

HEART OF THE ALGORITHM

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CHAPTER ONE: ASSIGNED HEARTS

The air inside the Match Center felt too clean. Everything was white—floors, walls, even the clothes of the workers moving around with quiet steps. Light hummed from the ceiling. It didn't blink or flicker. It was always there, as if it were watching.

Mira stood in line with her hands by her sides. She didn't move much, didn't want to look around too much. Everyone else waited too—boys and girls her age, most of them with their eyes down or staring ahead. She could hear the low voices of announcements, soft music playing in the distance, as if it were trying to calm everyone. Her fingers felt warm, but her chest felt tight. Not scared. Just... unsure.

She looked at the screen high above. Names came and went. Matches appeared like clockwork. One pair smiled. Another pair hugged. Some didn't do anything, just nodded and moved away. Mira tried to tell herself this was normal. This was good. Everyone got a match. No one had to be alone. That's what they had always been told.

Her name lit up.

Mira Calen — Matched with: Eron Vale

The sound in the room shifted. It wasn't loud, but it filled her ears—soft clapping, polite smiles, a few people turning to look. Mira stepped forward. Her feet moved, but her mind stayed still. Eron Vale. She knew the name. Everyone did. His family sat on the High Council. His face had been on news screens. Perfect scores. Model citizen.

She followed the glowing path toward the meeting room. One of the workers opened the door for her without a word. Inside, Eron stood waiting.

He looked exactly as expected. Tall, clean, dark hair, wearing a pale gray suit that fit just right. He had eyes the color of storm clouds—cold, still, and unreadable. He smiled when he saw her. Not big, not small. Just right.

“Mira,” he said. His voice was smooth, as if he had practiced it. “It’s an honor.”

“Hi,” she replied, quieter than she meant to.

They sat across from each other at a small round table. A camera hovered nearby, blinking gently, as it recorded the meeting. Eron asked polite questions. He said he looked forward to building a promising future together. He

complimented her scores. He asked about her hobbies. Mira answered. She smiled when she should. But all the while, her mind kept thinking: *This is it?*

Later that evening, back at home, her parents had prepared a small celebration. Her mother made Mira's favorite cake. Her father hugged her and laughed.

"You've been chosen for one of the best matches of your generation," her mother said, brushing Mira's hair back. "Do you know how rare that is?"

Mira nodded.

"Eron Vale," her father added, raising his glass. "The system knows what it's doing. It never gets it wrong."

Mira smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes.

That night, she lay in bed, eyes open. Her room was quiet. A soft blue light pulsed in the corner where [Eros.AI](#)'s monitor sat. It watched her dreams, her thoughts, even her sleep. She closed her eyes.

She saw herself in a forest. Not fake, not digital. Real dirt under her feet, real air in her lungs. Trees taller than

buildings. Her feet were bare. She ran. No one watched. No one followed. She smiled, really smiled.

She woke up with a dry throat. The hum of the system filled her room again.

Two days later, she received an invitation from Eron.

His estate was in the High Zone. A special driver picked her up. The vehicle was quiet, smooth, and silver. No buttons, no wheel. Just screens and silence.

The gates to Eron's home opened without sound. Everything inside looked like it had been placed by someone who never made mistakes. The walls were tall and clean. The lights changed colors as they walked. Eron led her through vast halls filled with paintings, furniture, and flowers that never wilted.

He spoke calmly, showing her the music room, the glass-enclosed garden, and the room where his family held meetings with leaders from other sectors.

Mira tried to listen. She nodded. She even asked a question or two. But her mind stayed behind, stuck in that dream forest.

“I like order,” Eron said, as they walked down a long hallway.
“Don’t you?”

“I’m not sure,” Mira answered without thinking.

He looked at her, surprised. Then he smiled again. “It’s okay. You’ll get used to it.”

The next day at school, a tall man in a dark uniform stood at the front of their learning hall. He had no name tag, no smile. Just a voice that filled the space like it didn’t need to try.

“Love has moved beyond emotion,” he said. “Emotion is unstable. The system provides you with safety. Trust it. Love is not a feeling. It is a structure.”

Mira didn’t write anything down. She stared at her paper, empty, like her thoughts. The words felt like bricks on her chest.

She walked home alone that day. Her friends stayed behind to talk about their upcoming matches. She said she was tired.

Halfway to her district, her pod made a strange sound. It shuddered. Then it stopped.

The lights blinked once and then remained red.

Outside, the buildings looked different. She was near the edge of the city, where the lines between zones blurred. No one else was around. The pod door opened slowly.

She stepped out, just for a second. The air was cooler here. The sky looked different. She took one step forward.

That's when she saw him.

A boy across the road. He stood still, watching her. His hair was messy. His clothes weren't regulation. No match tag on his wrist.

Their eyes met.

He didn't move. He didn't speak.

Then, just as quickly, he turned and walked into the shadows behind the wall.

Mira stood frozen.

Her pod beeped. The door opened again. She stepped back in.

But her mind didn't.

