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*To my family, for giving me the confidence to believe in
myself and telling me it's okay to dream big.*

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AUGMENTED

KENECHI UDOGU

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CHAPTER ONE

Augmentation Day Hyde Park Biodome, London

Channel 6289X: ‘What the hell is happening? How is she doing that?’

Channel 5168X: ‘I don’t know, but we have to stop her or there’ll be nothing left to save.’

Channel 6289X: ‘How exactly do we do that?’

Channel 5168X: ‘We have to break the sync.’

Channel 6289X: ‘No, it’s too soon, it could kill her.’

Channel 5168X: ‘Would you rather she brings it all down? We have to try.’

Channel 5168X: ‘Are you still there?’

Channel 6289X: ‘I’m thinking.’

Channel 5168X: ‘While you take your time doing that, I’ll go ahead and start programming the disconnection.’

Channel 6289X: ‘Wait!’

Channel 5168X: ‘We don’t have time for this.’

Channel 6289X: ‘Okay, fine! Do it. Just promise me one thing.’

Channel 5168X: ‘What?’

Channel 6289X: ‘If she has to die, make it quick.’

CHAPTER TWO

133 days to Augmentation Day

‘How long have you been with us now, Akaego?’

Three weeks, two days, eleven hours, and if I didn’t think you’d frown on me checking the seconds, I’d tell you exactly how long.

‘Three weeks, Mrs Miguel?’ I wasn’t sure why this came out as a question.

‘I told you to call me Elaine.’

‘Sorry, Mrs Miguel, I mean, Elaine.’

Shifting against the hard back of the chair, I kept my focus on a lopsided stain on the wall to her right.

‘We knew the adjustment wasn’t going to be easy so late into the academic year.’ Mrs Miguel sighed. ‘Nevertheless, we expected more from you to move the transition along.’

Her pause was so long, it could only be for effect. And it worked. I wriggled again, biting back the apology on the tip of my tongue.

‘You understand why your transfer was necessary? You get what this means. Not just for our academy but for the city. For your family.’

‘Yes.’

‘So you’ll try harder?’

‘Yes, Elaine,’ I replied, mentally patting myself on the back for remembering.

I kept my eyes on the stain to hide my nerves. There was no telling what information the data-streaming monocle sitting over her left eye was feeding back to her about my body language.

‘The good of one . . .’ Mrs Miguel’s voice trailed off.

‘Is the good of all,’ I finished the mantra.

‘I won’t keep you from class any longer. Hopefully, our conversation won’t be along the same lines when we review things in two weeks.’

I only realised I had been holding my breath when her office door shut and I felt the air gush out of me.

‘You just have to do better,’ I whispered, joining the sea of noisy students flowing through the wide corridor, hoping her words would fire up the sparks I’d been trying to get going.

Because I really wanted this to work. To prove to myself that coming here was the right decision. So Dad would see I wasn’t wasting everyone’s time making this huge change so close to Augmentation Day.

‘Hey, Engineering.’

My feet stopped before my brain could scream at them to do the opposite. Even if I hadn’t recognised the voice, a waft of mint and bergamot announced its owner. Sighing, I turned around.

Joon’s pearly whites flashed at me. As usual, that

wasn't the only thing about him that was blinging. I was still struggling to adjust to the Academy of Music's no-uniform policy after having to wear a collared blouse and pressed trousers for the last three years. Joon's bejewelled face and colourfully streaked hair always reminded me I owned far too many greys in my wardrobe and didn't have enough piercings.

Definitely nowhere near enough piercings. Was that a new hole in his brow?

'Why don't you try using my name? Just once.' I thought he'd given me the nickname because he was too lazy to remember my actual name, but after a couple of weeks, it sort of felt like he was trying to remind me I didn't belong there.

'Why? No one else answers to Engineering. It's perfect.' A hand that should have been weighed down by the metal hugging its fingers waved me off.

I had to give him a pretty big F for originality with that one. I was still trying to work out if this was some sort of caveman attempt at flirting. It wasn't like Joon Bernard-Jeong was any less of a mouthful to say than Akaego Eke.

'There's no other Akaego either. I checked.'

He closed the almost non-existent distance between us. I crossed my arms, hoping the motion would mask the annoying weakness in my knees. It was difficult not to be affected by chiselled-jaw boys who had lashes longer than mine, even when this one was confusing the hell out of me.

‘Someone could turn up next week.’

He said this like there was a real chance anyone else would show up as a mid-year intake when we both knew I was the first in nearly a decade.

‘Joon, what do you want?’ I asked, trying not to sound impatient.

He reached into his embroidered black and amber jacket, reminding me once again I really had to go shopping soon.

‘You left this at your last class. Mr Peterson said you’d need it.’

‘Oh. Thanks.’

The thin black box he extended had a silver treble clef debossed on its lid with the letters *A* and *M* below it. It was the same insignia on the black metal tags strapped to my wrist and Joon’s – the academy’s only mandatory item of clothing.

I must have dropped the box in my rush to meet Mrs Miguel. It still didn’t make up for Joon not calling me by my name.

‘I would have gone back for it if—’

Joon’s exaggerated tutting cut me off. ‘I have no idea how things were at your old school, but here, we stop after saying thanks. We have to find a way to loosen you up.’

‘Thank you,’ I repeated more firmly, before taking a step away from him.

‘Hey, wait.’

It was the sharp note in his voice that stopped me.

I didn't need to check my slider to know I was pushing my luck with time.

