

## Extraordinary - Elizabeth, Year 5, ACT

“Ross, why do we have to pack our bags?” Pepper asks.

*Because we can finally leave this place*, I think, but I say nothing, carefully folding clothes and stacking books in my suitcase.

“Ross?”

“Peps, I’ll explain on the way. Now PACK,” I reply.

“Fine,” she yells and runs to her side of the room.

I am Rosaline K. Johnson (don’t ask what the K stands for, because I won’t tell you, and don’t ever call me Rosaline because I will break your kneecaps). I have spent my twelve years in this godforsaken prison that Archangel put us in. Four people in one house. Me, the gardener (Waldings), Nanny and of course, Pepper. It would be very lonely with Pepper.

My best friend.

My twin sister.

My fellow prisoner.

The only thing that makes 1 Reserve Avenue bearable.

I have never met my parents.

Thirteen years ago, my parents, workers for Archangel AI Technology, were forced to give us away. Two little girls, genetically changed. To be smarter, work harder, be better. How do I know this? I stole our file.

The symbols on our wrists are in the file. Birthmarks, or... symbols of how we are. What we are. Who we are.

Most importantly, *why* we are.

A little plus sign on Pepper’s left wrist.

And a pencil on mine.

I want to know my parents. To meet them.

I can’t.

But I still can hope. I can always dream.

“Pepper. Are you nearly done?” I questioned.

“YES! Just finished.”

I run out the door, down the stairs and into Nanny’s room.

“C’mon, Nanny! We gotta go...” my speech slows, dread filling my body...

What if Nanny isn’t coming?

My dread is destroyed as Nanny says, “There’s arthritis in me joints. I’ll rush, now.”

Outside, Waldings is packing his bags. Pepper is already in the black limo.

I should explain.

The Prime Minister (I know, right??) walked in, saying that Peps and I had been chosen for a program. We would leave immediately, with Nanny and Waldings in tow. I shook his hand and I noticed something. A star on the underside of his left wrist.

The exact same place as my pencil.

But that doesn’t matter because we are leaving.

My only dream, only hope, only aspiration except meeting my parents is fulfilled. And even that is slightly more possible than before.

I wonder what would happen if we were normal.

My mum would be kind and sweet and my dad would make dad jokes that I would never laugh at.

*We are leaving. We are leaving. We are leaving.*

Pepper and I would walk to school, play video games and do sport.

*We are leaving. We are leaving. We are leaving.*

In the holidays we would go to see friendly grandparents and swim at the beach and go overseas. Have birthday parties. Maybe even have friends.

*We are leaving. We are leaving. We are leaving.*

With or without parents who abandoned us.

The words echo around my head for four hours, in a car with the windows tinted and the doors locked, sitting next to my only companion and only friend. (Unless you count Sophie Foster, Friday Barnes, Pearl Cole and Morrigan Crow, which I do but Pepper doesn't. "Your best friend can't be a fictional character. It isn't normal." "How are we supposed to know what's normal," I retort, "when we have never met another child and have only met Nanny and Waldings." And now the PM.)

"We're here!" Pepper squeals.

"We're 453 kilometres from that horrible place, Pepper!" I say quickly hugging my sister.

"452, and thanks for the hug."

Maths nerd. (If you ever read this, Peps, I'm sorry!)

The new building is three storeys high and at least 50 metres wide. Yellow in colour, with blue and pink flowers spiralling on vines from the windowsills.

The PM says something but I don't catch it, still marvelling at the beauty of this new home.

"Sorry, what was that?" I glow, joyous but wary.

Why were we rescued? How did they know where we were?

"Welcome to the Academy of Intellect." His words warm me. Then a chill shoots down my spine. "You'll meet the others at dinner."

The 'others,' as it turned out, were four twelve-year-olds.

"Luca," one of the boys – the one with curly brown hair – said, holding out a hand for us to shake. "Sprechen sie deutsch? Ou peut-être que parlez-vous français?"

