



E.R.E.B.U.S

A Novel By:



Chapter 12 - Dug Your Grave

“You’ve got some explaining to do, Elise,” Jaida said sternly, tucking Becky into bed like a concerned mother. Her sluggish energy had depleted almost instantly and she passed out like a child in bed, snoring lightly.

“I was just trying to loosen us all up, we’ve been working so hard and I just thought...” she trailed off before tears began to swell in her eyes and she collapsed to the floor with her head in her hands. “It’s too much, I can’t do this anymore.”

Hunter watched as Jaida knelt beside her and wrapped her arms around the sobbing girl. He had a damp towel to clean his shirt, but it wasn’t doing much to get rid of the strong smell. Jaida glanced up at him, motioning for him to hand over the box of tissues on Becky’s dressing table.

“How much have you had to drink?” Jaida asked, smelling the alcohol on Elise’s breath.

“Not much, I just wanted a little bit for us to relax. I didn’t mean for this to happen,” she sobbed, her voice crackling with bizarre static energy. Her neatly styled hair began to drift apart as if the gravity around her vanished.

“You know what alcohol does to us...” Jaida said, noticing the bizarre changes. “It messes with your head and lowers your inhibitions. We need clarity to stay in control, or this happens.”

“I’m tired of being in control, when do I get to relax?” Elise asked, glancing over towards Becky. “Why do I have to be the responsible one on our team?”

“It’s hard, I know. I understand,” Jaida said, comforting the girl as the crackling intensified. Through the charged air, Hunter watched the scene unfold and guilt began to bubble in his stomach. This was how Jaida felt too, and he was only just beginning to understand the impact it could have on someone.

“Since Eeva’s accident, I’ve trained every day, as many hours as I could... and I’ve tried to push the rest of my squad to do the same. But they don’t understand the pressure, the crippling anxiety I have every time Eeva steps out onto the field.”

“You’ve done an amazing job,” Jaida said, holding Elise tightly. “Look how far you’ve come, you’re the second-ranked Squad in the entire Academy.”

“But when does it end? How far do I keep pushing myself to protect Eeva, because everyone around us is growing stronger too? I can’t sleep at night because I’m terrified of the thought of losing her again... and I can’t, not again,” she choked up, burying her head into Jaida’s comforting embrace.

A faint blue aura began to glow around her and the sound of static ripped through the air. Jaida rocked her back and forth, hushing her cries.

“Shhh, it’s ok, just let it out,” Jaida whispered, the crackling energy causing her skin to tingle. A few moments passed before the static died down, and Jaida glanced up at Hunter with a soft expression. She didn’t dare speak, but her eyes motioned to the door.

Hunter nodded, knowing that they needed some time alone. He left the room quietly, glancing back to see Jaida wiping Elise’s eyes and guiding her towards the foot of Becky’s bed.

Once he closed the door, he felt vibrations pulsing through the air around him. No sooner had it started did the deep sound of a thumping bass burst through the concrete walls that divided the rooms.

It had only been ten minutes since they arrived and the apartment was in utter chaos. Hunter entered the lounge to be greeted by a wave of music and out-of-tune singing. His squad mates, accompanied by students from several other squads that they got along fairly well with, jumped and cheered along to a song he couldn’t hear over Aaron’s awful singing.

Ten minutes was all it took for all common sense and order to fly out of the window; with Jaida preoccupied with an intoxicated Becky and hyper-sensitive Elise, the squad took their chance to enjoy themselves whilst they could.

Hunter sat down at the bar, not really in the mood for dancing after seeing Elise break into a blubbering mess. It seemed like he was the only one who wasn't all that interested in the concoction Oleander had brewing in the kitchen. Jalen and Valentina were sat at the stainless steel bar keeping him company, enjoying the bleach-smelling samples of alcohol.

Sitting beside Oleander, Hunter tried to preoccupy his mind by talking to Jalen and Valentina whilst watching the alcohol brew. "Isn't this like... pure ethanol?" he asked, intrigued by how Oleander transformed chemicals with his Enhancement.

"Pretty much, we brought mixers to dull the taste though," Valentina said, pointing to the table with various colourful juices on display.

"Aren't you going to try some?" Jalen asked, downing the last of his drink.

"Nah, I'm not sure that's a great idea," Hunter said as the other three rolled their eyes.

