

Well-Versed

All I know is that I love him.

Teo holds me in his bed, his strong arms clutching me. My eyes droop as I feel safe entangled in him. We have been friends all my life, but we started seeing each other a few months ago, after one of Teo's track practices. He had to stay late, so I ran home to blend him a strawberry banana smoothie before he got out. He asked me to go on a walk afterwards, and we ended up at a park close to Mom's pod. There, he asked me hesitantly, "Can I kiss you?" And I immediately said yes, like kissing him was an instinct.

It was so simple. But couples before Matching Day aren't simple. After school, we retreat to his parents' pod, hiding out in his room. I've grown to love his room, with walls covered in portraits he's painted of his family. I feel more comfortable in his room than I do in Mom's pod, with walls completely bare and untouched.

"Cary, you can't sleep here tonight," I hear, hushed. I flicker my eyes open. Teo's chestnut eyes sparkle with the light from his bedside lamp.

"It's just so easy, though," I whine, tracing his cheek with the tips of my fingers. He places his large hand over mine, and I feel the sweat pulsating from his palm. I overlay my other hand over his and squeeze it before trying to get out of his quilted comforter, but his arm keeps me down.

"Aren't you worried?" Teo whispers, his voice cracking. "At least a little?"

I raise my eyebrow. "Why would I be worried?"

Teo looks away from me. "If we don't get matched..." His hand lets go of mine.

"Tee, listen to me," I say, running my fingers through his charcoal braids. "You don't have to worry, okay? We'll be matched. There's no way we won't be."

Teo trembles. “So this won’t be our last time?”

“Why would it be?” I say with full confidence.

Teo pushes his lips together, not responding. I take this moment to get up after giving Teo a side hug.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I tell him before leaving. Teo doesn’t respond, and I close the door behind me.

~

I wake up the next morning to the smell of burnt pancakes.

On important days, Mom insists on making breakfast for me, saying I should never have to worry about food on my big day. On the day of my first guitar performance, she undercooked bacon, resulting in me throwing my guts out right after playing a percussive piece. On the day of my speech tournament, she overheated the pan while frying an egg so much we had to call the fire department. And today, she burns pancakes.

“Can’t you just buy cereal instead?” I ask when I enter the kitchen, fanning the smoke away from my face. “Or fruit?”

Mom scowls, throwing a completely burnt pancake into the trash. “Maybe I would’ve if you hadn’t come home so late last night.”

“Sorry, Mom,” I say, taking the spatula out of her hand. “Teo wouldn’t let me leave.”

“The Algorithm can’t like that you sneak around with Teo before Matching Day,” Mom says, and I notice her darkened eyebags, more pronounced than usual.

“It already doesn’t like me,” I respond. The Algorithm definitely has a vendetta against me after all the times Mom has complained to me about it. To be fair, she really did not get good matches from the Algorithm. My father and Mom were matched as soulmates in the education

sector. But, when I was five, my father left Mom for someone else, never to be seen again. And after my father and his lover's pictures were printed in Verse's newspaper, captioned "THIS YEAR'S RUNAWAYS: HOW YOU CAN FAIL THE ALGORITHM," Mom hid from everyone, only coming outside to teach. When Mom speaks about the Algorithm at school, I can hear the strain in her voice as she repeats the mantra that she's forced to: *the Algorithm works for you; the Algorithm works to better your life*. "Or it just matches me with Teo, like it should."

Mom tilts her head to tell me she doesn't believe me. She fans the smoke out of her pod as I flip her unfinished pancake on the griddle. The wall close to the stove is slightly charred from the smoke, bringing a caramel color to the otherwise clinical white walls. Mom never decorates her pod, not after my father left us. We used to have photographs hanging around everywhere; my father loved to take photos of the flower garden at the park close by. On the day he left, Mom silently took them all down. "But they're so pretty!" I cried. Mom nodded as she burned them all on the stove, watching them fold into each other as they disintegrated into ashes.

As I wait for the pancake in the griddle to finish cooking, I flicker my eyes to my phone, waiting for a response from Teo to my good-morning text, but I haven't gotten one yet. He's probably being treated to a nice homemade breakfast to celebrate him getting a match today; his mom makes great omelets according to him. Sometimes I wish Mom and I were a normal family that celebrates Matching Day, but I enjoy cooking for her. She's preoccupied anyways, biting her lip so hard blood starts to draw.

Mom jolts up when her phone alarm rings. "We need to go."

