

Chapter 2

Are These Kids For Real?

Great
intro! :3

"Weird." Jess stared at me from a lounge chair after Mr. Summers left, his long legs stretched out in front of him, his smooth face a mask of stone.

"Right?" I leaned on a desk to steady myself.

"What's with Teach?" someone whispered.

"Bet he chugged too much Starbucks," came a reply.

"Ooh, maybe we'll get to skip math today!" chimed a third person.

The voices blended into a background hum as I worked to compose myself. Having my teacher mistake me for my dead sister had definitely *not* been on my back-to-school checklist.

"Hey there!" A girl with black-framed glasses and teal-streaked ebony hair popped into view. "I'm Amy. You okay? That was weird with Mr. Summers, right? He's usually super composed." She put her hand on my shoulder.

"I'm fine," I said with a quick nod. "And yeah, pretty weird." Amy waited, and I got the feeling she was hoping I'd say more about it, but there was no way was I discussing Aurora with a stranger.

When it became clear I wasn't continuing, Amy exhaled. "Gotta say, never seen him react to a student like that before." She looked me over. "You a new student?"

"Yeah, I'm Gemi. Just moved here."

A bit
of an
abrupt
introduction.
Why is
Amy
interjecting?
Does she
know her
Eden name?
Maybe ~~just~~ start
with "You okay?"

"Nice! Welcome to Sunnyport. Hey, come sit by me." Without waiting for a response, she guided me to the seat next to hers.

I looked around, counting seven other students—aside from Jess and Amy—in the small class. With a pleasant ping, a message from the administration lit up the front board, letting us know Mr. Summers wasn't feeling well and had to leave early.

"Alright, settle down, class." Ms. Chen, now at the front of the room, crossed her arms and waited for the room to grow silent. "You know the drill. You can work on assignments from your other classes or review the online materials Mr. Summers posted for today. Just keep the noise down, okay?"

With that, she settled into the teacher's chair and began tapping away at her tablet, occasionally glancing up to ensure we weren't causing chaos. A few inserted earbuds and started work at once, while others formed small clusters to whisper and giggle over something on their tablet screens.

One boy with copper curls smirked and aimed his phone toward Ms. Chen. A small drone, no bigger than a hummingbird, silently lifted from his desk. It hovered near the woman's head, its tiny camera likely capturing her oblivious expression as it nestled almost invisibly into her messy bun.

Amy rolled her eyes at the boy's antics before returning her attention to me. "You meet anyone else in here yet?"

"No, but Jess was in my homeroom." I pivoted toward where he sat behind us with his nose down in his phone, his previously stony expression replaced by a softness that I didn't think he'd meant for anybody to see. When he caught me watching him, the hard exterior returned tenfold.

Amy shook her head in sympathy once he'd dropped his gaze. "He's a good guy," she whispered. "Last year was rough for him. He keeps to himself now."

Peering back at Jess with his shoulders slumped and his head again drooped over his work, I wondered what made him keep to himself, as Amy put it.

Wanting to avoid sad things, my eyes scanned the other faces in the room. "The other students seem..." How to frame it? The kids all seemed unnaturally gifted in the looks

department, like I'd stumbled into a math class for the awesomely beautiful. No way were these normal kids.

- The normal kids reading this are sad for being not-beautiful. Maybe rephrase.

"Seem like rock stars?" Amy finished my sentence with an exaggerated smile. "Tell me about it." Amy leaned closer, her voice dropping to a whisper, her features brightening

with the thrill of sharing coveted insider knowledge. "We call them Edens. Connected to the Eden Research Institute somehow. All are... advanced, you could say."

"Oh." Amy hadn't entered yet when I'd given Mr. Summers my name. I considered telling her about my family history with Eden, but before I could mention any of that, a slender girl who'd been tapping information into the front interactive board turned to walk back to her seat. She caught my eye, assessed me against some invisible standard, then dismissed me with a slight toss of her cascading dark hair. *Wow.*

Was it my hair or clothes? I didn't follow fashion trends. Practical outfits just made more sense for hiking or camping. *But we're not doing these things at school...* something I used to do with Dad. Still, I took pains to keep myself neat and presentable. Mom always insisted on that.

