

CHAPTER 1

The chill spring breeze pushed through her thin sweater, causing her clammy skin to cover itself in goosebumps which increased her already extreme discomfort. Kya looked at her phone, studying the picture displayed on it. She reviewed the endless faces in the crowd and tried to find his face in the moving torrent of people outside the busy restaurant where they were supposed to meet.

As the crowd thickened, people began to bump into Kya, pushing her around, and causing her anxiety to shoot upwards. After being pushed and bouncing off another person without an apology, she glanced down at her hands, frustrated at the lack of respect. She could see herself, so presumably so could they, but the crowd continued to walk into her as though she was not worth noticing. She rolled her eyes and imagined having telekinesis. With it she would push all of the people away, giving herself a comfortable bubble of personal space.

"Keea?" A male voice said from above.

As she looked up, she saw a man hovering in the air, just above the tallest of the people walking by, and her mouth dropped open. The crowd parted slightly, and her date's feet touched the ground. He had a practiced, charming grin plastered onto his face and reached out to take her hand. Kya's head came only to about the bottom of his nose. His noticeably toned body was covered in a full black suit complete with a striking royal blue tie, which contrasted with the paleness of his sharp blue eyes. His light brown hair was meticulously styled, sitting perfectly in place. As her heart quickened, she couldn't help but think about how his online profile didn't prepare her for his grand entrance or how attractive he was. Suddenly, Kya felt underdressed in her 'fancy' dark wash jeans and a deep red silk top.

"Um, it's actually Kya," she said with a nervous smile. "Like 'Hi-yah!'" Kya made a chopping gesture with her hand and then waited for a few seconds for him to laugh. "But with a K", she continued when he didn't. She tried to come up with a witty retort, something funny, something interesting, but then blurted out, "and, you're Keen, right?"

"My name is Ken."

The deadpan, serious tone of his response let Kya know that he did not appreciate her joke, and she was in for a long night. The butterflies in her stomach that she had felt while waiting for him flapped harder after their initial interactions.

Inside the restaurant, Ken placed his hand on a podium by the front door and a green light flashed. A server appeared from nowhere and gestured for them to follow. Passing by a long line of waiting people, they were led to a private booth with gold accents, plush seating, and silk napkins. A crystal chandelier hung just above the table providing a dim glow to their surroundings.

"I almost feel sorry for the Normals in line. I bet they had to reserve months in advance," Ken said as he slid into the booth.

As the person that had seated them turned to leave, two other servers appeared with a bottle of wine, and two plates overflowing with food.

Ken directed the waiters with large gestures. "I'm glad I pre-ordered. The slow service here is the only negative thing about this place."

"Yeah, who would want to stay here all night?" Kya said with a smile, still hoping to salvage the evening. She picked up her utensils that were wrapped in a rich burgundy napkin and noticed not only the swirling design woven through the silk but also the weight of the cutlery. In her mind, she mused at how much it would cost to furnish and stock this restaurant. She couldn't help but imagine that it would cost her more than a week's wages just to buy a four place setting of the cutlery. She placed the knife, forks, and spoon back on the table and spread the napkin across her lap.

"So..." Ken said while he swirled the freshly poured glass of red wine. His brow furrowed as he studied the viscous liquid that sloshed around the near flawless crystal glass.

"So?" Kya replied. She made a conscious effort to smile as she said it, as she still wanted to appear friendly, despite the feeling that the date was quickly sinking.

Ken put down his drink and leaned his elbows on the table over his steak. The large slab of pink meat, with its bloody juices pooling and mixing with the melting butter, drenched the pile of carrots, green beans, and red peppers on his plate. It was almost enough to turn Kya's stomach. Her steak, with the black seared lines, and consistent dark colour, sat separately from her pile of delicious looking vegetables was inviting by comparison. She could never understand how anyone would want to eat a piece of a cow that looked like it had just stopped 'mooving'.

"So, what do you do for a living, Kya?"

She cringed a bit as he confidently, but incorrectly spat her name out, putting far too much emphasis on the 'ah'. 'Seriously,' she thought, 'how hard is Kya to pronounce? K-eye-uh.'

"Well, I guess you could say I'm..." She cleared her throat and took a moment to think how she wanted to approach the topic. "I'm a robotic arm. I work..."