I turn off the stove and make a mental note to clean up the pan when I get back before I remember that I won't be living in Mom's pod anymore; I'd be living in mine with Teo. The thought of that makes me smile so wide I'm sure Mom can see my wisdom teeth.

~

Mom and I hated sitting through the Matching Ceremony as I grew up. Everyone in Verse goes to the town center, and one sector by one, one couple by one, they announce the matches. Every year, as the couples on the stage embraced, I'd hold Mom's hand as it trembled like an earthquake.

But this year, instead of sitting in the back, a government worker leads us to our front seats, where all families with 18-year-olds getting matched sit.

"I hope you're excited for your match." The government worker smiles at me, motioning to our seats. I don't miss the glare the worker gives Mom as he turns away to leave. I scan the large crowd for Teo but can't seem to find him.

"Sit down," Mom hisses as the trumpets of our anthem sound, pulling my left arm down. Governor Ture gives her usual speech, but I tune her out, craning my neck further to look for Teo. I flip around my head, looking for his large frame, but I can't locate him.

"...The Algorithm trains on your own memories to give you the best partner and occupation that best suits your thoughts, your experiences, your likes and dislikes," Governor Ture says, signaling the end of her speech.

"The Algorithm works for you; the Algorithm works to better your life," everyone says with her.

Her smile meets her grey eyes as she says, "Let's get excited for the matches!"

I initially try to keep looking for Teo, but Mom wraps her arm around me to keep me down, so I give up, only listening for my and Teo's names. It's halfway through the ceremony when I hear mine, "Carissa Green" booming through the town center. I stand up, like it's a procedure. Mom whispers good luck as a government worker leads me up to the stage to stand

next to Governor Ture. When I stand next to her, I realize she's a lot smaller than she seems on stage; I match her height when she wears her signature blood red stilettos. I hurriedly look around for Teo in the crowd, using the stage as a vantage point. I always forget just how large Verse is: the crowd watching, their attention fully on me, goes for ages, overflowing the town center into the streets. When I finally find Teo, on the opposite side of the town center compared to where I was sitting, I quietly gasp. The sunlight reflects on his white tuxedo, making him glow like an angel. When he meets my gaze, he mouths *Cary*, and I think, *Just say his name, Governor Ture. Just match us—*

“Blaise Walsh.”

Fuck.

Instead of Teo's broad shoulders and walking up to the stage to meet me, I see a man that resembles a twig. He looks to be my height, with thin shaggy black hair and skin as pale as Mom's pod's walls before we charred it. His collarbones stick through his thin dark gray shirt. While Teo can take up the stage with his tall, mighty stance, Blaise wilts, slouching like a willow tree as he walks up to me.

I hold in a curse as we hug, customary for all new matches. I feel his collarbones through his raggedy black button-down shirt, clearly too thin to be made at one of the nicer stores in the clothing sector. When we separate and walk back to our seats, I look at Teo as I pass his row, but he looks down like he's tormented from hell.

I can't bring myself to watch the rest of the ceremony as I feel my throat constrict, suddenly feeling claustrophobic in the open plaza. My ears only perk up when I hear “Teo Johnson” thundering across the plaza, announced with the athletic sector. I look up to see who he's matched with and immediately recognize the thin blonde hair cascading to her hips. It's

Amber; she and Teo were on the track team together. I've never seen her talk to anyone, but I see her running around the park every day. It should be me instead of Amber. Teo needs someone loving, someone engaging. I am that someone.

When I watch Teo and Amber hug on stage, Mom holds my hand, which I didn't realize was shaking until she stabilizes it with her grip.

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Blaise and I get lunch at a dumpling place in the restaurant sector. When we walk in, I'm immediately hit with the smell of oil and steam, the humidity attacking me like I'm in a sauna. I wipe off a bead of sweat from my forehead, but Blaise doesn't even take off his trench coat.

"Pork dumplings," Blaise says to the waiter as we sit down. I notice his slight stutter. "She'll have that, too."

"No, I'll have chicken," I clarify, holding the waiter's arm to stop him. The waiter nods, and Blaise only peers into me with his emerald eyes, so green that they look artificial. His facial expression is completely blank, like an untouched sheet of paper. I shift in my seat. "Where'd you grow up, Blaise?"

"Transportation sector," he responds.

"Oh, that seems fun. I've always envied people working in the transportation sector. I've always wanted to drive. How often do your parents drive?" I pause to let Blaise answer, but he doesn't, toying with his black hair tie on his pale arm. The sound of the hair tie snapping echoes the crackles from the kitchen. "Oh, well, I grew up in the education sector with my mom and father. It was a little awkward when my mom had to teach me in fifth grade." I force a laugh. Blaise is still playing with his hair tie. "I notice that you also have a guitar?" I motion to the black guitar case laying on the wall next to Blaise. "What do you like to play?"

