

akwaeke emezi

BITTER



PRAISE FOR **PET**:

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

STONEWALL HONOR BOOK

WALTER AWARD HONOR BOOK

NEW YORK TIMES BEST BOOK OF THE YEAR

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BUZZFEED BEST YA BOOK OF THE YEAR

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TLS

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TES

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“Asks questions of good and evil and agency, all wrapped up in the terrifying and glorious spectacle of fantastical theology.”

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Bulletin

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Out Magazine

“Readers might see in Jam’s surroundings a version of a world that they, like Jam, might choose to fight for.”

BookPage

“A haunting and poetic work of speculative fiction.”

The Horn Book

“Tremendous . . . Emezi further solidifies themselves as an important contemporary writer.”

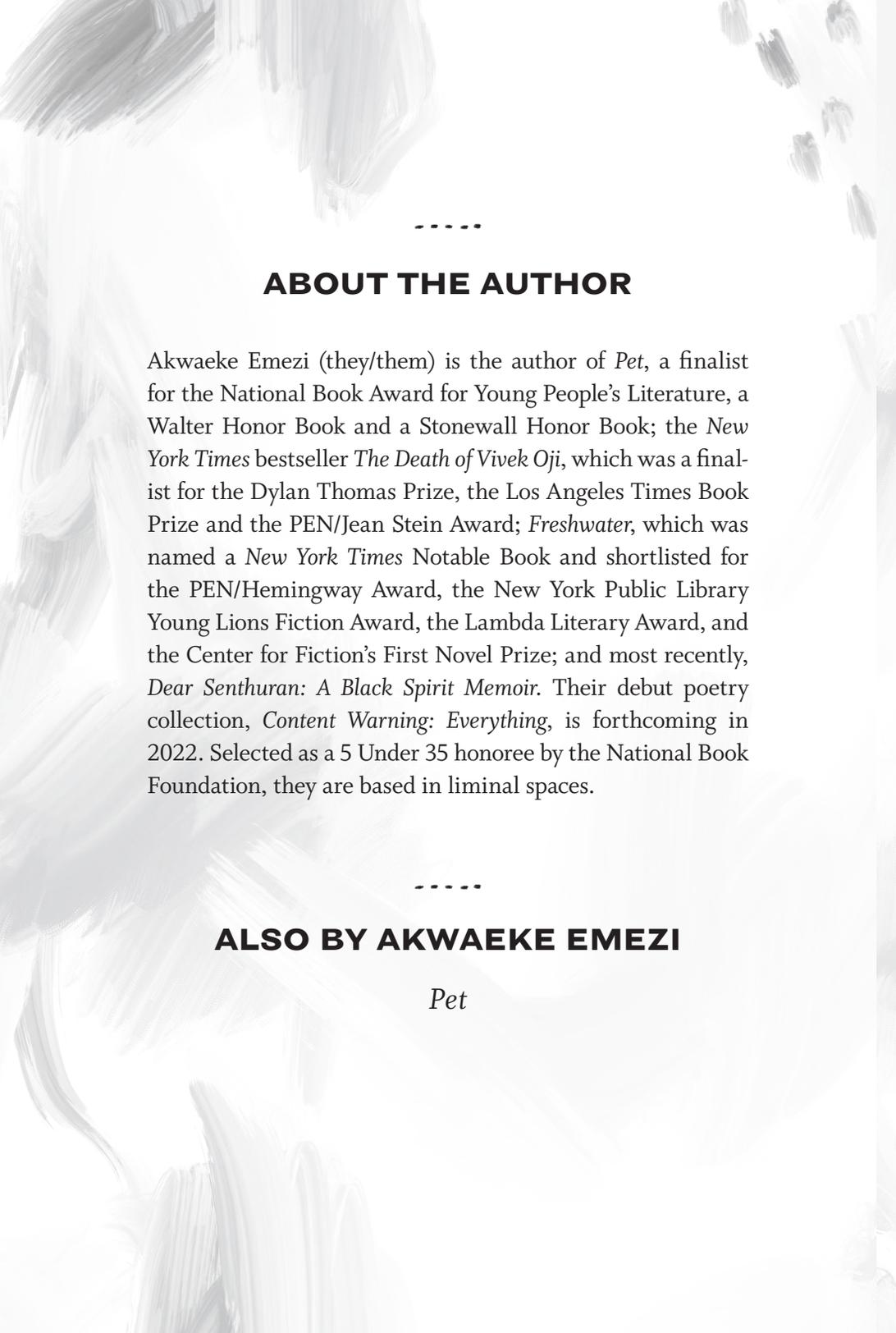
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“Defies all attempts at categorization . . . It is what it is, and what it is is pretty much perfect. This is a novel that must be read and shared.”