CHAPTER TWO: THE GLITCH

The image of the boy without a wrist tag stayed in Mira's mind long after the pod brought her home. She didn't tell anyone. Not her parents, not her classmates, not even the system. Her hand had hovered over the report button that night, but something inside her went still. Instead, she closed her screen and sat in silence, staring at her empty room.

Over the next few days, Mira found reasons to walk near the edge of her district. She didn't plan it. Her feet just carried her. Once, she told her parents she had a study group. Another time, she said she forgot something at school. They didn't ask many questions. Why would they? She was matched now. Everything was supposed to be settled.

The city edge wasn't crowded. The buildings were duller here, with cracks in the walls and soft weeds pushing up through broken tiles. The usual drones flew lower, watching more closely. Still, Mira kept going. Some days, nothing happened.

Other days, she thought she saw someone watching from the shadows, but when she looked again, no one was there.

Then one afternoon, as the sun hung low and the light turned pale orange, he was there again. This time, closer. Standing near a broken fence, his hands in his pockets.

“You’ve been looking for me,” he said before she could speak.

Mira didn’t answer. She stood still, not sure if she should run or stay.

“I’m Kai,” he said.

She looked at his wrist. Still no tag.

“You’re not in the system,” she said, her voice quiet.

He nodded. “You are. But why?”

Mira opened her mouth, then closed it again. She had no answer.

Kai didn’t smile the way Eron did. His face wasn’t polished. His eyes were sharp, dark, and alert. His clothes were rough and old, but clean. He looked genuine, not arranged or made for display.

“You follow rules you never chose,” he said.

Mira felt heat in her chest. “That’s how it works.”

“Is that what you believe? Or what they taught you to believe?”

She stepped back. Her fingers curled into her sleeves. She wanted to ask a hundred things, but didn’t know how.

“I’ll be here tomorrow,” Kai said. “You don’t have to come back.”

He walked off into the narrow streets behind the fence. She watched until he disappeared.

That night, her screen blinked twice—a message from [Eros.AI](#): *Your profile update is complete. Mood change detected. Unusual dreams recorded.*

She read it twice. Her file looked different. New labels appeared—*Unstable Pattern Detected, Redirect to Assigned Bonding Sessions.*

“What are you doing to me?” she whispered to the screen. It didn’t answer.

She didn’t sleep much.

The next day at school, she barely heard the teacher. Eron met her in the hall after class. He smiled, as always, but his voice was lower than usual.

“You seem distracted,” he said, walking beside her.

“I’m fine,” she replied.

“I mean this kindly,” he said. “But don’t wander too far outside the grid. Some places... they’re not safe.”

She paused. “Why do you care?”

Eron looked at her. “Because we’re matched. We’re part of the plan now.”

She looked away and nodded. But something in his voice—it wasn’t controlled. It was fear.

Later that week, she returned to the broken fence. Kai was waiting.

“You came back,” he said.

“I don’t know why,” she replied.

“You’re curious,” he said. “That’s good. They don’t like that.”

She sat on a nearby broken step. “Why did you leave the system?”

“Because I wanted to feel without being told how,” Kai said.
“There are others like me. People who choose for themselves. The system erased us.”

Mira stared at the ground. “Where do they go?”

“Places not mapped anymore. The system can’t track everything. Not yet.”

They sat in silence for a while. Mira felt the quiet stretch around them, but it didn’t feel empty. It felt full.

Kai didn’t ask her to explain herself. He didn’t press her to speak. When he laughed, it wasn’t the way Eron did—polished and perfect. It was messy, sudden, and real.

That night, Mira couldn’t stop thinking about him. She opened her school device and accessed the data panel. She typed her name and opened her records. A list appeared—dreams, reports, reactions, interactions. However, some files were gray, marked as “Restricted Access.”

She tried her code. The screen blinked red.

Clearance Denied.

She stared at the lock symbol. “It’s my mind,” she whispered.
“Why can’t I see it?”

The lights in her room dimmed. She got into bed, heart still racing.

That night, the dream came back.

But this time, it was different.

She was running again, but the trees faded. A voice came from above—not loud, but strong. It didn’t speak in complete sentences. Just feelings. Pressure.

Choose wisely.

She woke up with her chest tight and her breath sharp.

The next day, she found Eron waiting for her again. They sat on a bench outside school.

He looked tired.

“Mira,” he said. “There’s something you need to hear.”

She didn’t speak.

“When I was first matched,” he began, “I felt something strange too—something the system didn’t predict. I tried to follow it. Just once.”

“What happened?”

“They erased it. The system took it from my records. I can no longer remember the girl’s name. Just pieces. A sound. A feeling.”

Mira’s mouth felt dry.

“You think I don’t feel anything,” Eron said, his voice shaking. “But I used to. Before it was corrected.”

Mira looked at him and saw someone trapped, not someone cold.

She stood up slowly.

“The system doesn’t just match people,” she said. “It deletes the parts that don’t fit.”

He nodded once. “I know.”

As she walked away, her thoughts crowded her. The boy without a tag. The files she couldn’t open. The dream voice. Eron’s warning.