“I only play with Alan,” Blaise finally responds. The snaps from his hair tie hitting his arm become louder.

“Alan, okay.” I nod. We’re getting somewhere. “It must be fun to play with someone all the time. I play a lot of percussive pieces on mine, but they’re all solo, which is good, but—”

“I don’t want to play with you,” Blaise interrupts. He snaps his hair tie so hard that it flies off his arm, hitting my guitar case. I grab it for him and pass it to him, but when I look at him, I feel disturbed by how his eyes are glazed like a donut and how his face is emotionless like a statue. I decide that conversing with Blaise is fruitless; he doesn’t want to try, and honestly, I don’t either. After we receive our dumplings, we nibble on them in complete silence.

When we get to our pod, Blaise immediately wheels himself and his suitcases into the bedroom—crap, our bedroom. His suitcases are as black as his raven hair, and I find myself missing Teo’s colorful suitcases, him having splatter painted them when he was stressed about his track meet a couple months ago.

“I also need to move my stuff there,” I point out to Blaise before he closes the bedroom door.

“Not yet you don’t,” Blaise snaps, slamming the door behind him. The noise through the unfurnished pod. I’ve never felt so small and lonely in my life, standing in the middle of what’s supposed to be a living room but is completely bare. In fact, this pod is incredibly small, smaller than Teo’s parents’. The kitchen only has a couple burners, and the living room isn’t even large enough to fit a couch. I always dreamed of a large pod, one that could raise a family. The Algorithm should know that about me.

Wondering what Teo’s pod looks like, I text him.

hey where’s ur pod? i wanna drop by

I get an instantaneous response.

Message not delivered.

I clutch my phone silently, my knees falling to the ground. Teo blocked me. Teo went out of his way to block me. Does he really believe that Amber's the one for him? Part of me wants to find him, to yell at him for blocking me like our relationship—our friendship—could be littered away. But the other part of me wants him to be happy. I don't make him happy. I can't, anymore, if that's what the Algorithm dictates. *The Algorithm works for you; the Algorithm works to better your life.* Maybe I have to accept that.

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I reach my breaking point a month later.

It's after the fifth time my supervisor forces me to stay at work late. The government wants to put out a statement about the Algorithm's success. I wrote something about how the Algorithm seems to have made strides in its matches, but my supervisor chided me about how hesitant my statement was. "Didn't you place top in your class at the speech tournament last year?" he asked. When I nodded, he just clicked his tongue, spitting out, "Doesn't seem like it."

I get back to my pod, wanting to collapse onto my bed, but Blaise and his friend—I think his name is Alex—occupy the bedroom, playing heavy metal like he does every night.

"Oh, shit, Carissa," Blaise stutters, strumming a loud but incorrect chord. "We're busy."

"I noticed," I spit out before slamming the door, sitting on the cool white tiled floor to wait for them to finish. I pop in some earplugs as my anger brews like tea. I shouldn't feel this uncomfortable in my own pod. I want to plop onto my bed and cuddle and cry, tucking myself under the comforter. I want Teo next to me, whispering sweet everythings as he holds me so tightly, like it's the last night he'll ever touch me. But Blaise's and my comforter is white, like

everything else in our pod, and so constricting. I feel like I'm on edge every time I'm in what's supposed to be my pod.

So I throw my earplugs on the floor and run.

I run over to the athletic sector, which is only twenty minutes away. I've walked aimlessly through there so many times already, wanting so desperately to find Teo's pod. I always look for a permanent marker hanging from a pod door, something Teo's parents did for theirs. They asked every guest to sign their door after visiting, so the once-pastel front door is now covered in small black signatures from almost everyone in Verse. "Why do they do that?" I asked one afternoon, lacing my fingers around the string holding the marker. "It reminds them that they're a part of something," Teo responded. "Do you want our door to have that?" I asked, to which he nodded as he unlocked the door with his key. I thought about signing his parents' door after some nights in Teo's bedroom, but I always decided against it, since signing the door was like marking territory I didn't have.

