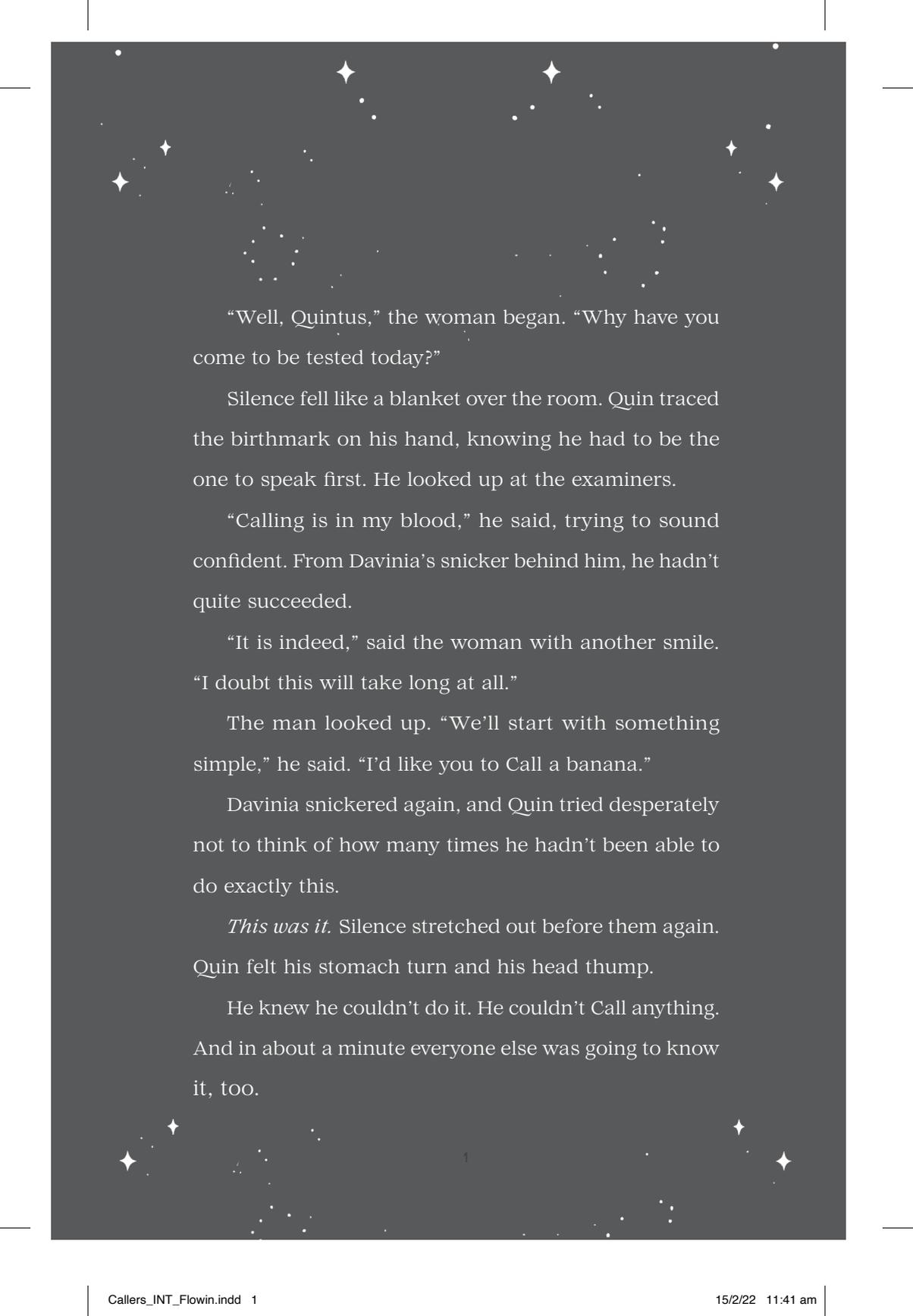


THE CALLERS

KIAH THOMAS

'Beautiful, big-hearted and so original' AMIE KAUFMAN



“Well, Quintus,” the woman began. “Why have you come to be tested today?”

Silence fell like a blanket over the room. Quin traced the birthmark on his hand, knowing he had to be the one to speak first. He looked up at the examiners.