"Oh! That's so cool!" Ken cut in, his whole face came alive. "You get to program robotics, then?"

"Um, no." Kya picked up her knife and the smaller of the two forks, turning her attention to her meal. "I work shift work at Starlife Technologies."

"You work for SLT?" Ken grinned wider and put down his drink. "Do you know Don Georgetown personally?"

"He's my boss." Kya looked around the restaurant. The windows were large, with beautiful stained glass imagery, surrounded by thick black iron, and draped with thick curtains with gold stitching. Unique, intricate chandeliers hung over every table. The overall ambiance was one of extravagant wealth. She watched as a man at a nearby table sat with his hands folded in front of a bowl of salad and mouthfuls of

food floated effortlessly from the bowl into his awaiting mouth. Kya couldn't help but smile. "This place is pretty spectacular, don't you think?"

"Mr. Georgetown seems like he'd be a great guy to work for. Is he?" Ken continued to talk as he filled his mouth with his nearly raw meat. "I hear he's got four Supers now. That's pretty impressive for an I.T. Director."

The smile fell from her face. "I've only seen two."

Kya picked the napkin up from her lap and fiddled with the edge of it, she glanced around the restaurant, counted four exit signs but could not think of a way to escape talking about her less than impressive job or boss. She placed the napkin back in her lap, leaned forward with her left elbow on the table resting her head on her thumb and first two fingers. With her fork in her other hand, she pushed a circle of carrot around her gold-rimmed plate.

"Anyways, I manage the data backup systems there, mostly doing overnights. I remove the full hard drives and replace them with blank ones so that the company can continue to backup its data. It doesn't take long to do, and it's not hard. Most companies have long since switched to a robotic system to swap out hard drives, and I could easily be replaced by a robotic arm tomorrow." She smiled, hoping Ken would get her earlier attempt at a joke of being a robotic arm.

Ken slumped back in his chair, his eyes glazing over and his face became nearly expressionless.

"Get it? Robotic-" She half chuckled and trailed off as it seemed to be Ken's turn to count the exits. "What do you do?" Despite the obvious physical attraction she had felt, Kya couldn't muster much enthusiasm in asking even this simple question.

"I market Supers to people like your boss."

The computerized beeping startled Kya. She blinked, stretched and shook herself awake. As her eyes adjusted to the darkened room, she struggled to lift her stiff, but average-sized frame from the black task chair where she spent her eight-hour shifts. She looked at the bank of displays monitoring the backup system, only to be nearly blinded by the flashing red and orange colours letting her know that it was time to do her job.

"What I wouldn't give for just one Super." She mumbled as reached out her hand and imagined herself directing the drives to swap themselves without her having to move any more than she already was. Unsurprisingly, nothing happened, so she pulled the first full hard drive and swapped it for the first blank one she had already set out at the start of her shift. The office was empty, as it always was during her overnight shifts, and every sound bounced off of the sea of cubicles. She counted out the forty drives she had to replace, making sure to label each one that she took out before setting them aside. With millions of files being archived on each one, Kya was cautious with the drives, though not as careful as her employers probably would have wanted. She scooped them all into a large plastic basket before quickly

tossing them into slots on the long floor to ceiling rack storage shelves.

Kya made audible whirring and buzzing noises as she moved her arm slowly and precisely, as she pretended to be nothing more than a robotic arm. She giggled to herself as she completed filing away the hard drives.

Kya jumped slightly as her phone vibrated in her pocket. While continuing to toss drives in their proper spots along the wall, she checked the time as she grabbed it from the back pocket of her jeans. She glanced at the alert that included a small picture of a blonde woman in a wedding dress. "Mattie, what are you doing up so late?" She said quietly to herself, reading a text from her friend.

>How was it? Were you out all night? Was he as awesome as his profile? Was he hot? Too many questions?

Kya rolled her eyes and responded.

>Sheesh, woman! I thought the world had ended! You're awake at 1:30 am?!

>Meh. It's Saturday night, and Rory has some friends over for beer and video games... I can't sleep.

>Must be torture for an old lady like you!

Kya smirked as she typed.

>Shut your face miss three months younger than me. NOW tell me about your date!

