

Parkway Central¹

Marcus approached the Parkway Central Library—or “Libraversity,” as the new sign proclaimed. He rolled his eyes at that. What kind of idiot corporate committee thought that was a good name?

The grand stone columns and towering façade still commanded attention, but the plaza around it hummed with life. People milled about—some resting on benches under leafy trees, others strolling or chatting, while children played near the fountain. The air was filled with the soulful sound of jazz—saxophones and trumpets drifting from a group of musicians in the park, their music weaving through the space like a living thread of Philadelphia’s storied jazz history.

Nearby, a Ghanaian food truck added to the scene, its vibrant colors and the rich aroma of jollof rice and grilled meats drawing a crowd of diverse locals, plates in hand, savoring the flavors. Just beyond the food truck, a group of older Italian men shared stories in thick South Philly accents.

The library’s exterior was alive with digital displays, statues, and portraits. Figures like Fred Rogers, and the Grimke sisters stood alongside Octavius Catto and Bea Johnson.

As Marcus stepped toward the entrance, the jazz, the food, and the energy around him felt like an invitation, drawing him in.

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The last few days had been a whirlwind.

Marcus could barely remember the ride from the prison gates to his one-bedroom apartment. The roads had seemed unfamiliar, even though they were the same ones he’d traveled as a young man—decades had passed since he’d last seen them. The world had moved on without him.

His prison had been the last one in Pennsylvania to close, a part of the final phase of prison abolition. The paperwork for his release had been swift, and he was out. But being out didn’t feel like freedom—not yet. Everything felt out of place, like a jigsaw puzzle with pieces that didn’t fit.

¹ Central ideas derived from participants at the recent Belonging workshop [workshop and participants anonymized to protect the innocent]. Literary flair is courtesy of the many contributors to ChatGPT’s training data. Blame for this assemblage of the workshop’s ideas and for guiding/editing ChatGPT’s writing belongs with David Sorge.

He didn't have much: a cheap bed, a second-hand couch, a dresser that smelled faintly of cheese. But it was his. The thin curtains in the living room blew in the late-afternoon breeze, and for a moment, he thought he could smell freedom. Or maybe that was just the leftover scent of the city.

The place was small, but it was enough for now.

The family had planned a "Welcome Home" party. His mom had cooked, his aunt had made her famous potato salad, and his cousin had brought over a cake that was probably too sweet. They all gathered around the modest kitchen table, too happy, too eager to pretend things weren't complicated.

They laughed, but it wasn't the same. Marcus wasn't the same.

His brother, Jimmy, should have been there. But he wasn't. Jimmy had died years ago—liver failure, too young. Marcus had promised him, years ago, that he'd do better, be better, get out of prison and make something of himself. But now, with his brother gone, the weight of that promise felt heavier than the freedom he'd just stepped into.

His mom gave him a hug and told him she was proud of him. But the pride didn't land right. It felt like a hollow echo of something that was supposed to mean more.

The warm, familiar sounds of his family filled the space, but his mind kept drifting. He was supposed to be free now, starting over, but the thought of sitting around doing nothing made his skin crawl.

He caught Shy's eye across the table. "So, what about work? What's out there for me? I gotta get moving. I can't just sit here."

Shy took a slow bite of potato salad, chewing before answering. "You're good for a while, man. Between the citizen's dividend check and the reparations trust, you're set for now."

Marcus shook his head, the restlessness tightening in his chest. "I can't just sit here and wait around. I need something to do. A job, anything. Can't stand being idle."

Shy set his fork down, leaning back in his chair and looking thoughtful for a second. "Well, you could always head over to Parkway Central. Check it out, see if anything catches your eye. They got openings for all kinds of stuff there."

Marcus frowned, not fully understanding. "Parkway Central? Ain't that just some old library? Thought it was all faded glory by now."

Shy chuckled. "Nah, man. Not anymore. It's a 'Libraversity' now—part library, part school, part job hub. People work, teach, learn all kinds of stuff. And it's free, too."

Marcus raised an eyebrow, still skeptical but intrigued. "Free, huh? Well, that's somethin'..."

Shy shrugged, a grin spreading across his face. “Could be worth checking out. Ain’t gonna hurt, right?”

Marcus thought it over for a moment. “Alright, I’ll check it out.”

Marcus stepped through the doors of Parkway Central, the cool air inside a welcome contrast to the heat outside. He paused for a moment, taking in the scene. A woman at the front desk caught his eye, offering a quick nod as she stood from behind the counter.

“Welcome to the Libraversity,” she said with a warm but succinct smile. “Feel free to look around. If you’re after something specific, we’re happy to help.”

Marcus nodded but didn’t say anything, unsure of what to expect. He wandered deeper into the space, glancing around.

It wasn’t like any library he’d been to before. The place felt more like an interactive museum than a place full of books. There were exhibits set up—hands-on things to touch, to experiment with. There were semi-transparent displays in the air, showing graphs and interactive visualizations, spinning with numbers and data that seemed to tell stories on their own. Reproductions of famous works of art hung from the walls, some of them almost alive with motion.

