

JINXED

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To Sarah, Wonder Woman

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PROLOGUE



SHE BURST THROUGH THE TREES, CRADLING THE creature in her arms.

The whine of a pulse gun sounded in the wood; she ducked and the shot flew over her head, obliterating the trunk of a beech tree in front of her. Panic rose in her throat. They weren't just out to destroy the creature.

They were going to kill her too.

She kept running, her feet slipping inside the blue, plastic overshoes she hadn't had time to remove before bolting from the lab. She'd known this day would come—she'd crossed the line so far, it was no longer even a mark on the horizon. But she still hadn't been ready.

How could she ever be ready to lose what she'd been working on her entire life?

The creature vibrated against her chest, a red light pulsing against its hot metal skin like a heartbeat. It wriggled in her arms, trying to escape—as if it too knew what was coming—but she tightened her grip. She just had to make it to the other side of the ravine to the emergency car that would take them to safety.

The next shot hit her shoulder, and she wasn't sure who



screamed louder: her or the creature. She stumbled, one leg collapsing underneath her as her foot sank into a crevice hidden by a carpet of fallen leaves. She dared to glimpse down, and her heart almost stopped—the creature’s metal body was smoking, the acrid stench of burned electronics filling her nostrils. The pulse guns were doing their job, destroying it from the inside out.

She pulled her foot free and pressed on. The bridge was so close, she could feel the rumble of trains as they passed underneath. Yet the heavy boot steps of the men behind her were louder still.

“Come on, come on,” said the voice crackling in her ear.

She must have come into range of her partner’s communication device. She forced her legs to pump harder, ignoring the sticky wet stab of pain in her side...

Barely had her toe crossed the threshold onto the bridge when alarms wailed, hidden IP protection sensors blaring from the tree line. Traps sprung from the ground, nets that coiled around her legs, tripping her up. “I’m down,” she screamed into her earpiece. “Help me!”

“Cutting comms, link destruction in process.” Almost as an afterthought, he added, “Sorry.” And then the line went dead.

Another pulse thumped her in the back, launching her forward and sending the creature flying from her arms. She had no choice but to watch as the smoking hunk of metal disappeared off the side of the bridge. Her assailants ran past her now, flinging themselves at the railing, leaning out over the edge and watching the blaze of sparks sent up as the metal monster hit electrified track.

It was gone. Her life's work—destroyed.

The men turned back to her, gun barrels levelling at her head. She closed her eyes and accepted the inevitable.

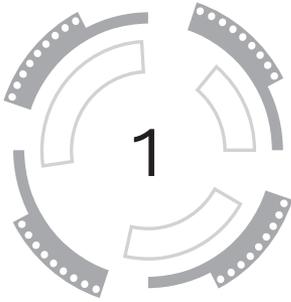
Down on the tracks below, the creature shuddered with one final pulse of life. As a train thundered down the tracks toward it, it only had the energy for the faintest sound.

It purred.

> PART ONE

JINX





SMOKE RISES FROM THE TIP OF THE SOLDERING iron, my eyes watering as I stare at the motherboard through the microscope. I don't dare blink, not until I finish melting the silver solder with its rosin core flux into miniature peaks, connecting the loose components together.

I count the seconds in my head as the solder dries. *One, two...*

The butterfly lifts its delicate mechanical wings, opening and closing the intricately detailed triangles of metal as it runs through system checks. *Whirr. Click.* A small vibration signals the okay.

"Yes!" I jump to my feet and dance, rocking my hips in time to the victory music in my head.

Mom rushes in from the kitchen. "You did it?"

"Why don't you check?"

She nods and says, "To me, Petal." It takes a second for the command to register, but the butterfly flaps its wings, lifting up



to land on her hand. Mom's face glows, reflecting back the stream of texts and emails that Petal projects onto the flat of her palm. "Looks like she works to me!"

I grin. "Okay, one final thing." I take Petal from Mom, gently placing her back under my microscope as I sit back in my chair. My work is flawless—so neat the repairs are barely visible. Taking it to the Moncha vet would have taken hours (and cost a fortune), but I've finished in less than an hour.

Satisfied, I snap the casing back over the exposed electronics. "There. Good as new."

"Thank you, honey!" Mom wraps her arms around me, planting multiple kisses on my forehead. I groan in mock-mortification, but my face heats up with the warmth of her praise.