Sadly, none of the doors have a permanent marker hanging from it, and I don't see Teo's strong body or Amber's thinner one walking around the sector. It starts raining, but I still dread going back to my pod, so I walk until I reach the walls surrounding Verse. I trace the outline of the town with my feet, feeling unease at how the walls tower over me, blocking the clouds from leaving Verse. My heels click on the sidewalk the entire way there, harmonizing with the raindrops hitting the pavement. When I reach the end of the wall, arriving at the park close to Mom's pod, the drizzle turns into a rainstorm. My jacket crinkles from the rain pelting it, but I still can't bring myself to go back to my pod. Instead, I park myself at the outlook in front of the ocean. When I was little, my father took me here to look out to the water and tell me how we're

part of a large planet we'll never fully explore. When he left, I would look out to the sea alone and wonder where he ended up.

After some time, I feel a presence next to me. It only takes a quick glance for me to recognize Teo, wearing a bright yellow shirt and sky-blue jeans like he wants to be the sun and clear sky on this murky day. He holds a small rainbow umbrella, his large hand engulfing the umbrella handle. The last time I saw him feels like an eternity ago, when I was so certain that the Algorithm would match me and Teo. Now, I think, how effective can the Algorithm be if it didn't match us together?

"What are you doing?" Teo asks.

"I could ask you the same thing," I respond. "I didn't think I'd see you again."

Teo sighs, putting his umbrella over me. "I didn't think so either."

I don't want to touch on how loaded that statement feels, so I avert my eyes, keeping them on the crashing waves in front of us. I watch the raindrops hurl themselves at the ocean, forcing themselves into the body of water.

"I miss you," Teo tells me, to which I suck in a breath.

"You blocked me."

"We weren't matched."

"I thought we would be."

"The Algorithm... I just..." Teo draws out. His mouth quirks, trying to form words, but nothing comes out for a while. I take this time to turn towards Teo and hold his thick arms. It's the first time I've seen Teo seem so lost, his eyes as turbulent as the waves below.

"What about it?" I choke out.

Teo drops the umbrella, and it pangs on the concrete before I feel his lips on mine. Even though the umbrella is forgotten, I'm warm from Teo's touch, and my jacket unwrinkles as he rubs it. He feels new and familiar at the same time, and my heart thaws out of the dirty ice I trapped it in.

When Teo pulls away, his braids flying from the wind, I look down and smile bashfully. "We need to dry off."

"You can come to my place to dry off," Teo says quickly. "It's closer than yours, and Amber spends Wednesday nights at her parents' pod."

The mantra echoes through my thoughts like a curse. *The Algorithm works for you; the Algorithm works to better your life.* "Show me the way."

~

I become intimately comfortable with Teo's pod.

Every Wednesday night, I go to Teo's pod while Amber is out for dinner at her parents' pod. Teo also messages me whenever Amber's out running or whenever Amber's practices go longer than usual. Any time I can get with him is gold.

Teo's pod has a larger kitchen than mine. I've always wanted a large kitchen—I always thought I'd cook dinner for my soulmate every night—but Blaise and I got a small one, resulting in us getting takeout often. At Teo's pod, I cook to my heart's content and leave the kitchen spotless.

Teo kept the quilted comforter from his parents' pod. After dinner, we'd cuddle under it, our smiles and breaths warming us. His comforter smells like chocolate chip cookies, still lingering from his parents' pod. They'd bake chocolate chip cookies every Friday to celebrate the end of the week, and Teo would sneak in a couple for me. The melted chocolate stained the

back of his comforter a bit, and I'd try to apologize, but Teo would shut me up with a kiss on the nose.

It's when Teo traces my cheek with his fingertips that he lets me know, "Oh, by the way, you can't come over Wednesday."

I flinch. "Why not?"

"I'm joining Amber for her family dinner," Teo says, which reminds me that I'm supposed to introduce Blaise to Mom at some point, but I don't know how to do that without cringing. *Hey, Mom, this is Blaise, my soulmate. He's the guy who plays such loud music at night I have to sleep on the couch. He's the guy who I can't bring myself to stand up to because he conceals every possible emotion. He's the guy who I'm certain could pretend to be a statue and I wouldn't notice the difference.* To be fair, I probably should mention to him how uncomfortable I feel about our relationship, especially since he apologized for playing heavy metal so often after that night. "I'm bad at meeting new people. I wanted to push you away. That's not fair to you. I'm sorry," he said, his eyes still glazed, but he held a bag of chicken dumplings as a truce. Since then, he's been not bad, only playing heavy metal after asking me if it's okay, and we even make small talk about the book I'm reading and the video game he's playing. And the more I get to know him, the more guilty I feel, so once a week, on a walk on the way back from work, I convince myself to sit down with Blaise over takeout and tell him everything that's happening, that I go to Teo's so often I know where he keeps his cutlery and spices. But when I get to our pod, steaming bags of pork dumplings in my hand, Blaise rests his head on the kitchen granite, wilting like a lean blade of grass, and I can't bring myself to broach the topic, so I tell him I bought dinner for him before retreating into our bedroom. Both takeout containers are finished the next morning.