"It's not going to hurt you," Jalen chuckled, gladly taking another cup full. "Your friends seem to be enjoying it," he said, pointing towards the group of dancing idiots. Sure enough, Kai, Aaron, and Leila were chugging drinks like there was no tomorrow.

"And I'm sure they'll get Jaida's wrath once she's finished taking care of Becky and Elise," he raised a brow, making a point of how alcohol had affected them.

"Ah, so that's why," Valentina grinned, sharing a mischievous glance with Jalen and Oleander. "He doesn't want to look bad in front of his Queen."

"Whoa, what?" Hunter stammered, shifting nervously in his seat.

“You’re so dense,” Jalen said, tapping the side of his skull and listening intently. “No echo, there’s definitely a brain in there somewhere,” he shrugged in a teasing manner.

“I have enough of a brain to know that drinking this stuff is only going to cause chaos tonight,” Hunter replied, pressing his heels firmly onto the metal bar of the stool.

“What’s life without a little chaos?” Valentina winked, downing her drink and gesturing for Oleander to pour her another. “You need to learn to let go, so does Jaida for that matter. Look at your Squad, they’re all having fun and bonding... When was the last time that happened?”

“I... I don’t know,” Hunter admitted, looking at his friends. Elise may have been a mess, but perhaps that wasn’t because of the alcohol and instead was the result of the crippling pressure weighing her down. The drink just eased the tension a bit and allowed her to release all of that pent-up frustration.

“We’re in the apartment, it’s safe,” Valentina said, “We’ve been training at the Academy for how long now?”

“Eight years,” Jalen answered, taking a sip of his drink.

“Eight years...” Valentina repeated, thanking Jalen for his input. “Almost a decade of honing and practising our craft... I think we’ve spent enough time getting our Enhancements under control. They aren’t going to go haywire just because we’ve had a few drinks.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Hunter breathed out heavily, wanting nothing more than to relax and joke about with his friends. “Maybe this is what we need to bring us together again.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Jalen shrugged, handing him a cup.

Hunter stared at it for a moment, weighing up the outcomes. Jaida would undoubtedly be furious with him, but if he explained it the same way Valentina had, then maybe he could change her mind. Elise had buried her emotions and stress under a deep façade, that’s the only reason everything came tumbling out at once.

“Give me one,” Hunter said, caving to the peer pressure as Oleander handed him a freshly made cup. He hesitated for a moment before downing it in one. The burning sting felt oddly cold as it worked its way down his throat. He wasn’t sure what to expect from a drink that smelt like bleach, but the small hint of orange juice did very little to mask the stench or taste.

“Feels great doesn’t it,” Valentina said with a grin, noticing Hunter’s face scrunch with distaste.

“Y-yeah,” Hunter coughed out, the alcohol still tickling his throat. “Burns a little.”

“That’s how you know it’s working!” she cheered, slapping Hunter on his back making him choke on the drink further. “Get a few more down you and you’ll finally have the courage to admit your feelings to Jaida,” she winked playfully.

“I-er, I think I’m gonna go over there now,” he chuckled nervously, wanting to leave the awkward situation. They knew he had a soft spot for Jaida and the last thing he wanted was to be coaxed into something he wasn’t comfortable with. Sliding away, he glanced around the room to notice the music had softened ever so slightly.

Sat at the dining table was Rob, accompanied by Nature Squad members Persephone and Fauna. Despite them spending a huge majority of their time in training gear and gardening in the greenhouse, they dressed up pretty nicely.

Persephone had slipped into a forest green dress with ruffles at the bottom like a rose. Running up her arms were vines that had small buds starting to sprout in a plethora of colours. They wrapped around her neck like a choker with a bright red rose in the centre. Fauna was wearing more conservative attire, a simple red chequered shirt with ripped denim shorts and cowgirl boots.

Everyone, aside from Jaida and Elise, had begun to loosen up and the stress of the impending tournament began to slip away. The dramatic and exaggerated effects of alcohol seemed to be the last thing on their minds, even Hunter began to relax. He joined Kai beside the large dining table as the group cheered Rob and Leila in the centre.

“Come on Rob!” Ferro cheered from beside him, as he and Leila were midway through an intense match of Enhanced Arm Wrestling. Rob’s arm was encased in a large robotic exoskeleton that had hydraulics to help him. Leila’s tiny arm paled in comparison and looked nowhere near as threatening, and yet she was holding her own against the mechanical monster.