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LoveReading



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Akwaeke Emezi (they/them) is the author of *Pet*, a finalist for the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature, a Walter Honor Book and a Stonewall Honor Book; the *New York Times* bestseller *The Death of Vivek Oji*, which was a finalist for the Dylan Thomas Prize, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize and the PEN/Jean Stein Award; *Freshwater*, which was named a *New York Times* Notable Book and shortlisted for the PEN/Hemingway Award, the New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award, the Lambda Literary Award, and the Center for Fiction’s First Novel Prize; and most recently, *Dear Senhuran: A Black Spirit Memoir*. Their debut poetry collection, *Content Warning: Everything*, is forthcoming in 2022. Selected as a 5 Under 35 honoree by the National Book Foundation, they are based in liminal spaces.

ALSO BY AKWAEKE EMEZI

Pet



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2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Still and always, for Toyin Salau.

You deserved a better world.

CHAPTER 2

The first creature didn't need that much blood.

Bitter had been six or seven then, inside one of the lost years, in a house she didn't remember. She'd been hiding under a table and drawing with crayons, a yellow butterfly with lopsided wings, when someone started yelling and she jerked, the paper slicing a thin cut into her thumb. Bitter had whimpered, then shoved the sound down into her little belly because it would all get so much worse if they heard her cry. She put the drawing down, and a whisper of blood smudged across the butterfly's wing. Bitter stuck her thumb in her mouth and watched with wide eyes as her drawing shimmered and the butterfly lifted off the page, fluttering around her in crayoned silence. Maybe she should have been afraid, but even as young as she was then, Bitter had been alone for too long and she'd seen much more terrifying things than a drawing deciding to come to life. Her butterfly felt like a

friend, for the half hour it stayed with Bitter under the table before dissolving into sunshine dust.

It was a long time before she tried it again. It had taken on the texture of a dream by then; she wasn't sure if it had really happened. The second time, she was in a foster family's attic, hiding again, this time with a ragged sketchbook someone had given her in an in-between house, an in-between time. Bitter backed into a corner of the attic and scraped her shoulder on a nail, gasping at the sting of pain. This house had a boy cousin visiting. He liked to corner her when the foster parents were out, grab her by her hair, and so far, the attic was the only place he hadn't come looking for her. Bitter reached up and touched the scratch, then stared at the blood that came back smeared against her fingertip. A memory of a clumsy yellow butterfly that had been a comfort flitted through her mind. She pulled out her sketchbook and held the page close to her face so she could see in the dim attic light as she drew a small cat, simple lines and quick circles. Bitter poked at her shoulder again and rubbed the touch of blood into her drawing. She stared at it, her breath held in her chest, her heart pounding with anticipation. The drawing blurred and shimmered, then the cat stretched and trotted off the page, its whiskers wobbling as it walked. Bitter stifled a delighted squeal. It hadn't been a dream! This

time the cat and Bitter played together for a few quiet hours before it curled up and faded into gray, then nothing. That was okay. It made Bitter a little sad, but she was used to loss.

The drawings had helped Bitter get through the years before she came to Eucalyptus, and once she had her own space, a steady haven to sleep and breathe in, Bitter slowly learned what it was like to draw when she felt safe. It was a strange feeling, but a good one. She didn't like to think about what would happen after graduation if she left Eucalyptus. Miss Virtue always told them that they didn't have to leave if they didn't want to, that there would always be jobs at Eucalyptus for its students. You could teach, you could do something, anything else. Bitter wondered if it was the easy way out, never leaving. Just staying in the bubble forever, just you and your art. It didn't sound half bad, but Blessing always pushed back against it. The morning after they'd been at the park, Bitter brought it up again. "I think I gonna have a talk with Miss Virtue about job openings, for afterwards."

"Eucalyptus isn't everything," Blessing pointed out. "What about the rest of Lucille?"

Bitter shrugged. "It's all on fire. What's left out there?"

"Oh, come on. You can't throw away a whole city just because it's broken."

They were in Blessing's room, the television playing

muted cartoons on the wall as the girls shared a bag of sour gummi worms. Bitter glanced out of the window and shook her head.