People moved through the space, some alone, some in small groups, talking quietly, as if every corner held a conversation waiting to be had. The noise wasn’t oppressive, though—there was a hum to the place, like the faint buzz of a beehive.

Toward the back, he noticed a large, quiet reading room, its soft light spilling across rows of comfortable chairs and small tables. Everything here was designed with a kind of fluidity, the boundaries between learning, leisure, and work all blurred. The space didn’t force you into anything—it felt open, like it was made to flow with whoever walked through its doors.

Marcus moved deeper into the space, his gaze drifting over the displays. He passed a section on sociology, where a screen flashed brief, vivid scenes from recent ethnographies—workers in a Shenzhen factory telling their stories, a group of unhoused mothers organizing in Los Angeles, a street vendor in Lagos explaining the rhythms of the market. Each scene lasted only a moment before dissolving into the next, the voices blending into the hum of the Libraversity.

Further along, a display on ecology caught his eye. At its center stood a sculpture-map of Te Urewera in New Zealand, the landscape rising in intricate topography, alive with shifting light. As he watched, the colors pulsed and changed, showing how the region had transformed since it was recognized as a legal person. The rivers ran cleaner, the forests thickened, species returned. The idea was strange to him—giving land legal rights like a person—but he had to admit, the results spoke for themselves.

But what stopped him in his tracks wasn't a glowing map or a flickering screen.

It was what looked like a piece of raw meat, floating in a display tank.

Marcus stepped closer, his brow furrowing as he took it in. The thing was unmistakably a human liver. Not fresh-cut, but smooth and uniform, as if it had never known a body. He read the small plaque beside it. *3D-Printed Human Liver: Functional Prototype.*

He exhaled slowly. His stomach twisted—not in disgust, but something deeper. A weight in his chest. He reached for the nearest shelf, his fingers brushing over the spines of books. Introductory texts on biotechnology. Atlases of anatomy and physiology. A neat stack of electronic book readers, each waiting to be picked up.

He shook his head slightly, murmuring under his breath. "How the hell did they get to the point of making something like this?"

A small screen on the display flickered to life, and a smooth, friendly voice chimed in.

"Hi! I couldn't help but overhear your question. Would you like to know more about this display?"

Marcus blinked at the screen, caught off guard. He glanced around, half-expecting someone nearby to have triggered it, but no one was paying him any mind. The AI agent's interface was simple—just a glowing outline of a face, shifting subtly in response to his presence.

He hesitated, then muttered, "Uh... yeah, sure. What am I lookin' at here?"

The digital face brightened. "This is a 3D-printed liver, created using bioengineered cells and a scaffold designed to mimic the structure of human tissue. While not yet viable for full transplantation, similar bioprinted organs are already being used for drug testing, reducing the need for animal models and improving treatment accuracy."

Marcus frowned. "So this ain't, like... a real liver?"

"In a sense, it is," the AI responded smoothly. "It contains living cells and functions in a controlled environment. However, it does not yet have the vascular complexity required for long-term survival in a human body. Researchers are working to overcome this challenge."

Marcus exhaled, rubbing his jaw. "So how close are they?"

"Very close. Within the last decade, fully functional printed kidneys have been successfully implanted in animal models. Human trials are expected to begin within the next five years."

Marcus stared at the floating organ. Five years. If they'd had this twenty years ago...

He swallowed. "Alright," he said, shifting his weight. "How'd they even figure out how to make somethin' like this?"

"The field of bioprinting builds on decades of research in stem cell technology, regenerative medicine, and biomaterials. Would you like a recommended reading list to explore these topics further?"

Marcus glanced at the books on the shelf again. The idea of sitting down with one of those dense textbooks didn't exactly excite him, but something about the AI's confidence in him made him feel a little bolder.

"Uh... yeah, alright. Lemme see."

A second later, the screen displayed a short list of book titles, along with an option to borrow an electronic reader preloaded with them.

Marcus scanned the list. *Introduction to Bioprinting, Tissue Engineering for Beginners, Anatomy and Physiology Atlas*. He tapped the first one. "I'll start with this."

A soft click came from the shelf, and one of the electronic book readers slid forward, waiting to be picked up.

He grabbed it, weighing it in his hand. Lighter than he expected. The screen flickered to life, displaying a table of contents.

"Let us know if you have any questions," the AI said. "Enjoy your reading."

The screen dimmed, and Marcus was left standing there, the reader in his hands, the floating liver still in front of him.

Marcus hesitated, then scrolled through the list again. His finger hovered over *Introduction to Bioprinting*. Might as well start at the beginning. He tapped the title, and the book loaded onto the reader.

He wandered toward a quieter corner, sinking into a chair. The reader's screen adjusted automatically to the lighting, the text crisp and clear. He took a breath and started reading.

At first, the words made sense. Cells. Proteins. Tissue scaffolds. Then, a few paragraphs in, the sentences started twisting up, crammed with words that felt like a different language.