It's not *that* big a deal. I've had a lot of practice with Petal. The butterfly *baku* is one of the bestsellers for Mom's demographic, and insects in general are the least complex models on the market, offering the bare minimum of functions like text and talk, a browser, and GPS. The butterfly is extra popular because of the ability to customize its wings. On the flip side, the wings are flimsy, prone to snapping with the tiniest snag, which in turn damages the internal electronics. Petal is a perfect example. She got caught when Mom unwound her scarf and her projector malfunctioned.

"You're welcome. Remember to unleash her as soon as you get inside next time."

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Lacey. Your repair is better than any of the vets could do." Mom smiles as Petal flies

back up to settle on her shoulder, her hand still lingering on my back. “You find out today, don’t you?”

I cringe. I thought she had forgotten. To my surprise, even *I’d* managed to forget about it for an hour. Fixing things does that for me. My mind focuses in on the problem—in this case, a loose wire and a wonky PCB connection—and the rest of the world falls away.

Even the fact that any minute now, I’m going to receive the biggest news of my twelve-year-old life.

“Yup.” All moisture evaporates from inside my mouth, and I try in vain to return the smile. I sense hesitation from Mom, her fingers drumming a pattern up and down my spine, so I stand abruptly from my chair. “Better put this stuff away,” I say, gesturing to the tangle of silver wire and machinery.

Mom gives me one final kiss on the top of my head. “Whatever happens, you’re still the best companioner in *this* household.” She heads over to the sink, Petal fluttering up to the leash behind her ear, where she plugs in to charge. Mom bobs her head in time to some invisible music, and I assume Petal has started streaming her favorite playlist.

I wipe the end of the soldering iron with a sponge and pack it away, closing the case with a decisive click. Some people ask for bikes or gift cards or books for their birthday. I asked for a soldering iron. I had researched a store on the outskirts of town that sold refurbished electrical tools and casually added it to Petal’s GPS database—and Mom had taken me there on my eleventh birthday.



Monica Chan—who invented the bakus and lent her name to Moncha Corp, now the largest tech firm in North America—had one when she was a kid. I’d read that somewhere. If it’s good enough for her, it is for me too.

As Zora, my bff, would say, *That doesn’t make you special—it makes you weird.*

She’s right.

I carry my kit and microscope back to my room. Mom normally hates it when I solder in the condo—the metallic smell seems to sink into everything, from the pillows on the sofa to the rice in the cooker—but when it’s her own baku that needs repairing, she makes an exception.

That’s too often for my liking. The level one insect bakus are renowned for being a bit...*buggy*. If I had my choice, I know exactly what baku I would get. I’d go straight for one of the originals. One of the level three spaniel models, with cute floppy ears and a tail that works as a selfie stick. If I close my eyes, I can picture hanging out with my baku in my room, teaching it to play games, helping me with my homework, and cuddling up with it at night. *But you only get a spaniel baku if you get into Profectus*, my brain reminds me.

My dream school—Profectus Academy of Science and Technology—was founded by Monica herself, and operates as a division of Moncha Corp. Profectus students are fast-tracked through all the education they need so they don’t have to go to university—after they’ve graduated, they can be hired straight away

by Moncha Corp. The Academy offer grants to incoming students who can't afford the minimum level three baku, and I need one. Otherwise, the only baku I can afford is a puny level one.

I take a deep breath.

I've done everything I can to make it happen. I have near-perfect grades, checked off all the extracurriculars, participated in science fairs and early-bird band, and volunteered for an environmental charity to pad my admission application.

Zora once told me I was a lock for a place because no one worked as hard for it as I did. If only it were that easy. It's not like I'm Carter Smith, the son of Eric Smith—Monica's business partner and co-founder of Moncha. Carter is also in our grade at St. Agnes, and even though I beat him in all our classes, and in two science fairs, I know he'll get in without a fight.

Whereas my dad...

I twist the ring on my finger, the only object I have left of him.

...is just a liability. I don't let myself think about it anymore. Besides, Mom and I, we owe Moncha *everything*. They gave us a place to live when Dad disappeared, gave Mom a job, and provided child care for me while she worked. Without Moncha, I wouldn't have met Zora.