“It’s more than broken, Blessing. Actually,” she corrected herself, “it’s not even broken. It’s doing what it was meant to do: protecting those rich motherfuckers and killing everyone else. Allyuh acting like you could change that.”

“We *can* change it!” Blessing’s eyes were bright with something Bitter couldn’t find in herself. “What do you think Assata is out there fighting for? What do you think the old-timers fought for? We can *make* the mayor and the council listen to us.”

Bitter laughed, and the sound echoed her name. “This is Lucille. The mayor and the council eh matter. You and me both know who matters here.”

A flash of anger passed over Blessing’s face, but it wasn’t directed at Bitter. “Yeah,” she said. “Dian Theron and his fucking money.”

Bitter didn’t blame her friend for the snaking hatred that hissed through her voice. Dian Theron was a billionaire who owned everything that mattered in Lucille, and everyone knew that the mayor and the council answered to him. That was the power money had: it mattered over people; it could put a bullet into the head of anyone who was too loud, who found out too much. Theron was always in

the papers, making headlines with the obscene amounts of wealth he was hoarding. His face was burned into Bitter's memory: the pasty skin and thin blond hair, the hawk nose, the unnaturally white teeth. When she thought of greed, she thought of Theron.

And yes, Bitter just wanted to make her art and mind her own business, but she could agree with Assata and Blessing that Theron was evil. It was impossible to be a billionaire and be good. You couldn't make that kind of money without hurting people, without stealing from them, exploiting them, making them suffer while you accumulated wealth that was impossible to spend in this lifetime. Just sitting on it for nothing, while others were struggling to stay alive. He could have used that money to do so much for the people of Lucille, used his influence to make the administration change how they treated their citizens, but Theron didn't care. It worked better for his profit margins the way it was. The whole thing was selfish and cruel, and it made Bitter more angry than she had space for, because she knew what selfish and cruel felt like on the receiving end, she had years she couldn't remember because of it. She had suffering knitted into her bones, and on her worst days, she tried not to think about how much she had in common with her mother.

"Theron isn't above the law," Blessing said, and it shot irritation through Bitter. Why did people insist on being this

naive? Did it just make them feel better to think that they could control what was happening, as if they had any power? As if the world was just slightly off course, and with enough sweat and will they could push it back on track?

“Theron is the law,” she snapped. “Or you forgetting how money does work in Lucille?”

Blessing gave her a patient look. “There are some things that matter more than money,” she said.

Bitter kissed her teeth. “Tell that to the mayor dem.” She shoved the bag of gummi worms back at Blessing and fought the urge to get up and leave, go back to her room, draw something that made more sense than this world. Her skin was crawling.

“Okay, okay. Let’s change the subject.” Blessing could always tell when Bitter had reached her breaking point. “Can we talk about the new boy?”

A flush wrapped around Bitter’s neck. “Aloe? What about him?”

“Girl, I see how you two were looking at each other! You feeling him, huh?”

Bitter rolled her eyes. “He real cute, sure. Maybe we hook up once or twice, but that’s it.”

Blessing shook her head. “I don’t think he’s that type, Bitter.”

“He’s a guy. There’s no other type.”

“Nah, I think he’s different. You know what his skill is?”

“I didn’t ask.” She’d been too shaken to think of it last night, but Bitter was curious. It was the first question Eucalyptus kids usually asked each other: What’s your skill? Do you paint, draw, sculpt, sing? Do you work with clay, metal, tech, fabric? She tried to imagine what the new boy’s medium was. Maybe he took photos or wrote stories.

Blessing grinned. “He’s a sound artist.”

Bitter raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yup. He’s looking into the healing properties of sound, the ways it can affect our brains and shit. You should ask him for a sound bath.”

“I not asking him for shit.”

Blessing leered at her friend. “Ask him for a kiss. You know you want to.”

Bitter snatched the bag of gummi worms back. “You eating too much damn sugar. I cutting you off.”

“That’s how I got Alex, you know. You just gotta say what you want.”

“It’s different with girls,” Bitter replied, biting into a blue worm. “Guys doh like it when you act like you want it.”

“Then you don’t need to be fucking with guys like that. We’re people too—we got needs and whatnot.”

Bitter cast a sidelong glance at Blessing. “How things going with Alex?”

