

Chapter 1

On the Struggle Bus

Some days should come with a warning sign. Like the one I imagined posted on Tomb House's front lawn: "Turn back, creepy house ahead." Or at least they should come with a heaping basket of soft, cuddly kittens to help you deal with the fallout. I had neither as I boarded the bus for my first-ever day of school, still rattled by the girl I'd seen in the bathroom mirror. A girl with my face but a foreign light in her eyes.

I'd chalked it up to being tired from yesterday's move. But I couldn't shake the feeling that the one staring back had been Aurora. Her photos haunted every wall of our Victorian ^{I think describing Aurora's ghostly appearance here would help ground the opening.} family home, hence the pet name Tomb House. We looked so eerily alike that those pictures could easily have been of me. Aurora was only seventeen when she died. I celebrated my seventeenth birthday only three months ago.

The wrinkled bus driver with giant glasses and a jack-o'-lantern grin hollered unintelligibly as he pointed a knobby finger to the empty seat behind him, bringing me out of my reverie. I nodded sheepishly and took the open seat, happy to have it to myself as we rolled past a sign that read "Welcome to downtown Sunnypoint". The kid-gorged bus squeezed its long shape down brick-paved streets lined with dormant cast iron lampposts and still slumbering antique shops, their old-fashioned charm a stark contrast to what came next.

Learned my last name?

Sunnyport High's connection to it. My stomach dropped. What would the kids think when they

"accelerated curriculum" and "especially equipped" floating through closed doors. She'd said

Mom's recent hushed phone conversations suddenly came to mind—terms like

twisting into a double helix—the Eden Research Institute logo. An institute founded by my grandfather Isaac where my parents had worked so many years ago.

muttering and jostling me as they hurried around. I stared at the familiar tree design with roots

A silver plaque on the building's front caught my eye, and I froze in place, with kids

doorway of the school's entrance.

much choice. With bodies surrounding me, I found myself herded toward the tall arched

"What'd ya stop for? Keep moving!" came a girl's voice from behind. Not that I had

body slammed into my backside as other students filed from the bus.

feet wide at the base, or so I'd read—though the dome seemed impressively larger up close. A

dismbarked on the moon. I gaped at the enormous building waiting for me—a hundred and fifty

despite the overcast sky. After years of studying in my cozy den at home, I may as well have

onto the black asphalt of the school parking lot. The nearby sidewalk gleamed almost white,

With a loud wheeze, the bus pulled to a stop at the curb. Heart racing, I took my first step

pointed toward the heavens.

Sunnyport High came into view, its main building a massive glass dome that glowed against the

stormy horizon in the background. Smaller mound-like structures extended from all sides like

connected hamster pods. From the tips of each of the rounded rooftops, decorative metal spires

As the bus heaved across the bridge over the Erie Canal, the sprawling campus of

Inside the main building, holographic projections of people with identical androgynous faces guided students through the lofty space. "Welcome to Sunnyport High, Gemini," one said. *210 = 2-10?*
How did it know my name? "Your homeroom class is with Miss Rainers, room *two ten right* *use numbers*
here in the Central Mound. Go up the first set of stairs and head to your left." Then, at the top of the *winding* stairs, another holograph directed me to my locker. "Make sure to take only what you need for each class. Backpacks are not allowed in the classrooms," it reminded. Meanwhile, news scrolled across the glass ceiling overhead, turning the dome into a giant screen. The school slogan "Cultivating Tomorrow's Generations" frequently flashed between the informational snippets. This was worlds away from Dad's whiteboard drawings and hastily assembled molecular bond demonstrations.

Cool! :) *I love this whole paragraph*

Figuring out how to unlock my locker with the biometric scanner ate up precious time.

"C'mon," I muttered, swiping my hand into the red beam repeatedly before realizing it needed my palm. With a friendly beep, my locker finally opened. I removed a few folders from my backpack and headed to homeroom—just a brief fifteen-minute administrative period before regular classes, as explained by my welcome email—barely making it before the bell. Peering in, I could see thirty other kids had already settled into what looked like high-tech recliners with slim computers built into attached tabletops.

I sighed and took a hesitant step inside. At first, curious eyes ~~had~~ lifted to scan the newcomer, but they quickly ~~shifted~~ darted from me to the front of the classroom, where a large board pulsed with a blue glow. Several students exchanged puzzled glances, and one whispered, "Blue? It's never done that before."