“You know you can’t win,” Leila grinned as crimson red energy flowed beneath the surface of her skin. The energy breached out like a wave and began to drain the vitality of everyone around her, including Hunter. His vision began to blur and his head spun uncontrollably, the ethanol in his system taking more of a toll now that his vitality had been drained.

“Hunter, are you feeling ok?” Kai asked, seeing him swaying on the spot. The room began to spin around Hunter like he was on a tiny yacht caught in a whirlpool. He turned to Kai, but couldn’t focus on his face. His features moulded into one blurred visage and his voice felt distant. The sudden sound of Rob’s hydraulic arm slamming into the table shocked Hunter back to his senses, but he could still feel himself swaying side to side.

“Yeah, sorry... what?” he asked, shaking his head and rubbing his temples. His eyes felt heavy and he struggled to keep them focused. He hadn’t noticed Jaida walk into the lounge and paid very little attention to her immediate gasp of horror.

The room fell silent, and everyone froze in place watching as Jaida twitched furiously. The thumping music mysteriously stopped and everyone stared at her dramatically, waiting for her to explode. Her eyes scanned the room before stopping on her squad mates, surrounded by cups of alcohol.

“Please tell me you haven’t been drinking?” she said sternly, walking over to them. “Something like this was bound to happen, I should never have let you come tonight.”

“We’re fine Jaida,” Hunter said groggily, not reading the tension in the room. His head spinning from the cocktail of alcohol and Leila’s Enhancement, he looked as if he’d been drinking all day.

“You most definitely are not fine,” she shot back quickly, stomping over to him and pulling on his arm. “Come with me,” she said sternly, pulling him over towards the sliding balcony door. Hunter glanced back at Kai for help, but he just chuckled under his breath at the fiasco.

Once outside it was too late to escape. Jaida stood firm and folded her arms as Hunter shifted nervously at her glares. “How could you be so irresponsible,” she sighed, clearly upset with him. The music suddenly started again, and loud obnoxious cheering soon followed. This only wound Jaida up further, and Hunter was now the only person in her firing line.

“It was just one drink,” he tried to argue back but she waved him off ignoring his words.

“The others I understand because they have no self-control. But you... I thought you at least would have had some common sense.”

“I do!” Hunter shot, causing Jaida to take a step back. “It was just one drink. I’d be fine if Leila hadn’t used her Enhancement on me.”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses. There is a reason it’s banned, Hunter. It affects our Enhancements, you saw what happened to Elise... And you still went ahead and drank it anyway.”

“I’m fine,” he replied, thinking of a way to calm her down. “Valentina said we don’t have anything to worry about... That we’ve trained enough for the alcohol not to affect us.”

“You aren’t fine. You can barely stand still without swaying,” Jaida shot back furiously. “Valentina doesn’t have to show the same restraint as some of us. Her body heals too fast for alcohol to have any effect on her body, and she can’t hurt anyone if she loses control.”

“I’m just trying to have some fun, loosen up. We’re not going to get caught up here, and everyone will be downstairs soon dancing. I don’t always want to be prude like...” he began, but stopped himself short of saying something he’d regret.

Nevertheless, Jaida knew how that sentence was going to end and she stepped backwards, hurt. "I... I didn't mean... I don't know why I said that" Hunter fumbled, but this just seemed to make things worse. It only proved Jaida's point, and her pain soon turned to anger.

The balcony door suddenly slid open interrupting the tense moment.

"Hey, hope we're not interrupting," Kai said with Persephone clinging onto his shoulder. Her dress had begun to bloom with even more colourful flowers decorating it.

"No, I think Hunter's said everything he wanted," Jaida said, staring into his eyes before pushing her way back into the lounge. Hunter sighed and turned his back to the door leaning over the balcony. He heard Kai whisper something to Persephone before the sliding door shut once again.

"I thought I'd come out and rescue you, but it looks like I made things worse," Kai said, leaning beside Hunter. "Are you going to tell me what that was about?"

"I'm such an ass," Hunter replied, looking up towards the evening sky. It wasn't his intention to hurt Jaida but it seemed like he could never do right by her. The perfect prince everyone expected him to be, the knight in shining armour... He couldn't be either of those.

