

*Great opening!*

## Chapter 5

### To be Eden, or not Eden: That is the Question

No longer trusting *any* reflective surface at Tomb House, I waited until I got to school to check my appearance. Bloodshot eyes and pale skin greeted me in the bathroom mirror. A corpse would have had a rosier complexion. I pinched my cheeks to revive some color in them.

A stall door opened behind me. I looked over my shoulder to see Ashton emerge and approach the sink next to me. At first she didn't recognize me—she was still tucking her shirt into her jeans—then our eyes met in the bathroom mirror and [she paused. "You look about as bad as I usually feel. Rough night?"] — *Maybe make this dialogue its own paragraph. Better transition from internal to external.* "Something like that," I nodded, a little embarrassed.

"Here." She pulled an eyeliner pencil from the back pocket of her jeans and handed it to me. "It'll help hide the red in your eyes."

"Um..." I looked at the pencil, having never used one before, and awkwardly lifted it to my eye. "Thanks."

She shook her head. "Here, let me show you." Her palm opened for me to hand the pencil back to her. I did as she asked and held still while she leaned into my space. "Don't close your lids all the way, keep them about half-open. Yeah, like that." She ran the tip along my upper eyelid while I tried not to flinch. No one, other than my parents, had ever been so

close to me before. I could smell her cherry lip gloss and see red veins in her eyes. Maybe she'd had a long night, too.

"There," she said when finished. "Much better. You know, you've got really pretty eyes. I can see why Jess likes you." *feels a bit presumptuous at this point.  
Maybe change this to "why Jess took an interest in you"  
or something similar.*

I spluttered. "But he doesn't. He just offered to walk me to gym class, that's all."

"Uh-huh." She tucked the pen back into her pocket. "Jess doesn't just offer to walk anyone anywhere. At least not lately." *Speaking of class, gotta run. Bell's about to ring. See you at lunch.*

*-Add pause here because of shift in topic.*

"Thanks for the help," I said.

She smiled and hurried out the door.

I stared at the girl in the mirror, surprised at the difference. My eyes seemed brighter, and I looked older somehow. Almost like someone else—but in a good way. This Gemi seemed more confident. Was that just because of the makeup? Or did Ashton's compliment have more to do with it? *Avoid back-to-back internal questions when possible.* Whatever the reason, I liked this new Gemi.

Later in homeroom, I laid my head down, hoping for a quick rest. *Except my* *Not complete sentence.* *Pick one or merge into one question. We want readers to be the ones asking internal questions.* My nightmare kept coming back to me as if on auto-scroll—the car rolling, the beeping of the hospital room, the terrifying, numbing cold. My body shivered reflexively in response.

Matt's sudden tense whisper drew me back to the present. "Is it true they found another one? I heard my parents talking about it this morning." I peeked out from under my arm to see Matt turned away from me, talking to Jess. *Another what?*

"A deer this time," Jess replied, his voice low. "Other side of town. Cut up just like Andrew. Eden's sending drones to scan the area."

Matt hissed through his teeth. "That's sooooo crazy. Hope they find whatever's doing it."

I sat up, morbidly curious. Matt went silent and scooted his chair away. Jess glanced at me before returning to his drawing pad, stylus brushing back and forth as he shaded in the wing of some kind of bird. A blackbird maybe? I couldn't see most of it from my angle, and he seemed intent on keeping it that way.

An awkward silence stretched between us, punctuated only by the soft hum of the room's air conditioning and the occasional pings from students' devices. I checked through my school emails, hoping they would distract me from wondering if Mr. Summers was in today. The way he'd paled when he saw me, the way he'd whispered my sister's name—I wasn't sure what to expect when I saw him again.

The bell's jarring ring made me jump. I dug my nails into my palms, preparing myself for what was sure to be an awkward encounter. *Just do it, Gemi.*

I trudged my way to the nearby North Mound. Boots thudded softly behind me. I turned and saw Jess a few paces back, his eyes trained on the floor. He said nothing as he caught up to me, matching my stride as we approached room 112. I thought of Ashton's comment about Jess not walking with anyone. Did this count as walking together? It wasn't as if we were saying anything. But then again, we hadn't said much when we'd walked together yesterday, either.