“Calling is in my blood,” he said, trying to sound confident. From Davinia’s snicker behind him, he hadn’t quite succeeded.

“It is indeed,” said the woman with another smile. “I doubt this will take long at all.”

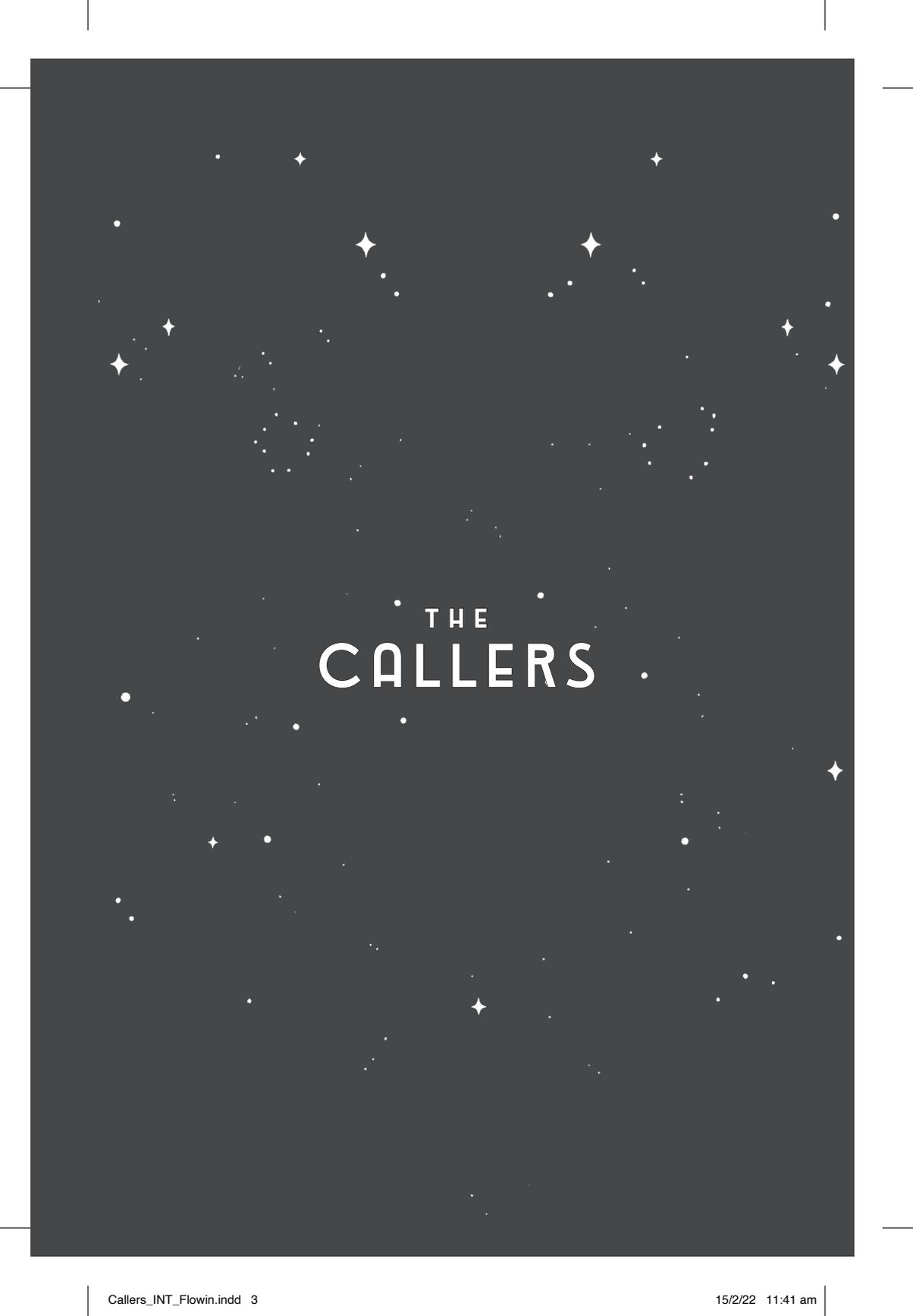
The man looked up. “We’ll start with something simple,” he said. “I’d like you to Call a banana.”