“Do they like her?” I ask.

He takes the comforter off us. “Of course. They wanted me to be matched to her. Our families are already close.”

I nod but don’t really understand. I’ve never had family friends, since Mom reclused herself after the news article with her and my father came out. “We have each other,” Mom would insist, pulling me into a hug. I’ve always wondered how lonely Mom must feel, but I never asked.

“I’ll miss you,” I tell him, throwing on my jean jacket.

“I’ll miss you, too,” Teo says, smoothing out the comforter.

When I get to my pod, I slip into my bed with Blaise. He’s on his laptop with noise-cancelling earbuds popped in, furrowing his eyebrows at some video game. But as soon as I get comfortable in the white comforter and pull out a book, he takes out an earbud and turns to me.

“How was your day?” he asks.

“Not bad,” I respond. “I saw a friend.”

“Teo?” he asks. I nod. “You see him a lot.”

“I do,” I confirm. I really should tell Blaise now. *He’s actually someone I do more than just see, Blaise.* It’s a perfect segue; it should be so easy.

But Blaise beats me to it. “I mean, I’d rather see someone I actually kiss than someone I don’t.”

The words in my book in front of me blur. When did he figure it out? Why would he mention it now?

“It’s fine,” Blaise continues. “My mom already left Dad. It makes sense that my soulmate would leave me too.”

I pause. Blaise is the first person I've actually met who had their parents separate. It's rare with the Algorithm, which the Verse government touts a 99.99% success rate on. I don't meet people who are in the 0.01%. Sure, I hear about them in the news every new year, but I don't *meet* them. I drop my book and turn to him.

"Your parent left you, too?" My voice breaks.

Blaise's eyes widen, the first time I've ever seen Blaise express any emotion. As I look into his emerald eyes, I realize I recognize them from a news article that came out when I was 10, captioned "FAILING THE ALGORITHM: WHY IT'S AVOIDABLE." Pictured was a woman with emerald eyes just like Blaise's. I tore up the article before Mom could see the newspaper, like I do every year. "Yeah." He chuckles. His smile is a crooked one, I now notice.

"I'm sorry," I say, and it comes out as a whisper. "You deserve better."

Blaise's lip quivers, and I want to comfort him, but I don't know how to. I feel like I'm short-circuiting, drawing a blank because I've never even seen him express emotion until today. So I bring him into a hug, feeling Blaise shake wordlessly in my arms like a fallen leaf through the wind.

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The next day, Blaise and I talk through my relationship with Teo. He tells me that he's not going to rat me out to the government, seeing how his dad ratted out his mother and then watched their family fall apart. I deliver him pork dumplings the next day with a handwritten thanks, coloring a pink heart with a permanent marker.

"Isn't that great?" I ask Teo the next Wednesday, after telling him the entire story.

Teo's charcoal face blanches. "Is it great that he knows?"

"No, that he won't say anything," I explain.

“I—” Teo stops himself. He can’t even meet my gaze as I put on my dress, looking down at his quilted comforter. “Cary, answer this. When does this end? Like, we can’t do anything together. Hell, we can’t leave my pod holding hands. What is this? What is us?”

I pause, not expecting his outburst at all. “I don’t know,” I say sheepishly. “But we have each other. Isn’t that enough?”

Teo doesn’t say no, but he also doesn’t say yes. He just grasps his comforter with his large hand tightly, as if the comforter could give him the answers he needs.

“I’ll miss you,” I tell him like I always do. Teo doesn’t say anything. When I close his bedroom door, his silence ripples through me.

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Matching Day preparation starts way earlier than I expected it to. My supervisor has me writing an article on projected updates for the sector matches. They’re planning on taking out the transportation sector, replacing it completely with the driverless cars the technology sector put out this year. But as I type up my statement, I feel weird getting rid of a sector that makes at least some people happy. If that’s their true match, why would we take away their option to have it?

“Your writing’s shit,” my supervisor tells me as he peers over my shoulder.

“I just don’t believe that it’s worth it to take out the transportation sector. Someone’s match is this sector.”

