

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. *I think describing Aurora's ghostly appearance here would help ground the opening.* Her photos haunted every wall of our Victorian 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.

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

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

pointed toward the heavens.

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

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

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

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

feet wide at the base, or so I'd read—though the dome seemed ^{much}impossibly larger up close. A

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

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

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

doorway of the school's entrance.

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

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

twisting into a double helix—the Eden Research Institute's logo. An institute founded by my

grandfather Isaac where my parents had worked so many years ago.

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

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

Sunnyport High is the most technologically advanced school in the empire state, but she never

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

learned my last name?

passive voice
Chang
to active

Maybe make this an image?

display transitioned to a gentle white. Her blue eyes, accented by blue-rimmed glasses that perfectly matched her dress, widened when she saw me in the doorway. "You're Gemini. We've been expecting you." Her tone held a mix of reverence and excitement one might use when meeting a minor celebrity.

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

"Welcome to Sunnyport High, dear. I'm Miss Rainers." Her berry-glossed lips curved into a genuine smile. She gestured toward an empty seat across the room. "You can sit at that workstation by the window."

I felt the eyes of every student on me as I made my way to the seat, my self-consciousness on overdrive from so much attention. At least the view out the window would help distract me from all the staring.

"Heeeyyy," a shaggy-haired boy looked from the tech at the front of the room to me, "what was that about? You always make the tech go crazy, or was that just for dramatic effect?"

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

"Yeah, just moved here."

He leaned closer, his curls shifting higher on his forehead with his smile. "Sweet! This year's looking up already. If you need anything, just ask. The school can be confusing with all the domes and connecting tubes. It took me *ages* to find the Music Mound the first time. Not all the areas have holographic guides installed yet."

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

More physical description
love

→ What's cut there?

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?

Would you introduce yourself?"

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)

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

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

(further.

farther = real distance

farther = figurative distance

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

room. My head spun around, seeing for the first time the annoyed looks of several faces in the room. What did they have against being an Eden? A sudden burst of anxiety threatened to

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

Miss Rainers stepped in smoothly, casting the offender a warning glance. "Thank you,

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

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

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

enrollment process.

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

subsided as I took a deep breath.

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

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

Starting with you, Jess."

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

muttered to his desk before sinking back down.

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

studied my face. Some even averted their eyes when our gazes met. The frosty reception seemed

an extreme reaction to some donated funding and technology ~~by~~ ^{from} my grandfather. Weren't those

good things?

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.

apostrophe
not quotes
to distinguish
from
dialogue.

112 or 1-12

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 wall boards 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 stilled as recognition morphed into pure shock. The holographic display above his hands began blinking furiously, and he fumbled with a slim control panel on his wrist to cut the display. I stepped forward, uncertain, as his face drained of color.

"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 confusion. "It's my first day."

He stumbled back, shaking his head slightly as if trying to clear it. "Yes, of course. Your 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 Sunnyport 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!