Amy let out an exasperated sigh in the girl's direction before turning a comforting smile on me. "That's Tilania. Top-level gymnast who thinks she's too good for literally everyone. Don't let her bother you." *Um, yeah. Too late there.*

Nearby, an athletic girl with long legs and perfectly coordinated pink accessories frowned at Tilania before turning in her seat to beam me a broad smile and wave with enough fervor for the entire class to notice. Her friendly greeting made me smile—a welcome change, I had to admit, after the unfriendly glares I'd received in homeroom that morning.

Need some more concrete details here. Maybe compare them to famous actors?

Perfect way to introduce new info. You could probably introduce the research institute officially for the first time here.

"That's Kate," Amy whispered, retrieving her tablet from her bag, where I glimpsed a paperback romance with a shirtless hottie on the cover and a well-worn spine. Her voice

shifted to a tone I couldn't quite place. "Captain of like... every sports team. And... one of the nicer ones, I guess."

I sent Kate a small wave, which she received with an excited bounce in her seat.

Amy's shoulders tensed as Kate's attention lingered on me rather than acknowledging her. There was an obvious history there that hung in the air like an unfinished sentence.

Kate leaned forward, flicking her expensively highlighted hair over one shoulder and

mouthed "Talk later?" to me while pointedly not including Amy in the invitation. She tapped her pink manicured nails on her desk impatiently, as if my response was the most important

thing happening. I nodded awkwardly, caught between Amy's kindness and Kate's

unexpected interest.

The tiny drone, no longer in Ms. Chen's hair, flew within inches of my face on its

course back to its owner. The boy who controlled it eyed me with amusement when I shot

him a startled look.

"Who's that?" I asked.

Amy glared in his direction and contempt oozed from her voice as she answered.

"That's Flynn. Uber rich, usually gets whatever he wants, and his brain? Off the charts.

Careful of him. Smart and bored is a dangerous combination. And the way he's looking at

you..."

Flynn sprawled in his chair like a king on his throne, his hands manipulating his

holographic interface with startling speed despite his attention being trained on me. His lips

curled into a smile both charming and unsettling, suggesting he could be your best friend or

worst enemy, depending on his mood. Next to him, a boy with short tawny hair eyed Flynn's

Can it be a manga?

movements with undisguised admiration. The name Rowan Archer hovered in the holographic projection over his desk.

Feels a bit redundant. Amy's expression darkened as she stared at the two boys, her fingers curling into fists. Pain flashed in her eyes before she looked away. I wondered at the shift in her mood, but she clearly didn't want to talk more about Flynn, his drone, or his sidekick.

Time to shift topics. "Are you an Eden?"

"Me?" Amy shook her head, her eyes clearing. "Nor is Jess. You won't catch us hanging out with them. Edens don't mix with non-Edens." — The normies need a better name...

"Huh." I sucked in a breath, debating if I should just tell her my last name already.

Whatever being an Eden meant in that school, I wanted to be judged for myself, not my name or heritage. So far, Amy had done just that. Of course, that would change as soon as I logged into my desk system and the computer brought my name up, but no one had shown me how to do that yet. At the moment, the holographic display above me showed only the class name and a login prompt.

"Where'd you move here from?" Her gaze swept over my clothes and hair.

I shifted under her scrutiny. "Colorado Springs."

She brightened and all but swooned on her desk. "Really? It's gorgeous there! Why'd you move to cloudy Sunnyport?"

With a sigh, I tried not to think about the extra clouds... and snow... and rain.

Sunnyport had an average of a hundred and eight less sunny days per year compared to Colorado, and buckets more precipitation. One of those things I wish I hadn't looked up. Amy still waited for an answer.

"We used to live here, and my grandfather's here," I said, careful not to mention his name, which had to be common knowledge in an Eden-sponsored school.

Amy curled a long tendril of hair around her pointer finger as she listened, but she didn't probe me further. Instead, she launched into tales about how her family had lived in Sunnyport for generations. I tried to appear interested, but my mind had drifted sixteen hundred miles away—back to the tall mountain peaks and fresh mountain air of my past life. When lunchtime came, I followed the flow of students to the cafeteria in the Central Mound basement. The smell of steaming processed meat infused with a subtle undertone of disinfectant reminded me of the hospital cafeteria where Mom and I visited Dad. I pushed the unwanted memories away and focused on the unfamiliar space before me.

