

## Making My Mark

I trudge silently on the pathway to school, kicking up piles of dust around my feet. School. To me, school is a place of complete misery. I have to sit, crammed with others that look like me, listening to the teachers slowly explain everything to us as if we were babies.

“We understand your situation. We are here to help you.” they say. If they truly wanted to help us, they would teach us real material, not degrade us because of our history and looks.

I am a Descendant. Descendant as in descendant of the Criminals. I have fiery red hair, golden skin, and bright, bright, yellow eyes. The government wants people to know who we are so we can feel ashamed. My great great grandfather was a Criminal because he refused to give in to the government. Once you’ve been declared as a criminal, they alter your looks. Alter them so you would stand out anywhere you go. It’s an eternal punishment. One that passes down to your children, grandchildren, and so forth. They stopped using the punishment about 20 years ago, but there is still severe segregation. We, the Descendants, are still here.

In school, they put us in a separate room and call us the “Special Education” class. My teacher, Mrs. Calisbury, teaches us almost nothing. Most of us don’t know how to read. I am very lucky. Last year we had a student teacher, Ms. Liall, for two months. She believed in us, and taught us regular things, working with each of us and helping us to strengthen our abilities. Ms. Liall liked me, especially. She was fascinated, she said, by how “smart” I was. She told me that I would become a great person. Ms. Liall sneaked out special books for me and had me take a test testing my abilities. If I passed, I could move up with the Regulars, a task no Descendant had ever done before. The day after I took the test, she had to leave and I never heard from her again.

A school bus whizzes past me, spraying smoke into my face. I cough, then open my eyes to see the red bus disappear around the corner.

Descendants aren’t allowed to ride buses to school. It’s one of the many laws we have to follow. We are expected to get up extra early to walk the 45 minute walk to school.

After a while, I see the glimmering steel wall of the Regulars’ school. In the windows, I see rows of kids, all dresses in pearly white uniforms, listening intently to the teacher. One boy with golden locks sticks his tongue out at me, then nudges his friend and together they snigger, pointing at me.

My eyes drop to the ground. I enter the small brick 2-room building next to the massive one. This is *my* school. I slowly open the door, entering my classroom. 50 pairs of sickly golden eyes blink back at me. Carefully avoiding their gaze, I find an empty spot on the hard floor and sit. Mrs. Calisbury, the teacher, drones on and on, and anyone can plainly see that she wants to be here about as much as we do.

After a long talk about Criminal History, there is a sharp knock on the door.

“Come in.”

The principal, Mrs. Saster walks in, chin jutting out at us. She scrunches her nose and looks at us with a look of pure disgust. Mrs. Calisbury suddenly pastes a smile on her face.

“What bring you here, Mrs. Saster?”

“I need Jasmine Sancher.”

What? Me? Shaking, I stand up. Mrs. Saster points a perfectly manicured nail at me and says, “Ah, yes. You.” She speaks to me with an expression that matches one looking at a cockroach. The other Descendants look at me with wide-eyed stares. Some looked as if they are scared, while others look like I am lucky. I walk behind Mrs. Saster out the door and to her office, and for the first time, I get a good look at her.

She has sleek black pumps with black tights to match, paired with a black pencil skirt and a black coat. Only her hair is a fairytale blond. Her eyes are cold, but have slight wrinkles around them, as if she used to laugh a lot.

We arrive at a door with the words “*Principal’s Office*” engraved on it. We enter, and I sit across from her on a comfy wooden chair. She folds her hands on the table, her penciled lips pulled in a taut line.

“So, Miss Sancher, do you recall having a teacher with the name Ms. Liall?” The name places a smile on my face.

“Yes ma’am.”

“I hear you have taken a very special test with her?”

“Yes ma’am.” My heart is beating so hard in my chest it feels like it could burst.

“Did she tell you if you passed, you could join the Regulars?”

“Yes.”

“Well... I have to say, Miss Sancher, congratulations. You have passed.”

What? My eyes widen in disbelief. Me, going into class with the regulars?

“We will be expecting you in Mrs. Dane’s class tomorrow. There will be a great deal of angry threats and in the most severe case, violence. Can you put up with that, Miss Sancher?”

“Yes.” I don’t care if the world is ending, I’m just so happy.

“Good. The matter is settled. Now go and enjoy you last day in the Special Education classes.”

I walk to school the next day, my heart pounding. When I reach the doors, there are two men waiting for me.

“Guards.” Mrs. Saster says, then smiles. It lights up her cold eyes, and I remind myself to not judge people right away.

There are all sorts of people screaming, threatening that they will sue for having a Descendant go to school with their child, threatening to kill me in front of the school doors. The press is also here, snapping photos. I do not know how they know I was going to go to the Regulars. I am scared, and I walk in to Mrs. Dane’s classroom as quickly as possible. 20 beautiful faces look at me as if I am dirt as I take a seat. The girl in front of me whips her head around and glares at me. I suddenly feel very small and very hot.

Mrs. Dane starts to talk, and my eyes turn to her.

“I see you have noticed we have a new addition to our class.” *Noticed* is an understatement.

“Class, please welcome Jasmine Sancher.” Faint murmurs come from around the room.