Kya looked around at the drives. She knew full well that none would need to be changed for at least four hours, but she still searched for an orange flash before responding. All green, signaling they were ready to go.

>It was...

He called me Keea.

>Ouch! I guess he didn't read far enough through your profile to see that's one of your pet peeves. Never a good start. Guess that answers question 2.

>It was the only thing I had listed in that section. So, yeah, another early night for yours truly.

And I read his whole profile. It made me think he had a personality! This dude... Nah. I think he had a bigger crush on old Donnie or even a glass of wine than on me!

>Lol!

Was he as hot as his pics though?

Kya twirled around in her chair for a moment, watching the ceiling tiles spin and thought about

that.

>If you'd asked me that at 8 pm when he wasn't there yet I'd say no. If you'd asked me when he finally showed up using Flight at quarter after, I'd have said WAY HOTTER!

>He's a Super? Cool! And also a little weird, no offense.

>None taken.

The date went the way of the Titanic so quick, and his personality or to be more precise: lack thereof took ALL the hotness away.

>You and those pesky personalities! lol

>I doubt you are literally laughing out loud.

>Add it to your pet peeves.

Kya smiled at the message from her friend.

>I'm so glad you get me.

He actually asked if we should go to his place or mine after what had to be one of the worst first dates in the history of the world.

>Think he's just doing the online dating thing to score? Like he thinks Normals are desperate or something?

>You know, Mattea, you might be onto something there! Have you ever thought of becoming a detective?

I have to admit, I am still kind of half considering a second date.

>What? Why would you do that??

Kya smiled at getting the kind of response she had hoped for. Even just typing the words, and accepting the truth behind them had made her skin crawl. Her smile faded as she drafted her response.

>I could get a Super if I stay with him.

>Don't do that! There's plenty more fish in the sea. There has to be one out there who will find your wit endearing. Supers or not.

>Well the sea of online dating can keep its fish.

>Oh :-(

Kya clenched her teeth for a moment and took a long drawn out breath.

>No :-(needed, I'm cool with being single. And two more years at SLT, and I'll be able to afford a Super without a guy.

>You know I just want you to be as happy as I am.

Kya's thumbs hovered above her keypad, ready to type a response when Mattie sent her final message:

>Oh! Rory and his bros are done. I'm going to bed. Nighty night.

She replaced her phone in her pocket without responding and the long wait set in for her next hard drive swap. Donning her headphones, Kya fell into her chair, spun it back towards the status monitors and began to listen to the most energetic tracks available on her Song Feed station. She checked her bank balance more out of habit than necessity and confirmed that if she was able to continue saving the way she had been, and if the prices didn't jump again, she could get her first Super in two more years. It seemed like a terribly long time to stay in this job, but it also seemed better than the alternative if the only alternative was Ken.

With the beat of the music providing her with a second wind, she opened her web browser, and pulled up her account on Flash Fiction Fan Favourites, a website with thousands of independent writers, and began reviewing fiction written by writers from around the world. Her editor profile had dozens of submissions in the queue, and she couldn't help but smile.

"You push me without touching me, but I'll use my hands to shove!" Kya sang her heart out as she closed her web browser and made the rounds to swap the hard drives once again. She lifted one of the empty drives near her lips and continued to belt out the rhythmic lyrics. "Maybe I can't fly like you, but I can rise above!"

Twenty minutes of work every few hours was all the babysitting that the machines needed. A light tap on her shoulder cut Kya off mid-chorus and startled her. With her heart racing, she turned and saw a tall, lanky man, her relief.

"Leonard! Don't sneak up on me like that!"

"Don't you know by now you shouldn't be listening to music at work? And anyways, I'm not sneaking around here."

Leonard walked past Kya and put his briefcase on the desk closer to the window. She turned to look at her co-worker and noted that he was dressed in full business attire, with pressed black dress pants, an ironed button up shirt, and a dark green checkered tie in a meticulous Windsor knot. Despite his pale skin, dark eyes, and thin frame, the suit fit him well, making him look older than Kya knew he was.

"Nice threads," she said. "New tie?"

"Yes. I got it yesterday." He squinted a bit as he took in Kya's appearance. "What does your shirt say?"

Kya looked down at her black t-shirt. Above a purple circle, it had words written. "It says 'When I was your age, Pluto was a planet.'"