"Nice view isn't it?" Kai sighed in contempt trying to take Hunter's mind off his messy situation. He averted his eyes towards Kai for a moment before looking back up. "The only thing that changes around here is the sky."

"I suppose it is," Hunter said, watching as the orange tones burned out into a cloudless night sky. The sun was moments away from being completely set and the moon had appeared faintly in the dark-toned heavens. Fleeting rays of light tore through the forest creating lines of pure colour throughout the grounds.

"Do you ever think about it?" Kai asked, turning to face Hunter. "The outside world, our families, our homes? I can't remember what any of it looks like," he shamefully admitted, disappointment lacing his words.

“I can’t either,” Hunter replied, pushing his body away from the railing and stretching his back. “Sometimes I wonder if this is all worth it. Will we even have a family once we get out? Or is this it... Are we now just fighting until the day we die?”

“Nah I feel them,” Kai smiled looking out over the balcony. Streams of people below started to walk through the gardens and over towards the Baphomet residence. The music downstairs began to get louder as more and more people piled into the building. “I don’t see them, but I know they’re waiting for me. Proud of what I’m doing here.”

“That’s a nice thought, the only time I see my family is in my dreams... And that’s not real.”

“Why can’t it be real?” Kai asked with uncertainty.

“Because it’s a dream. My imagination, none of it actually happened,” Hunter replied as if this was one of the most stupid questions Kai had asked.

“It’s an experience, isn’t it? I feel in my gut that I’ll see my family again. Just because it’s a feeling doesn’t mean it’s not real,” Kai said with a warm smile on his face. “Just like your dreams. It’s an experience so it’s real.”

“I hope for our sake that you’re wrong,” Hunter sighed remembering how awful his dreams were. The last thing he wanted was for anyone to have experienced the same feeling of loss and isolation. “When did you get so smart anyway,” he grinned playfully, messing up Kai’s hair.

“I guess Jaida is rubbing off on me,” Kai shrugged, quickly looking back to the balcony window to straighten up his hair.

“Speaking of; I should probably go and talk to her,” Hunter said, glancing back into the room to see Jaida sitting at the bar with Oleander and Leila.

“Good luck,” Kai laughed sarcastically knowing that Hunter wasn’t going to get anywhere fast with her. “If she’s angry with someone, she stays angry... The best you can do is ride this one out.”

After nearly an hour of trying to get Jaida to speak to him, Hunter had to admit that Kai was right. In his groggy and drunken stupor, he slumped down onto the couch beside Fauna who was talking on her ACD.

Hunter glanced over to see the small hologram of Aatu with a bandana tied neatly around his neck. "You've never looked so handsome," Fauna giggled as Aatu bared his canines for a toothy grin. "I'll come down and meet you, we're finishing up here soon anyway," she said, turning off the device and sliding it back into her pocket.

"Tell him I said hey," Hunter said, catching Fauna's attention before she could leave. "And no hard feelings with the whole dragging me out of a bush by my neck thing..." he chuckled, trying to take his mind off Jaida.

"Can I offer some advice?" Fauna said, noticing Hunter's eyes glancing across the room longingly. With a heavy sigh, Hunter threw his head back in an attempt to stop the room from swaying around him.

"Sure, I could use all the help I can get."

"Jaida's a tough girl, she has a thick skin but it isn't made of diamond," Fauna said, placing her hand on top of Hunter's, sensing his frustration and need for guidance. "I'm lucky that I have a squad that listens to my problems... And when they can't, I can sing with the birds in the trees or sunbathe with the swans by the lake."

"I don't think singing with birds is going to fix this... I've screwed any chance I had," Hunter said, gazing across the room to the girl of his affection. Despite her current furious disposition, she was still stunningly beautiful. Her lips were stained pink and her eyes glistened like emerald gemstones, her beauty cut through the room like there was no one else standing around her.

"You aren't listening," Fauna said, snapping him back to the conversation. "I'm not going to give you all the answers, you need to figure them out for yourself. But for someone who has super-powered hearing... You're a terrible listener," she said, pursing her lips with a courteous shrug before leaving him to his thoughts.

It wasn't long before the group began to make their way down to the lobby. They stumbled down to the bottom of the staircase, laughing and giggling like children. Jaida remained cold, walking silently ahead of Hunter. As they reached the lobby, Hunter couldn't quite believe how so many people could fit into one room.