'Listen, Elaine chewed my ear off earlier about how I've not done such a great job as your integration buddy. Apparently, you should be best mates with half the year by now.' He rolled his eyes. 'Help me make things right. Will you join me and the others at Rush—'

'I have catch-up classes—'

'I know your after-school schedule is packed, so I was thinking Friday night? My band is playing. It's a small gig, but the crowd is always fun.'

He must have mistaken my non-committal shrug for a yes because his smile wattage went up a notch. Why did everything about him always look so easy and perfect?

'Great! I'll send you the deets. Bring a friend.'

I would have asked a ton of questions on any other day, but I could do that via text, so I turned and dashed down the corridor. I kept my head down, occasionally bumping into people heading in the opposite direction. Some smiled when I yelled out an apology, even though I doubted they knew who I was. Yet another thing I had to remember to do more of if I wanted to give the impression I was settling in.

'On time today, Miss Eke? Well done.'

Ignoring Mr Ericsson's tone, I scurried to the space he had set up. At our first session, I had thought one good thing about having nobody else present was

that I could choose where I sat. The kit my stone-faced tutor positioned right at the front of the room sank that hope.

I unwound a scrunchie from my wrist and piled my box braids on the top of my head. Mr Ericsson loved turning the thermostat up, and my neck had been covered in rashes from the intensity of the heat after our last session. I figured he couldn't tell my skin was flushed by the end of the class. He probably just assumed my cheeks were always that dark.

'Did you open it?'

I nodded and pulled out the black box, silently thanking Joon.

'Are these really organic?' I asked, lifting the lid and placing the box between us.

It was his turn to nod as he picked out one of the contents with a pair of forceps. Raising the slightly wonky oval object, he pointed out the grooves on its light green coat, his watery eyes squinting from behind his glasses.

'Anything genetically modified is never as easily affected during growth,' he explained, returning it to the box and shutting the lid. 'These came from a vault at Kew. Only the Ministry of Agriculture has access to them. In my thirty years of teaching, we've only had the honour of six students receiving ten seeds for practice. Everyone else gets five at best.'

I hadn't known that. If these were the real deal, the academy was not playing. And I had left the box lying

around like it meant nothing. I hoped that little fun fact would never get back to Mr Ericsson. Or Mrs Miguel, for that matter.

‘They must value your potential. Let’s hope they’re not mistaken.’

Before there was time for the queasy feeling in my belly to take hold, he swiped a flat screen on the table between us, tilting it to himself.

‘Can you tell me where we stopped last time?’

‘Mechanoreceptors?’

It was a word I’d never heard until recently.

‘Is that a question or an answer?’

I resisted the urge to make a face.

‘We studied how sensory receptors for plant cells differ from other organisms.’

‘And did you do the extra reading?’

The next few minutes were filled with me rattling off facts about the effects of external mechanical forces on plants at molecular, cellular and organ levels.

After spending years immersed in a world of codes, I had plenty of horticultural knowledge to catch up on before Augmentation Day if I wanted to help society grow more plants quickly.

‘You’re fed up of all this, aren’t you?’ Mr Ericsson must have sensed I was waning.

I took a second to consider if admitting it would result in some form of penalty.

‘I was hoping the seeds meant we were moving on.’

‘I get it. We’ve pushed you hard, but I really want you to graduate with the rest of your year in top form.’

Knowing he was right didn’t make his words any more comforting.

‘But if you promise not to tell anyone, we can do things a little differently.’ Mr Ericsson’s voice dipped conspiratorially. ‘Just for today.’

Hang on, what now? I sat up straight.

Switching off his screen, he reached under the counter and brought out a clay pot filled with earth. There was no way the seedling sprouting out of it could have survived there with no light, so he must have been planning this all along. I was actually more intrigued by the enormous smile on his face than the plant. He was usually so short with me.

‘Why did the debate about plant life’s ability to detect sound waves go on for so long?’ he asked when he pulled out a UV lamp and switched it on over the pot.

‘Because the exact frequencies that cause the reactions had not been isolated.’

‘Until Dr Mwangi’s fortunate discovery. And since we no longer had forty to sixty years to develop the new forests we so desperately needed, it couldn’t have come at a better time.’

His smile now a full grin, he pressed his thumb to the left side of his neck, just below his jaw. After a few seconds, he repeated the action. There was no indication anything had happened, but the action was one I was familiar with. All enhanced adults did it

regularly, though the contact could be anywhere on their body.

‘You’ve seen footage, but it’s time to show you the process in real life.’

I leaned in.

‘Bear in mind, this plant is not organic. If we used one of those—’

My slider chose that moment to vibrate loudly in my pocket. There was only one person who would try to reach me at that hour even though he was aware of my after-school schedule. Whatever Jaden had to say, it could wait.

‘Sorry.’

Mr Ericsson didn’t even raise a brow, already too into the moment. The first note that left his lips was barely audible, almost like he didn’t want to let it out at all.

‘Keep your focus on the plant, Miss Eke, not my mouth.’

‘Sorry.’

Just before he let out the second sound, my tutor tapped his neck once more. This time, the surface of his skin hardened into a thumb-shaped bulge and flashed neon blue. I felt the hair on my arms rise with the release of the deep, rumbling note.

From the videos I’d been shown after the ‘incident’ at my old school, I knew what would follow, yet I couldn’t hold in a gasp when the tiny seedling writhed.

‘Bloody he—’

My body leaned forward even more, but I didn't get the rest of the words out because the plant stopped, as if deciding on its next move, before making up its mind and shooting towards the hollow sound of Mr Ericsson's voice.