"What is going on with this confounded contraption?" A gray-haired woman with immaculate pronunciation approached the board. She tapped a panel on the board's side and the

close, and still quite embarrassed.

"Thanks, I'll... keep that in mind." I flashed a forced smile, not comfortable with him so

the areas have holographic guides installed yet."

the domes and connecting tubes. It took me ages to find the Music Mound the first time. Not all

years looking up already. If you need anything, just ask. The school can be confusing with all

He leaned closer, his curls shifting higher on his forehead with his smile. "Sweet! This

"Yeah, just moved here."

here?"

When I only shrugged, he continued, "I'm Matt. Haven't seen you before. You new

"what was that about? You always make the tech go crazy, or was that just for dramatic effect?"

"Heeeyy," a shaggy-haired boy looked from the tech at the front of the room to me,

distraught from all the staring.

*More
Physical
Interaction
Love*
consciousness on overdrive from so much attention. At least the view out the window would help

I felt the eyes of every student on me as I made my way to the seat, my self-

worxstation by the window."

into a genuine smile. She gestured toward an empty seat across the room. "You can sit at that

"Welcome to Sunnypot High, dear. I'm Miss Rainiers." Her berry-glossed lips curved

"Um, yeah," I mumbled with a sudden desire to disappear into the floor.

meeting a minor celebrity.

been expecting you." Her tone held a mix of reverence and excitement one might use when

perfectly matched her dress, widened when she saw me in the doorway. "You're Gemini. We've

display transitioned to a gentle white. Her blue eyes, accented by blue-rimmed glasses that

Miss Rainers came back and placed a slim tablet on my desktop. "I almost forgot your student device. There's a training tutorial pre-loaded that should help you get acclimated to our systems." She lowered her voice. "Our technology can be a bit overwhelming at first, but unlike me," she added with a nervous laugh, patting her chest, "you're young and should catch on quickly."

I thanked her, wondering why on earth she worked at a tech-savvy school if she found it overwhelming, and examined the device. The sleek black surface caught the light as I turned it over in my hands, its edges seamlessly rounded.

"You turn it on right here." Matt's curls fell into his eyes as he leaned forward and pointed to a knob on the side. He sat back quickly when our teacher began speaking.

"Good morning!" Miss Rainers announced from the front of the room. "We have a very special young lady joining us. She's just moved here from Colorado. Her generous family, through the Eden Research Institute, in addition to sponsoring a number of the special programs we offer here, has donated much of the state-of-the-art technology to our school. Miss Eden?"

Long
interruption.
Too many
commas.
Split to
two sentences.

Would you introduce yourself?"
or rephrase: "Oh no. I swallowed past the sudden tightness in my throat and rose to my feet, my hands trembling slightly. Memories of Dad coaching me through public speaking exercises flooded back, making my eyes tingle with forming tears. *Don't think of him right now.* "Hello, I'm Gemi Eden," I managed, my voice smaller than I'd intended. Matt's eyes went wide.

A boy in a black hoodie next to him frowned as he studied my face. I couldn't help noticing how his tousled dark hair and angry eyebrows stood out against his ghostly pallor—like he hadn't been outside for months. But his eyes spoke volumes. I sensed a deep pain in them, or maybe ~~it was merely my own reflecting from him~~. A ~~pain~~ I worked very hard to keep hidden.
> *I was projecting my own pain.* sting, dull ache

good things?

an extreme reaction to some donated funding and technology by my grandfather. weren't those
studied my face. Some even averted their eyes when our gazes met. The frosty reception seemed

One by one, the others stood and gave their names. Most seemed frustrated as they

uttered to his desk before sinking back down.

The boy in the hoodie flinched, then rose with obvious reluctance. "Jess Blakely," he

Starting with you, Jess."

don't we go around and introduce ourselves? We'll go in alphabetical order by last name.

"Now," Miss Rainiers continued with renewed energy, "since this is Gemini's first day, why

subsided as I took a deep breath.

I sank back into my seat, grateful to be out of the spotlight. The twinge in my eyes

enrollment process.

about my situation than she was letting on. ~~What~~? Mom must have said something during the

Eden feels welcome during this transition." Something in her tone suggested she knew more

Gemi. We're so pleased to have you with us." She turned to the class. "Let's make sure Miss

Miss Rainiers stepped in smoothly, casting the offender a warming glance. "Thank you,

crumble my already fragile self-control. Keep it together. Just breathe.

room. What did they have against being an Eden? A sudden burst of anxiety threatened to

room. My head spun around, seeing for the first time the annoyed looks of several faces in the

"Another Eden in Sunnyport, just what we need," piped a voice from the back of the

*farther = further = far / distance
further = further = distance*

Could he see it in me, too? When he caught me watching, he looked away. My throat tightened

The bell startled me from my thoughts. Our brief homeroom period had ended. I gathered my things to leave when Matt asked in a hushed voice, "You're an Eden?"