My supervisor sighs, his beer belly extruding. I’m used to his sigh since he’s always disappointed with my writing. When he sighs, it’s more like a groan seeping out of his stomach. “Does it matter? The data tells us that not enough people want to be matched there.” He whacks my head before leaving.

My anger from not being matched with Teo bubbles in my heart. I realize I'm too biased to write this statement, so I jump out of my chair and decide to pick up some dumplings for Blaise. He texted me earlier that he's going to have a long day at work since he needs to clarify memories for all the 17-year-olds going through the Algorithm, but he tends not to eat when he stays late at work, and he's already lost five pounds from his already-thin physique because of it, and I can't fathom him losing more weight.

When I approach him at his desk, he's scrunched over his keyboard like a cat stretching its back. I drop the steaming takeout containers in front of him. He doesn't look up. On his screen is a memory of a five-year-old boy blowing bubbles at the park close to Mom's pod. He looks so joyful, like he has all the time in the world with his bubble wand. It's like I'm watching the memory happen in real time.

"Wow, the memory has so much detail," I comment.

"After clarification, yeah. The government knows a lot about us." He finally looks away from his screen to look at me. "Thanks for the dumplings, Riss."

I smile at him before turning to leave. Blaise's supervisor approaches us, towering over me. I wave hi, but she ignores me, instead leaning over to peer at Blaise's screen.

"Oh, Blaise, you don't have to clarify these people," she says, placing her index finger on his screen.

"Why not?" he asks.

"Oh, because they're on the negative training list," his supervisor says, as if it's obvious.

"Negative training list?" he continues asking.

"Oh, you know, the people who are purposefully given bad matches to help train the Algorithm," his supervisor explains, so nonchalantly.

My eyes widen, turning back to face her. “Purposefully?”

She looks incredibly unfazed. “It’s mostly filled with people who are likely to fail the Algorithm anyways, like those who personally know someone who’s failed the Algorithm. Remember that little girl who shit-talked the Algorithm during the Matching Ceremony a couple years ago? People like her.”

I do remember her. She’s a little girl with frizzy brown hair with parents matched to the entertainment sector, yelling during the entertainment sector matches, “Mom! Dad! Don’t you hate it there?!” I didn’t think of her as shit-talking the Algorithm; she’s only 6; she really didn’t know any better. But her parents’ pictures were plastered in the newspaper with a headline “NEVER DOUBT THE ALGORITHM,” next to the typical article celebrating the Algorithm’s success. The mantra echoes in my head. *The Algorithm works for you; the Algorithm works to better your life.* Thus people can’t fail the Algorithm; the Algorithm fails people. How could Blaise’s supervisor say people fail the Algorithm? I look at Blaise, who is somehow even more pale than he usually is, his emerald eyes being saucers on his face.

“Can I get a copy of that list?” Blaise asks.

“It’s under this year’s folder,” his supervisor responds. Her gaze softens when she looks at Blaise. “Take a break, Blaise. You’ve been here a while.”

She rubs her hand on his shoulder for a few seconds too long before walking away. Once she’s left the room, I pull a rolling chair next to him.

“Blaise, I need to see last year’s list,” I tell him.

“Already looking for it,” Blaise says, clicking through his computer’s folders. I wordlessly open the takeout containers, break apart the takeout wooden chopsticks, and feed him

a pork dumpling, which he takes in one bite. For the first time since we've been matched, I feel in unison with him. "Shit, last year's stuff is restricted."

"Do you think anyone has access?" I ask.

"My supervisor," he answers.

I flick my head to her office, with the lights completely off. "She's not in."

"It's locked," Blaise responds. "Fingerprint access only."

I scrunch my face, thinking there isn't any hope, but then it hits me: she touched Blaise's screen. "Blaise, do you have tape?"

Blaise opens his desk drawer to show a stapler, a tape dispenser, and a set of framed photos: one with him and his dad when he was young (he got his dad's freckles), one with him and Alan holding their guitars, and one with me and him out at dinner a few weeks ago. I hesitate a little when I see the photo. He really cares for me that much? But I shake myself out of it and grab the tape dispenser.

"Open the clarification tool," I tell him, and he obeys. I look at where the person's name is in the interface and place the tape over it. I rub my fingers over the tape to make sure that the fingerprint is completely transferred before taking it off. I then walk over slowly to Blaise's supervisor's office and place the tape over the fingerprint scanner. After I put my finger on the scanner to supply heat, I hear the door unlock. I open the door with Blaise following me in the room. The room's illuminated from the lights outside and the office is very clinical, only having a desk, a chair, a computer, and an empty bookshelf. Blaise and I quickly move to the computer, and I almost glare at the inanimate object when I see another fingerprint scanner.