A large crowd of students surrounded the stone stage as music vibrated around the lobby. Dotted along the walls and stone catwalk were speakers that shook from the thumping bass. The entire room was alive with cheering, music, and laughter, but all Hunter could feel was the bass pressing against his chest.

Dangling obnoxiously from the ceiling was a crystal ball that spun around refracting a spectrum of light beams from a source in its core.

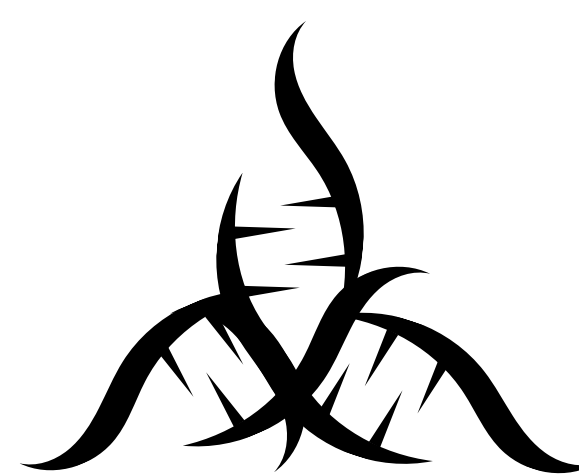
"It turned out better than I expected," Hunter overheard Jalen say to Jaida, who cracked a restrained but proud grin. "Come on, smile! That's what tonight's about! Enjoy yourself, you deserve it."

"I know," Jaida sighed, her shoulders relaxing but only ever so slightly. "Winning this tournament means everything to me, I just don't want anything to jeopardise that," she said, absently following Jalen towards the dance floor.

Their voices vanished into the crowd and Hunter lost sight of them soon after. The amalgamation of perfumes and beverages vanished from his nose as he tried to focus on their voices, but it was to no avail. Scrunching his eyes tightly, he tried to filter out the crowd but the voices came and went like waves of sound.

"Hunter... Do you need the toilet or something?" Leila asked, looking up at him with a puzzled expression. He looked around and noticed Aaron and Kai both looking at him with the same confused look on their faces.

"No, it's just really loud down here. Too many voices," he replied, slightly embarrassed.



“Olly’s brought some more ORANGE JUICE down with him,” Aaron said loudly, trying to act inconspicuous as one of the Academy Security Guards circled them. “I’ll get him to slip us some, that should help drown out the voices,” he whispered to Hunter, who wasn’t sure if it was a good idea. The lobby was littered with guards, and there was no doubt they’d be patrolling outside too.

“Just don’t let the guards see you,” Hunter said, glancing about to make sure they weren’t being watched.

“Don’t even think about going without me,” Leila said, her voice slurred and coarse. She was quite drunk but thankfully the mass of bodies hid the fact that she was slightly stumbling. It wasn’t much of a challenge to find Oleander.

He was by the large buffet secretly pouring more cups of alcohol when the guards weren’t watching. Hunter knew he’d end up regretting it but Jaida was already ignoring him. He hadn’t seen her since losing her in the crowd, it was like she’d vanished.

One, two... six drinks later, Hunter had given up caring about the consequences and lost himself in the decadence and false glamour of intoxication. His constant searching for Jaida lessened with every drink and soon he was on a cloud of ecstasy as the music swayed his body.

“Hunter?” he heard Kai call from beside him. Through glazed eyes he noticed the sandy-haired boy approaching, taking his hands and holding them lightly. “Dance with me?” he asked, his voice soft and nervous.

“S-sure...” Hunter replied with a slight stutter. Grinning, Kai pulled Hunter into the crowd and found a nice spot for them to dance. The music was louder than before and the beat had picked up. Hunter tried to keep up with the music, but his mind was cloudy and his body felt sluggish.

“Here, like this,” Kai said, putting Hunter’s hands on his shoulders. “You’ve drunk a lot huh?” he asked, and Hunter just nodded, letting Kai guide him through the song. “How do you feel, better?”

“No, just numb,” Hunter replied simply with a shrug. “What about you? Wasn’t tonight your chance to find a new guy?”

"I don't think that's going to happen," Kai chuckled, swaying back and forth with Hunter as the music began to slow down.

"Why not? You shouldn't be wasting your time dancing with me... Jalen's here somewhere. You know he has a crush on you," Hunter replied, glancing around for the white-haired boy.