No matter what, I want to work for the company—I'll sweep Moncha floors if I have to, a practical dung beetle baku at my side. But if I truly let myself dream...I know what I want to do with the rest of my life. It's not only about working for Moncha. I want to be Monica Chan. I want to be a companioneer, one of the people



working on the bakus. I want to design new animals, innovate for existing ones, and implement even more amazing features. Every day would be a challenge.

But the first step to get there is acceptance into Profectus. Although in theory, Moncha could hire companions from anywhere, for the past decade (since Profectus has been open), every companion hire has been a graduate of the academy. The middle school feeds into the high school, and all students are rising stars in science and technology fields.

You'll know soon enough, I remind myself. I gently place everything on my desk. *But maybe I should check...*

I bounce onto the bed and tap my phone screen to wake it up. No email from Profectus. But I have missed a Flash from Zora. “*BYE BYE!!!*” is scrawled in her fingertip-writing as a boomerang clip plays on a loop of her throwing her phone from the edge of a boardwalk.

I swipe the screen so I can see the next Flash—a still of the splash her phone makes in the lake, with the caption *#PhoneMurder*.

I snort a laugh and collapse back onto the nest of pillows. *#PhoneMurder* is the latest craze—the wanton, totally unnecessary (but often hilarious and creative) destruction of your old, government-granted smartphone, filmed by a newly acquired baku, and shared online. Things got out of hand when a Flashite committed *#PhoneMurder* by dropping his device from the top the tallest building in the city and almost caused *actual* murder by phone. Still, the video got over ten million hits, so he'd probably consider it a

win. Thanks to his status as an incoming Profectus student, he was released from police custody with only a warning.

Within the space of a few seconds, I film a video of myself drawing a fake tear dripping down my cheek, select the puppy-ear filter, type “*RIP ZORA’S PHONE*” as a caption and send my reply. This is the distraction I need.

If Zora is destroying her phone that means she must have chosen her baku already. My next message to her is a giant question mark. Okay, I send her about fifteen of them.

“*I chose...a dormouse!*” Zora’s next selfie shows her hugging the cutest baku I’ve ever seen, a tiny ball of soft matte-gray metal fur, pointed nose, and oversized eyes. It’s curled up in a ball next to her cheek, its long tail extended to take the picture, her dark brown skin glowing gold from the sunlight reflected off the lake. She looks so happy; I can’t help but smile with her. A dormouse is a level two baku—better than I can afford, but not good enough for a place at Profectus—but going there was never one of Zora’s goals. She’s continuing on at St. Agnes, and experimenting with programming on the side.

“*His name is Linus, and I can already tell we’re going to be best friends for life. Well, not better friends than you and me, but you’ll know what I mean as soon as you get your own. Tell me as soon as you hear anything!!!*” reads her next message.

“*Of course,*” I shoot back. I stare at the photo of her and Linus together a little longer, my throat feeling tight.

Then it comes in. The alert. I can only read a tiny portion



of the subject line, and it gives nothing away. **LACEY CHU:**
PROFECTUS APPLICATION STATUS

My heart hammers inside my chest. The slim rectangular device feels so old-school in my suddenly clammy palm, but then...this is it. The very last time I will use it. Before I choose a baku of my very own. Level one or level three.

A single tap opens my email app where, in bold letters, is the message I'd been waiting for.

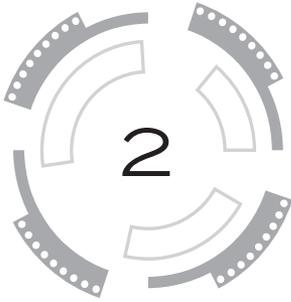
I click open.

Dear Miss Chu,

We regret to inform you that...

The phone flies out of my hand like it's heated to a thousand degrees. It bounces off the corner of my bed frame and onto the floor, where—just like that—the screen shatters into a million tiny pieces.

Exactly like my dreams.



“I’M SORRY, WE’RE SOLD OUT OF THE PRAYING mantis.” The vet doesn’t even look up at me as he stares at the information provided by his Labrador baku. They’re standard-issue for employees of the Moncha store (and most service industry professionals), always helpful, with smooth black digital fur that makes reading information off their backs easy.

I feel a twinge of jealousy at the sight, and then a wave of embarrassment for envying a Moncha store employee. They call themselves *vets* because they think it’s hilarious, as if they have real medical degrees or something, but the actual geniuses behind the bakus are the companions, not the faux-hip guys in white lab coats and lens-free, plastic-rimmed glasses with no real understanding of what makes their bakus tick.