As expected, Blessing's face softened into a silly sweetness. "Man, she's perfect. I never thought I'd meet someone like her, you know? Like, she really sees me and she cares about people and she makes amazing art. It's an incredible combination. She was at a protest the other day, and when she came back in, I swear she was buzzing—you could feel it on her skin. Like, she's got all this energy in her."

"She was at a protest? With the Assata kids?"

Blessing came back down to earth. "Don't start, Bitter."

"I eh say nothing!"

"You didn't have to say anything, that's how loud your thoughts are."

"I just want to know if she going to start dragging you with her to those things. I want you to stay safe, that's all."

"She wouldn't be dragging me—I can choose to walk there on my own, you know?"

"That's not what I meant."

Blessing swung her legs off her bed and stood up. "You gotta stop being so scared of Assata. They're not the dangerous ones in Lucille." She held out a hand to Bitter. "Come on, let's go down to lunch."

Bitter wanted to remind her that this was Lucille, everything and everyone was dangerous, but she swallowed the words and took Blessing's hand. Sometimes it was easier to

just let things go. After all, at the end of the day, Bitter would still be able to go back to her room, lock the door, and draw something that was more real than anything they'd talked about. That was what mattered.

It took the new boy about a week to ask Bitter out. He came up to her in the cafeteria during breakfast, while she was waiting at the omelet station, watching the onions and peppers sweat into the cook's pan.

"Hi," he said, standing in front of her. He was wearing too much denim—blue jeans and a denim shirt with a denim jacket over it. On anyone else, it would have looked corny as hell, but on him, it managed to look good. "Bitter, right?"

She balanced her tray on her hip. "Yes. And you're . . . Aloe?"

He grinned, flashing the gap in his front teeth. "Yes. I've been trying to run into you since that night we met, but you're always around people."

Bitter shrugged. "I like people."

Aloe's eyes were warm and amused. "Me, I'm more shy, but Alex helped me build my courage."

"Courage for what?"

“Ah.” He ducked his head and looked up at her from under thick eyelashes, his locs falling over his face. “I wanted to ask if—if you’d go on a date with me?”

Bitter nearly dropped her tray in surprise, her glass of orange juice wobbling precariously. She steadied it against the omelet counter as the cook cracked two eggs into the pan and Aloe looked on with those eyes of his.

“A date? You don’t think that’s a little old-school?”

“I like old-school.”

Bitter bit back a smile. Was this what Blessing had meant when she said he wasn’t the hookup type? Bitter couldn’t remember the last time anyone had asked her out like this, if ever. It was always, Oh, let’s hang out, swing by my room, we’ll watch a movie or something. “Okay,” she said, because she couldn’t think of a reason to say no.

Aloe grinned. “Let me collect your number,” he said, his voice thrumming with pleasure. Bitter gave it to him and watched as he typed, his lashes dark against his cheeks. When he slid his phone back into his pocket, she watched the collar of his shirt slide to reveal a part of his collarbone. He would be fun to draw, she thought. “I’ll text you,” Aloe was saying, smiling as he walked backward, away from her. He waited until Bitter nodded before he raised a hand and turned around, dipping into the stream of students flowing

between cafeteria tables. Barely two seconds later, Blessing popped up next to Bitter.

“Did he just get your number?” she asked, her voice squeaky with excitement. “Ooh, ooh, ooh! Are y’all gonna ‘hang out?’” She waggled her eyebrows and giggled at the mock outrage on Bitter’s face.

“He would have to work fuh that,” Bitter replied with a smirk.

Blessing looked genuinely confused. “Since when?”

Bitter smacked her arm. “Shut up!” She smiled at the cook, thanking them as she took her plate of eggs, then headed with Blessing to their usual table, where Alex was soaking a stack of pancakes in an unholy amount of syrup.

Blessing stared at her girlfriend, aghast. “Baby!”

Alex looked up. “What?” A few bubbles dribbled out of the bottle as she squeezed the last of the syrup onto her plate. “This shit is delicious. Wet and delicious.” She winked at Blessing. “Just how I like it.” Blessing blushed as Alex reached out to grab a piece of bacon off her plate, dragging it through the puddle of syrup before popping it into her mouth.

