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THE HATE WITHIN

by

Kora Kukk

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Biomedical Engineering)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2021

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ABSTRACT

A novel in its beginning stages, *The Hate Within* (May 2021) is the product of discovering a way to be able to eloquently combine biomedical engineering with creative writing which will intrigue young adult readers. This thesis contains the first few chapters of the story along with an additional journal entry, the story's outline with a list of plot events, and a disquisition exploring the motivation and methodology behind creating this thesis. The novel is about a junior in high school named Alaita. She is a super sweet, kind, and popular girl in school until one day she is diagnosed with a brain tumor. Once her tumor is surgically removed, she realizes that she has lost her ability to connect and empathize with others. She works with her therapist to try and learn techniques to help her regain her empathy to no avail. Her personality change has created rifts between her parents and between her and her best friend. She feels like she is responsible for all the negativity and conflict happening around her since she has lost her empathy. That is until she meets a kid dealing with substance abuse who helps her realize that the most important thing is for to learn to accept herself for who she has become before she can be able to move forward and improve herself.

PREFACE

This thesis is meant to be read in the order with which it is written to provide readers with a sense of how reading the novel will be before explaining all aspects of the story and how it will continue to progress. A disquisition follows all of the creative writing to explain the work that happened behind the scenes to create this thesis. This thesis in no way represents a final copy of the work and the story, instead it is meant to serve as a foundation which will continue to be built upon until a final story emerges from start to end.

I plan to continue to turn the work that is presented here in this thesis into a finished novel which I will pursue to be published because I do want to help stimulate younger audience's interest in the field of STEM since it is a rapidly expanding and ever-changing field. Some day readers of this thesis can hopefully be able to read the rest of the story in a published novel that they can find in a bookstore, and that is my goal.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many people who I can thank for helping me on my journey not only through Honors College but also through life to get me to where I am. Thank you to my parents for always supporting me no matter how crazy my goals and aspirations became and for teaching me discipline and motivation so I can be able to pull off my goals such as graduating from UMaine as a biomedical engineer, Honors graduate, and student-athlete.

Thank you to two of my bestest friends who have helped teach me the life lessons which I hope to portray and pass on to the readers of my story. Being able to be a part of and watch your growth has been so inspiring and motivational to me. And thank you for always supporting me even when you were going through your own tough times. You both are lights in my life.

Thank you to my advisor, Katie Quirk for teaching me so much about creative writing in such a short amount of time and taking the time to look over all of the pieces of writing that I produced. I wouldn't have been able to make the progress that I did without your help and your uplifting words and compliments that accompanied each of your critiques of my work.

Also thank you to Jordan Miner, Luke Huizinga, my mom, and Olivia Bamford for reading aspects of my thesis so I could gain more feedback on my writing. I really enjoyed hearing all of your reactions to the story and characters. And I promise there is more to come with the story, I won't leave you on a cliffhanger forever!

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CHAPTER 1

Alaita walked out of the gym locker room and stood at the top of the soft, grassy hill which led down to the school's two turf sports fields. She squinted into the bright morning sun as she extended her arms over her head, stretching her shoulders and upper back. Maybe stretching would make this pestering headache go away? For god's sake, she already took four ibuprofen. Maybe this was a migraine?

Serena came bounding out of the locker room and hip checked Alaita, knocking her off-balance. Serena clapped her hands at the sight of the bag of soccer balls laying on the field. Serena's sleek, black high ponytail flew about her face in the breeze as her eyes sparkled. A mischievous grin filled her face.

"I have been waiting for this day to come. Everyone is going to know what it's like to go up against a two-time state champion." Serena gave Alaita a smug look.

"God, I hope I'm on your team today then. I'd rather be working with a two-time state champ than against." Alaita smiled at Serena and tried to ignore the dull pulsing ache at her temples.

Serena's look turned serious, "Girl, of course you're going to be on my team. I made sure to make an example of Lucas when he tried to steal you away from me."

"Yeah, his nose is still slightly crooked from your literal killer spike." Alaita shook her head laughing.

"Race you to the field!" Serena took off flying down the hill, going so fast it seemed like even her ponytail had a difficult time keeping up with her.

Alaita took her time getting down the hill. It was fruitless for her to even attempt to catch up with Serena at this point. She stood next to the ball bag that her best friend was digging through for a pumped up ball. Alaita looked back up the hill and watched the rest of her classmates filing out of the locker room and starting towards the field.

“How good are your reflexes today?”

Alaita turned back towards Serena just as a soccer ball flew at her face. She caught it just in time and, looking over the ball, glared playfully at Serena.

“When will you stop doing this to me?” Alaita smiled and threw the ball back at her. Serena trapped the ball with her chest and then bounced it on her foot several times as if it was attached to her body by a string.

A group of boys walked past the two girls. One gave Serena a dirty look and mumbled, “show-off.” Serena spun towards them with a look that said she was about to shoot the ball at his head. Alaita put her hand on her best friend’s shoulder and shook her head.

“Hey Tommy!” Alaita called out.

“Hey, sorry Alaita. The soccer unit with Serena? That’s the worst. She’s just going to be showing off the whole time.” Tommy answered.

“Yeah, kind of like you going all out during the basketball unit by dunking on us constantly.” Alaita gave Tommy a good-natured smile.

He ran one hand through his hair as the other vibrated Alaita’s shoulder with laughter. “Alright, alright. As long as she doesn’t grow several inches and gain the ability to dunk a basketball, I’m happy.”

He started to walk away. “Hey, Alaita! Don’t hold back on me today! I know you picked up a few things from Serena!”

Alaita returned to Serena’s side. “I don’t get it. How can you get everyone to like you, even jackasses like Tommy? You always find a way to bring out the good in people.”

Serena smirked.

Alaita bent over to grab her bottle on the sidelines, but when she straightened back up, she was overcome with a wave of dizziness. The field spun. She stuck her arms out to regain her balance. But the dizziness passed as quick as it came. Was she dehydrated? The dull pulsing ache at her temples quickened slightly. She took a couple long swigs of water before she tossed the bottle back on the ground and jogged over to her team for the class period.

“Ethan, you take goal.” Serena barked out positions to her other teammates and then paused when she saw Alaita. “You okay?”

Alaita waved off her concern.

“Okay, Alaita, you’ll start with me up top, if you’re okay with that.”

“Perfect! Let’s do this, guys!” Alaita put her hand in the middle of the group for a cheer.

“GOOOOOOO TEAM!” The group shouted together and broke apart to take their spots on the field.

She took her place next to Serena in the center circle for the kickoff. Alaita passed the ball to her best friend to start off the game. Serena took the ball and dribbled it down most of the length of the field and passed a perfectly placed ball behind the other team’s

defense for Alaita to get. Alaita sprinted to catch up to the ball and continued to take it down the line. She crossed the ball back into the opposing team's box for three of her teammates to try and deflect it off themselves into the goal. Allie was able to get her foot on it and sent it into the net, putting Alaita and Serena's team up 1-0. Everyone high-fived each other as they jogged back to the center circle and waited for the other team to restart the ball.

Alaita reached her half, but her breath was heavy. She felt a wheeze with each inhale. It was like there just wasn't enough air. She doubled over. Was she really this out of shape all of a sudden? Serena came over and patted her back.

"Nice cross back there. You still good? I can have someone come in to sub for you." Serena stood up and waved over a substitute for Alaita.

"No... no, I'm good." Alaita managed to get out between breaths. She stood up and willed her racing heart to slow and the increasing pressure behind her skull to fade.

"Alright, I'll take your word for it. Just let me know when you need a break." Serena jogged back over to her position and signaled the other team to play the ball.

After every run Alaita made, her breathing became more labored, her heart felt like it was about to beat out of her chest, and the throbbing pain behind her skull worsened. She pushed through her ever-increasing fatigue and even managed to score one goal. She was finally able to stop and try to catch her breath when the teacher called for a drink break with a score of 2-1 since the other team was able to score once.

Breathe, come on. In through your nose ... 1, 2- damn, couldn't get to three, she had to breathe out. A couple runs shouldn't have killed her. No one was watching right? Was Tommy concerned? No, he was just talking to his friends. Okay, one more try... 1,

2— why did her chest tighten up so much that she could only get limited air? She saw Serena approach her.

“Dang, take it down a couple notches, girl.” Serena slowed down to a walk to accompany Alaita back to the bench.

Alaita plopped down onto the ground, grabbed her water and waited for her breathing to slow enough for her to be able to take a sip of her drink. It was a lifetime before her chest released enough so she could take a few sips of water without the feeling of suffocation. The five-minute break ended before she could drink more than a couple sips. Why did she still feel like she sprinted around the field a dozen times?

“Alaita, take a break, we can get a sub in for you until you recover more.” Serena gave Alaita another worried look.

Alaita reluctantly gave in and allowed Serena to put a sub in to resume the game. A wave of fatigue washed over Alaita. Her headache continued to increase in intensity as she reclined back on her elbows and tried to relax. No matter how hard she focused, her breathing refused to slow while she continued to sit on the sideline. What was happening to her? She’d never felt like this before, her lungs starved for air. Allie signaled to the sideline for Alaita to sub in for her about five minutes into the game. Alaita felt her hands on the grass. She was pushing herself up, but that drilling pain in her head was pushing her down. As soon as she got upright, her heart was pounding out of her chest again. She shifted her weight forward. She could do this. She was on her feet. The field spun underneath her. She regained her bearings and noticed Serena staring at her. Alaita forced a smile onto her face as she looked back again towards Allie.

Alaita went to take a step. Her legs were as heavy as cement blocks. That's it, one foot in front of the other. She inched again towards Allie. Her heart fluttered again. Someone was stabbing her brain. She saw Allie's brow knit upwards in a mixture of confusion and concern. The feeling in her chest disappeared as the quick stabbing pain in her brain turned into harsher jolts that made her wince. This was definitely no ordinary headache. Alaita stopped and put her hands to her head. She had to hold it together, to stop it from splitting. Everyone's eyes appeared to focus on her. What was wrong with her? What was taking her so long to get onto the field?

Alaita took one more step and suddenly she was weightless. Her vision darkened and her body swayed. Someone was screaming, and she was falling... falling. Then... nothing.

CHAPTER 2

Alaita woke up to Serena's face. There were two faces, or... the two merged into one. What had happened? Had she been hit by a truck? Were her bones broken? Was she paralyzed? She moved an arm, and then a leg. They all seemed to be there, but... they were so heavy.

Her eyes shifted beyond Serena. Blue sky. But... where was she? The ground under her hands was uneven, but soft. She looked down. Flexible pebbles? Oh, she was on the turf field. At school.

"The ambulance is on their way!" Someone yelled. "Make sure to turn her on her side, Serena!"

"Ms. G, Alaita is awake!"

Alaita flinched.

"Oh crap, sorry girl." Serena's face again. "Didn't mean to scream in your face. I'm just going to put you on your side until the ambulance gets here." Alaita felt Serena's arm tuck under her torso. She rolled onto her right side. "I'm not leaving your side, okay girl? We are going to get through this together."

The pain in her head. It was coming back.

Alaita sensed another person kneel beside her. A young guy. He had on a uniform, but... the pain inside her skull.

"What's your name, miss?"

Alaita opened her mouth to answer but Serena beat her to it.

“Her name is Alaita. A-LATE-A, spelled A-L-A-I-T-A. Do you need her last name?”

“I was kind of asking Alaita herself. These are questions I need her to answer more than you.” He sighed as he spoke.

“Sorry about Serena. She’s my best friend. She means to help.” Alaita spoke slowly as she formulated her words.

Serena dove over Alaita, knocking the kneeling EMT off balance. She squeezed Alaita into a hug on the ground. “You can speak! And you remember me! You’re going to be okay!”

Alaita heard the EMT sigh. “Okay, let’s try again. What’s your name, miss?”

“Alaita Dain”

“Alaita, do you have any history of seizures, have passed out before, or had seizures in the past?”

“No.”

“So, this is the first time you had a seizure?”

“Seizure? I thought I just passed out.”

“The call that we received said that you were seizing on the ground for a couple seconds, no longer than a minute. I’m glad they got you on your side. How are you feeling currently?”

“Tired, I want to take a nap.”

“That’s a common reaction to coming out of a seizure. Anything else?”

“It feels like my head is pounding. I’ve had a headache all morning.”

“Have you been drinking water?”

“She was drinking water before, during, and right up to the point that she collapsed.” Serena blurted out. “She seemed more out of shape than she usually does.”

“Thanks Serena.” Alaita let out a low laugh.

“Serena, did she hit her head?”

“Well, she collapsed to her knees and then her shoulder hit before her head. I rushed over as soon as I started to see her lose her balance.”

“If that’s the case, you shouldn’t have hit your head hard enough to cause any major damage or hurt your neck. Okay, Serena, help me sit Alaita up, gently.”