But the truth is, this vet is still going to have a better baku than I will.



“This is a waste of time,” I say to Zora, turning away, but she grabs my arm and drags me back around to stare at the screen on the glaring white counter.

“No way am I standing in line again,” she hisses. Then she turns her sweetest smile on to the vet. On the counter, one of Moncha’s slogans glows to life: *Moncha: We always have your bak(u).*

Well, it doesn’t have *my* particular baku, but that’s apparently beside the point.

“So...no praying mantis and no dragonflies. What *do* you have in stock?” Zora asks. Linus sticks his head out from underneath her collar and twitches his nose at me. I wrinkle mine in response and poke my tongue out. Linus ducks back under the fabric, and Zora shoots me a look over her shoulder. I roll my eyes but pay attention to the vet once again.

“We have butterflies and scarabs in the insect department,” he says, bringing up my options on the screen. “If you want to move up to level two, small mammals, the selection is a lot bigger...”

I grimace. Without the Profectus grant, all I can afford with my savings is a level one insect. “I’ll pick something another time,” I say through gritted teeth, not feeling inspired by any of the options.

“You can’t, because you smashed your phone, remember? You need something *now*.” Zora grabs my arm again to stop me moving.

I sigh. I know she’s right, but my mind is still refusing to accept reality. I rub the sore spot behind my ear where the leash has been installed. I’m committed now, and I have to choose something. *I can always upgrade in a few years, when I’ve saved up a bit more money...*

The vet stares pointedly over my shoulder at the long line snaking its way out the door behind me. I take a deep breath and force myself to focus. “Okay, I’ll take a scarab,” I say, pointing at one on the counter’s screen. Its carapace is greenish purple, iridescent like an oil slick. It’s kind of pretty. Scarabs are known for having flight issues (something about the way the wings fold up) but I don’t want the same baku as my mom. That would be too sad.

“Coming right up. Rolo and I will go get one for you.” He snaps his fingers, and his retriever baku follows him obediently to the stock room.

Once the vet and his baku are gone, I turn my back on the counter and cross my arms. “Well, this sucks.”

Zora nudges my shoulder. “Can I give you a hug?”

She knows I’m not normally the touchy-feely type, but I nod—every hug is worth its weight in gold right about now. The sting of the Profectus rejection is a raw hurt, an open wound that refuses to heal over. I keep going over it in my head.

Did I fail a portion of the test?

Which part?

If I’d studied harder...

Or maybe the competition this year was too much...

Yet as much as I want to pretend it was a mistake, or forget the email ever came in, Zora’s right: I barely lasted the morning without the internet (is net-withdrawal a thing? Because I was all shaky and sweaty without being able to check my Flashes) and I can’t show up to school with a broken phone. I need a baku. It’s not



even a social standing thing anymore. At St. Agnes (where I'll be forced to stay now that I wasn't accepted into Profectus), once we enter seventh grade, all our textbooks are stored in baku-encrypted software, and homework assignments are sent to our bakus directly. It's the trade-off of living in Monchaville. It's not really called that, but it might as well be. Moncha provides our housing, health care, and education—it's a corporate mini-city within Toronto, occupying almost the entire eastern half of the city. And a requirement of living in Monchaville is that you have your own baku. Not that that's a big deal anymore. Almost everyone in the country has one.

Another slogan appears where my elbows are touching the countertop. *Bak-up your life... Moncha's newest cloud software included with every new baku.* This time, a picture of Monica flashes up, with her signature asymmetrical fringe cut into a diamond pattern, almost like a reverse crown. Mom has a story of when I tried to cut my hair into the same style...and that's why I had a pixie cut for half of second grade.

Seeing Monica's face makes me smile. The story behind bakus is ingrained in our cultural history, and Monica Chan is its main protagonist. There's even a Hollywood-produced miniseries about her journey, called *(Wo)man's Best Friend*. I stream it whenever I'm feeling low or uninspired—and I dread to think how many times it's been logged that I watch it.