*Maybe change this to an observation or reasons why it would/wouldn't count.*

When we arrived, I halted in front of the doorway. My hand gripped the cold metal doorframe as I willed myself to go in. My brain hardly registered Jess passing by on my left. "Everything okay?" he asked from inside, his voice gentle.

I looked up and found myself mere inches from his face. I couldn't remember why I'd paused. "What?"

And that's when Jess seemed to notice my defined eyes for the first time. His breath caught, and he stammered, "He... Mr. Summers... isn't here today. His car wasn't in the

parking lot." He continued staring like he'd never seen me before, even though we'd been in several classes together already.

My cheeks flushed from his reaction, but my shoulders relaxed. I hadn't realized how tense I'd been about facing Mr. Summers again. How ~~not~~ ready I was to deal with his connection to Aurora. Especially not after last night's disturbing dream about her.

Jess continued holding the door, his body tense, but his expression... there was something about the way he looked at me—the same searching gaze from yesterday when he'd offered me a ride home. Unlike yesterday, when I'd turned away, afraid he might see too much, I no longer minded. I wanted to be seen. Not my face or my clothes or my name, but (me) I shot him a smile and entered. *Maybe! Yesterday, I'd been afraid he might see too much, but now I wanted to be seen.* True to Jess's word, Mr. Summers didn't show. The teaching assistant babysat us again—if you could call it that. She spent most of the time nose-down in her tablet, only glancing up when the room got too loud. And to think she got paid for that!

The Edens dominated the room. Flynn sprawled in his chair, programming a tiny drone to dance above his head while his workstation projected his homework in the air. His fingers were almost a blur as he worked. He caught me watching and flashed a knowing smile. The speed with which he manipulated his holographic display made my head spin. Beside him, Rowan worked equations with smooth gestures, his gum-pops echoing through the room.

All the Edens moved through their work with the same grace, like their movements were mere afterthoughts. Their tech seemed on a whole other level from mine as well, their screens displaying options and features mine didn't seem to have. Despite spending hours on the training tutorial last night, I still couldn't do half of what they were doing.

Amy noticed my stare and gave me an encouraging nod. "You'll get the hang of it. Not everyone here is raised on this technology like the Edens are. Some of us just tested well

*Be  
Careful not  
to overuse  
italics. If  
you use them  
for internal  
thoughts, be  
VERY  
careful when  
using them  
for emphasis*

enough to be here." There was a hint of pride in her voice, mixed with something harder to place. Resignation, maybe.

I nodded along, feeling caught between two worlds and understanding now why I'd been placed in this advanced class, but unsure how to bridge the gap between what I was and what I appeared to be. I wanted to tell Amy my last name—*tyro!* ~~serioiusly~~, the entire school had to know I was an Eden by now—but Amy was the only one who treated me like a regular person. ~~And~~ I didn't want that to end. So I kept my mouth shut and felt like the world's biggest jerk.

But by the time the fifth period bell rang, a heavy ball of guilt had burrowed a home in my abdomen. I wasn't ~~much~~ in the mood for talking when Flynn and Rowan materialized behind me in the hot food line of the cafeteria, as if they'd been waiting.

"Hey, Eden," Flynn said as he slid into the line behind me with Rowan. A white t-shirt peeked out from beneath Flynn's unbuttoned plaid shirt. "How's the standard interface treating you? Finding your way around all the features?"

"Still trying to figure it out."

Flynn exchanged a knowing look with Rowan. "Aw, that's because you're stuck with the standard setting. Once you get your upgraded access, you'll never go back."

The line moved, and we all moved forward.

"Speaking of upgrades," Flynn continued, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, "I'm having a party at my place this Friday *Eden only.*" He emphasized the last two words with clear meaning. "You in?"

"Yeah, girl, come out and play with us," Rowan cooed, like he could be hanging at the ~~beach named in the graphic~~ of his beige and navy hoodie.  
*You could name the beach!* Maybe something from California like Lake Tahoe to show wealth.