"Deutsch, Herr Luca! You're pretty good at languages," I reply, laughing.

"You too!" Luca cracks up.

The other boy – black hair, blue eyes – stared in open-mouthed shock at Pepper.

"A-a-are you two sisters?" he asks. "I'm Xavi."

“Twins, this is Pepper, I’m Ross,” I beam.

“Abby. Nice to meet you.” The girl with red hair similar to my auburn locks smiles.

The other girl – blonde – says “I’m Ubiytsa. I’m a Russian.”

This makes Luca cackle.

“Your name is NOT Killer!” I gasp, then join in with the laughing. The others follow suit.

“Her name is actually Olga,” Xavi says through tears of joy.

We chatter more, then the PM walks in. The silence echoes. He speaks. “Xavi, Luca, Olga, Abby, Pepper and Ross. You are the six smartest people in the country. Your respective IQs are 167, 170, 149, 164, 178 and 199.” The PM pauses, then continues. “But how?” He pauses again. “You all know that Archangel took you from your parents and hid you away.”

He tells us to search it up on the ancient computer in the dining hall.

“Project Archangel was a government-run operation in 2012 to create superhumans. This failed,” I read out. *We... aren't natural.* The thought chills me to the core.

“My predecessor ordered it. But I need your help. You are free to leave but we cannot let the opposition win.”

“Why?” we ask in unison.

“Because he plans a dictatorship. You are each uniquely gifted. Xavi is a scientific prodigy, an alchemist able to create new technology to boost the economy. Abby has memorised every war, every battle, every dictator, every piece in the jigsaw of history so we will never repeat it. Olga can predict what the public will think of a decision. Luca can speak English, Arabic, French, German, Mandarin, Russian, Maltese, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Japanese fluently. Pepper can solve any equation you give her and she can calculate the stock market falls and rises.”

“And Ross?” Pepper asks, eyes glinting.

I hold my breath for the reply.

“Ross is a literary god. They are a leader who will save us in times of need. Ross is the person the former prime minister wished I’d be.” he says, tears forming in his eyes.

His words echo around the silent hall.

The star mattered after all.

Of course! I could slap myself. The pencil is literacy, the plus sign is maths. The star must mean Prime Minister!

“Can you really speak eleven languages fluently?” Pepper asks Luca, breaking the silence.

Soon the room fills with laughter and chatting kids.

*Thank you Pepper.*

I slip out quietly.

Up the stairs.

Up.

Up.

Sitting in the dorm alone. Pepper comes up.

“Ross, I heard from Xavi that there’s a roof garden.”

She knows me far too well.

The only thing we have of our parents is a bookmark pressed with a red flower. Inscribed on it are the words *La véritable amitié viendra*. True friendship will come. I suppose that’s why the others mean so much to me. True friendship did come, just like Mum promised.

Up.

The garden is filled with ripe red tomatoes and oranges and lemon trees. Carrots grow on the ground beside a cabbage patch. I peer over the edge at the bustling nightlife four floors down.

“I think Xavi likes you,” I blurt out, turning to see Pepper laughing.

“Really? I had no idea!” she says sarcastically.

We walk back down in time for teeth and bed.

Abby whispers to me as we change into our pajamas, “Classes start tomorrow.”

And I fall asleep to the sound of a slowly ticking clock.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

I get the feeling tomorrow will be a good day.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

The sound of Abby's alarm clock tears me from sleep. I pull the pillow over my head as I yell "TURN IT OFF!"

"Ross, we have five minutes to get dressed." Pepper pulls the doona off.

I rush to dress before breakfast and stumble on my untied shoelaces. Racing downstairs, I fling open the door.

I gasp.

A woman with curly auburn hair, exactly like mine, and sea-green eyes like Pepper's stands before me, arm in arm with a man who has blue eyes like me and black hair like Pepper's.

"M-mum?" I whisper. "Dad?"

"It's me."

And I run toward the parents who weren't there, but silently watching and loving from afar.

The parents who made us extraordinary.