The story goes that Monica grew up glued to her smartphone—so much so that it began to be detrimental to both her mental and physical health. During her doctor-mandated phone

break, she wandered the streets and found herself watching people walking their dogs in High Park. She realized what she'd been missing all along: a companion. If her smartphone was going to be by her side all the time, why not have it be cute and interactive? Something she could love and feel comforted by? But that could also be useful—helping her keep track of her life and her calendar, stay in touch with her friends and family, and access her social media and the internet and everything else she needed.

She got to work in the storage locker of her apartment building because her parents didn't have a house with a garage (I bet her mom couldn't stand the smell of solder either). They squeezed their entire family into a two-bedroom condo, just like my family's. She designed a robotic pet with all the features of a smartphone and called it a "baku" because of a story she'd heard from her Chinese grandmother about creatures made up of the leftover parts of other animals. Her first model, affectionately known as Yi (the Mandarin word for *one*), was built out of the screen from her portable gaming device, her old smartphone's motherboard, and metal parts she could scrape together from old toys and electronics. She went door-to-door in her apartment building, asking her neighbors to give her any old bits of tech destined for the scrapyards.

She took her design to a board of reality television investors, who threw money at her and turned her—and her baku—into a viral sensation overnight. Before long, Moncha was up and running in a small co-working space in Toronto's Discovery District, alongside crowdsourced taxi services and the latest health-tracking software. It



opened its first factory east of the city and kept expanding, taking over buildings and multiplying like mold in a petri dish as bakus became *the* must-have device around the world. Monica bought her old condominium building to help provide housing for her employees, then started her own school for her employees' kids, acquired a local hospital to provide health care...and quickly, Monchaville was born.

A loud crash from beside me snaps me from my thoughts. Zora gasps, and when I look up, my jaw drops too. On the counter two down from ours is a stunning high-level baku—an eagle—its wings spread so wide, they've knocked over a display case of customizable butterfly wings. The companioning work on display is on a level beyond anything I've seen. The feathers are made up of individual filaments of steel-sprayed gold, giving it a rich, sparkling texture. It tosses its head—so lifelike—and lets out a screech that almost pierces my eardrums. It's magnificent. It's absolutely top-of-the-line. Must be at least level four, if not level five.

Who could *afford* something like that?

I get my answer. The eagle folds its wings and, staring wide-eyed at his new baku, is a guy in a Profectus-branded jersey.

"Lace?" Zora whispers in my ear. "I think you're drooling."

"What?" I drop my head and wipe my mouth, in case she wasn't joking. "That baku is amazing."

"That's not the only thing that's amazing. He is cute," Zora says in a low voice, wiggling her eyebrows at the guy, making me snort.

She's not wrong. I dare one more glance. The guy is older than us and tall—with close-shaved black hair that's just starting to lift

into small curls. His teeth are bright white against his dark skin as his lips split into a giant grin.

I'd be grinning like that too if that beautiful bird was destined to be my baku.

"Tobias, my man!" comes a shout from behind me. Another guy—also in a Profectus jersey, but this one so new I see the price tag sticking out the back—barges past me, knocking me into Zora, and then both of us into the counter.

"Watch it!" I snap. "There's a line, you know."

The guy doesn't turn around, but his baku does. An ugly pig snuffles at our feet, pawing at the ground. It has two huge tusks, and it sways its head menacingly—not a pig, then, but a boar. I leap back, letting out an involuntary yelp.

"Rein it in, Carter," says Zora, who recovers faster than me.

My neck snaps around so fast, I almost get whiplash. *Carter?*

I don't know why I'm so surprised. Despite the fact that I beat him in almost every class—much to his annoyance—his acceptance into Profectus was a signed, sealed, and delivered thing.

He saunters over, smirking at me.

"Zora? Is that you—and Lacey?"

I cringe as he says my name. I wish with all my heart now that I had taken the subway out to some distant Moncha store where I wouldn't run into people I know. Especially not this particular person.

"Admiring my new baku, are you? When I got my Profectus acceptance last night, I got him *right* away. Meet Hunter—he's a level four, in case you didn't know."

I grimace, despite myself. Trust him to get a level four baku without having to earn it. I wonder if he even knows how to operate it properly. And his dad probably got one of the companions at Moncha to customize it for him. My body aches with jealousy. “Choosing your baku, are you?” He leans his elbow on the counter, tilting his head to one side. “What are you going for?”

“Oh, uh...” I try to calculate the time it would take for me to bolt to the door. Internet or no internet, anything is better than the humiliation I’m about to face if...