Alaita winced at the pain shooting through her head as she was helped to a sitting position.

“Alaita, we are going to take you to the hospital where a doctor will be able to check you out. In the ambulance, I am going to give you an IV just in case you start seizing again. Due to your headache and the new seizure, you will probably receive a CT scan once you arrive at the hospital and the doctor is able to see you.”

Alaita felt arms under her armpits. They were lifting her up to her feet. She was walking... or being carried, slowly, toward the ambulance.

“Hope you feel better, Alaita!” Tommy’s voice yelled from behind her. Alaita raised her arm off Serena’s shoulder to wave back at him and heard a chorus of encouraging words come from the rest of her class.

In the ambulance, the EMT was fiddling with a needle and a bag. Serena stepped up into the cab behind him.

“Hey, woah. You can’t come in here. Only family.”

“So, I’m Alaita’s sister then.” Serena juttled out her hip.

The EMT held the bridge of his nose and sighed. “Alaita, are you okay if Serena accompanies you to the hospital?”

“Yes, she can come.” Serena bounded to Alaita’s side and grabbed her hand.

“No, no. You still can’t be back here! Go sit up in front. You can still turn around and see Alaita and talk to her on the drive. But I can’t have you back here with all the equipment.”

Alaita heard the driver’s startled response up front and then Serena’s cheery voice. “Alaita! I’m right here! I’ll talk to you the entire ride! We’re going to get through this!”

“You don’t have to scream, she’s able to hear you if you speak normally.” The driver’s voice.

Alaita laughed.

“That’s some friend you got there.” The EMT looked at Alaita as he cleaned her arm to insert the IV.

“Yea she’s a fireball, and she always has my back.” Alaita scrunched her face as the prick of pain from the IV needle hit her. She could hear Serena talking to the driver up front, something about winning two state championships. But – she laid back down on the gurney – she was so tired.

“It’s not a long ride to the hospital but feel free to just relax in the meantime.” The EMT’s eyes felt soft, caring.

“Serena! How did you get here?” Alaita heard her mother’s voice.

They were in the emergency room now. Serena had insisted upon rolling Alaita there, making the nurse walk along beside them.

“By my amazing powers of persuasion and awesomeness, Mrs. Dain!” Alaita opened her eyes to see Serena hug her mom.

Both of her parents approached her bed with smiles on their face, but she could see their eyes scan her entire body. “How are you doing, darling?”

“I’m just tired guys. I’m sorry for worrying you. I’m sure there’s nothing wrong, maybe it just has something to do with my headache this morning.” Alaita tried to smile at them, to reassure them that everything was okay, but was it? She could see the lines of worry etched into her parents’ faces as well.

The door opened again and a middle-aged man in scrubs with sandy hair and bright blue eyes stepped into the room.

“Hello, I’m Dr. Weller. I’m one of the residency doctors here. And you must be Alaita, correct?” He smiled politely.

“Yes.” Alaita answered and saw the smiles vanish from her parents’ faces.

“Well Alaita, because you were diagnosed with new onset of seizures, we are going to take a CT scan to make sure there’s no damage that occurred to your brain. When was the last time that you ate or drank anything?” Dr. Weller asked.

“I had breakfast at 7 and I was drinking some water in the morning and during gym class at 8. But I wasn’t really drinking that much water, just a couple sips.”

The doctor grabbed a syringe and a small vial. “I’m going to give you another 30 minutes, just to make sure the CT scan will come out as clear as possible. I’m going to

give you some contrast solution through your IV which will highlight if there's anything wrong happening in your brain." He started to prepare the contrast solution as he talked. "Once you finish with your CT scan, we will have you come back here while we look over the results, and we'll go from there." He turned back around and gave Alaita a pat on her shoulder. "Everything is going to be fine. You may have just been dehydrated or sleep deprived."

His voice was calm. He was a doctor, he knew what was going to be the most likely cause of her seizure. But she drank more than enough water this morning. And it wasn't overly hot outside either. What if something seriously was happening? What if...?

She saw her mom's worried face and forced herself to smile. "Yeah, okay. Sounds good."

~ ~ ~

Back in the room after the CT scan, Dr. Weller was pinning up images.

"We are going to have to take an MRI."

What was that circular blur on all of them? That definitely didn't belong.

"Are you sure those are mine?" Alaita's voice quivered.

Dr. Weller turned towards her. His eyes looked sad. "I know this is hard. We don't completely know what this means and that is why I have ordered you an MRI. All we know is that it appears that you have a small mass located on the right side of your frontal lobe."

Alaita looked around the room. Serena covered her mouth with her hand. Alaita's mom looked like she was on the verge of crying and her father was trying his best to not change his expression.

“Where would you say you were feeling your headache, Alaita?” Dr. Weller asked.

“My temples and right behind my forehead.” Alaita’s eyes locked back onto the fuzzy white spot that stood out on her CT scan.

“So, this would explain the headache. And could explain the seizure if her brain ended up creating pressure on her brain stem due to inflammation. We are going to give you some anti-inflammatory medication and I suggest that you just rest until we get the MRI ready.” Dr. Weller looked like he wanted to say something else, but then he stopped.

“You won’t know anything other than that there’s a mass in my brain until the MRI?” Alaita felt disconnected from her body and the room. The question almost seemed like it came from another person.

“Correct, but it could also end up being something else. We won’t know specifics until we are able to get more detailed imaging. I’m going to get you into the MRI as soon as possible but I’m also going to give you a little more of the contrast imaging solution as well.” He started to prep more of the solution. “We will come up with the best course of action for you once we have a better idea of what we are dealing with.”

Silence choked the room after the doctor left. Alaita couldn’t tear her eyes away from the CT scans. That couldn’t be her brain, could it? She felt Serena lean over and hug her tightly. Her mom kissed her head and rubbed her back. She felt everyone else’s eyes avoid the wall where the CT scans were hung. She was the only one fixated on them.

CHAPTER 3

Alaita was distracted the entire drive home from the hospital. Everyone had been so positive there, hugging her, telling her they loved her, they were proud of her, but what was it that they were proud of exactly? She was letting them down.

“You’re so strong in how you’re handling everything,” they said.

How was this being strong? She was weak. Her body was weak. Her body allowed itself to damage one of the most important organs in her body. This was not strength.

Alaita felt the car stop and looked out the window to see the little slate rock path that led to her front door. She turned back to the front of the car when she felt her parents’ eyes on her. Their mouths formed smiles but their eyes didn’t follow suit.

“You girls up for doing anything tonight?” Alaita’s father was the first to speak.

“If you’re too tired then that’s fine too! You’ve had a very busy day.” Alaita’s mother narrowed her eyes slightly at her father.

It was only 7pm. Yeah, she was definitely tired, but she also wasn’t ready to lay in her bed for hours staring at the ceiling, thinking about that little circular blur spot. Her worst fears were confirmed when the blur was enhanced by the MRI. The blur spot. It had been even worse on the MRI images. Alaita’s thoughts drifted back to the moment when the doctor had finished reviewing the MRI images with them.

“I’m sorry that I don’t have better news,” Dr. Weller had said.

“The MRI scan did confirm that Alaita has mass on the right side of the frontal lobe of her brain. The good news is that the mass is relatively small and seems to have been caught in its early stages so it should be easy to remove.” Alaita could feel the doctor looking at her.

“We are going to have to schedule a craniotomy to remove the mass. The craniotomy is also going to serve as a brain biopsy so we can determine if the mass was cancerous or not. Until the mass is able to be tested in the lab, I can’t confidently give you a diagnosis on what the mass is or your condition.”

The doctor’s words were a droning buzz. A goddamn brain tumor. How was there a brain tumor? She was healthy! Her vision started to blur as tears welled up in her eyes.

“It’s going to be a couple week recovery so I would notify anyone necessary to make plans for your absence during that time. But other than that, there’s nothing more that can be done right now so you are free to go home.” Alaita felt Dr. Weller finally look away from her.

A tear silently escaped from her eye and ran down her cheek. Thank god it was only a couple weeks to winter break.

“What do you think, Hon?” Her dad’s voice called her back to the present.

“You down to get into pajamas and play some board games?” Alaita tossed the question onto Serena.

“Of course, girl! Anything you want to do!” Serena nodded with enthusiasm and hopped out of the car. She held the door open for Alaita.

Alaita put one foot on the ground and then the other before using her hands to push herself off the seat. Her body seemed to weigh twice as heavy as it usually did. She hugged Serena tight.

“Thank you for being here for me.” She mumbled into Serena’s collarbone.

She felt Serena squeeze her tighter. “You’re going to get through this, girl. You’re strong. And I’ll be here every step of the way.”

Alaita nodded into her friend’s shoulder as she felt the tears start to well up in her eyes. Although she knew she could cry in front of her best friend, her parents were already trying so hard to remain strong. She couldn’t cry in front of them. If they saw, they would probably break down as well. She couldn’t bear to see the sight of her parents sobbing because of her.

Alaita squeezed her eyes tightly shut, willing the tears back. She took a deep, shaky breath into Serena’s body as she felt her parents standing outside the car, watching the two girls. Serena gave Alaita another little squeeze before letting her go. Alaita rubbed her eyes to brush away the tears but tried to make it look like she was rubbing her eyes because she was tired. She tried to keep her gaze down as she walked towards the house so she wouldn’t have to see her parents’ concerned looks.

Once Alaita got into the safety of her own room with Serena, she sat on her bed and let her tears flow. Serena sat right next to her and rubbed her back just like she did when they were in the hospital.

“What’s that hazy border surrounding the spot?” Serena pointed towards the MRI images while keeping a hand on Alaita’s back. “What does that mean? Or is it just blurriness from the machine?”

Alaita hoped it was just some blurriness. After all, the MRI machine was extremely loud compared to the noises from the CT scan. It also felt like the MRI process took ten times as long as the CT scan process. The loud metal banging noises from the machine had made her jump at first. Hopefully the jumpiness was what blurred the image slightly. By the end of the process, her head felt like it was pounding so hard that her brain was going to pop out of her skull.

The doctor’s frown deepened with Serena’s question.

“It could be blurriness on the part of the machine. But that’s unlikely since the resolution of the rest of the scan seems clear. Most likely that hazy border is because the mass isn’t completely separate from the rest of the brain tissue.” He studied the image again.

“That means it’s likely that when we perform the craniotomy, we might have to remove some of the healthy brain tissue surrounding the mass. We want to make sure that the mass isn’t allowed to regrow.”

Alaita couldn’t keep from sobbing now that she was alone with Serena. She tried her best to keep her tears silent and muffled her hiccups and sniffles. After a while it seemed like Alaita had no more tears left to cry and just sat silently staring down at the floor as her tears stained her cheeks and pants. Serena got up and came back with tissues, a cold compress, and face wipes. She tilted Alaita’s chin up and looked right in her eyes.

“You’re going to get through this. You are strong. You’re my best friend, and you can overcome everything.” She handed Alaita a tissue and grabbed Alaita’s woven wastebasket. “Blow your nose, let’s get you cleaned up and reduce some of that puffiness in your eyes.” Serena grabbed a face wipe and gently wiped at Alaita’s cheeks and cleaned her entire face. She then grabbed the cold compress and made Alaita lay down so she could lay it over her eyes. “Hey, I’m looking forward to seeing you kick all our asses in trivia and Sorry. And we need to make sure you’re in prime ass-kicking condition!”

“Thanks, Serena. You’re the best.”

“Girl, if it was the other way around. I know you would’ve already come up with a foolproof cure for me and may have even done the operation yourself! The least I can do is comfort you.” Serena gave Alaita a quick hug.

She pulled Alaita with her out of her room and downstairs to the dining room table. Alaita’s parents were sitting at the table with a stack of board games and a bowl of chips and pretzels.

“Oh my god, yes! Snacks!” Serena dropped Alaita’s hand and dove for the bowl. “Trivia first, I want to see if Alaita’s smarts have rubbed off on me yet!” Serena shoved a handful of pretzels into her mouth and leaned across the table to grab the box.

“Alaita are you up for that?” Her mother asked.

“Mom, I’m fine. Of course I’m down to play trivia.”

“My Alaita not wanting to play trivia? That would only happen in an alternate universe!” Alaita’s father said in response to her mother’s comment.

Serena nodded in agreement as she grabbed a handful of chips. Alaita’s mother threw her hands up in mock resignation and set up the trivia game.

It was about 11pm when Alaita's father shoved his chair away from the table and stood up after losing yet another game of UNO.

"Alright, it's time to go to bed. I think I've had my ego hurt enough by a bunch of girls for one night." He tried to cross his arms and act serious, but it only made everyone at the table start laughing at him.

"Fine, but that means you get to put away the games while we clean up the snacks. Ultimate loser of trivia, Sorry, Clue, and UNO, ya know." Serena counted each of the games on her fingers as she said them.