"Crap!" I exclaim.

Blaise passes me the same piece of tape, him having picked it off the fingerprint scanner.
“Here.”

When I perform the same trick, the computer unlocks in a hitch.

“Dumbasses,” I mutter, to which Blaise chuckles. He sits at his supervisor’s chair as he goes through the files. I can’t decide whether I want to watch him sift through the files or not, looking away and back at the screen every few seconds. It only registers that Blaise found the file when I see *Carissa Green* and *Blaise Walsh* on the screen, listed in serif font under *Negative Soulmate Matches*. I forget how to breathe when I look over at Blaise. He’s shaking vigorously, and his eyes start shimmering with tears. I hold his shoulder to calm him, and I feel him immediately loosen up. I feel a tear—my tear—plop on my thigh. He starts holding me back, and we stay in each other’s arms to stabilize ourselves as we tremble.

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I don’t know how long Blaise and I have been holding each other. All I know is that our faces feel constricted from the dried-up tears and that I feel antsy. They fucked us over. They fucked us over purposefully. And they don’t care, like it’s something that must be done. How could they do this to us without letting us know? The mantra now just feels like pure bullshit. *The Algorithm works for you? The Algorithm works to better your life?* The Algorithm didn’t work to better our lives; The Algorithm didn’t work for us.

I break our silence. “I can’t come back here tomorrow. And write stuff for Verse applauding the Algorithm? I can’t do it.”

Blaise shifts slightly in my arms. “I could do my job, but I don’t want to. I can’t help others when I wasn’t helped myself.”

If I heard Blaise say that when we first met, I would've written that off as selfishness. But now I understand him completely. Why work for an entity that works against you?

"I can't sit here, you know? And do nothing." I stroke his hair, which is surprisingly thin and dry. "People deserve to know that the Algorithm can cause pain. We can't keep saying that the Algorithm works for us!"

"But what can we do about it?" Blaise's voice cracks.

"I can write," I respond. I feel a fire being lit in my heart, like at all those speech competitions I did in high school. It's the first time I've felt this fire since Matching Day. "I can write an entire thing and show pictures of this and tell my—our—story. And I can publish it immediately from the government with my speech job—"

"Riss, they're—" I feel a tear—Blaise's tear—on my thigh. I feel my tears starting up again as well. "I don't know what they did to my mother. I don't know what they did to your father. But they didn't come out of this unscathed."

"But we can't do nothing," I respond, my voice surprisingly stable.

Blaise is full out sobbing when he stutters out, "I agree with you. I agree. We need a backup plan, though."

"Maybe we should leave Verse," I suggest. "Pack up our shit and some food and head the fuck out."

"My dad can get us a car," Blaise says. "But if we leave, don't we have to take our parents, too? There's no way the government will let them off."

"I—should we?" I ask.

"We'll ask them," Blaise responds.

We hold each other for a few minutes longer before Blaise heads out to pack our things and talk to our parents. I open my mouth to thank him, but he shakes his head to tell me that I don't need to.

So I plop at my work desk and I write. I write and I write and I write. I also cry and I cry and I cry, so much that the keyboard under me is permanently stained with my salty tears. But I keep writing, until the article is done and published.

~

I knock at Teo's pod. I pound at it like my life depends on it. The permanent marker that Teo put up on the door knocks against the door. There are a few signatures already on his door, illuminated by his door light, but my eyes are so blurred from tears that I can't read a single one. When the door opens, Teo looks surprised to see me, his eyebrows raising slightly. He has charcoal bags under his eyes for the first time in his life.

"Amber's here," he says coldly.

"I know, I just need to talk to you," I tell him.

Teo hesitates but still invites me in. I slip off my wedges. Teo's large sneakers and Amber's smaller ones sit right outside the door, both heavily used from all the running they do. I sit on the brown leather couch in Teo's living room, my body not sinking into the cushion like it usually does. He sits on the opposite side.

He flicks his gaze to me. "What do you need?"

I'm taken aback by how cold he is. I take a deep breath. "Did you see the article?"

He looks away. "That was really rash of you, Carissa."

"I guess." I shrug. "But I did it. And Blaise agreed. And he's packing our stuff and preparing the getaway car and... We have to leave, Tee. You should leave with us."

Teo looks taken aback, showing emotion for the first time tonight. “I should?”