"Jalen's a good guy, he doesn't deserve my baggage," Kai said, not taking his eyes off Hunter.

"There has to be someone here for you..." Hunter said, but Kai just shrugged, not wanting to get into it. Despite his intoxication, Hunter seemed to be surprisingly sober at the moment and his eyes pierced into Kai until he finally gave in.

"Well, there is someone I like... But he doesn't notice me," Kai said, looking down to the floor and standing still. Hunter let go of his shoulders, and took his hands instead, holding them tightly with a smile eagerly waiting for more details. "When he looks at me, he doesn't ever really see me. Not how I want him to see me anyways."

"Then make him see you, he doesn't know what he's missing," Hunter smiled, embracing Kai tightly before pushing back and grinning. He takes Kai's hand and spins him around playfully as the music picks up again. "Your past isn't baggage, it's experience. Blake's an ass, but at least he taught you something..."

"Like what?" Kai chuckled sarcastically, not sure if anything great came from his relationship with Blake.

"That you're special, and worth so much more," Hunter grinned, forcing Kai to shy away in embarrassment.

He wasn't sure what to say, he hadn't thought much of himself in a long time. It was weird to hear Hunter say that he was special, especially when he didn't feel it. "I've wasted enough of your time," Hunter said suddenly, stopping to catch his breath. "If you need me, I'll be by the buffet... But try not to need me," he winked, grabbing Kai by the shoulders and spinning him around. "Go find that guy and tell him how you feel," he whispered, giving Kai a gentle nudge forward, before disappearing into the crowd of dancers.

Hunter managed to stumble his way across the dance floor and towards the buffet table. Now that he didn't have Kai to keep his mind preoccupied, the alcohol in his system had begun to play havoc with his senses again. By the time he approached the buffet, all the food seemed to blur together and he wasn't sure what he was shovelling into his mouth, but he didn't care.

It was the most delicious meal he'd ever had, even though he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was. Cheese, bread, pickled onion, chicken... all the flavours blended into something comparable to a meal in heaven. He'd heard the best way to sober up was to eat as much food as possible to soak up the alcohol, but the more he ate the more nauseous he began to feel.

"Whoa steady there," a concerned voice suddenly spoke from behind Hunter, shocking him and making him slip on the wet floor. In his drunken stupor, he failed miserably trying to brace his fall, but a pair of arms grabbed him and held him steady. He looked up to see Jalen smiling down at him with a playful grin.

"Thanks," Hunter muttered as he scrambled up, wriggling himself out of Jalen's arms. "Think I may have had a bit too much."

"You're good, just slow down a bit," Jalen assured him, brushing Hunter's shoulders to tidy him up. Being on the same squad as Oleander, Jalen was no newcomer to the effects of alcohol. "Lucky for you I came by," Jalen said as a guard walked past, staring at them curiously. He waved playfully, pretending to dance with Hunter until he was out of view. "What a party eh, have you seen my lights?" Jalen asked, taking in the atmosphere.

"Yeah they're pretty awesome," Hunter hiccupped out to which Jalen laughed. "Jaida helped you make them, right?" he asked, remembering the conversation he overheard.

"You're adorable," the white-haired boy said, helping Hunter into one of the chairs. "But instead of asking me and shovelling all that food down your throat, why don't you just go and talk to her."

“I tried earlier, she doesn’t want to talk to me. Not that I blame her,” Hunter slurred in his slouched position. Jalen sat down next to him and tried to keep him steady and upright.

“Look...” he began, making sure Hunter was listening. “She’s just upset because she thought she could trust you to back her up. I told her I didn’t agree with how she acted, but I do understand why she’s upset... With you specifically.”

“What do you mean?” Hunter asked, confused by what Jalen was saying. “Everybody keeps coming to me with advice, but it isn’t helping. It’s just making things more confusing and complicated,” he groaned, just wanting a straight answer.

“She likes you, Hunter...” Jalen said, just cutting to the point. “Yes, she’s uptight and obsessed with being the best... But that’s just who she is. In that moment, regardless of whether she was right or wrong, she expected your support. But instead, you made her feel worthless... Like what she was saying didn’t matter.”

“How do you know all this?” Hunter asked, hating how in the dark he felt.

“Because I’m not as dense as you,” he chuckled back but then pointed across the room. Hunter peered through the crowds of dancing teenagers to see Jaida standing against the far wall watching the party around her. She didn’t seem to be enjoying herself, and even from this distance, Hunter could tell that her eyes were red and poofy.