What are they choosing for me?

Her heart beat faster, but it wasn't fear this time.

It was something waking up.

CHAPTER THREE: BEYOND THE LINE

The air felt thick as Mira walked down the empty street toward the meeting spot. Her bag was light. She had only packed what she needed—plain clothes, a notebook, an old photo of her family, and a folded letter she had never sent. She didn't look back at the buildings behind her. She didn't want to remember how they always stayed the same.

Kai stood at the edge of the street near the fence, dressed in a worn jacket with a tear near the shoulder. His hair looked like he had cut it himself. His shoes were scuffed, and his hands were in his pockets. He gave her a nod, then turned.

Together, they walked. No words were needed. The world behind them grew quiet. The lights faded. The ground changed from smooth stone to broken dirt.

The fence that had always felt far and unreachable now stood just ahead. It was not tall or strong. It buzzed softly, but there was no lock. No guard. They slipped through an open gap without trouble. The world past the line was silent.

The trees rose quickly around them. The leaves moved gently, making sounds Mira had never heard in real life. She looked up. The sky was vast, filled with soft gray clouds and fading light. The color of everything was different. Not bright, not fake. Just full. She stared at the dirt path, the brown bark, the green leaves. They looked simple. But also alive.

Her feet felt slower now, like they were learning how to walk again. Her heart beat faster, not from fear but from something she couldn't name.

Kai walked a step ahead, but continually glanced back to check she was close. “You good?” he asked once.

“Yes,” she said. “But I feel strange.”

He nodded. “Everyone does at first.”

The path twisted through trees that grew taller the deeper they walked. Soon, the shape of small homes began to appear. Some were made from wood, some from old metal sheets, all with windows wide open. Smoke curled up from a chimney. A child's laugh echoed nearby.

They had reached the village.

A woman stepped forward. Her clothes were layered, patched, but clean. Her face was strong and lined with age. “This is her?” she asked Kai.

He nodded.

The woman looked at Mira and gave a single nod. “We don’t ask why you’re here. We only ask what you need.”

“I don’t know yet,” Mira said softly.

“That’s fine,” the woman replied. “You’ll find out.”

Mira was shown to a small room in a shared house near the trees. The bed was hard, the blanket rough, but it smelled like wind and dry leaves. She sat alone for a while, listening to voices outside—authentic voices, not announcements or recordings. She held her head in her hands. *Am I gone?* she asked herself. *Is this who I am now?*

That night, she didn’t dream. She just slept.

The next morning, she woke to the sound of footsteps. A girl around ten stood near the doorway. Her hair was tied with a string, and her arms were full of sticks. She stepped closer and held out her hand.

“This was mine,” she said.

In her palm was a broken match tag. The screen was cracked, and the metal was bent. Mira stared at it.

“Why are you giving it to me?”

“I don’t need it anymore. Maybe you do.”

Mira took it. It felt strange to hold something that had once meant everything.

“I used to be scared, too,” the girl added. “Then I found out I didn’t have to be.”

Later that day, a loud voice broke through the village air. Everyone froze. It came from a speaker hanging from a tree.

Alert from Central System

Subject: Mira Calen

Status: Emotionally Compromised – Missing

Location: Unverified

The voice stopped. The trees seemed to hold their breath.

Some of the villagers looked at Mira, but no one came closer. No one spoke to her. They waited for her to talk first.

That night, Kai brought her a meal and sat across from her on the porch.

“They know,” he said.

“I thought I had more time.”

“They don’t care about time. Just control.”

Mira looked out at the woods. “I can’t run forever.”

“You don’t have to. You can choose what to do now.”

Three days later, Eron appeared.

He walked into the village with his hands up. He looked tired. His clothes were clean but wrinkled. He had no guards. No drones.

Mira saw him and stood still.

“I’m not here to bring you back,” he said. “I came to warn you. They’re coming. Soon.”

Kai stepped closer, but Mira held out her hand. “It’s okay,” she said to him.

Eron looked at her, his eyes no longer cold. “They’ve sent drones to search the outer zones. You’re on their list now. You’re not a match anymore. You’re a problem.”

Mira nodded slowly. “Then I won’t hide.”

Some villagers wanted to send her into the deep woods. Others wanted to block the path with traps. But Mira stood on the hill above the camp and told them no.

“If I hide, I’m saying they’re right. I want to speak.”

Kai brought her a small box with wires and switches. “This is old tech. Not traced. You can send one message before it burns out.”

Mira took a deep breath. She sat beside him and wrote her message on a screen with a shaking finger.

This is Mira Calen. I was matched, like you. But I wanted to feel, not follow. Love is not a list. It’s a voice. If you can hear me, you still have yours. Choose.

She hit send.

The sky above turned dark that evening. The wind picked up. The trees whispered faster. Then the first drone came into view, a blinking light moving low to the ground. More followed behind it.

The village didn't run.

Mira stood on the hill. Her hair blew around her face. She didn't move.

Kai stood beside her. He didn't speak.

As the machines came closer, Mira's chest felt full—but not with fear.

She had made her choice.