“Yeah, you should,” I affirm. “We can restart our lives together. Like, forget the Algorithm for a sec. Isn’t that what you want?”

Teo opens his mouth and tilts his head, forming a response. I’m certain that the mantra is running through his head. *The Algorithm works for you; the Algorithm works to better your life.* He should realize that the Algorithm doesn’t work for us. We can work for us.

But Teo shakes his head. “Carissa, you’re crazy.”

I have to stop my jaw from dropping out of instinct. What is he not understanding? “I’m crazy?”

“I’m staying with Amber.”

“You are?”

“Well, yeah, I—” *The Algorithm works for you; the Algorithm works to better your life.* “I trust it, Carissa; it worked for my parents. It’s worked for my friends. It’s literally worked for everyone but you guys.”

I bite the inside of my mouth to hold my tongue. Teo stares at the ground, as if he didn’t just insinuate that I’m the reason that my soulmate hasn’t worked out. Of course, since it’s so goddamn rare that soulmates don’t work out, it’s my fault. I’m the devil leading Teo into the dark side, dragging him through the depths of emotional hell.

“But you know why! I literally wrote it in the fucking article! They fucked me ov—”

“Carissa, we pissed off the Algorithm. That’s it. And maybe that’s why I’m feeling a certain type of way, but I trust it.”

“Stop talking about the Algorithm like it’s some kind of all-good entity!” I scream, getting out of the couch. I finally notice the paintings hung on the wall, all portraits of Amber

that Teo has painted, obvious from the signed cursive T on the bottom right corner of them all. He didn't have these up before, right? When did he have the time to paint these? "Nothing in Verse is, fucking hell."

If Teo's surprised, he hides it well. I hear the mantra when I look at Teo's face. *The Algorithm works for you; the Algorithm works to better your life.* My trust in him evaporates. He believes in the efficacy of the Algorithm since that's all he knows. But now that I know about how the Algorithm purposefully screwed me over, how can I surround myself with people that only know what they want to believe? I throw on my wedges and throw his front door open.

"Fine. Bye, Teo."

When I slam his front door shut, his permanent marker thuds onto the ground.

~

Blaise picks me up five minutes away from Teo's pod. I hop into the car and look in the back. Blaise's black suitcases and my pastel ones are packed into the back seat like building blocks, with our guitar cases placed delicately on the top.

"Did your dad teach you how to drive?" I ask him.

"He gave me lessons," Blaise answers. "But I didn't learn."

"You seem to be doing just fine," I tell him as he makes a turn. "Are you picking up our parents?"

"Both of them wanted to stay," Blaise says. "Your mom left you something, though."

He sifts through the tray next to him with his right hand, not taking his eyes off the road, until he finds a slip of paper and passes it to me. It's crumpled up, almost as if the note was a second thought. But I open the note delicately, since it's the last thing I'll have from Mom.

Carissa, you're brave for doing something I could never do. Your article reminds me of all the speeches you'd give when you were six about why chocolate ice cream is the best dessert out there. I was proud of you then, and I'm proud of you now. I'll be fine. Love you.

The light from the sunrise reflects off the paper, tinting it with a bright yellow, and my heart flutters. I crumple the paper the exact same way Mom did and hold it in my fist.

“Where are we going?” I ask Blaise.

“Out of Verse,” Blaise responds. When he turns again, I see the several fences blocking the wall opening, out to the world outside. I’ve always wondered what exists outside of Verse. My father would give several theories on those nights looking out to the sea: maybe it’s all grassland outside of this, with no development, or maybe we border another town just like ours, or maybe right outside the walls is a nice beach and we’re on an island. I wonder if he ever found out which one’s true.

“Shit,” Blaise curses before speeding up in the car. I hear the growl of the government car behind us. It makes a distinct vibrato, almost like an angry cat’s purr. And we keep speeding up, so much so that the buildings around us blur past us.

“Blaise!” I exclaim. The fences are coming closer and closer to us, and the fire under my heart lights up again.

“We have to, Riss,” Blaise says. I look behind us to see the black government car behind us, the sunlight reflecting off it blinding my eyes. By squinting, I can make out Blaise’s supervisor’s face in the passenger seat glaring at us. I’d rather us try to escape and fail than succumb to the government’s punishment.

As we speed towards the fences, I look up at the walls, which feel especially constricting. They repainted the walls recently after someone in the art sector graffitied them, the gray seeming bleaker than usual.

And we crash into the first barrier, without any regrets. If anything, it's a reminder to Verse that people crash and burn to keep this town running.