Davinia snickered again, and Quin tried desperately not to think of how many times he hadn’t been able to do exactly this.

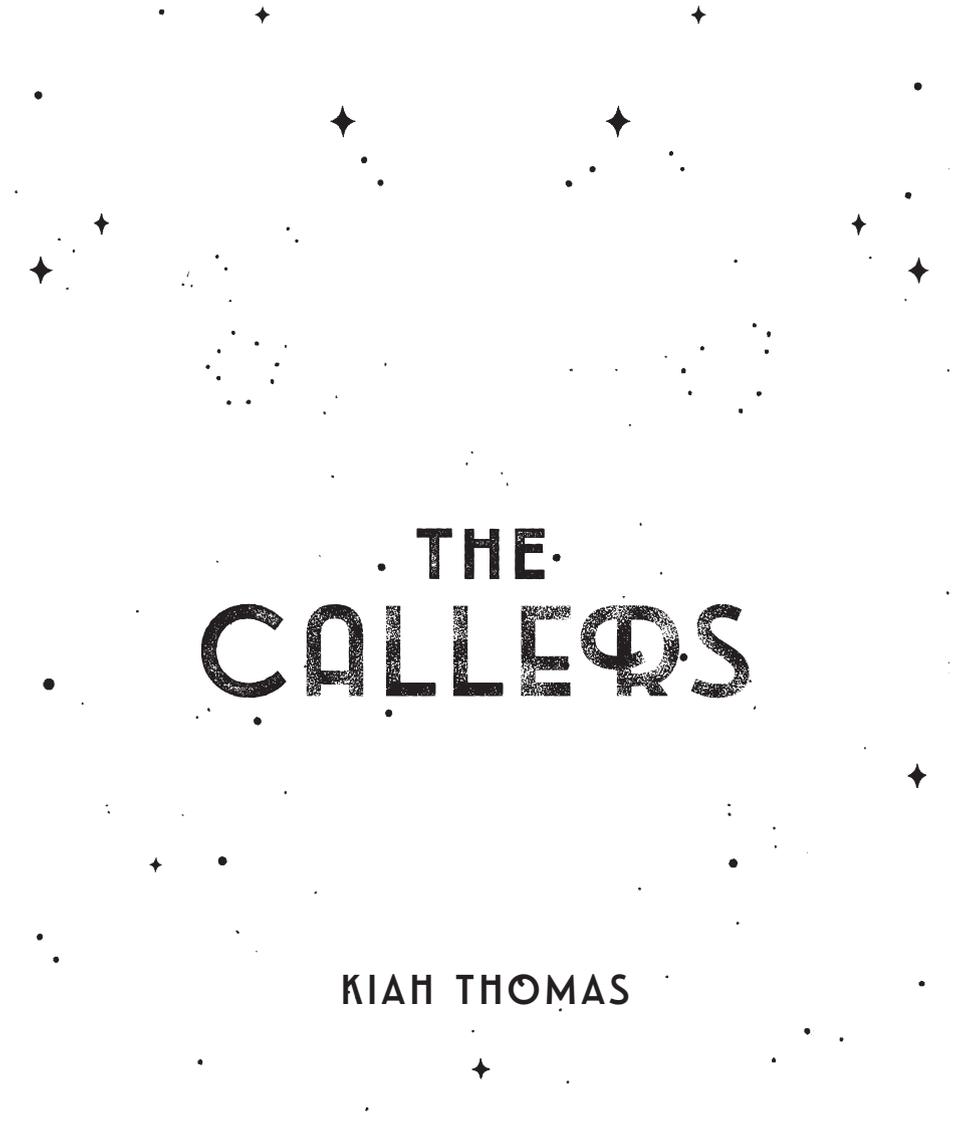
This was it. Silence stretched out before them again. Quin felt his stomach turn and his head thump.

He knew he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t Call anything. And in about a minute everyone else was going to know it, too.





THE
CALLERS



THE
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KIAH THOMAS

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FOR LUKE.

CHAPTER ONE

Quintus Octavius had been staring at the same blank spot on the table for twenty-six minutes.