“Here’s your beetle, miss.”

The vet’s timing couldn’t be worse. He sets the tiny box down on the counter, the beetle baku trapped in a white plastic mold, clearly visible through the transparent opening in the front. Carter’s eyes bulge out of his head. I don’t know whether he’s going to explode from confusion or glee—or both, as the realization dawns. Then, he begins to laugh. He laughs and laughs, as my face burns with embarrassment.

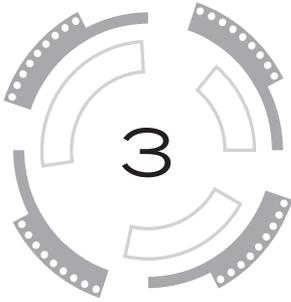
I turn away from Carter, but not before I notice that everyone in the store is looking at me, including the cute guy Tobias with the eagle baku.

“You didn’t get in, did you? Oh, Lacey—all those years of being a total nerd, wasted!” Carter says, before laughing even more.

“Come on, Zora,” I mumble, snatching the beetle off the counter, and this time, she doesn’t try to stop me.

“Hey, don’t you want me to show you how to leash it?” the vet calls after us.

But Zora and I are already out the door.



“HE’S A JERK. FORGET ABOUT HIM,” SAYS ZORA, once she catches up to me. She slips her arm around mine, forcing me back to a more normal pace. But I don’t want to slow down. Everywhere I look in the mall, I see people with their higher level bakus—mechanical dogs and cats either trotting at their heels or leashed up on their shoulders—and it’s a constant reminder of what I can’t have. I make a beeline for the exit, craving sunlight and fresh air.

I’m still shaking, Carter’s laugh a soundtrack to my steps that I can’t turn off. I’m simultaneously humiliated and annoyed that I’ve let him get to me. My new beetle baku is still trapped in the box in my hand; I can’t bear to look at it yet. “Let’s go somewhere,” I say to Zora once we’re through the revolving doors and outside. “Somewhere...to escape from here.”

“I know a place. I’ll get directions.” She holds her palm out as her dormouse sneaks down her arm, projecting directions on her fingers.

I shove the beetle into my backpack. Zora shoots me a look, but doesn't say anything. I avert my eyes, focusing on the zipper of my bag. I can tell by the gentle rattle of the beads at the bottom of her braids that she's shaking her head at me.

By the time I stand again, though, she's over it. That's what I love best about Zora. She's the least emotional person I know. It's one of the things that makes her such a great coder. She sees everything as if it's an algorithm, including our emotions.

"This is your body's inbuilt response to stressful stimuli," she'd told me when we first met, while I was crying in the elevator after getting a B on a test in third grade, and I blinked at her as if I couldn't believe I'd found another eight-year-old as nerdy as I was. She'd just moved into the same condo building with her parents and three high-maintenance sisters. I'd always been the loner kid in class—the one who took everything (especially my grades) a bit too seriously, who was always hungry to learn more about engineering, to be the one the teacher always knew to call on. Zora was the first person who was as passionate about something as I was.

No other person has ever understood me like she does. We lock together like pieces of a very specific jigsaw puzzle. She pushes; I pull. She codes; I build. My creations would be lifeless without her code and her code formless without my builds. And because we live in the same building, she's always hanging out in my unit—helping me not get too lonely when Mom is at work, and even hanging out with Mom when I'm tinkering in the basement. She's more like a sister than a friend—she calls me a

sister that she *chose* rather than was born with—and I don't know what I'd do without her.

There is no specific border for when we leave Monchaville, no massive gate or wall, but there's a definite *feeling*. A gentle shift in energy from one side of the road to the other. I think it's because of how clean everything is in the part of town that is run by the company. They took over responsibility from the city for all the maintenance of the ten-block (and expanding) rectangle in exchange for preferential planning permissions and the right to override specific bylaws. I saw an article in a regular city paper once that said the sidewalks and pathways around Moncha are embedded with anti-trademark-infringement alarms that trigger if someone attempts to steal anything, and that there are security bird bakus flying over every square inch. I don't know if any of the rumors are true—I've never seen any unusual-looking birds or heard an alarm, but the Moncha guard—the security team—are ever-present, keeping the streets of Monchaville safe.