“I can’t go...” Hunter began but noticed Jalen had disappeared. He hadn’t even noticed him slip away, but now his eyes were fixed on Jaida, who remained pressed against the wall with her arms folded.

He sat for a while, just watching her from a distance. Leila approached her and tried to persuade her to dance, but she refused and stayed on the sidelines just watching the fun from afar. Hunter’s stomach dropped at the realisation that his words had made her feel even more excluded than she already did.

Plucking up the courage, he pushed himself up and began to cross the warzone of dancers. Halfway across the room, he noticed the music die down until it was but a subtle hum from what it was. He glanced up to see Aria behind the decking system that was perched on a platform atop the stone stage.

She had been using her abilities to control the sound and rhythm as she did with all the music in the Academy. The lights around the stage started to dim and change to a deep purple colour as fog began to roll across the stage. Aria began to play another song, it's melody soft and haunting. A figure emerged slowly from the fog, standing in the centre of the stage with all eyes on them.

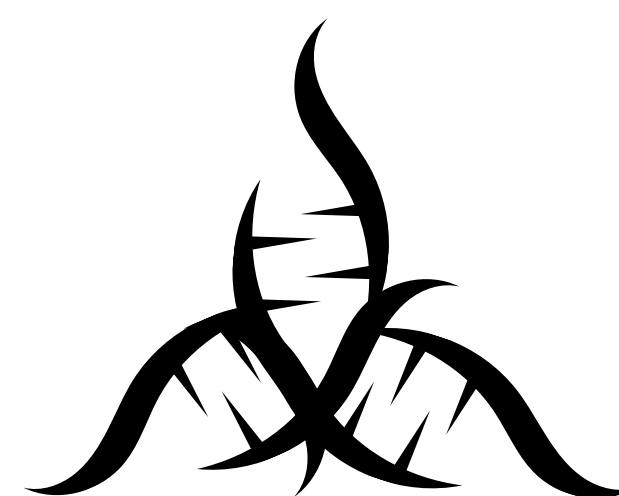
It was Siren, dressed in an enchanting figure-hugging mermaid dress. Her hair was pushed back and styled like it was wet, with tiny crystals shimmering on her skin to give it the same wet appearance. He tried to ignore her presence on the stage, but as soon as she began to sing the melody entranced him.

Her silky voice helped to wash away any conscious thought and the song bathed the lobby in a melodic trance. Unable to move, Hunter watched absently as Jaida scoffed at the scene and pushed her way out of the lobby, not noticing he was just across the room.

*"Is it him or is it her,
Will you say the first or final word?
Your heart's in two, what would you do,
If he wanted forever with you?
You can't get this right; it will end in a fight.
At the very least only one of them will cry."*

Siren sang, keeping the room fixated on her performance.

*"You're lost, on that glittering shore.
Just take, my hand,
And we'll dance real slow.
You're lost, can't find it,
but soon you'll know.
All you have to do is let them,
Let them go."*



Through his trance, Hunter felt a pair of hands grip onto his shoulders. He could see the blurred vision of someone standing before him, but the trance had captivated him and he couldn't make out who it was.

"We'll dress in black and wear our hats cause' you have dug your grave.

Fight through the pain and brave the rain, you can't save the day.

Living in the past is toxic, but you don't really seem to notice.

We're dressed in black, wearing our hats cause' you have, you have dug your grave."

The bass felt like a weight on Hunter's shoulders, pushing him down. Siren hummed through the tune, to keep the room entranced. But she danced around the stage as the music picked up and the beat thumped furiously. Hunter felt himself moving through the crowds, someone guiding him away from the stage and out of the lobby.

The sliding doors shut behind them, and the music became a silent and distant hum. Hunter's eyes began to clear and his mind drifted back into consciousness. He rubbed his tired and strained eyes, trying to focus on the person in front of him.

"Steady, just let your body re-adjust," a familiar voice said. As his eyes refocused, Hunter smiled seeing Kai standing with a concerned look on his face. "I had to get you out of there, that was a cheap trick she pulled."

"But it worked, didn't it..." a voice spoke from behind them. Kai froze in place, his hands clasping together and not daring to turn around. "What do you want, Blake?" he uttered, taking in a deep breath before turning to face his demons.