“Banana,” he said, for the twelfth time.

He held his breath.

Nothing happened.

Again.

Quin opened his eyes as wide as he could. Maybe he wasn’t staring hard enough.

Drops of liquid gathered at the corners of his eyes. His eyebrows ached.

“Banana,” said Quin, a little louder this time.

His nose twitched. He opened his eyes even wider still. Something was about to happen; he could feel it.

Someone behind him snorted.

Quin froze. He hadn’t realized there was anyone else in the room.

THE
CALLERS

“I think you almost had it that time,” said his sister, Davinia. Quin could hear the laughter in her voice.

He sighed. “What do you want, Dav?” he asked, keeping his gaze fixed on the table.

“I just want to help,” she told him.

“I don’t want your help,” said Quin.

“Maybe you should try something else,” said Davinia, ignoring him. She held out her hand. “Like an **orange**. Or a **melon**.”

Quin watched as the air shimmered and the fruit thudded softly on the table.

Then Davinia held out her hand again. “Though a **banana** does sound good to me,” she said with a sly grin.

But this time Quin was ready. He shot out his hand as the banana shimmered into being and caught it before it hit the table.

Davinia rolled her eyes as Quin pulled back the skin. “Nice one.”

“Thanks,” he said, with a confidence he didn’t quite feel.

Quin took a bite, and Davinia’s eyes narrowed again.

“You must be nervous about the test next week,” she said.

KIAH THOMAS

Quin took another bite of the banana so he wouldn't have to answer and traced the leaf-shaped birthmark at the base of his palm.

"You know, I don't think there's ever been an Octavius who wasn't a Caller." Davinia grinned. "Just think, you could make history, little brother."

The first Octavius not to Call. In any other family, Quin's lack of ability would be normal. Callers were rare—the ability to Call, to conjure things, was a gift that appeared only once every few generations.

But in the Octavius family the ability was not exceptional. It was expected. And anything less than a strong Calling ability was not enough.

Quin felt a familiar twist in his stomach, the one that always appeared when he thought about the Octavius legacy and his failed Calling attempts. And the test was *next week*. He rubbed his palm again, then stopped when Davinia smirked at him.

"Shouldn't you be at Chambers?" said Quin, trying to shift her attention to something else.

Davinia's grin widened and Quin knew that she knew she'd gotten to him.

"Not today." She shrugged. "Council doesn't *officially* admit new members until after the tests."

THE CALLERS

Council, the ruling body of Elipsom, was based in their city, Orbis. It was made up of only the strongest Callers. New members were elected by current Council members.

Unofficially there was no way Davinia wouldn't be admitted. She was one of the strongest Callers to pass the test in the last five years. And she was an Octavius.

"Besides, what's more important than helping my little brother? **Chair.**"

Quin almost jumped as wood hit the ground next to him. Davinia rested her hand along the carved back of the chair she had Called.

"You're not meant to Call constructed materials," he reminded his sister, even as he admired her skill. There was little point in reprimanding her—there wasn't much that Davinia took seriously. Quin marveled at the chair's smooth design and solid legs. It always amazed him how each Called thing seemed so unique.

Davinia raised her eyebrows. "And you're the expert?" she asked him. She watched him as he studied the chair. "What are you looking at?" she asked.

And because she did it without a bite in her voice, Quin took a chance.

"Do you . . ." He hesitated, trying to think of words that wouldn't make him sound as ignorant as he was.

KIAH THOMAS

“Do you design the chair in your mind before you Call it?”

Davinia blinked, surprised by the question. She considered for a moment.

“No,” she said. They both sat, the silence between them light for once, and Quin felt a flash of pride that he’d managed to ask a question about Calling that Dav hadn’t considered.

“Others might have to, but I guess I’m just so good that it’s instinctive,” Davinia added, and the moment was gone.

Quin was working out how best to tell his sister to go away when a loud cry sounded outside the window.

They both looked up to see Dawn, their mother’s rhinodrite, landing in their central courtyard.

“Mom’s home,” sang Davinia under her breath with a sideways look at her brother.

Quin ignored her, tracking Dawn’s movements, his breath catching as it always did at the sight of her landing.

