

Excerpt from “The Human Trial” by Audrey Gale

Archer’s years on campus had perfected his ability to move through it unnoticed. From the first, he’d learned he had enough challenges fitting-in without spotlighting them.

Bundled in all the clothing he owned against a frigid wind scudding snow across the frozen earth, Archer kept his head down and his shoulders hunched against the wintry gusts. Moving fast retained some bodily warmth while lessening his time in the unforgiving elements. In the evening gloom of the short winter day, he scurried toward the medical lab feeling invisible and enjoying the anonymity.

But despite the frigid weather, he was not alone. Dodging all obstacles which could slow him, disjointed snippets of crunching footsteps and muffled conversations, even bursts of laughter, infiltrated his scarf-bound ears. He trudged determinedly onward even when he heard what sounded like his name, assuming it was no more than a trick of the howling wind. It was far too cold to stop anyway. Until ice-crushing footsteps forced him to a halt.

“Randall!” It was unmistakable. Archer glanced up into the face of Adam Wakefield, barely visible beneath a warm-looking fedora which Archer eyed enviously. With a thick scarf knotted around his neck and ears, Wakefield looked impervious to the cold. A heavy woolen coat extended the length of his body. No, Archer concluded, the coat’s more luxurious than wool. Cashmere?

“Whoa there, Dr. Archer. It’s me, Adam. Adam Wakefield from the lab.”

Archer gritted his teeth, rich layers of wool and cashmere close enough to touch adding to his physical discomfort. But the threadbare scarf he’d tied around his own face made his expression invisible. “Hi,” Archer mumbled through the wool, the cold already overtaking him.

“Where have you been?” Wakefield demanded. “Haven’t seen you in the lab in a couple weeks.”

“An extremely demanding rotation,” Archer replied, risking the uncovering of his face to do so. “But it’s over now, and I have time for my extracurricular lab work again. I’m heading there now. You?” He drew the wrap back over his face, shifting from foot to foot to force his already-coagulating circulation.

“Shake a leg, Adam,” a female voice behind them called out. “We’re freezing here!”

Both Archer and Wakefield glanced toward the voice coming from the small group Wakefield had detached himself from. He nodded at them and turned back to Archer, who stared longingly at the assemblage in their insulating furs, hats, boots, and gloves. You’re freezing? he grumbled inwardly, shifting faster and hugging himself, aware his meager layering looked ridiculous compared to real winter clothing. Who are these overly tall people? he wondered crossly. Is everyone in Adam’s world as tall and lanky, and yes, regal, as he?

“No lab for me tonight, I’m afraid,” Wakefield answered Archer’s forgotten question. “My best friend since childhood, we attended St. Paul’s together, is celebrating his birthday with a few of us and his sister. I’ve known the family my entire life and well, I’m taking the night off. My microscope will have to wait.”

“Adam!” A fur-bedecked presence inserted itself. “We’ll die if we don’t get out of this wind. What’s the holdup here?” When Wakefield acknowledged the female speaker, his blue eyes softened perceptibly, and Archer noticed.

“Sorry, Elizabeth. Be right there.” When she didn’t retreat, instead staring at Archer curiously, Wakefield said, “Oh, I forget myself. Elizabeth, this is a friend from the medical lab. He likes off-hours as much as I do. We tend to share the empty lab between us most nights. Elizabeth Perrish, meet Randall Archer, Dr. Randall Archer, MD, interning just now, but still keeping hours in the lab.” He nodded at Archer. “You must need no sleep if what one hears about medical training is true. Randall, meet Elizabeth Perrish.”

With a fuzzy cap tightly fitting her scalp, a few dark brown waves framing her striking face, the young woman offered Archer her gloved hand, a smile lighting her large eyes. “Pleased to meet you, Dr. Archer. Any friend of Adam’s is a friend of mine.”

Though it pained him to loosen an arm from his body, the cold instantly invading its place, he took her hand and smiled through his physical misery. Those eyes were dark and expressive, he saw, perhaps a deep blue, though it was hard to tell in the evening dusk. But definitely amused or of good humor. “Hm-mm. Nice to meet you, Miss Perrish.”

Perrish, Archer contemplated. Like the glaring statue he passed regularly on campus? Likely related, he decided, based on her expensively clad, angular body, and that indefinable quality again—a self-assured bearing. He remembered to release her hand.

“Elizabeth,” she corrected him. “I’m sorry but really Adam, we must be going. We’ll all freeze to death if we don’t. Prescott will never forgive you if his twenty-ninth birthday should prove his last.”

“Be right with you, Elizabeth. You go on. I’ll catch up.” Wakefield pivoted to Archer. “Glad you’ll be back in the lab when I return tomorrow night, old boy. I worried I’d scared you off with my verbal meanderings. I will see you then, correct, Randall?”

Archer nodded, feeling frost tingling his toes, fingers, nose, and ears. He dragged his eyes from Elizabeth’s retreating figure. “Uh-huh. I’ll be there.”

“Good!” Wakefield exclaimed before dashing to catch his companions, who loudly complained that his ‘dawdling’ had given them all frostbite.

As Archer hurried off in the other direction, Elizabeth, the only female in the group, could be heard asking, "Who was that?"

As he fled for the shelter of the laboratory, it never occurred to Archer to wonder at her meaning. He'd been reminded over and over again of his obvious otherness which her question implied.