"You are too sassy for your own good sometimes. You don't have to rub it in." Alaita's father laughed and started to scoop up the cards and carried the games back to the storage closet.

That left Serena, Alaita, and her mother to clean up the table. Alaita's mom kept trying to pick up most of the items on the table leaving Alaita to only bring in one empty chip bowl.

"Mom, I can carry more. I'm not super fragile all of a sudden." Alaita tried to get her mother's attention.

"No, no. I'm good, Alaita. Thank you, Serena, for helping." Her mother wouldn't look Alaita in the eye as she rinsed the dishes and put them in the dishwasher. "You two girls can head up to bed. I've got this covered."

Serena tossed the last can into the recycling bin and thanked Alaita's mom as she took Alaita upstairs with her.

"My mom is acting weird, right?" Alaita asked as the two girls were setting up the bed with extra pillows.

“She cares about you. Not weird,” Serena said matter-of-factly.

“I don’t want her to be worried,” Alaita said almost to herself.

“Alaita. They’re going to worry. I’m worried. Just understand they’re concerned. If you want, just keep reassuring them you’re okay.” Serena looked her best friend in the eye. “Until you no longer have a tumor in your head, expect people to be worried.”

Alaita couldn’t help but flinch slightly at the straightforward way Serena talked about her diagnosis. The two girls shut off the light and got into bed. Serena started snoring soon after her head hit the pillow, leaving Alaita laying on her back, alone with her thoughts.

Serena had a point, but Alaita just wanted to forget about the whole thing until she had to have a hole drilled into her skull. Couldn’t everyone just continue pretending like life was normal until then? Until the risk and threat of her tumor became real? Nothing had to be done in the meantime, no special medications, no change of diet. Maybe just refraining from overexerting herself with physical activity, but that was the same suggestion that was made when someone had a cold or sprained their ankle. Just take it easy for a couple days, then everything will be fine. But everything wouldn’t be ok in a couple days, would it? It might become much, much worse.

~ ~ ~

Even two days later, Alaita found her mind drifting back again and again to the little white spot that she saw on her scans. After reading the same paragraph over for the fifth time, she put her book down and strolled over to her desk. She opened her laptop and found an empty notebook in her room. She labeled the cover with her name and then wrote down “The White Spot Within Me” as a title.

With her pencil in hand, Alaita opened a new webpage and Googled “brain tumors.” She had a million hits pop up from Mayo Clinic to personal blogs from cancer survivors. It all seemed so overwhelming, so she just started with the first website listed in the results.

There were so many types of brain tumors. So many classifications for brain tumors to be listed under. But no way for her to know what her brain tumor was until her craniotomy was performed and the doctors were able to analyze her tumor in a lab. Could her tumor be primary? Metastatic? Benign? Malignant? Low-grade? Slow growing? Fast growing?

“Alaita? Sweetie? Dinner!” Her mother’s voice stopped her hand which had been taking notes on all the different definitions and classifications she was learning. She looked at the time on her laptop and realized she had been reading about brain tumors for over three hours.

Journal Entry 1 (Brain Tumors)

- There are 2 main types of brain tumors: primary and metastatic: {The doctors should be able to identify all the characteristics of my tumor after they perform the craniotomy - and subsequent brain biopsy - to analyze the composition of the tumor}
 - o Primary tumors: tumors that originate from the tissues of the brain or immediately surrounding it. They can further be classified as a glial tumor (composed of glial cells {what's a glial cell?}) or a non-glial tumor (it's developed on or inside of brain structures - nerves, blood vessels, or glands). Additionally, these types of brain tumors can be either benign {stationary tumors, I learned that from biology class, they won't migrate throughout the body, and tend to be easier to treat} or malignant {the tumor cells could migrate through the body and start forming tumors in other places, way harder to treat and not all the tumors' locations can be found throughout the body, until it's too late...}
 - o Metastatic: {sounds like it should be better in the sense it's easier to treat, static... not the case} these tumors arose elsewhere in the body (such as the breast or lungs) and ended up migrating to the brain (usually by the bloodstream). These tumors are considered malignant cancer.
- Glial cells: non-neuronal cells {aka not a nerve cell} in the central nervous system (brain & spinal cord) and peripheral nervous system. They don't produce electrical signals {doesn't send signals like nerves do such as when you feel pain} instead they maintain homeostasis {equilibrium in the body!}, form something called myelin {helps with signaling pathway speed} and provide support & protection for neurons/nerves.

CHAPTER 4

Alaita walked into school that next morning and felt everyone's eyes on her, almost like she came back from the dead. Word must have gotten around about how she had a seizure during gym class and got rushed to the hospital. Then Tommy came up to her.

"How are you doing?" He looked around her face as if trying to find something wrong.

"I'm feeling much better. Sorry for scaring everyone in gym class." Alaita tried to wave off his concern.

"Wait, have they removed it yet?" Tommy looked confused.

"Removed what?" Alaita felt her throat start to tighten.

"The tumor?"

His words hit her like a truck. How did he know? Had Serena gone ahead and told everyone? Well, there goes normal.

"I'm sorry, I have to go find Serena. We have some homework stuff to go over."

Alaita went to move around Tommy.

Tommy placed his hand on her shoulder as she started to pass him. "Well good luck. Hope it goes well."

"Yeah, thanks." Alaita forced a smile as she dashed off down the hallway towards Serena's locker.

She found Serena talking to a group of her teammates in front of her locker. They went completely silent as soon as the group of girls saw Alaita walking towards them.

Serena turned around.

“Alaita! Ready to walk to history together?” She hugged Alaita.

“Serena, can I talk to you a minute?”

“Yeah girl!” The group of teammates continued to stand around.

“Alone...” Alaita hinted.

The group dispersed as quickly as they had become silent.

“What’s up?” Serena turned to her locker and started grabbing notebooks.

“Who did you talk to about my... condition?” Alaita said quietly.

“Well, I told my parents, as you know. Then I texted one of my teammates who I originally made plans with on Saturday and I told her since I cancelled on her. I guess word spread to the rest of my team.” She shrugged.

“No, Serena. It spread to the rest of the school. Everyone knows I have a brain tumor.” Alaita spun Serena around to look at her.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize. Is that even an issue?”

“I wanted everything to be normal until I started treatments.”

“Well, weren’t you talking to the teachers today about missing school for your treatments?”

“Yes! But it’s my place to tell people about MY condition!” Alaita’s raised voice cracked slightly.

“You’re right. I’m sorry, girl. But everyone is sympathetic. They’re hoping for the best.” Serena put her textbooks back down to hug Alaita.

“I just didn’t want everything to change just yet.” Alaita admitted.

“Hey, just pretend everything is normal. People will start following suit.” Serena let go and put her textbooks into her bag. “Speaking of normal, might want to make sure to get to class on time.” Serena smiled as she slung her bag over her shoulder.

Alaita just couldn’t concentrate through history class. Was she hearing her name being whispered around? People were definitely staring. She glanced up from her notes once and caught Caroline staring directly at her. Caroline ducked her head back down quickly and pretended to take notes.

For the most part, she was able to copy everything Mr. Hershman wrote on the board for class and tried her best to ignore everyone else. To pretend like everything was “normal”.

She waited for everyone else to leave the classroom after the bell rang before walking up to the front of the room to talk to Mr. Hershman.

“Hello Alaita! To what may I owe the pleasure?” He chuckled.

“I wanted to talk to you about making up work.”

“Making up work? You haven’t missed a single assignment.”

“I, uh... I’m going to be missing a couple classes in a week. Including the midterm for this class.” Alaita cleared her throat as she felt it start to tighten.

“Going on an early vacation, Alaita? We can always do something remotely for an exam.” Mr. Hershman seemed confused.

“No, I don’t think I’ll be able to do any work for a bit after the end of this week.”

Alaita looked away and focused her eyes on the wall, trying to level her breathing.

“Alaita, is everything alright?” Mr. Hershman’s bushy eyebrows knitted together.

“I am...” Alaita heard her voice squeak slightly so she cleared it again. “I am getting a craniotomy so I’m not going to be able to come to school and might not be able to study for a couple weeks following recovery.” Her words came out fast.

“Uh, a cranio what?”

“I’m sorry, I just am having a hard time talking about this. It’s all new. I kinda got diagnosed with a brain tumor. They are removing it in a week.” Mr. Hershman’s eyes grew wide. “I’m doing fine! Shouldn’t die or anything, haha.” Alaita internally smacked herself. “I’m sorry, just, can I take the midterm early or have an extra assignment due by the end of this week to make up for it? If my recovery takes me past winter break, I can try to do my assignments at home.” Alaita looked back at the wall again as she fought back her swelling emotions.

“Alaita, I am so sorry. No, no need for extra assignments or taking the midterm early. Just... Just keep up with what you can, and we will figure the rest out when you come back to school after your recovery.” Mr. Hershman gave Alaita the same sad look she saw on the doctor’s face. “Please, let me know if there’s anything I can do to make things easier on you, Alaita. You’ve been a phenomenal student. I know you would’ve aced the midterm if you took it anyways. No need to waste the paper!”

“Thank you, Mr. Hershman. I should be getting to my next class now. Have a good rest of your day.” Alaita waved goodbye as she left.

“You, too, Alaita!” Mr. Hershman waved back.

The rest of the morning followed in a similar suit. Alaita waited for everyone else to leave the classroom and talked with the teacher. Every teacher went from confused to

concerned and then to dismissive for any work Alaita had to make up as they heard about her condition. Alaita hated to see the look of pity and sympathy on their faces after she explained her diagnosis each time. She also felt bad that every teacher let her off the hook for making up work. She didn't deserve special treatment just because of her misfortune.

At lunch Alaita sat in her usual spot with Serena and some of Serena's teammates. She was hoping that Serena mentioned something to them about acting normal. But it didn't seem to appear that way.

"Serena told me that it looks like a little white dot. Is that true? How big it is? This big? Or more like this big?" Miranda held her fingers apart like she was holding a tiny pebble and then expanded them like she was holding a tube of lipstick.

"Of course it wouldn't be that big, that would be like a quarter the size of her brain." Stephanie rolled her eyes and then stopped. "Or wait, can it?"

"Guys, I appreciate the interest and concern, but I'm not really in the mood to talk about this right now." Alaita pushed the mashed potatoes on her tray around with a fork.

"Hey, did you guys see Matt fall up the stairs earlier? It was hilarious, he somehow almost reached the landing, he flung himself so hard!" Serena tried to change the subject for Alaita.

The girls started talking about how they overheard some seniors talking about creating a slip-and-slide in the hallways for their senior prank.

"Thanks," Alaita mouthed.

Serena winked back.

In Alaita's last class, there was a sub who gave them a study hall. Alaita pulled out the book she had been reading over the weekend and picked up where she left off. About a page into reading, she overheard two boys in the back of the room talking in low voices.

"It started with a seizure."

"You can get a brain tumor from a seizure?"

"No, you idiot. They found the tumor when they were trying to figure out why she had a seizure."

"So why did she have the seizure?"

"Probably, because of the tumor."

"They're just going to remove it right and she'll be fine?"

"That's what they're going to tell her. But most brain tumors are death sentences."

"What!"

"Bro, keep it down."

"Wait, so she might not make it?"

"I think everyone should start saying their goodbyes now..."

Alaita stood up and walked to the front of the classroom. "Mrs. Swann, can I go to the bathroom?" She felt her voice crack.

"Yes, here's the hall pass."

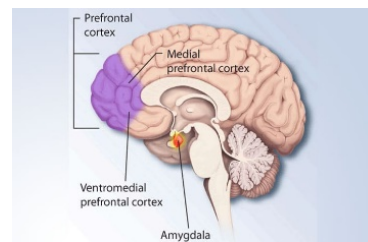
Journal Entry 2 (Craniotomies)

- A craniotomy is a surgical procedure that gives neurosurgeons access to a patient's brain to remove a tumor or sample of a tumor {my tumor will be completely removed}. Craniotomies can be broken down into different types: stereotactic (uses CT or MRI scans during the surgery to guide the surgeon), endoscopic/needle (a small hole is drilled into the skull and a needle or endoscopic camera is placed into the incision to reach the brain), or open (a section of the skull is removed to gain access to a portion of the brain) {I will have a type of open craniotomy}.
- More specific kinds of craniotomies are: extended bifrontal craniotomy {this is what I will have}, orbitozygomatic craniotomy, minimally invasive supra-orbital "eyebrow" craniotomy, retro-sigmoid "keyhole" craniotomy, and translabyrinthine craniotomy.
 - o Extended bifrontal craniotomy: allows access to the frontal lobe (especially the space behind and between the eyes). There is an incision in the scalp behind the hairline {I will have to have a portion of my hair shaved off} and the bone flap (portion of the skull) that is removed is what forms the contour of the orbits (eye sockets) and forehead. {I will have a hospital stay of 3-7 days and I won't be able to wear any tight head coverings for 3-4 weeks ~includes the wigs I will pick out with Serena}
- Possible complications that arise from craniotomies: infection, bleeding, blood clots, pneumonia {from being immobile during the recovery period in the hospital, I will be taught breathing exercises to keep me from developing a lung infection and keep my lung capacity from decreasing}, unstable blood pressure, seizures {already had one of these, the doctor said removing the tumor should stop it from happening again}, muscle weakness, brain swelling {they won't replace the bone flap (skull) right away if this happens}, leakage of cerebrospinal fluid (fluid surrounding and cushioning the brain {sounds kinda gross, I hope this doesn't happen, or any of these complications, but especially this one}), and then general anesthesia risks.
 - o Rare complications: memory problems, speech difficulty, paralysis, abnormal balance or coordination, coma.