“Good now let’s start. Please get your science textbooks and turn to page 356.” I pull out a new, shiny, textbook and open it. The pictures are bright and full of color, unlike the dull ones in my old classroom. Mrs. Dane seems nice enough, but I think she doesn’t fully understand that I’m in here because I’m smart. I passed the test, you know. When we do math, she stares at me with worried eyes and says, “I think this is too hard for you, Jasmine, honey.” Everyone stares at me, and my skin turns a tomato red, to match my hair. Boys snicker at me and girls whisper, and I feel like I’m going to cry. But I knew this would happen. I was ready for it.

“It’s fine, Mrs. Dane.” I’m filled with determination to show her up, so I listen extra carefully, I look around the classroom and I see the other children stealing glances at me, some as if I’m the black plague, some as if I am an exhibit in a museum. I shift around in my seat uncomfortable, and listen to Mrs. Dane.

The day ends after what seems like forever, and this time the guards take me home. I go to bed after supper, but there’s no way I can sleep. My head is filled with thoughts. For the first time in

a while, I think of Ms. Liall. Her kind eyes and loving smile and the way she always believed in me. “You’ll make a difference, Jasmine. I just know you will.” I wonder what she would say now, seeing me in this situation. I wonder if I really *could* make a difference. I was the only Descendant to go to a Regulars school. I must have some power. I think of all the unfair laws we have to follow, unfair laws I never saw as unfair because I am so used to it. Why are Descendants so bad anyway? All we have are different looks and a different history.

I lie under the covers and think about what it would be like to be a normal. What it would be like to ride the bus to school, to eat at the good restaurants, to not have people sneering at you wherever you go.

I think of the people outside the school today and how they hated the fact that I was going to school with their children. How would they like it if we shared the same parks with them, lived in the same areas, if we had the same rights as them?

I then think of all the kids back in my old classroom. The “Special Education” ones. Who says that they can’t be as smart as the Regulars? I feel sorry for them, sitting in that cramped room, knowing that I, at least, was going to school in the Regulars building. And then, suddenly, I decide I *will* make a difference. I decide that I will let them join me in the Regulars class, no matter what it takes.

The next morning, I wake up excited and anxious to try out my new plan. I’ve decided to make a secret tutoring class where the kids can come and learn, and maybe they will pass the test too. It’s a huge responsibility and I know it will be hard (I mean, some of them don’t know how to read) but I am determined. I tell my mom, and she is worried that I will get in trouble if I get caught. I beg though, and she promises me that she will get the word out to her friends.

I come home and I see 5 faces eagerly peeking out at me through the window. I smile, and reach into my backpack and pull out the textbooks. I sit down at a table with them, and after the hour-long session, each of them can read a whole sentence, and add 2 digit numbers. I am so proud. It feels good to know that I am making my mark on the world, step by step.

The weeks and months after that don’t seem so long and heavy anymore. I teach the kids every day, and have managed to train one, Natalie, to be my assistant. Together we teach them what they need to know at their grade level, from 1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. We take practice tests every once in a while, and soon I can see the progress. The 5 kids look so happy, when I tell them if

they pass they can move up to classes with the Regulars. I don't know what would happen if even one of them didn't get in.

Before we know it, it is springtime. Ms. Liall comes back, and I realize that she is not a student teacher but a testing assistant. She sees me and grins, and I manage to convince her to let my students in the class take the test. "Well, it can't hurt, right?" she says, then agrees.

I am so nervous. Today is testing day. Through the whole school day, I fidget and shake in my chair so much that Mrs. Dane asks me if I have to use the restroom. To give me hope, I think of their little faces, round and beautiful, and their eyes, not clouded and ugly like mine but clear and sweet and the color of honey.

After school, I pace in circles around the testing building, waiting for the kids to start coming out. Instead, I see Ms. Liall dash out the door, screaming, "Mrs. Saster! Mrs. Saster!" Startled, I run after her. Mrs. Saster comes out of her office and sprints over to us as fast as a person can in black stilettos. "Yes, Linda?" She says to Ms. Liall between gasps of air.

"The children...."

"Children?"

"The Descendant children.... They have all passed the test!"

"WHAT? No, no, no. There's no way..."

"Look at the paper, Mrs. Saster. Look!"

I see them pointing and whispering over the scores, and for a long time I cannot speak or think out of shock. All my "students", all of them passed? When the shock dies away, I sit down on the ground and cry. The tears come naturally. The tears of hard work, joy, pride, everything I did for this, spill on the ground and make dark puddles. Ms. Liall looks up from the paper and comes over to me.

"What's wrong, Jasmine?"

"Nothing, Ms. Liall. I am just so happy."

"Why?" For a second, I hesitate. Should I tell her? But this is Ms. Liall, after all. So I do.

"I taught them, Ms. Liall. I prepared them for the test so they could all pass and have the same privileges that I do." Ms. Liall lets out a yelp of surprise, and then laughs.

"Oh, I knew it Jasmine. I knew you could do it!"

I smile, and she hugs me tight. Mrs. Saster, who has overheard all of this, looks at me with a curious expression on her face.

“You know what?” Mrs. Saster says. “The Descendants are smarter than I thought them to be. Jasmine, you have proven to me that Descendants can be as smart or as talented as the Regulars. Even the ones that didn’t pass. From now on, the Descendants will join us on the buses and in the classroom.”

I scream, and then cover my mouth right away. Ms. Liall looks worried.

“But, Mrs. Saster... the school’s reputation!”

“As a true teacher would say, Ms. Liall, nothing is more important than education. Tell the teachers and children right now.”

Ms. Liall runs off. Mrs. Saster turns to me and tells me to go home, that I have done well. On the way, I think to myself, ‘The journey’s not ended. It’s just begun.’”