Tales of surveillance bakus and alarms go against everything I've read about Monica Chan—she doesn't seem paranoid about copyright infringement. We've had loads of talks in school about how important it is for us to experiment and play—that's how technology makes its great leaps forward. And no company in the world has yet been able to replicate the bakus to any reasonable standard. There was a disastrous version that came out in Germany—the animals were all based on mythological creatures (that part was totally cool)—but they bugged out and started twitching, scrambling text messages and

rerouting all websites to illegal darknet stuff. One even attacked its owner. They had to shut down production within a week. Once again, there were rumors that it could have easily been Moncha's ace code creators that infected the German hosts, but viral code wouldn't explain the weird mechanical tics.

In the decade that bakus have been around, there haven't been any major glitches. The neuroleash technology is no more invasive than an ear-piercing. The best part is that even older bakus can be upgraded, incorporating any developments in the technology, under lifetime Moncha warrantee. Their spread around the world has been so rapid and prolific, there isn't any need for competition. And if you want to work for a cutting-edge technology company, there is only one choice: Moncha.

There has only ever been one choice for me, that's for sure. Except now, the spark of hope is accompanied by a wave of crashing disappointment. I wonder if that feeling will ever go away, or if I'll be left with this regret for the rest of my life.

When Linus indicates we should turn left, I realize where Zora is taking us. I grin with delight. The river valley trails. The river valley splices through the city center like a river of green, an oasis of calm in the busy metropolis. It's one of my favorite parts of the city. You can look down into it and pretend you're in the middle of the wilderness. I have a blurred memory of being on my dad's shoulders as we hiked down toward the tracks and—

I immediately curse my brain and scrub it of all mention of my dad. I do not need to go there. Not today. Today has been filled

with enough disappointment.

“Everything all right?” Zora asks, and Linus tilts his head in strange synchronicity. He’s only been hers for a day, and yet already he’s adopting her mannerisms and becoming as much a part of her as the line of earrings dotted up her earlobe.

“What do you mean?”

She tilts her head and stares at my hand. “You’re rubbing your ring.”

Heat rises in my cheeks, and I snap my hands apart. She’s right. Whenever I touch my dad’s old engineering ring—the last piece of him I have left—something is up.

The iron rings are a Canadian engineering tradition. Supposedly forged from the iron of a collapsed bridge, it’s a reminder of the immense responsibility borne by engineers to keep the safety of their work in mind. It’s supposed to be worn on the left pinky, but my hands are much smaller than my dad’s. I wear mine on my thumb. Besides, I’m not an engineer yet.

And maybe now you never will be—not for Moncha Corp, anyway, says a small voice in my head.

I push the thought away.

“Oh, I’m fine,” I say. “This was the perfect place to come. I love it here.” I throw my arms wide and twirl around under the canopy of leaves, hoping to distract her.

It works. She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. “It’s pretty great. And if we head across the bridge, it’s a shortcut downtown, so we can get some bubble tea.”

There’s a suspension bridge in the middle of the park that



crosses over the high speed rail tracks. “Excellent plan,” I say. I stare at the pattern of shadows created by the leaves on her face and arms, her skin shining burnished copper where the sun hits it. I feel a twinge of sadness that she’s off to an advanced coding course this summer. It’s an amazing opportunity for her.

“When does your program start?” I ask, wanting to know exactly how many days I have to hang with Zora before she leaves me for two whole months.

“Hmm?” She opens her deep-brown eyes and levels her gaze at me. “Oh...beginning of next week. Are you going to miss me?”

“Are you kidding?” I stop in my tracks. “What am I going to do with my summer without you?”

She pokes me in the ribs. “Maybe you’ll *enjoy* yourself. It’s the summer. You’ve worked hard all friggin’ year. You’re allowed to take a break and relax.”

“Right...” *Easy for you to say, but you get to do the thing you’ve been wanting to do your whole life. Whereas for me...* The words balance on the tip of my tongue, but I don’t let them spill off the edge.

Laughter reaches us from behind, the low chuckle of inside jokes and bad puns. Zora looks over her shoulder. “Oh no,” she says, her shoulders tensing.

“What is it?” I turn around too and immediately see the source of tension: the twitch of a robotic boar nose coming up behind us. Their bakus must have directed them down the same shortcut into downtown.