Bitter slid her tray onto the table and sat down with them, glancing over as they bickered. Alex’s eyes were always so soft when she looked at Blessing. Sometimes it was

hard for Bitter to see their affection without feeling a little lonely herself. She tried to shake off the feeling. Maybe she would call up a little creature later, when she was alone in her room. The drawings could make her feel better, but they could also make her feel even more isolated, like there was a part of her life that she'd never be able to share with anyone because it was too strange, too different, and she had no idea how to explain it. Bitter had spent most of her life holding secrets, and she was good at it, but they could get real heavy, especially when you were carrying them alone.

“Whatchu gonna wear on your date?” Blessing asked, snapping Bitter back to the table.

Bitter shrugged. “The usual?”

Both Blessing and Alex looked at her outfit, the paint-splattered overalls and the worn sweatshirt underneath. “Absolutely the fuck not,” Blessing said.

“I like it,” Bitter replied, taking a bite of her eggs. “I eh dressing up for no guy.”

“She has a point,” Alex said, and Blessing rolled her eyes at both of them.

A wave of energy rippled around the cafeteria, and Bitter turned her head to see Miss Virtue walking through, dressed in a green snakeskin suit, her hair sculpted into an elaborate pompadour with a long braid down her back. She looked, as she always did, both formidable and like she wasn't really

part of the rest of the world around her. Bitter slipped off her chair and darted between the tables until she was interrupting Miss Virtue's path.

"Sorry, pardon me, do you have a minute?"

Miss Virtue looked down at her, and Bitter felt the familiar shock of being in the woman's line of sight, those gray eyes piercing through Bitter's skin. "Yes, child?"

"I was wondering if I could make an appointment to talk about staying on at Eucalyptus. . . ."

Miss Virtue frowned. "You're only in your junior year."

Bitter set her jaw. "I like to plan ahead."

"Are you sure you want to stay at the school? You don't have to decide right now, you know."

A cold thread of fear wound around Bitter's spine. Was Miss Virtue trying to gently push her out into the world? The thought of not having Eucalyptus as a sanctuary was almost enough to tip her into a panic attack. Miss Virtue must have seen some of the alarm in her eyes, because she reached out and placed an elegant ringed hand on Bitter's shoulder.

"You will always be safe here," Miss Virtue said. "That doesn't mean that you can't be safe somewhere else too."

Bitter nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Miss Virtue looked at her kindly and brushed her fingertips against Bitter's cheek. "Come by my office this week," she said. "We'll talk more about it then." She drifted away, leaving touches of

sandalwood and citron in the air behind her. Bitter headed back to her table, and Blessing raised an eyebrow at her.

“What was that all about?”

Bitter shrugged. “Nothing,” she said. She knew her best friend wouldn’t believe her, but also wouldn’t push, and sure enough, Blessing and Alex fell right back into their banter. Bitter finished her breakfast, letting their voices wash over her and reminding herself that this was what home sounded like.

For their date, Aloe took Bitter to a café a few blocks from the city center, within walking distance of Eucalyptus. “Alex told me you like the menu here,” he said. “It’s from the islands?”

Bitter smiled. “Yeah. Only place in Lucille where you could get doubles.”

“Doubles?”

She laughed. “You’ll like them. You could eat spicy food, right?”

Aloe pushed out his chest. “Ah, of course!”

“Good.” The staff greeted Bitter warmly as they entered, and she put in their orders before leading Aloe to an

overstuffed mustard-yellow sofa in the back of the shop. “This one of my favorite places outside the school.”

He settled into a corner of the couch and looked around. “It’s a nice place. I love that they have zobo on the menu.”

Bitter giggled. “You mean sorrel?”

“Same difference.”

They smiled at each other, and then the server brought over their food and drinks: several orders of doubles, an iced hibiscus for Aloe, and a double espresso for Bitter, who explained the different pepper levels in the doubles and watched as Aloe tasted them.

“These can’t be vegetarian,” he said, his mouth full and his eyes wide.

“Swear down,” Bitter replied. “Is just fried dough and curry chana.”

“I didn’t know chickpeas could taste this good. Did your mother use to make this for you?” There was an awkward moment as Aloe, his face flushed with embarrassment, realized what he’d said. Kids didn’t end up at Eucalyptus because they had good or even alive parents; it was tactless to pry into their old lives. “I’m sorry,” he said, choking down his doubles. “I shouldn’t have asked that.”

“It’s fine.” Bitter gave a little smile. “We all find out sooner or later where we come from.” She met his eyes, making sure

her lost years were staying lost in her head even as she answered. “My mother died when I was a baby. I ended up in foster care.”

“Like Alex.”