"All the right people." Flynn leaned closer, his caramel-colored eyes fixed on mine. "Kate's going. She'll even give you a ride if you ask her. You should be with your own kind, you know?" My ears perked up at Kate's name. It would be the perfect chance to get to know some of my classmates. See what being an Eden was all about. Amy clearly didn't like them, but I wanted a chance to judge them for myself.

Flynn gives me the ick now, lol.

Rowan nodded. "And Kate's ride is sweet! She'd love to drive you around. C'mon, Gemi. Say you'll come."

"I... I'll think about it." My heart hammered against my ribs, but it was nothing like when Jess leaned close. Flynn's advance seemed ~~somewhat~~ more planned, less genuine.

*Did she pull away because it was her turn or because it was her turn of the gesture? Unclear.*

Flynn's smile widened with satisfaction. "I'm sure you will." He lifted a hand as if to brush my cheek, but it was my turn at the counter, and I pulled away before he could land the gesture. I threw some items on my tray, barely registering what before fleeing to Amy's table. I hadn't even sat down when Jennifer's voice cut through the air. "Didn't you hear? She's an Eden. And not just *any* Eden. She's Isaac Eden's granddaughter." At hearing the words I'd been dreading all morning, I froze in place by the table, my tray still mid-air, my eyes glued to Amy. Her face drained of all color.

Amy lifted her head to meet my gaze, her eyes heavy with hurt. "You let me go on about the Edens yesterday like you weren't one of them?"

"But I'm not!" I urged. "I don't even know them. Sure, Flynn and Rowan talked to me just now to invite me to some party, but honestly—"

Jennifer's expression hardened, her voice sharp. "You're going to Flynn's party?"

"I-I don't know," I spluttered. "I hadn't really thought about it."

Jennifer huffed. "Well, if you're associating with them, then we're out." Her eyes darted to Ashton, who gave me a look of utter betrayal. Jennifer pulled her to her feet. Her

voice softened as she addressed her friend. “C’mon, Ash.” Jennifer continued to murmur into Ashton’s ear as she guided her away. Jess’s jaw clenched as he watched them go.

*What am I missing here?*

My shoulders drooped. “I’m sorry... didn’t mean to upset anyone.”

“Yeah, well, you did,” Amy replied, her eyes pointedly glued to the romance manga in her lap. The distance between us suddenly felt much wider than the few inches of table.

I glanced at Jess, hopeful for an explanation. He eyed me for a long moment, as if hesitating, but then he became fascinated by something far across the cafeteria.

Matt also kept his eyes fixed elsewhere. His fingers drummed a nervous beat against his tray.

I sank into my seat, wishing I could think of something to make the situation better. Everything that came to mind was just an excuse. I ~~had~~ kept my name from Amy. But still...  
*- Don't italicize here.*

At the ring of the bell, I dumped my untouched lunch and turned to find Jess already rushing toward the exit.

“Jess! Wait up!” But he only walked faster, which confused me. Jess already knew my last name. He’d known it since my first morning in homeroom. Why avoid me now?

“Hey, Gemi!” Kate’s long legs caught up to me with ease. “So, you’re coming Friday, right? Flynn’s parties are legendary. His parents are out of town, and he’s got access to all the latest Eden tech.”

“I don’t think—”

“Don’t even try to get out of it!” Kate snapped and draped a strawberry-scented arm over my shoulder. “You belong with us. Tell your mom you’re staying at my place. I’ll drive!”

*Mean  
Girls  
vibes.*

I glanced back at my former friends’ table.

Kate's expression softened. "Look, I know it's complicated. But you're an Eden. Those divisions exist for a reason." She steered me toward the gym. "Come Friday. Get to know your real friends."

### Rephrase to statement

I hesitated, then nodded. What choice did I have? In ten minutes, my entire social world had realigned itself. ~~But~~ <sup>no italics</sup> as we entered the gym, I couldn't shake Ashton's tears, Amy's hurt, or the way Jess wouldn't even look at me. Something ~~must~~ have happened between the

Edens and my friends. The question was: where did that leave me?

this

Must be complete clause  
before colon

No need to italicize.  
Can stand on its own.