Editor's note: This third journal entry is included here to give you another sample of how these read. It will be placed later in the text between future chapters.

Journal Entry 3 (Frontal Lobe)

- *The brain is broken into two hemispheres (the left and right side). In general, the left side of the brain will control the right side of the body and vice versa.*
- *The frontal lobe is responsible for controlling a lot of different things in the body: motor function (especially of the face for facial expressions & speech), problem solving, spontaneity, memory, language, initiation, judgement, impulse condition, social and sexual behavior. {The doctors said that the removal of the tumor is likely to improve any of these functions which it could've suppressed rather than create more problems} {The functions that are most important to me are problem solving and memory, I don't want to lose my intelligence}*
- *The frontal lobe is actually a pair of lobes (left and right frontal cortex) and each cortex or lobe has functions that the other does not {this is where the left and right brained concept arose from}*
 - o *Left frontal cortex/lobe: controlling language related movement. Damage likely results in pseudodepression {what is this?}*
 - o *Right frontal cortex/lobe: non-verbal abilities. Damage likely results in pseudopsychopathic {also what is this?} {my tumor is on the right frontal lobe}*
- *The frontal lobe is the one that is most commonly damaged when there is physical brain trauma because it is very large and positioned towards the front of the head {I'm not sure if there's a most common place tumors will grow, since there are so many types and variables that go into how each one develops}*
- *{My tumor is located on the right prefrontal cortex,} The prefrontal cortex is important for directing thoughts, integrating information from different places and switching between the two.*
- *Pseudodepression: depression developed due to another disease in the body. Characterized by apathy, lack of concentration, tendency to isolate.*
- *Pseudopsychopathic: Characterized by sham rage-like reactions, emotional/ social instability, aggressiveness, incoherence, abnormal social behavior, careless.*



WORKING OUTLINE

Character Development

The main character's name is Alaita (A-late-a) Dain. I created this name from the root word, alaitasuna which means joy in Basque. I wanted to use a name that was unique in order to reflect her unique situation. I think giving the main character this name is symbolic because joy is something that was easy to come by for the main character before she learned about her condition and started to undergo treatment. Her last name, Dain, means important which I wanted to use to symbolize that her story and development was important for others to learn from.

Alaita is a 16-year-old in her junior year of high school. Before the start of the book, she was always in a perfect physical condition and living a relatively healthy lifestyle. She is a super sweet and popular girl in school. She is headstrong but super supportive of those around her which makes her popular with her classmates. She is also the first one to step forward with an answer, question, or opinion during class or to stick up for one of her classmates if they are offended or hurt. She is a star student and extremely organized (perfect handwriting and color codes her planner). The person closest to her is her best friend, Serena. The two girls tend to hang out all the time with each other and Alaita supports Serena's passion for sports.

She finds out that she has a potentially life-threatening condition (a low-grade glioma tumor in her frontal lobe). At first, she's in disbelief but soon she recovers when she realizes that her parents are getting worried and stressed about her condition. When she sees them in this state, she works to reassure them. She faces her condition head on

and is very active in the discussions and explanations surrounding her treatment. She even ends up doing her own research outside of the explanations which are given to her during the doctors' roundings. She appears very optimistic about her outcome to treatments and surgery on the outside, although on the inside she worries that she might break down crying at any moment.

After her surgery takes place and she begins medical and radiation oncology treatment, the differences in her personality and behavior start to change. The best way to describe how her personality changes is that she loses her empathy. Alaita is now quick to aggression and becomes more self-absorbed. Her replies to others come off as insensitive and she doesn't appear to care about their problems. Her change in personality leads her classmates to start treating her like an outcast and avoiding her. She also becomes more disorganized and even forgets about some of her important assignments even though she still passes all of her quizzes and exams with flying colors.

Alaita's attitude and behavior results in Serena becoming distant to her because she doesn't like how Alaita isn't acting like her number one fan anymore. The two girls stop being able to connect with one another because they are both too stubborn and aggressive. Alaita ends up connecting more with a troubled youth in the grade above her who is treated as an outcast as well. Alaita is able to connect with him because he doesn't care about her being overly nice to him and he is able to show her that she shouldn't care what others think and that she should learn to love herself.

Alaita's change in personality and behavior also creates a rift between her parents because one of them is noticing the changes in their daughter and wants to protect her and get her help. The other parent refuses to acknowledge that anything could be different in

their daughter, after all the doctor's said she was cured. Seeing her parents constantly getting into disagreements over her makes her feel like she's the problem within the family and she doesn't know how to fix it. She tries to hide that anything is wrong with school or her relationships with others like Serena. Sometimes she will say that she's hanging out with Serena but go and wander around the woods. But sometimes she's unable to keep her cool and snaps at her parents when they start disagreeing with each other over small things because they are subconsciously at odds with each other.

Sometimes Alaita becomes angry at the surgery doctors and blames them for her mental changes even though logically she knows that they did the best that they could to help her. She also becomes frustrated and stressed by her parents when they start fighting due to her situation. She has to learn to forgive both the doctors and her parents throughout the book in order to be able to move on and be able to help herself and them.

The character's medical condition generates concern because it is uncertain if another brain tumor will form. Concern is also generated through how the treatment of her medical condition affects her mental state even though she is "cured". The character is always super considerate of others which will make readers feel love and warmth towards her. Also, after knowing how sweet she is, her medical condition will further emotionally invest readers. Concern and warmth will continue to grow for the readers as she deals with conflict between her parents and her best friend. Her comments to others become more insensitive because it's more difficult for her to think about others and to not be so self-absorbed. She can only realize that her empathy has deteriorated through comments from others. She is unable to tell on her own that her empathy disappeared so as time passes, she becomes more and more self-conscious. She also constantly worries

how she is being perceived by others, which starts distracting her from other aspects of her life such as schoolwork.

Here is some backstory of the character that may or may not be included in the story but helps to shape her personality and actions. In grade school, this character was extremely introverted and shy. She had trouble understanding social cues since she didn't interact often with others her age and would instead immerse herself in her books. Sometimes when her classmates would come up and talk to her, she would respond in a rude or short manner that would offend them or make the situation awkward so that they would just walk away. She was a very smart girl, so sometimes her classmates would come and ask her questions if they were lost or just to see how much she knew. One time when one of her classmates asked a question, she responded with her truthful opinion which ended up hurting the classmate's feelings. After going to the guidance counselor and saying that she was being bullied by Alaita, a rumor spread throughout the school that Alaita was mean and would bully those who talk to her. Also, that one classmate would never speak to Alaita again even though she tried numerous times to apologize. After regretting not understanding what would hurt others, Alaita became more observant to others. She got a second chance to reinvent herself when she moved a couple years later and became the super sweet, kind, and helpful girl that she is in the book. Alaita was so proud and happy with her transformation and rarely thinks back to that time in her life until similar situations start happening again as she loses her sense of empathy. After her treatments, she starts to fear that she is becoming that insensitive, bullying, mean person again and it terrifies her. And the last people in the world that she wants to hurt or be

mean to are her parents since they were always there for her and do everything they can for her.

Setting Development

The character is financially supported by her parents who have a decent income and are able to cover the cost of her medical expenses through insurance and such. Money is not the main issue or concern of the main character or throughout the story. The politics of this world are the same politics as living in America. The school system that the main character attends is a public school, but she also learns a lot in her hospital/lab setting. Her school takes place in a decently populated suburban area. Her grade is made up of about 100 students which is enough for a good amount of diversity but also small enough for everyone to be somewhat acquainted with everyone else in the grade. The story starts a couple weeks before her school's winter break starts, so she goes to school in a more southern located state where it is still warm enough for her to be able to have gym class outside before winter break. Her parents are pretty open-minded and trust that she is able to make good decisions for herself and for her future. She's able to discuss many aspects of her treatment with the doctors and scientists due to her maturity level.

The main character spends almost every night with her family making and eating dinner together while talking or just watching TV. Her family's dynamic is very casual, but they make sure that they put aside time to be together and talk about their day. One thing that is in Alaita's family's routines is how their chore list is completed. Every Sunday the family gets together and creates a list of the chores that they want accomplished in the upcoming week. Then they randomly assign the different chores

evenly amongst themselves. Every time that one of the members is able to fully complete their list of chores, they are able to choose one thing that the entire family will do over the weekend (such as going to an arcade for a couple hours or going and seeing a new movie in the theaters). On the opposite side, if someone doesn't finish all their chores, there's no punishment but that chore remains on their list to do for next week. One other quirky thing that her family does is something called Freaky Friday. Once in a while (every couple weeks or so) a family member might become so fed up with their work that they'll yell, FREAKY FRIDAY and for the next hour or so each family member switches roles with another. For example, one of Alaita's parents will take over and do Alaita's homework while Alaita will take over the work that one of her parents were doing. After some time has passed, they'll meet up and talk over what they accomplished and laugh about mistakes that the others made or complain about how annoying the other's work was.

The values in this world are very similar to the day-to-day social norms and it's the social norms that mostly affect the main character when her emotions disappear. Since a lot of the characters that interact with the main character are high schoolers, interpersonal relationships are extremely important to them. Also, they have more elevated emotions and reactions than adults and are more easily offended by certain comments. The most pivotal values that occur in this high school atmosphere of her life is feeling like she is accepted and that she belongs with everyone else. The last thing most high schoolers (especially popular ones) want is to be seen as an outcast by their peers or lose their friends. Since this dynamic happens to Alaita, she has to learn that not fitting in with everyone else isn't the end of the world. Alaita has to be able to push past social

norms to learn that although everyone else might not love her, she needs to be able to accept and love herself for who she is. Alaita learns to break the social norm of conformity by the end of the story and is comfortable being her own person. The values in the other part of her life, the lab/hospital setting, are determining and analyzing the importance of her mental and physical health. She feels like the center of attention while being treated so she doesn't realize when she loses her empathy and ability to connect with others until she is expected to return back to normal life.

Side Characters

Serena White

Alaita's best friend. Tends to be possessive over Alaita and stand-offish in public. However, in private to Alaita, Serena acts very silly. Serena is very sporty and adventurous and is constantly active. She does well in school thanks to Alaita keeping her on track and reminding her of assignments. However, her grades drop after Alaita's treatments because Alaita becomes unable to keep herself organized, nevermind keeping Serena organized as well. She comes and visits Alaita when she's in the hospital and brings her lots of pictures and silly videos of her fellow classmates while they're in high school. Serena helps Alaita to relax and have fun when she's in the hospital by going around to different parts of the hospital and pulling pranks or talking about boys that she thinks are cute. She helps to ground Alaita to reality and keep her from stressing too much about her health. She also helps Alaita readjust to school when she comes back and catches her up on the material she missed.

Serena is the person who first notices that Alaita is acting odd and doesn't seem to have the same reactions to certain situations that she used to. Serena's comments about Alaita's personality are very forceful and end up hurting Alaita's feelings and leading the two girls to fight with each other (something they used to never do). Serena quickly gets fed up with Alaita after her treatments because she feels that everything should go back to normal with the duo. Serena's breaking point with Alaita is when the negative image surrounding Alaita seems to pass on to Serena after a party that the two go to over the weekend. Serena stops asking to hang out with Alaita and ends up not talking to her at all by the end of the book. Alaita extends an apology to Serena and asks her to start over and try to be her friend again, even after all that happened, but the two girls will never regain the same type of relationship that they had.

Alaita's mother

Very sympathetic towards Alaita, constantly checking up on her and getting her favorite snacks for her whenever she's feeling down. She also likes to hang out with Alaita and her friends and take them to fun places like the mall. She tries to understand the science behind the procedures and talks to the doctors to learn how her conditions and treatments could possibly affect her (consequences, side effects, and what the procedure would be treating or solving). She also talks with the doctors on the best way to care for her daughter once she starts receiving chemo and radiation treatment. She notices that something is wrong with Alaita and wants to get her treatment (she hires the therapist).