Bitter nodded, even though she hadn’t known that about Alex. “Like a lot of us. What about you?”

A shadow seeped into Aloe’s eyes. “My parents kicked me out when I told them I was queer.” He shrugged. “They said the usual—they didn’t raise me to be like this, I wasn’t welcome under their roof until I repented, rubbish like that.”

“I’m sorry,” Bitter said. “Blessing’s parents were also like that. Said it was haram.”

“Ah, she told me. Conversion therapy, even.” He shook his head. “I’m glad she got out.”

“I’m glad you got out too.” Bitter wanted to reach out and touch his knee or something, but she felt too awkward to try. “How did Miss Virtue find you? One of the social workers?”

Aloe chuckled. “Actually, it’s me that found her.”

Bitter laughed in disbelief. “Yuh joking.”

“I’m telling you. I met an Assata member who was recruiting, and they told me about Eucalyptus, so I came to find out for myself.”

Bitter frowned. “Why didn’t they recruit you for Assata? Why would they send you to Eucalyptus instead?”

Aloe sipped at his iced hibiscus, his brow furrowed. “I

wanted to make art. They thought it would be a good fit. Why wouldn't they have recommended Eucalyptus? They do it all the time."

Bitter didn't answer. She thought Assata looked down on Eucalyptus; the idea of one of them sending Aloe there instead of brainwashing him into their cause didn't make sense to her. Aloe glanced past her and broke out into a grin, waving a hand.

"Eddie!" he called. "Over here!"

Bitter turned, her stomach dropping. Eddie was at the counter in tiny denim shorts and a neon-pink crop top, her eyes outlined in matching pink eyeliner and her spiked purple braids pulled up in a ponytail. Bitter watched nervously as she strolled over to their couch.

"Hey, Aloe," she said, ignoring Bitter.

Aloe didn't pick up on any of the tension between the girls. "Hey, Eddie! This is my friend Bitter. Bitter, this is Eddie."

Eddie gave Bitter a scathing glance. "We've met," she said, her voice cold.

Aloe looked taken aback. "Ah. Is something wrong?"

"I mean . . ." Eddie examined her nails. "Other than the fact that she's lowkey trash. You sure this is who you wanna be spending your time with?"

"What the fuck did you just say?" Bitter stood up in one fluid, aggressive movement. "Yuh better watch your damn mouth before ah swell it up for yuh."

Eddie's snarl widened. "Bitch, I'd like to see you try."

Aloe jumped up. "That's enough!" He glanced between them, looking upset and confused. "What the hell? Why are you two even quarreling?"

Eddie tossed her braids. "Ask your *friend*," she said. "I'm out. Hit me up later, Aloe."

With one last glare at Bitter, she was gone, and Bitter was left with her hands clenched tightly into fists. She hadn't fought since before Eucalyptus, and the surge of blind furious adrenaline was both terribly familiar and uncomfortable. Aloe's gentle touch on her shoulder brought her back down, and she turned to meet his worried eyes.

"What was that?" he asked, keeping his voice soft. "Is everything okay?"

"It's fine," Bitter replied. "We just—we've bumped heads a few times, that's all."

"That was more than bumping heads. Were you two friends before or something?"

Bitter barked out a short laugh. "Friends? Never." She let Aloe pull her back down on the couch even though her spine was tense and her muscles were still humming with adrenaline.

"Here, relax," he said. "Take a deep breath and tell me about it."

Bitter held herself away from him, fighting the urge to

curl up on that mustard sofa and tell him everything, how it wasn't even about Eddie, it was about all the things underneath. She twisted her fingers together and looked down at her tangled hands. All these feelings were knotted inside her—how helpless she felt, how hopeless Lucille felt, how even talking about change felt like a joke, a cruel hope. Aloe was a stranger, and if there was one thing Bitter had learned, it was that you couldn't tell things to a stranger. But Aloe was still looking at her, curious and open, and Bitter found herself taking a deep breath after all. There was no point in having a home, in finally feeling safe at Eucalyptus, if she wasn't going to at least *try* to unravel some of these knots. And yes, Aloe was a stranger, but Bitter had also learned that some strangers could be kind. In that moment, she decided to trust him, because she was so, so tired of feeling this alone.

“I'm listening,” he said. “Tell me what's wrong.”

Bitter nodded. The words felt like she was chipping them off a frozen block before forcing them through her teeth. “Okay,” she replied stiffly. “I'll try.”