"So my birth certificate says," I replied with a smile that said "what-can-I-do?"

Matt's face paled. "Wooaahh, didn't know." His previously friendly face elongated with disbelief before he grabbed his things and scrambled toward the door.

Shocked, I stared after him, my mouth hanging open. Miss Rainers came toward me then, tapping a tablet in her hands. "There, I've activated your dining access in the system. You're all set for lunch. The cashiers will be happy to assist if you need help. Don't hesitate to ask."

"Oh, um, thanks." I nodded.

"Do you know where you're going?" Her eyes studied me with concern.

"Calc two with Mr. Summers, North Mound, room one twelve," I repeated from memory.

"I think I can find it."

She smiled. "You'll do fine, dear, but if you have any trouble, the holographic guides will help you. We're happy to have you with us, Gemi."

Unsure of what else to say, I cast her a weak smile and hurried out the door, my stomach twisting in a ball of knots. In the hallway, a flash of lightning illuminated the glass corridors, followed seconds later by a low rumble of thunder. The storm that had been threatening all morning was finally breaking.

With frequent help from the holographic guides, I made my way to the North Mound, the Central Mound's baby twin. Fat raindrops grew into sheets of water on the connecting glass corridor. By the time I reached the smaller dome, the storm roared overhead. Briefly, I imagined myself at the base of a waterfall, much like the one near our Colorado home—a place now as distant and unreachable as my life before Dad's illness.

Breathe, you've got this.

I took several slow, calming breaths, then entered Mr. Summers' math class. The room was unlike any I'd seen yet. Holographic displays hovered above each desk, some showing

student profiles or customized welcome screens as students logged in with their tablets. A few

early arrivals had already pulled up notes or homework from previous classes.

Around me, interactive walls like the one in homeroom shifted slowly between

varying shades of pink, green, and blue, creating the impression of a living space and seeming to

prefer blue whenever I drew near. Odd. Was the tech responding to me?

A man in his early to mid-thirties stood at the front, Mr. Summers I presumed,

manipulating a floating array of numbers and symbols above his palms with graceful hand

gestures.

He turned to greet me, then stalled as recognition morphed into pure shock. The holographic display above his hands began blinking furiously, and he stumbled with a slim control panel on his wrist to cut the display. I stepped forward, uncertain, as his face drained of color.

"I... I'm Gemini Eden," I stammered, using my full name instead of my nickname in my confusion. "It's my first day."

"Aurora?" he whispered, so quiet I almost didn't hear it.

"I... I'm Gemini Eden," I stammered, using my full name instead of my nickname in my grandfather mentioned..." His voice faded as he continued to stare, his green eyes wide and unfocused. "I just didn't expect..."

The seconds ticked away on a digital wall display, the only sound in the room. Finally, he took in a deep, ragged breath. "I apologize. I need a moment. It seems I'm not feeling well." He

glanced at the teaching assistant, who had been working quietly in the corner. "Ms. Chen? Take over, please."

Without another word, he hurried from the room.

As I stood there, confused and embarrassed, the full weight of my situation crashed over me. A few days ago, I was in Colorado, surrounded by familiar mountains in a place that made sense. Now, I was in some bizarre, high-tech school where a teacher had just called me by my dead sister's name. I glanced around at my classmates' curious faces, feeling more alone than ever. Why had he called me Aurora? First the pictures at Tomb House, then seeing her in the bathroom mirror that morning, and now this. I couldn't seem to escape her.

Amidst the pelting rain above and the students whispering around me, I took a deep breath. Only second period, and already I wanted to bolt for the exit. But as disorienting as this new world seemed, I'd already survived the worst day of my life when we lost Dad. Nothing else could ever top that. Whatever Sunnypoint High, Tomb House, and Aurora had in store for me, I would meet^{it} head-on. Aurora may have shared my face, but our similarities stopped there. ~~Cause~~

there was one thing I knew for sure: I was *not* my sister.

↳ Maybe try changing this to present-tense?[?]

I like the
improvements
you made!
Great job!