Also, she thinks that Alaita should be pulled out of school until they figure out what is wrong. She attacks her father because she doesn't think he cares about the family anymore and accuses him of neglecting their daughter and not realizing that something is

wrong. She continues to push Alaita's father (her husband) away (to the couch at night and then to a hotel) and starts filing for a divorce.

Alaita's father

Very rational and fact oriented. He cares a lot about Alaita and will take the time to do fun things and help her when she needs it. He also can be very silly at times and uses a lot of humor to try and cheer up Alaita whenever she's down. He loves to share dad jokes, nerdy jokes, or funny pick-up lines that he found or made up. He supports Alaita's high ambitions and helps her with schoolwork when he is able to.

He refuses to admit that there is anything wrong with Alaita because the doctors said that she was "cured". The last thing he wants is for Alaita's life to become abnormal and thinks that she just is readjusting to life going back to normal. He tries to treat her as he always would so that she doesn't feel like her world has turned upside down. He acts relatively quiet and calm when Alaita's mother starts yelling and fighting with him and continues to listen to her even when she continually pushes him away. Alaita has his back when she finds out her parents are starting to file for divorce because she appreciated him trying to keep their relationship and her life at home as normal as possible.

Aidyn Corey

The troubled teen who is battling addiction. He is mainly addicted to cocaine but he also vapes to help cope with his cravings. He's seen as an outcast by his classmates but ends up being exactly what Alaita needed to help her out. He is a senior in high school and 18 years old when he starts talking to Alaita after her treatment. He has his own job to make money for himself to be able to move out of his parents' home, but he

still spends a good amount of it on drugs. He has a reputation in school of being a druggie, so most people stay away from him, but he is perfectly fine being left alone.

His parents are also addicts, to the point where his mother does basically nothing but get high and stay in bed all day almost every day. Both of his parents are abusive to him and each other. His father will come home from whatever odd jobs he's been able to pick up or from a late night of drinking or getting high with friends and will usually go beat and rape his mother. Aidyn's room is in the basement so he can hear everything that goes on upstairs and if he is unlucky enough to not be in his room when his father gets home then his father will beat him up (there are numerous holes in the walls from Aidyn being thrown into them). Aidyn fought his father back one time and was able to pin him down until his father seemed to give up. Then his father came back an hour later into his room with a baseball bat and hit him with it until Aidyn curled up into the fetal position. His mother is no better with the abuse although hers is more emotional. She blames Aidyn for the death of his brother (which is what spiraled both of his parents into this drug and abuse centered life) and will claw at him and choke him when in her drug-induced state. Aidyn always tries to sneak around the house and not draw attention to himself which makes it easy for him to do the same when he's at school.

He enjoys people watching and he goes to most of the parties that his classmates throw because it gets him out of his house, and he is able to people watch. Because he is constantly people watching, he knows a lot about everyone else in the school. He has a caring personality and will stick his neck out for those when he feels they deserve it. He also feels like the way to punish others when they do something wrong is to kick the crap

out of them. He beats up the guy who tries to force himself on Serena at the party which ends up separating Alaita and Serena.

After getting to know Alaita, he develops a crush on her which he keeps hidden and hopes that she will return. He ends up overdosing on a batch of cocaine that was laced with other drugs after really connecting with Alaita and calls her to help him. After waking up and seeing her by his side when she saved him from his overdose, she helps to convince him to take the steps to recovery which he knows he should've started a long time ago. At the same time, he is able to show Alaita that she never truly lost her empathy because she cares about others and is there for them when it really matters. He convinces her to go back to her therapist and take her advice to learn to love and accept herself, because deep down she hasn't really changed in who she is.

Amanda Lamont

One of the female doctors that tends to make her rounds with Alaita. She helps Alaita figure out her treatments. She teaches Alaita how to research about her illness and use scientific journals to learn about the different experimental treatments that are being explored and tested. She spends a lot of time with Alaita and becomes like a friend when Alaita is in the hospital. Amanda also sometimes sneaks in special snacks for her and sometimes brings back research or prototypes from other research that she's doing to entertain Alaita. Alaita enjoys learning from Amanda and asks most of her questions to her since she trusts her the most. Alaita confides in Amanda first when she starts thinking that she's starting to lose her emotions.

Sharon Dorsen

Alaita's therapist that her mom hires. She helps Alaita to figure out the origin of her personality change and pinpoint what aspects of her behavior has changed since her treatment. She tries to teach Alaita to learn to accept herself, changes and all. If she is able to accept who she is, it will be easier to develop good behaviors and habits to use when interacting with others. Alaita ignores her advice and Sharon's exercises to help her learn to accept herself. Instead, she continually asks Sharon to just teach her how to be more empathetic to others. Sharon starts off every session with having Alaita share what feelings she's had since they last met and sharing what she has heard from Alaita's parents on how she has been doing. The first exercises she does with Alaita are to try and get her to learn to love herself and when she realizes that Alaita has stopped trying, she moves to teaching Alaita about nonviolent communication and how she can use it to appear more empathetic to others. She also works with Alaita to help her learn to recognize and control her quick temper which makes her prone to outbursts of emotion.

Alaita gets frustrated with Sharon because she feels like she hasn't been fixed and tells her that she's done with Sharon's pointless therapy sessions. After talking to Aidyn, Alaita comes back to meet with Sharon again. Sharon points out that situations such as the ones where Alaita helps Aidyn and Serena show that Alaita has not lost her empathy. Sharon helps Alaita tap back into her empathetic side by suggesting that Alaita shares all the notes she took about her condition and treatment (both physical treatment and the psychology she learned with Sharon) and post them online and help others who are going through similar things that she went through. That way Alaita's knowledge can help others in similar situations be put at ease.

Main Plot

Alaita learning how to cope with a Personality Disorder (losing her empathy) and accepting herself even though she has changed.

Subplots

- Alaita's low-grade glioma brain tumor and her treatments to get rid of it
- Her parents fighting and growing farther and farther apart
- Losing her best friend Serena
- Connecting with the side character, Aidyn, who is dealing with addiction

Plot Events

1. Alaita goes into gym class with an annoying headache which doesn't go away although she took ibuprofen in the morning.
2. Alaita is hanging out in gym class with her friends. The class starts playing soccer. Once on the field, she starts feeling more out of breath than usual. She chalks it up to just being out of shape and pushes through. After about 10 minutes of playing, she starts feeling light-headed and her heart rate won't go down during their water break.
3. Inciting incident: Alaita loses consciousness, goes into a seizure halfway through class.
4. She goes to hospital by an ambulance and the doctors diagnose her with a possible new onset of seizures. The doctors order a CT scan where they discover a mass in

her brain (use this chance to include the pronunciation of her name). She then gets an MRI to identify the mass.

5. The mass is confirmed in the MRI and she is diagnosed with a low-grade glioma. She is given a brief explanation of what is to come in her treatment and a craniotomy is scheduled.
6. Alaita goes home and everyone tries to act as normal as possible for her, but hovers.
7. Alaita goes into school to inform her teachers about her condition and the fact she will be missing the last week or so of school in a week's time. She discovers most of the school learns of her condition through Serena.
8. Sometimes when Alaita is talking to her teachers or other students throughout the day, her voice starts to quiver from the stress of keeping herself together.
9. Alaita breaks down in the stairwell halfway through the school day which is the emotional breakdown she has been keeping inside since coming home from the hospital.
10. Her father calls a Freaky Friday scenario where everyone takes over what another was working on and everyone appears in a good mood. Alaita has her first noticeable outburst (something is hiding underneath the surface of her personality) in response to her mother hovering over her too much.
11. Alaita has periodic calls from her doctors after school to go over in detail the procedure which she will go through and a broad overview of what to expect her treatment to be like after the surgery (these phone calls might be represented as her journal expressing her knowledge about her condition).

12. A couple days before her surgery, Serena decides that the two girls are going to go wig shopping for Alaita so she can have them ready after her surgery is over.
13. Alaita has her craniotomy completed and is mostly out of it for about a week, but she secretly enjoys becoming the center of attention at the hospital and all the extra treatment she gets. She meets and connects with the doctor, Amanda, while her medical and radiation treatment is being decided and explained to her by a team of resident doctors.
14. Can breeze through most of the hospital scenes by using Alaita's journal entries to explain the medical descriptions and give one page/couple page scenes where Serena comes to visit or her parents bring in a board game and make a ruckus throughout the hospital.
15. After about a week or so, Alaita is allowed to go home and returns to the hospital periodically for treatments but she's gotten through the worst of the radiation therapy. She is cleared to return to school.
16. When she returns to school, she becomes the center of attention again and everyone is asking about how she's doing and trying to make small plans such as going to get milkshakes together and offering to help her catch up on what they're learning in class. Her teachers are very lenient and tell her that she doesn't need to make up any homework she missed during her treatments and can just work on getting caught up. They just expect her to do the current homework as soon as she is able to understand the material.

17. The dual nature of her parents begins to show: her mother is constantly hovering over her and Alaita feels like she is being examined under a microscope. Her father tries to keep the dynamic of the family as normal as possible.
18. The nicety of her classmates and teachers fade out after about a week and she is expected by everyone to go back to how she used to be before. This is when her disorganization is noticed by the teachers, since she forgets about some homework assignments or is digging through a bunch of loose papers in her bag.
19. At the end of the second week, her teachers become concerned about Alaita's change in behavior. One of Alaita's teachers asks her if anything is wrong when they notice her new routine of disorganization. Alaita brushes off the teacher's concern and says everything is perfect.
20. The teacher schedules a meeting with her parents to bring her new behavior to their attention. Alaita's parents meet with her teacher and her mother jumps at the opportunity to prove that something is off with Alaita. Her father tries to brush it off that she is still just readjusting back to life. This scene manifests in Alaita's mother confronting Alaita after the meeting and telling Alaita that she is going to start going to a therapist. Alaita's father tells her that if she doesn't want to go to the therapist she doesn't have to. Her parents begin to argue as Alaita escapes off to her room.
21. The next day Serena asks Alaita if she wants to hang out after school to get milkshakes and so Alaita can help Serena with some math homework. Alaita says she's busy, but Serena keeps pushing. Alaita snaps at Serena telling her that she has to go to a therapist because everyone is concerned about her well-being and

she doesn't have time to deal with everyone's problems on top of her own sometimes. She stomps off leaving Serena confused and slightly concerned about Alaita.

22. Alaita goes to the therapist and they have a whole discussion on what Alaita's teachers and her mother have been noticing and how she's been feeling and if she feels any difference from before to after her treatment. The session is just a discussion between the therapist and Alaita about how she feels her life is going. At the end Alaita asks, "is there something wrong with me, did something happen to my brain during the surgery?" The therapist looks sadly at Alaita and tells her she's fine, there's nothing to worry about, they will pick this up again next session.
23. Alaita goes home and finds Serena talking to her mom about her and how she has been acting lately. Alaita is annoyed at her mom for going behind her back to talk about her to her friend. Serena tries to tell Alaita that everyone just cares about her and wants to make sure she's okay. Her father gives her mother a disapproving shake of his head and retreats to his study. Alaita storms off to her room.
24. Serena comes up to Alaita's room to try and talk to her again and get her to not be at odds with her mother. Serena tells her what she's been noticing about her attitude and how she seems to get angered by others quickly. Alaita is snippy back and frustrates Serena. Serena ends up chastising Alaita for getting mad at others when they try to look out for her and how Serena regrets trying to help Alaita in

the first place. Serena leaves Alaita's house and slams the front door on her way out.

25. The two girls have an estranged relationship in school for the next couple of days and Alaita struggles with some of her conversations with old acquaintances and classmates, seeming normal at some points and frustrated at others.
26. Alaita sees the therapist again and the therapist talks about the new information which Serena told Alaita's mother. Alaita makes a comment about everyone sticking their noses where they don't belong. The therapist tells Alaita that she believes that Alaita has lost a bit of her empathy during the surgery due to some of her frontal lobe being removed which made it more difficult for her to be able to look outside of herself and empathize with others. Alaita asks the therapist to fix her. The therapist responds that she can't bring back what was lost, but they can work on exercises to help her realize when she is closing herself off. The therapist explains that the most important thing is that Alaita learns to accept who she is now. Alaita calls bullshit and is convinced there has to be a way to fix her, she is unable to accept the fact that she has changed.
27. Alaita tells her mom when she gets home that the therapist is full of shit and is of no help since she said she can't fix her condition. When Alaita goes up to her room, she hears her parents start fighting about how her mother was right that something was wrong with Alaita and her father was refusing to look at their daughter. Alaita starts to feel bad because she feels like her parents are only fighting on matters concerning her.