Amy appeared at my elbow. "Come on, I'll show you how things work around here." As we moved through the lunch line, I noticed a cordoned-off section of the room with extra staff and food that looked like it belonged in a high-end restaurant. "What's that about?" I nodded towards the upscale section.

Amy rolled her eyes. "The 'Gourmet Selection' meal plan. Extra subscription fee for families willing to pay triple for organic, nutrient-balanced meals." Her tone mixed annoyance with envy as Tllania collected a tray of what looked like chef-quality food: seared salmon on a bed of fancy-looking rice, roasted asparagus arranged just so, and some kind of artisanal bread that probably had a French name. "Rich kid food," she added with a smirk. "All the Edens buy it. Though I heard the principal's daughter uses it too—all that talk about brain food and optimal nutrition. Just wish they'd put some of that into our regular meals." Amy waved her palm in front of a machine to pay for her less appetizing meal of overcooked spaghetti and a bag of celery, the machine's red beam flashing as it processed her identity and account information. I grabbed a yogurt and an apple juice, doubting I could eat much with my first-day nerves. When it came time to pay, I placed my palm in front of the machine as Amy had

done, then let her lead me to a table where a handful of students were already sitting. Jess sat on the end, his expression as closed off as it had been in class.

We passed Matt from homeroom on our way. He crouched over a tray a younger student had dropped, quietly cleaning up the mess while others walked by. Despite his earlier retreat from me, there was a gentleness to how he handled the situation that reminded me of Dad—the way he'd always stop to help me with schoolwork, no matter how busy he was. When Matt came to sit across from Jess, I realized he and Jess must be friends, as they'd been sitting together in homeroom, too. Matt kept his eyes down as he sat, clearly still uncomfortable with my presence.

Amy introduced two unfamiliar girls at the table as Jennifer and Ashton. Both wore matching band t-shirts and their hair styled in side braids, giving off strong BFF vibes. Ashton, the lighter-haired one, scanned the cafeteria anxiously, as if searching for someone or hoping to dodge them.

While the group chatted around me, I couldn't help but steal frequent glances at the Eden table. They sat together, a small island of perfection in the sea of ordinary students. Their laughter carried across the cafeteria, drawing envious and curious looks from those around them.

"Don't let them get to you." Amy noticed my gaze. "They might eat better, but trust me, being an Eden comes with its own set of problems." ^{Like what?}

Ashton fidgeted with her napkin at Amy's words, tearing it into tiny pieces as her eyes darted to the Eden table and then back again. Jennifer placed a comforting hand on her arm, her eyes hardening as she followed Ashton's gaze to where the Edens sat.

"Heeeyyy," Matt spoke up, clearly trying to change the subject, "did they ever find that animal from last week's attack?"

The question drew everyone's attention; even Jess looked up from his tray.

"They're still working on it," Jess said, his voice low. "It sucks what happened to Andrew."

"Attack?" I asked, latching onto the new subject, curious despite myself.

Jess's fork stilled over his plate, though his gaze avoided mine. "They found a sophomore last week in the town park. Killed by some kind of animal. Had cuts and claw marks all over his body."

I gaped. "What do they think did it?" Where I grew up, we had wolves, bears, cougars, even bobcats that could claw or tear a person apart. But in upstate New York? I couldn't imagine a long list of animal suspects.

Jess's brows huddled low on his forehead. "They don't know. Dad thinks he got hit by a car first. Had a lot of broken bones and a fractured skull."

The gruesome details sent a chill down my spine as an awkward silence fell over the group.

Amy cleared her throat. "So, Gemi, tell us more about Colorado. I bet the mountains are amazing, right?"

I began to respond, but caught Jess watching Ashton, whose eyes frequently strayed to the Edens with a mix of sympathy and... was that frustration? When he saw me observing, he dropped his gaze, his face once again an unreadable mask.

A noticeable tension lingered about the table, and I couldn't shake the feeling that it had something to do with the Edens still laughing on their side of the room. Which left me wondering as I gazed from their table to ours. Where exactly did I fit in? I wasn't just connected to Eden; I *was* an Eden.

If Jess dislikes Edenites, why didn't he protest to Gemi sharing a table with him?

- Great chapter! The fun characters helped keep the story engaging and the pace quick.