valer glances around anxiously.

I know that too much commotion can be heard from the lower levels, even through the thick barrier walls of level six, but I don’t care. Nothing they can do to me will be worse than what they already are planning to.

“No!” I scream, jumping up from my chair, suddenly full of rage.

“I don’t believe you!” Then I crumple to my knees, sobbing once more.

“Shh, Kamila!” Dr. Valer says. Then, more gently, “Kamila-maybe... maybe it’s better to see for yourself.” The woman reaches down to the joint of her jawbone, and gripping the skin, she pulls up. Her pretty-mask comes off, revealing her gray-metal robotic face underneath.

But this is not surprising. Zeena is a robot city, and what Humans remain on Earth were banished long ago. Everyone knows this.

Dr. Valer reaches for my face. I pull away.

“But... how?” I ask, knowing I sound as horrified as I feel.

“Your parents were, too. They snuck in together. This isn’t your fault, Kamila. We will make this as easy as we can.” I fall to my knees, and my eyes close. I feel the slight tug as Dr. Valer pulls off my pretty-mask, but this time I don’t fight back. When I force my eyes open, what I see in the mirrored wall across from me is horrifying: where my silver, robotic one should be, there is an ugly, human face.

I hear footsteps as more people enter the room, feel strong arms holding me down. I don't fight back. The syringe pierces my skin as a woman speaks.

"You're the last one, Kamila."

I feel myself fading away.

"We've been looking for you for a long, long time."

"And we found you," another voice says, "in the Heart of Zeena."