28. Alaita calls the doctor, Amanda, and asks if it's possible that her treatment could've made her lose her empathy. Amanda confirms that's a possibility due to the fact that they had to remove some of her frontal lobe due to the fuzzy borders which the tumor had. There are many cases where removal or damage of a small part of the frontal lobe can create large changes in an individual's personality. She shares with Alaita a story of a patient who had a rod through their head and dealt with a personality shift disorder after the rod was removed.
29. Alaita has a nightmare that night which replays a memory of her as a kid when she was insensitive to one of her classmates when they asked for Alaita's opinion. The classmate then ran crying to the guidance counselor saying Alaita was a bully. Then the memory blurs and the elementary school kids grow up into her current high school classmates who start giving her stares like she's an abomination and whispering about her to each other.
30. Alaita goes to school the next day and apologizes to Serena for the way she's been acting and explains what Amanda and her therapist told her. Serena gives Alaita a hug and tells her that she's sorry and she'll help her.
31. Later in the day, Serena comes up to Alaita and asks her if the two of them can go to a party that weekend because her crush is there. Alaita tells Serena that she would love to go, but they might not be able to stay long because she still gets tired easily. Serena tells Alaita that they'll stick together, and they'll leave whenever Alaita wants to. Serena also promises to convince Alaita's mom to let her go.

32. Serena works to convince Alaita's mom to let her go. Alaita tells her mom that it's good to try to get back to life as normal and be around her peers, to help her become reaccustomed to her friends and not be so alienated. She assures her mom that her and Serena will come home as soon as Alaita starts to feel tired.
33. Alaita goes to her therapist and asks her to help her regain her empathy before she goes to the party so she can socialize as usual. The therapist again explains how Alaita needs to learn to accept herself for who she is before she can start making progress. Alaita brushes her off and the therapist starts explaining how Alaita can make sure to always use non-violent communication when talking to others (from this point on, the therapist's sessions can be portrayed through journal entries of Alaita taking notes from her meetings with the therapist).
34. Alaita gets ready for the party with Serena and the two girls have fun choosing outfits. Serena tries to get Alaita to go bold with a colorful wig, but Alaita wants to appear and feel as normal as possible. She wants to go back to who she used to be and pretend that her brain tumor and treatment never happened.
35. The two girls go to the party and very quickly Alaita notices she's going to be ignored when Serena's attention is focused on the boy who has a crush on her. Serena spills water on Alaita which thins Alaita's patience and she goes to the bathroom to dry off. Serena follows and the two girls argue with each other and Serena ends up leaving Alaita alone at the party.
36. Alaita goes looking for Serena after she finishes drying her clothes and notices she took off. She gets stopped by a group of boys at the party who try to take advantage of her. After she rejects them, they start insulting her and putting her

down as a freak and an outcast that no one wants anyways. Aidyn comes to her rescue and after the group of boys leave, Alaita turns on him and says she doesn't need or want his help. She leaves him to go look for Serena again.

37. She finds Serena drunk, hanging all over the guy who she has a crush on and notices that he is only interested in trying to sleep with her. Alaita tries to separate Serena from him by telling her that she is starting to feel tired and wants to go home. Serena keeps trying to brush Alaita away and tells her that she's not tired. Alaita notices Aidyn in the dark corner of the room still keeping an eye on her. Alaita keeps trying to find excuses to get Serena to come home but Serena turns on Alaita and just tells her to go home on her own, she'll find a ride or place to stay.

38. Alaita gives up and leaves the party, where Aidyn stops her at the door and tells her that Serena doesn't deserve her. He also mentions that the guy she's hanging all over is definitely going to take advantage of her. Alaita goes off on him about how he doesn't know anything about her and Serena. Aidyn points out that she doesn't realize how much you can learn about others through people-watching, probably more so than being in the middle of it all when you're seen as popular.

39. Alaita says that she's leaving but tells Aidyn that he's more than welcome to "stalk" Serena if he's so worried about her well-being. That's when Serena stumbles out the front door and starts to throw up on the lawn. Her shirt is slightly torn, her bra strap has fallen off her shoulder, and the top button of her pants are undone. Her crush soon follows and sees Alaita and Aidyn talking right outside the door and disappears back inside. Alaita and Aidyn go to Serena and ask her

what happened, and she just asks Alaita to take her home. Alaita and Aidyn carry her to the car and Alaita gives Aidyn a mumbled thanks as she drives off.

40. Alaita's mom is asleep when the two girls arrive home and Serena breaks down in Alaita's room after Alaita makes her a bed on how her crush was groping her and ended up sticking his hand down her pants. Alaita asked if he went any further and Serena said that's when she started to feel sick and tried to get away from him. Alaita makes Serena eat some food and drink water before they go to bed. Alaita doesn't mention to Serena the interaction that she had with the group of guys at the party.

41. The next morning Alaita's mother asks the two girls how the party went, and they said it was good. Serena tries to lighten the mood by saying that she saw Alaita talking to one cute guy at the party. Alaita's mother has a concerned look cross her face but says nothing until Serena leaves. Her mother then confronts Alaita after Serena leaves and asks if Alaita drank or ate anything at the party (since clearly Serena was hungover) and if any guys tried to force themselves on her. Alaita assures her mom that the only thing she had was tap water that she got for herself and that she didn't have any issues with guys.

42. When the two girls go to school on Monday, they see that Serena's crush has a black eye and won't meet either of the two girls' gazes. When Alaita sees Aidyn leaning against his locker, she notices that he is keeping one of his hands in his pocket. Alaita goes and talks to him asking if he had something to do with Serena's crush. All Aidyn says was that he had a civilized talk with him, and he won't go after Serena again. He pulls his hand out of his pocket and Alaita sees

that his knuckles are swollen. Alaita just responds with: “don’t think that your little heroic act is going to result in you getting into my pants.” Aidyn responds: “wouldn’t dream of it.”

43. Alaita notices less people are coming up to talk to her throughout the day and during lunch she hears someone say “bald-headed freak” as a group of guys walk past her table. Serena sits down next to Alaita and gets mad at her for telling her “friend” (Aidyn) to beat up the best player on the boys’ soccer team and now everyone is blaming Serena for acting like a slut but not being able to take the consequences of how that attitude is received. Alaita tries to explain herself, but Serena just gets up and walks away.
44. Alaita sees Aidyn sitting at a table in the corner of the cafeteria so he gets up and walks out after their eyes meet. Alaita follows him into the hallway and tells him to stop trying to be the goddamn hero and “helping” her when he’s making her horrible life, worse. Aidyn just looks at her and says, “sweetheart, if you think your life is horrible, then you don’t truly know what that word means” and walks away.
45. Alaita comes home to her parents screaming at each other in the kitchen where her mother is accusing her father of being too self-involved in his own work and neglecting his family. Alaita’s mother sees Alaita walk into the kitchen and she slaps a piece of paper onto the countertop. She asks Alaita why she didn’t come and tell them that she was struggling in school. She’s gotten D’s on almost all of her history assignments since going back to school and the only class she still has A’s in is science and math. Alaita says that she didn’t want to burden anyone

further she is just having a hard time keeping her history notes organized. She's doing fine, she'll focus more on schoolwork. Alaita's father tries to be understanding and nods his head and says he trusts her and Alaita's mom screams at him that he needs to stop sitting idly by when it's clear that Alaita is struggling. Alaita's father tells Alaita that everything is okay. She should go up to her room and listen to music and focus on her history work.

46. Alaita goes up to her room and can still hear her mother's muffled yells through the closed doors and then soon hears muffled sobs and her parents' bedroom door slam shut. Alaita's father comes up soon after and talks to Alaita and asks her if there's anything that he can do to help her. Alaita gives her dad a hug and tells him that she's fine and for him not to worry about her. He says that he knows she's a very strong and independent girl but it's okay to ask for help sometimes, but he trusts that she'll make the right decision in the end.
47. Alaita tries to reach out to Serena that night for support, but Serena just leaves her on read and doesn't respond. Serena also ignores Alaita during school the next day. She also starts talking to someone else whenever she notices Alaita coming towards her. Alaita finds Aidyn later in the school day and goes to blame him for all of her misfortunes. He takes the yelling from her and doesn't react. At the end of her barrage he just grabs her shoulders, looks into her eyes, and says: "you are strong, you are handling a lot emotionally and I think you need to allow yourself to open up to someone. I know you don't trust me, but I can hold secrets better than you think. I have no one to tell." Alaita feels like she hit a rock bottom because she is looking for comfort and acceptance with a druggie. She says,

“again, I don’t need any help from you.” He reminds her to take a look around and determine who her real friends are.

48. Alaita goes home to a quiet house and doesn’t hear her mother or her father talking. Alaita feels lonely so she finds her father in his study and catches up with him. She then asks him where mom is, and he responds that she’s taken up reading and working in her bedroom recently.
49. Alaita goes to look and does find her quietly reading under the covers. She asks her mother what is for dinner and she just responds with reheated leftovers or whatever is in the fridge. Alaita is stunned at her mother ignoring her after doting on her so much. Her mom snaps back out of her indifferent mood after she notices that Alaita hasn’t left and says that she’ll make Alaita whatever she wants if Alaita feels tired or doesn’t like the leftovers. Alaita assures her mom that she’ll figure it out.
50. Alaita tries to pull a Freaky Friday with everyone at home but it’s the first time that she ever remembers her parents denying the request and tell her maybe they’ll do it another day. Her mom brings up that it seems Alaita is still behind on work and she doesn’t need her father trying and failing to complete her work and waste time.
51. Alaita tries to text and call Serena to connect with her to voice her concerns on what is going on with her parents. Alaita’s texts stop delivering to Serena and she goes straight to voicemail. When she tries to call a second time, she realizes Serena blocked her. Alaita cries herself to sleep that night.

52. Next day at the therapist, Alaita talks to her about what is going on with her parents and how it's all her fault because they never disagreed or argued before she was diagnosed with a brain tumor and now all they do is fight over her. The therapist tries to reassure her that her parents' disagreements are not her fault and she cannot take the blame for their relationship falling apart. She goes back to how Alaita needs to learn to accept and forgive herself, which Alaita brushes off yet again. The therapist suggests that Alaita confide in her friend and see if she agrees that Alaita is at fault. Alaita then explains that her friend blocked her when she tried to reach out and is ignoring her at school. The therapist suggests that she try to find the next person she is closest to, because hearing her own peer's point of view on the problem might help her realize she shouldn't be blaming herself.
53. She tries to message Serena over a social media platform, trying to reach out one more time and the only thing she receives is a message from one of Serena's friends who texts her: "can't you take a hint, Serena doesn't want to talk to you. You ruined her." Alaita mentally accepts the fact that there is basically only one person for her to turn to now.
54. When Alaita goes downstairs in the middle of the night, she finds her father sleeping on the couch and sneaks around him to grab water and go back to her room without waking him up. She continues to blame herself for the separation that is happening between her parents.
55. The next day in school Alaita finds Aidyn by his locker watching a group of girls gossip on the other end of the hallway. He tries to act calm and cool, but his foot taps the ground rapidly. He acknowledges her when she comes up. He says, "Are

you here to ask me to grace you with my presence?” She asks him to spare the theatrics and is here to take him up on his offer to talk. She offers to pay for them to go get fries and milkshakes after school. He turns and looks at her for a moment before reaching out and smoothing down the back of her wig because it looked lumpy and unnatural and tells her he’ll be there.

56. The two meet up after school and Alaita explains to him everything she’s going through with her parents and Serena. She asks him if he thinks she’s responsible for chasing everyone away. He ponders over his milkshake for a moment and asks if she can answer a question for him first. He explains his family situation and asks her if she thinks he should be blamed for what they do to themselves and if he deserves to be treated the way he is. Alaita finds herself feeling awful for complaining about what she’s going through and gets up to leave. Aidyn grabs her arm and makes her sit and answer if it’s his fault. She says no. He says that children cannot blame themselves for the actions of any adult, including their parents. They are adults, they make their own choices. He also mentions to her that her therapist is right that she should learn to accept herself first before trying to learn how to become empathetic again. Developing will be a lot easier if she accepts who she is first. He tries to convince her that she is still an amazing person and should still love herself and not let unlucky circumstances (her tumor) let her change how she feels about herself. Alaita tells him that he doesn’t need to follow in his parents’ footsteps and that he’s basically throwing his life away doing drugs. He brushes her off saying that he’s in control of what he’s doing, he

won't take it too far. At the conclusion of their talk, he takes her phone and puts his number in and texts himself to have her number.

57. Alaita goes home to a quiet household again but only finds her mother. She asks where dad is, and her mom responds that he's staying at a hotel because he is no longer welcome at the house and he needs to start finding a new place to live. She tells Alaita that they're getting a divorce because she can't handle the ignorance he has towards life and how he doesn't pay attention to his family.
58. Alaita is crushed by the news and escapes to her room to call her dad crying and apologizing. He tries to reassure her that she has done nothing wrong, the divorce might not be finalized and all she needs to worry about is getting caught back up on school, he'll figure out how to make her mom happy again. She tells her dad that he hasn't been neglecting her and she likes how she's able to pretend like nothing ever happened when she's with him. He thanks her for telling him that and tells her good night.
59. Alaita goes to her therapist the next day and yells at her about how she hasn't helped her get better at all. How she's wasted her time trying to get her to accept herself when she should have been focusing on how to get Alaita back to normal so she could have saved her parents' relationship and not lost Serena as a friend. The therapist asks what happened and Alaita says that her mother filed for a divorce and Serena avoids her like the plague. Alaita says that she's going to find a new therapist or quit therapy all together and how Sharon was a terrible therapist.