"Charming," Leonard said, his nose turned up slightly.

"Don't you think it's a bit silly to dress up for a job swapping out hard drives? Seems a bit overkill to me." Kya blurted.

"Ugh, Kya!"

"I know what you're going to say," Kya said. She dropped her tone of voice to sound more masculine. "Not only do we have a dress code, but you should dress for the job you want."

Leonard straightened his tie. "And judging by your sweat pants, some people might assume you want-"

"Anyways..." She cut him off. "Nothing of interest happened last night. I swapped two sets, placed them in the library. The third set is being chewed through right now. Gotta go catch my bus."

As Kya collected her stuff, Leonard inspected the logs slowly and carefully before signing off on the changeover.

"I don't know why you do that. No one ever checks the log book."

"I do it because it's procedure."

"Well, you have fun with that," Kya said with a mocking grin and a wave. Humming the tune of the last song she listened to, she quickly turned and pushed her way through the double doors exiting the Information Technology section of Starlife Technologies. Out in the main pavilion, the smile melted from her face, and her shoulders slumped as the weight of another boring night slammed into her.

A few of the information technology staff were coming in as Kya left, their eyes still red, coffees in hand, frowns etched on their faces, but they were all dressed up in professional clothing, something that Kya dreaded having to wear on her upcoming week of day shifts.

Kya made eye contact with someone she recognized from her department, and he smiled at her. He stood the same height as Kya and wore a suit that looked older than she was.

"Hey, Kya," he said.

"Heyah," Kya said back, uncertain of his name.

"I hope you are going to be ready for your day shifts. I'll be working in the desk next to yours, and I'll need you to be on your toes swapping drives for me as I run some tests." The older man paused, seeming to wait for Kya's answer, and just as the silence lingered on for a little too long, he continued, "I heard they only give you data management folks twenty-four hours to switch from nights to days."

"Yeah, it's rough. I feel like I'm sleepwalking my way out of here most days."

"I don't think I could do shift work ever again. I did it when I was in my twenties, but we were given a week off between major changes like that."

"Yeah. I don't know why Don won't let anyone have just full days or full nights." Kya said as she pulled her hair back from her face with both hands.

"Oh! Is the purple new? I could have sworn you had orange in your hair."

"Yeah. I did it a couple days ago." Kya was surprised he'd remembered her orange streaks. She kept her brightly coloured streaks of hair mostly hidden under the top layer of natural brown.

"Don't let Don see!" The man beamed back and winked.

Stifling a yawn, she responded. "Nah. I'll keep it down and professional for dear old Don. Like always."

"Good plan. Good plan." He said, patting her on the shoulder as he started to walk past her. "Speaking of Don, I don't want to be late. Can you imagine what he'd do? I'll see you the day after tomorrow. Bright and early!"

"Bright and early," she repeated less than enthusiastically, as she walked towards the big glass doors to the outside world.

A weight was lifted from her shoulders as a light breeze hit her face. She closed her eyes for a moment, which stopped them from burning, before heading to the bus stop. Time dragged on as she waited for her bus that would take her from the wasteland of factories and offices that was the industrial section of the city to her apartment near the downtown core. She closed her eyes again, quickly falling into a daydream about being able to fly home, over the buildings, and right onto the balcony of her apartment.

The bus stopped at a large transfer point, one of the few in the city where both buses and the light rail system met up. The building that served as the hub was two stories tall, and the center area was a large glass dome, open to both. The lower level served bus terminals and was an entry point for all passengers while the train platforms lined the upper level. A glass and metal staircase led down from the trains into the open pavilion.

Kya watched as one of the large trains, only accessible by Supers, pulled into the station on the far side. She walked closer to the staircase trying to glimpse inside the train while staying close enough that she could see her next bus when it came. A gate at the top of the stairs prevented unauthorized individuals from accessing the trains.

"She was my wife!" A loud voice boomed. Kya quickly craned her neck to try to see where the

voice had come from. A horde of people began moving chaotically through the station, clearing a line of sight for her to see the situation. She watched as a man, likely no older than herself, drew a large gun from his billowing jacket, and aimed it at the chest of a slightly older man in a suit who had just descended the stairs.