Like all rhinodrites, Dawn stood twice as tall as a human, and as long as three. With thick gray skin and horns like the common rhinoceros, rhinodrites boasted

THE CALLERS

three major differences: their size, their loyalty, and a set of strong wings. Dawn's were currently stretched to capacity as she glided down.

Quin had always dreamed of riding one. Had *actually* dreamed about it more than once. Unfortunately, rhinodrites didn't tolerate the presence of anyone apart from the person who had Called them by name. Quin could still remember sneaking out of the house when he was younger to try to ride Dawn while his mother slept. Luckily, Adriana had woken in time to stop Quin before he got close enough for the rhinodrite to react. He could have been killed, she'd scolded him.

Quin hadn't tried again since, but sometimes he found himself wishing he was as bold now as he had been then. He still found it hard to draw his gaze away from the sight of the rhinodrite's power and grace.

Now, his mother was vaulting off Dawn and starting toward the house with long strides.

"I wonder if she'll be in a better mood," said Davinia, watching beside him. "She's been in a foul temper ever since her trip to the Spurges last week."

Not for the first time, Quin marveled at Davinia's ability to casually refer to their mother's mood, as if it

KIAH THOMAS

wasn't terrifyingly unpredictable. He figured Davinia's confidence came from the fact that she didn't have to constantly try to prove herself.

She was right, though. Adriana had been in a bad mood since the Spurges.

The Spurges were just past the outskirts of Orbis. They were older than the capital city, and more derelict. The area was largely inhabited by people who refused to use or consume Called goods. They claimed that it was wrong to rely on things created from thin air. *Radicals*, Quin had heard his mother call them in her public addresses. *Wild* was what Davinia muttered to Quin whenever they were mentioned.

Quin still hadn't decided what he thought. All he knew was that people from the Spurges made him uncomfortable, with their passionate claims that nothing should come from nothing. The soil was as infertile there as it was on the rest of Elipsom, but they still insisted on growing their own food from seed. Generally, Council left them to their own devices. *They're too insignificant to bother*, his mother had said more than once.

Still, she'd bothered last week.

THE CALLERS

At the sound of his mother's footsteps, Quin pushed the thought aside. It wouldn't surprise him if she somehow managed to see into his brain.

"Are you sure you don't have somewhere else to be?" he asked Davinia as she sank into the chair next to him. "Like the other side of the planet?" he muttered under his breath. Though even from that barren wasteland, he imagined, Davinia would find some way to annoy him.

Davinia swung her legs up onto the table and leaned back.

"Nope," she said with a grin.

A moment later the door clicked open and Adriana Octavius walked in.

Quin held his breath and waited as she took in the items on the table, the chair, and Davinia lounging in it.

Her eyes sharpened on Quin.

"Who Called the fruit?" she asked. Not in a better mood, then.

Quin thought about lying, but she'd probably make him prove it anyway.

"Davinia," he said softly.

His mother was silent. She didn't even bother sighing.

"You shouldn't Call constructed materials," she said to Davinia instead, touching the back of the chair.

KIAH THOMAS

Though the words were a reprimand, Quin swallowed at the pride in her voice. Their mother might be Chief Councilor, but she was an Octavius first. Displays of power, particularly in her own household, always impressed her.

“Sorry, Mother,” said Davinia, but she slid a look at Quin.

“Have you Called anything today?” his mother asked him. She already knew the answer. Quin suspected she just wanted him to admit it out loud.

“No,” he said quietly.

There was a beat, and then, “Cassius has been making excellent progress with his Calling,” Adriana said mildly.

Quin hated the feeling of shame that trickled through him. He was proud of his best friend, happy for him. But somehow the tone of his mother’s voice alone managed to make Quin feel bad. He wasn’t even sure how she knew about Cassius’s Calling skill.

The room pulsed with silence again, and Quin’s head hurt.

“A Council vehicle will collect us at nine tomorrow,” said Adriana finally to Quin. “Don’t be late.”

THE CALLERS

She turned to Davinia. “Come, Davinia, I need your assistance with something,” she said, before sweeping from the room. She didn’t look at Quin again.

Davinia waved cheerily to Quin over her shoulder as she followed behind.

Where were they going at nine the next morning?