60. Aidyn tries to text Alaita to check in on her and Alaita tells him she's fine. He asks to hang out and she leaves him on read.
61. A couple nights later, Aidyn calls Alaita late at night. Alaita picks up expecting a booty call but hears him mumbling nonsense to what sounds like someone else. She tries to get his attention and asked if he didn't mean to call her. He sounds panicked when he hears her voice. He tells her that they're after him and they're surrounding them in his room, he asks Alaita to come over right away and help save him. She's able to get him to share his location and leaves to help him.
62. Alaita goes to his house and finds it about as much of a mess as she imagined it would be. She goes down to the basement where Aidyn is and finds his drugs spilled over the coffee table and him curled in the fetal position in the corner looking like a mess. He looks at her without seeing her and she realized that he's overdosed. She takes him right away to the hospital and stays with him while they treat him (he's 18 so doesn't need a parent there and she pretends to be his girlfriend who lives with him).
63. When he comes to, he finds Alaita at his bedside napping. He gently wakes her up and asks her what happened, which she explains. She tells him how he's stupid to go and throw away a perfectly good life. He's choosing to put his life in jeopardy and almost die because of his stupid decisions while she almost died from something that was completely beyond her control. She's realized how precious life is and wants him to stop treating his like it doesn't matter.
64. He asks her if he can live with her family. She's startled and speechless. He explains that she's right, he's not ready to ruin the life he's been given, and he

was terrified of the hallucinations coming after him. All he remembers is seeing her as an angel coming and saving him. He interrupts her before she can answer and tells her that if she's giving him advice then he needs to tell her that she hasn't truly changed who she is as a person. She is still sweet, selfless, and caring. She helped him when he overdosed and helped Serena even if she can't realize it. She also didn't beat the crap out of the douchebags who were trying to force themselves onto her so she's nicer than he is. He tells her that she's had empathy all along and she really needs to be able to accept and love herself. Once she does, she'll be able to see that for herself. And while she thinks on the living arrangement idea, he will get into a 12-step program first to prove that he's on the steps to recovery.

65. Alaita goes to her therapist the next day and says that she's changed her mind and is willing to do things the way her therapist suggests, if she's willing to help. The therapist asks what brought about her change of heart and she explains her exchange with Aidyn. She tells Alaita that she's had her empathy all along and still puts others' needs above her own, she just struggles to hold empathetic everyday conversations, but she's there when it matters most. The therapist suggests that Alaita create her own community online where she can share all the notes she took on her disease, treatment, and even psychological treatments and be able to help others who are dealing with similar situations to her. She can help them mentally prepare and understand and help relate to what they're going through.

66. Alaita goes home and uploads all her notes to a website and types out a welcome message to her new website to help those diagnosed with brain tumors, personality shifts, brain surgeries, and more based on her own experiences.
67. She goes to her mom and gives her a hug and tells her that she loves her and thanks her for all the care and attention her mom has given to her throughout her road to recovery. She explains that dad also helped her too. She enjoyed and needed the sense of normalcy like nothing happened to make her feel like she isn't about to break at any moment. She tells her mom that she hopes the two of them can work through their disagreements.
68. She goes to school and finds Aidyn in front of his locker, less fidgety than usual. He tells her that he started the program and found a sponsor to help him and he'd love to go grab a milkshake with her and explain the program to her and talk about the favor he asked of her at the hospital.
69. They grab milkshakes and he explains everything that he has to go through and how they say it's usual to have bumps in the road, but not constantly living in a drug filled house will help him immensely. He's currently couch-surfing and doesn't want to put pressure on her or her family. Alaita invites him over to her house to meet her parents.
70. When Alaita goes home, she finds both of her parents in the kitchen, talking with each other civilly. Aidyn introduces himself to her parents and Alaita explains how this is the guy who has been helping her out recently and helped her make a major breakthrough. Alaita's mother becomes skeptical because she's heard about this boy from the therapist. "You're an addict" she accuses. Alaita jumps to

defend Aidyn, but he corrects with “recovering addict actually, and your daughter saved my life.” Alaita pleads with her parents to just hear him out and listen to his story, especially since he listened to hers.

71. After Aidyn finishes sharing, he looks to Alaita for what to do next. Alaita sees her father tearing up and gives Aidyn a big hug while Alaita’s mom goes and grabs some tissues for herself and her father. Alaita asks her parents the huge favor of Aidyn staying with them while he recovers. Aidyn assures them he doesn’t need an answer right away and that he’s couch-surfing with friends currently.
72. Alaita’s parents speak to her privately and ask if she trusts this boy and if he’s started on the path to recovery and if she’s ok with living with him and the image it will give her at school. Alaita assures her parents that the only opinion of herself that she cares about is her own right now. And Aidyn was there when everyone including Serena started treating her like an outcast.
73. Alaita’s parents go back to the kitchen where they find Aidyn washing dishes that were in the sink. He puts down the sponge and apologizes, he didn’t want to eavesdrop, so he was trying to distract himself. Alaita’s parents tell him that he’s welcome to stay as long as he continues on his road to recovery, and if he gives up, he has to leave. Aidyn accepts and tells them that he has a job and can also pay them a monthly rent as well for him staying here, which Alaita’s father says they can figure out later after he’s able to move in and they can talk more.
74. Alaita hugs her parents and Aidyn shakes their hands, thanking them over and over. Alaita and Aidyn go out to his car where Alaita goes to tell him goodbye.

Aidyn tells her that there's one thing he left out when he explained his road to recovery, that he can't be in a relationship until he's at least one year sober. Then he leans in and kisses Alaita. She kisses him back and they separate with Alaita confused. Aidyn apologizes but says he couldn't bear to wait a year before being able to do that. But he wants to remain friends for a year even though he likes her. He reaches his hand out for a handshake but Alaita gives him a hug and says she thinks remaining friends for a year is a good idea.

DISQUISITION

Motivation

This thesis arose from my fondness for science and for storytelling. Ever since my parents first started to teach me how to read, I've been drawn to stories. I already had a senior capstone project which fulfilled my requirements for receiving my degree in biomedical engineering. So then I found myself wondering, what should I do for my Honors College thesis? I could've done a research project under one of my professors in the biomedical engineering department, or analyzed the equipment used to monitor athletic performance at the Division I sports level here at UMaine. All of the projects available and offered to me seemed interesting, but I had this part of me always nagging to write, to create a story. So then the question arose, how can I combine the biomedical engineering aspects of my major with my passion for storytelling? The solution to this question presented itself once I took my Honors tutorial, entitled "Craft of the Young Adult Novel" and met Katie Quirk who would end up becoming my thesis advisor. In that class, I was able to brainstorm multiple story ideas and critically analyze a number of young adult novels from a craft point of view. This was where I came up with the idea of writing a story about a teenage girl who develops a medical condition which impacts her capacity to empathize with others. This original idea came more into focus once I used the skills I developed from my major to explore what medical conditions could result in a person undergoing a personality shift where they lost their ability to empathize.

Purpose

My purpose for my thesis is to discover a way to eloquently combine elements of biomedical engineering with creative writing to create a young adult novel about a teenage girl who loses her sense of empathy due to a type of brain cancer. It is relatively easy to write a story and throw in aspects of science and the biomedical engineering field. The issue with just combining these two fields arises when you try to make the scientific parts of the story intriguing and easily understood by the readers. A lot of scientific writing can seem dull and monotonous to most readers, so the goal of this thesis was to find a way to write about the field of STEM without losing readers' interest, particularly that of younger readers. This aspect of my thesis is important because there aren't many successful fictional young adult novels that creatively integrate STEM into their storylines. I'm hoping that by writing this thesis I am able to not only improve on myself as a storyteller and writer but also to provide a way for writers in general to introduce younger audiences to the field of STEM, stimulate their interest in science, and help encourage them to go into studies within the field.

Methodology

This thesis started with the work that I did in my Honors tutorial with Katie. In that class, I looked at a number of young adult novels from a critical craft point of view, and ultimately wrote a very basic rough draft novel outline, as well as one chapter, which I workshopped and rewrote. That process of outlining and drafting the first chapter presented me with more questions than answers about my story and what we called in craft terminology its "pivotal value." This process highlighted for me my desire to return

to the prewriting stage, as Katie predicted those of us who continued with our novels might, to develop a much more detailed and multifaceted outline that would address fundamental questions about voice, point of view, subplots, character and setting details, and pivotal values among other core craft concepts. Had I not taken this creative writing class and experimented with beginning this novel once already, I would likely have been tempted to dive straight into writing a full first draft of the novel. For me, this heavy investment in detailed pre-writing proved worthwhile. I was able to flesh out key plot events and remove excessive and unnecessary story events and/or exposition through the multiple drafts of editing that I went through with all components of my thesis. I also believe this prewriting-heavy process put me in a better position to successfully finish this novel, and possibly even see it through to publication, after graduation.

After that creative writing class with Katie, I knew I needed to do more research into different medical conditions that would alter the brain and subsequently an individual's personality. I conducted a lot of preliminary research before diving into the actual writing portion of this thesis. I did some reading of medical websites and research articles as well as talking extensively to an emergency room registered nurse at Yale New Haven Hospital, Amanda Halim, who helped me decide on using a brain tumor for Alaita's medical condition. She suggested that I use a cancerous brain tumor called glioblastoma. I delved into research on glioblastomas and the diagnosis of the condition so I could gain enough of an understanding to be able to accurately depict Alaita's condition and treatments.

Amanda then helped to connect me with someone she knew at the Yale New Haven Hospital who I could talk with about different kinds of brain tumors, their

treatments, and patient-doctor interactions, especially with minors. She was able to connect me with Dr. Layton Lamsam who is a resident in the Department of Neurosurgery at Yale University School of Medicine. He completed his undergraduate and medical degrees at Stanford University, and he also has experience in the analysis of scRNA-Seq data for human brain tumors. In our discussion we talked about what a typical workday was like for a resident doctor for neurosurgery, what types of interactions he had with his patients, different kinds of brain tumors, and what kinds of brain tumors and their locations which would produce the outcomes which I was looking for. Dr. Lamsam directed me to look into using a low-grade glioma tumor instead of glioblastoma because it has a better survival rate while also developing possible fuzzy borders which would lead to some of the healthy brain tissue having to be sacrificed when the tumor is removed. He also helped direct me to some good websites to conduct further research and the best terms to use when researching these tumors to find the best medical journal articles that focus on aspects which were helpful for creating my story.

After talking to a couple of medical professionals, including an EMT so I could be as accurate as possible in portraying the ambulance scene in chapter 2, I moved to talking to a couple people who had experience in the field of psychology and therapy, specifically with minors.

The first person I talked to was Attorney Sharon Wicks Dornfeld. She is a graduate of the University of Michigan and the University of Michigan Law School. She has practiced in Danbury since 1983 and is an adjunct professor of Family Law at Quinnipiac University School of Law. Her private practice primarily consists of representing minor children as an Attorney or Guardian *ad litem* in Family, Probate and

Criminal proceedings and serving as a mediator or Parenting Coordinator in custody cases. I chose Sharon as one of my psychology resources because she has worked extensively with children in traumatic instances, and she has always been an advocate for what was best for the child. She has worked closely with therapists and psychologists to learn the inner workings of the brain in minors. We talked about how a minor's attitude and personality could change after experiencing a traumatic incident. She helped me to realize that Alaita's personality change doesn't only have to be the result of her brain being damaged. We discussed that Alaita could become more selfish and less empathetic as a result of her focus becoming more inward because her life was turned upside down. We also discussed the impact that Alaita's parents' fighting could have on her and her mental state and how Alaita's interests could change as a result of her treatment affecting her personality. Sharon helped me come up with the idea of showing Alaita's personality change through Alaita going from being a super organized and focused person to suddenly becoming extremely disorganized and forgetful. This change in behavior would alert those closest to Alaita that something was wrong and would trigger her going to a therapist. Even after our discussion, she continued to send me interesting articles that she came across about people who suffered personality shifts due to brain trauma.