“Oh look, it’s beetle brain and her rodent friend,” says Carter,

his voice laced with smugness as he approaches. He's accompanied by a few guys I don't recognize, all with level three bakus and also in Profectus shirts, and Tobias. At least *he* has the decency to look ashamed at his friend's blatant taunting, staring off into the trees and refusing to make eye contact. As if I'm looking at him anyway. My eyes drift over to the sight of his beautiful eagle baku, my stomach clenching with jealousy.

"Ignore Carter," whispers Zora, holding her chin up high. Linus quivers inside the hood of her jacket. We slow our pace, hoping they'll pass us by.

"Now, seriously, though," says Carter, holding his hands up in front of him as he steps in front of us, forcing us to stop. Reluctantly, I hold his gaze. "I'm kinda disappointed that you're not going to be at Profectus next year. You were by far my closest competition in our class. I guess now I get to see what the *actual* smart kids are like. So did you flunk the exam?"

Beside me, Zora bristles, all four-and-a-half feet of her stocky frame, and she glares at me expectantly, her expression in her deep-brown eyes screaming: *You can't let him get away with saying that!*

But my treacherous brain draws a blank at anything witty or creative. Instead, I mumble non-words, drop my chin and my eyes, and keep on walking, speeding up this time. My cheeks burn with shame.

Zora doesn't immediately follow, and I whisper a silent prayer for her to *drop it*, and a few seconds later, she's hurrying to catch up with me. "I preferred him without that baku," Zora hisses in



my ear, and—as if he’s heard us—we hear a huff and snort from the boar behind.

“He’ll probably upgrade him in no time.” Despite myself, I sneak a glance over my shoulder. It’s true: Carter is like a different person with that boar by his side. He’s standing taller, his stance wider, and his blond hair less lank and greasy on top of his head. The Profectus makeover. It’s a thing.

“Come on, guys,” he shouts after us. “This might be the last time we see you—soon we won’t exactly be travelling in the same circles.” He’s tossing a ball up and down in his hand—I recognize it as a baku training tool, so owners can play “fetch” with their bakus, like with a real pet. “Unless I need someone to come and clean my house. Isn’t that what beetles do? The grunt work of the animal world?”

“What does that make you, a garbage disposal like your pig?” The words fly out of my mouth before I can stop them. I might hate my little beetle, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to give Carter permission to dis him.

A flare of red creeps over Carter’s pasty skin, rising up from his collar to his cheek like an angry tide, and his fist closes over the baku ball. We don’t want to see his reaction rise any further (satisfying though it is). I know full well I might have just poked an angry bear...or boar. I pull Zora forward.

“I’ll have you know pigs are highly intelligent and resourceful creatures!” Carter’s screechy voice follows us down the trail. “Come back! Don’t you want to see what a level four baku can do?”

We ignore him, half running, half walking until we are out of

sight and earshot before we relax.

Once upon a time, I would have loved to see a level four baku at work—especially something as complex as a boar model—but now, I only want to get away. I hate how small Carter can make me feel. Less than twenty-four hours since I got the rejection from Profectus, and already it's like my dreams have shrunk down from sky-high to subterranean.

There's a snapping of twigs and leaves behind us, a sinister snarl.

The boar is back. I reach out and grab Zora's hand—the boar baku might be intimidating, but he can't hurt us or Linus—he's not programmed that way. If we can get across the bridge and into the city, we can lose them for good. I start to run.

At first, Zora surges forward with me, but then her palm slips from mine. There are angry shouts from behind us and then a piercing screech from the eagle. I stop and spin around, already halfway across the bridge.

Tobias's eagle soars over the top of Zora's head, so close his wings brush her hairline, and he snatches something too small for me to see out of the air in his talons. She screams with fear, but she's running so fast, she stumbles over her flip-flops, skidding out of control, and she lands with a thump on the metal surface of the bridge. Something escapes her collar then bounces once, twice, and over the edge and down into the valley.

Out of instinct, I grab the closest thing I can find—a pinecone—and whip it at the eagle to get it away from Zora. My



aim, surprisingly, is good. The pinecone rattles against the eagle's golden wings, sending it off balance.

Then I hear Zora's panicked scream: "Linus!"

Oh no. My throat drops into my stomach and I race to Zora's side, leaning out over the railing as Carter, Tobias, and the rest of his friends run past us on the bridge, disappearing into the forest the other side. Cowards.

But her brand-new baku is absolutely nowhere to be seen.