I also talked with Marissa McInerney, LMFT-A, Expressive Arts Therapist, and public school mental health provider in CT. She studied Literature, Drama and Performance Theatre at Central Connecticut State University, Expressive Arts Therapy, Coaching & Education at the European Graduate School and the Expressive Arts Institute of San Diego. She also graduated with a masters in Marriage & Family Therapy from Southern Connecticut State University. I chose Marissa as another resource for my thesis

because a majority of her career experience has been focused on child development. We discussed Alaita's personality shift and the types of issues and telltale signs she would have from becoming less empathetic. Mostly we focused our discussion on the secondary character of Aidyn since she works a lot with children who are labelled as "at-risk". She helped me decide which substance I should have Aidyn be addicted to and what his symptoms of using are likely to be. We talked a lot about Aidyn's role in the story and ways that his story could be accurately portrayed without taking away the focus from the main character. We also talked about how to make sure that Aidyn's story and his journey of addiction and recovery was realistic while also being uplifting and motivational.

In addition to gaining inspiration for the story's events from written materials and professionals, I have taken my own life experiences to create realistic conflicts and interactions between the characters. The inspiration behind Aidyn is based on two of my best friends and their journeys through and out of addiction. I was able to be there to help support them through their journeys of recovery and I am still happily continuing to help both of them. Helping my best friends to overcome their own hardships taught me so many priceless lessons on the value of life and how crucial communication is. I also learned how strong the power of hope and trust could be in helping someone overcome some of the hardest obstacles in their life. My hope is that I was able to and will continue to portray these themes through the creation of this story and share these lessons with others. This thesis enabled me to combine all these elements that furthered my knowledge to craft a gripping story idea which will reflect my life experiences as well as the in-depth research I've conducted.

Scientific research wasn't the only kind of preliminary research that I conducted before writing my thesis. I also focused my research and learning on story development and plotting. Katie recommended a great book on screenwriting called *Story* by Robert McKee, which furthered my understanding on how to craft a good storyline. I also closely followed an up-and-coming manga writer who shared a lot of the tips and tricks that he learned and discovered on how to create a gripping story that people didn't want to put down. I also read many young adult novels with plotlines that dealt heavily with medical conditions, mental health issues, or estranged friends to find examples of how young adult authors incorporate these heavy topics in a way that invests teens.

In addition to constantly conducting research for my thesis, I was also constantly writing. If I wasn't working directly on a piece of the story that would be in my thesis, I was creatively writing random scenes with the characters of my story so I could get to know them better and be able to develop their voices and personalities. There are pages upon pages of text that are filled with not only research notes but also random scenes starring the main and secondary characters which didn't make it into this thesis due to the chronology of the story or because it was written from a secondary character's point of view. But the first piece of my thesis that I developed was the working outline of the story which is included. I state that it is a working outline because it is a dynamic piece which represents the story. As I continue to write more of the story, I am likely going to change aspects of the outline and especially the timeline of plot events which will result in the best flow for the story. Additionally, the timeline of plot events represents a broad overview of all the events that will happen within the time period that the story spans. Not all of the events that are listed in the plot events section of the outline will be written

in prose within the story, but the results of those events will impact the story and be mentioned in one way or another. I went into extreme detail with my plot event timeline because it helped me to be able to look and see everything that the characters will go through to feel immersed within the world I've created and be right there with my characters. If I skipped a detail that helped me understand how a character got from point A to point B, I would feel disconnected from my world because I would be confused about how the transition happened. However, the readers do not need to know how my characters got from point A to B, they just need to know what happened once they got to point B.

The beginning chapters of the story which are included in this thesis are written in close third person and past tense. I chose this format of writing because it was the style I was most comfortable with writing in and using past tense helped with when I had to include summarized scenes of diagnostic tests and procedures. With these chapters and the chapters that will follow in the future, I worked to write mostly in scene through using direct address which would avoid excessive exposition and would draw my readers into the narrative I was portraying. One of the issues which I corrected the most in editing is to "show not tell" with my writing to keep readers close to the narrative and avoid scene summaries. One of the most enlightening processes of creating my thesis was editing my chapters. By working with Katie, we developed a process for me to be able to recognize when a piece of writing was essential to the storyline or when a section was unimportant and could be cut. The process we developed to edit the chapters started with me identifying all the places in my chapters where I was summarizing information. After identifying these places, I would ask myself if I could get rid of the summary or if it was

essential to the storyline. If the summary was important to the storyline, I would figure out a way in which I could rewrite the section so it was in scene.

The biggest challenge of this thesis was finding a way to include STEM explanations into the storyline without using heavy-handed exposition. The way that I decided was the most effective way to accomplish this was by inserting journal entries that were written by the main character, Alaita. These journal entries consisted of notes about aspects of her disease progression that she took while researching her medical condition and treatments, after conversations that she had with doctors and other personnel within the hospital, and psychology notes which she took during her sessions with her therapist. These journal entries allowed for the inclusion of some really interesting science facts and explanations behind some of her medical treatments without having to create scenes filled with dull descriptions of her going through her procedures where all the details were explained. Additionally, I was able to replace any dull dialogue pieces that she would've had with the doctors at the hospital to be able to understand her condition and treatments. The journal entries were also helpful because they catch the reader's eye due to the change in font and allow for a more intimate connection between the main character and the readers because they can read her thoughts on the information that she's learning.

I was also able to use the journal entries to hint that her personality changed after her brain tumor was removed. I achieved this by using a font called MV Boli in Word to represent her handwriting for the journal entries that were written before she underwent treatment. Then in the journal entries that were written after her treatment (this will start with journal entry 4), I will switch to the font, Segoe Print, in Word. They are similar

fonts, but readers with a keen eye could be able to notice a change in her handwriting which would foreshadow that some change has occurred in her brain. Additionally, the writing style which Alaita used to write the journal entries before her treatment was portrayed by formal note taking and she was very organized with separating her thoughts from the facts she wrote down. Conversely, her writing style changed after her treatment to a more informal note taking with incomplete sentences and she is not so organized when separating her thoughts from the facts that she found.

Literature Review

There was a wide selection of books that influenced my process of creating my story. This started with the books that I read in the “Craft of the Young Adult Novel” Honors tutorial which helped me be able to analyze the craft of writing from successful young adult novels. Additionally, the majority of my knowledge of Alaita’s medical condition and the treatments she would undergo was gained through reading many research articles, looking through medical webpages, and talking to medical professionals. However, the book that provided me with the most insight into storytelling was *Story* by Robert McKee.

Plotting and pre-writing was a real challenge for me, so McKee’s focus on screenwriting proved inspirational. *Story* helped me brainstorm the development of characters and subplots. While reading this book, I found inspiration for a couple of scenes that I wanted to include in the book along with ideas on how I should further the plot of my story. *Story* also helped me identify the central idea or pivotal value of my novel, which was Alaita’s journey in learning to accept herself even if her personality had changed.

A couple books that helped provide insight into the young adult genre when medical conditions were involved are *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green, *Six Feet Apart* by Rachael Lippincott, Mikki Daughtry, and Tobias Iaconis, and *The Mosquito Test* by Richard Kent. *The Fault in Our Stars* was a romance story about two teenagers who were diagnosed with cancer, one with a terminal diagnosis and the other who ended up having cancer remission. The other novel, *Five Feet Apart*, was another romance story about two teenagers; however, both of them had cystic fibrosis and weren't allowed to be within six feet of each other. *The Mosquito Test* was about two friends who were able to bond with each other over their love of the sport of tennis. One of them was diagnosed with cancer and the other with cystic fibrosis. These novels served as good examples of stories that had their plots center around serious medical conditions that took place in or out of hospital settings. Although my novel won't incorporate a romance aspect or love interest like two of these novels, I wanted to emulate the novels' ability to portray how a serious medical condition affects a teenager's daily life, mental health, physical health, and their relationships with those around them.

I continued my reading of young adult novels through reading books that included other aspects which I wanted to emulate within my own story. I read *We Used to be Friends* by Amy Spalding which was about two best friends who became estranged in their senior year due to a lack of communication between the two. This book helped me to see an example of how two best friends could drift apart from each other. There was also *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio which was about a child who was born with facial defects and followed his journey of going to school for the first time and dealing with how rude other children can be. This book helped me because I liked how the author included the

main character's thoughts on how he wished he could be seen as normal like all the other children. His portrayal of these thoughts helped me formulate how I was going to have Alaita wish that life could go back to normal for her. *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes was about a man with an extremely low IQ undergoing an experiment which turned him into a genius. This book helped me because I was able to see the main character's mental progression going from a low to a high IQ and I can emulate that progression in my own story but with empathy instead of IQ. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon is about a boy who lacks the ability to make emotional connections, but is mathematically gifted, and it follows his investigation into the murder of his neighbor's dog. This book was fantastic with the portrayal of a lack of empathy and the inability to understand emotions and helped me visualize how I could portray Alaita's lack of empathy. Also, Mark Haddon's inclusion of different mathematical proofs and calculations within the novel is similar to how I want to include aspects of science into my story. *Hold Still* by Nina Lacour is about a girl whose best friend commits suicide but left behind her journal for the main character to find. This book provided me with an example of a text that used journal entries to portray important information without relaying them in summary or overly explanatory dialogue. Lastly, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas is about a girl who is the only one that witnesses her friend get shot and killed by a police officer and she has to decide what she will say about what happened that night. This book was helpful as an example of how extremely stressful situations can affect a teenage girl both mentally and in their everyday life.

Another book I read was *Nonviolent Communication* by Marshall B. Rosenberg which went over aspects of effective communication. This book was extremely helpful

because it helped me create the type of nonviolent communication that Alaita used in all her interactions before her treatment. As the book goes on, Alaita's ability to empathize with others decreased along with her ability to effectively communicate in a nonviolent way, which means I will diverge from the teachings of the book as the plot is furthered in the future. I also read a past Honors College Thesis called "The Physiology of Love" by Noelle Leon-Palmer which was a short story written about one girl's interactions with love throughout her life. Noelle combined both the emotional and biological aspects of love into her story in an attempt to make the biological aspects of how love works easier for readers to understand while keeping them interested in the biology behind the nature of love. Her thesis helped me see an example of a thesis that was trying to accomplish a similar goal to my own.

Critical Analysis

The process of creating my thesis has helped me to develop both my storytelling skills as well as my creative writing skills. Katie has helped to provide me with a taste of what the process of writing a novel is like and the amount of work that goes into outlining, writing, and then editing story material to finally reach a final result. Everything in this thesis is a work in progress and is subject to change as I continue to write this story after I graduate. It represents the foundation that the continuation of the story will build upon. Up until writing this thesis, I never thought about how important it was to remain in scene when writing to help keep readers invested in the story and with the characters. It was also a fascinating process to go from only having creatively written short stories to taking on a large novel idea such as this one. It was the first time I had to

think about subplots and character development outside of the main character. I also had to figure out how to transition from scene to scene for the first time, especially if long periods of time passed between one event and another.

As I stated previously, I would say the most enlightening part of my thesis journey was the process of editing my chapters, I would also say that this was where I felt like I made the most personal growth with storytelling. I remember when Katie and I first discussed chapter editing I felt disheartened at having to delete huge sections of writing from my chapters because they weren't necessary to the plot and the story's pivotal value. For reference I went from a word count of 2454 to 1638 after editing the first chapter. Once rereading the edited version of chapter 1 after the cuts were made, I realized how much more dynamic and interesting the chapter became. There weren't any sections that felt like they dragged on, and every moment contributed something to the story.

In addition to my own and Katie's feedback on my edited chapters, I sent them out to four other people and talked with them to hear their thoughts. Their feedback helped me find spots of the story that seemed confusing which I would then use as the focus point for my editing efforts in later drafts. Something that I found interesting about sending out my chapters and receiving feedback was that I felt proud when all of my readers came back and said that they loved the characters and that there were particular moments in the book that made them laugh or angered at the characters. After hearing this feedback, I felt a drive to want to keep writing, to be able to continue to invoke emotions into my readers. I didn't realize how rewarding it felt to have others invested in my story and want to read more. Now that I am aware of everything that I learned about

creative writing and storytelling in the process of writing my thesis, I am proud to discover that I will not only graduate as a biomedical engineer, but also as a storyteller.

Reflection

This thesis does not mark the end of my story, in fact it is only a representation of the beginning. There is still more research to be done on low grade glioma brain tumors and experimental treatments which can be used to treat them. There are still many more chapters to write and new characters to introduce and develop. After graduating I still plan on continuing my story by writing chapters, journal entries, and tweaking my outline and plot events until the story is complete. My end goal for the story which I've started in this thesis is to finish it and find an agent who will help me finalize it and eventually get my story published as a YA novel. But even then, I won't be done with storytelling. I plan on turning storytelling into a side job which I would have in addition to being an engineer. I have so many story ideas floating around in my head which I would love to be able to bring to life and share with others.

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Upon graduation, Kora plans on pursuing a M.S. in biomedical engineering here at the University of Maine before working in research and development. She plans to continue to educate herself in storytelling and creative writing and hopes to become a published YA author one day.