"A major challenge in bioprinting is the formation of stable biofilms to support cellular adhesion and proliferation..."

Marcus squinted. "Now what in the hell is a biofilm?" he muttered under his breath.

The AI agent flickered to life on the reader's screen. "A biofilm is a structured community of microorganisms embedded in a self-produced matrix of extracellular polymeric substances."

Marcus blinked. "The hell does that mean?"

The AI paused, then recalibrated. “Think of it like this. You know how sometimes, if water sits too long in a pipe, it gets kinda slimy?”

“Yeah,” Marcus said slowly.

“That’s a biofilm—microbes sticking together, forming a protective layer.”

“...So this is like, medical-grade slime?”

“In a way! But instead of clogging pipes, biofilms in bioprinting help cells attach and grow into functioning tissues.”

Marcus exhaled, nodding. “Alright. That makes more sense.”

He went back to reading. Every few paragraphs, he hit another roadblock—*hydrogel scaffolds*, *angiogenesis*, *extracellular matrix*—each one stopping him cold. Each time, the AI agent popped up, and after a couple of fumbled explanations, it found the right way to break things down.

It was slow going.

An hour in, Marcus glanced around and realized most of the people who had been nearby when he sat down had left. Two hours in, he stretched his neck and flexed his fingers, shaking off a cramp from gripping the reader too hard.

Three hours in, he finally reached the end of the first chapter.

He leaned back in his chair, rubbing his eyes. He felt like he’d just wrestled with a damn textbook and barely come out on top.

But he also realized something—he actually understood most of it now.

Not everything. Not all at once.

But enough.

He looked down at the reader, then back up at the floating liver in the display tank.

Maybe this was possible. Maybe he could do this.

As Marcus sat there, still processing what he had just fought his way through, the AI agent flickered to life one more time.

“If you’re interested in digging deeper,” it said in its smooth, patient tone, “the Libraversity offers a number of regular classes in its Biomedicine track.”

Marcus raised an eyebrow. “Regular classes?”

“Yes. We offer introductory and advanced courses in tissue engineering, regenerative medicine, and bioprinting applications.”

Marcus frowned. “Tissue engineering, regenerative medicine...” He shook his head, exhaling through his nose. “Man, that sounds like some serious shit. I barely made it through one damn chapter.”

The AI paused, then adjusted its tone, as if sensing his hesitation.

“If you’d like to start with something more foundational,” it offered, “we also have regular introductory biochemistry courses. Many learners begin there before moving on to advanced topics. These courses provide the essential knowledge to help you understand subjects like bioprinting.”

Marcus glanced at the reader in his hand, then back at the floating liver.

“...Biochemistry, huh?” He exhaled, rubbing his jaw. “And, uh... how long does that take?”

“Courses are designed to be flexible. Many learners complete the introductory biochemistry course in a few months, attending part-time.”

Marcus drummed his fingers on the table, staring at the reader. A biochemistry class. A few months. It wasn’t like he had anything else lined up, but still...

“I dunno,” he muttered. “I gotta get a job first.”

The AI paused. Its expression—a smooth, featureless avatar—shifted slightly, eyebrows knitting together as if in thought. A few seconds later, its face brightened.

“I see a career path opening at Bansen Labs,” it said. “There’s an entry-level position as a lab technician. The work wouldn’t be very hands-on at first—mostly cleaning and inventory—but it would give you a chance to observe the field up close.”

Marcus straightened slightly. “Yeah?”

“Yes,” the AI continued. “And Bansen, like many companies in Philadelphia, has a work-and-learn program with the Libraversity. Employees can take classes while working and gradually take on more advanced tasks as they gain knowledge.”

Marcus sat back, letting that sink in. A job. Something steady. And a way to learn without having to dive in headfirst.

“...So I could get my foot in the door, see if this is really something I can do?”

“Exactly,” the AI confirmed.

Marcus exhaled through his nose, glancing once more at the liver in the display case. The idea still felt big, too big, but for the first time, it didn't feel impossible.

"...Alright," he said. "What do I gotta do?"

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Here's the updated version with a Latina-sounding name for Erin:

The next morning, Marcus sat on the edge of his bed, staring at the scuffed floor of his apartment. A single window let in the gray light of early morning. His dresser—cheap, Ikea-style, but functional—stood against the wall, his few belongings stacked neatly on top. He'd slept like shit, his mind running in circles around the idea of the job, the classes, the whole damn future that suddenly seemed cracked open in front of him.

His phone buzzed on the nightstand. An unfamiliar number.

He hesitated, then picked up. "Yeah?"

"Hello, is this Marcus?" A woman's voice, warm but with a crisp edge. "This is Valeria Rodriguez from Bansen Labs. We received your application for the lab assistant position and wanted to talk with you about your interest."

Marcus straightened, running a hand over his head. "Oh—uh, yeah. Thanks for calling."

"So," Valeria continued, "I see here that you submitted your application through the Libraversity's career portal. Can you tell me a little about what drew you to this position?"

Marcus exhaled, rubbing his thumb against his knee. He hadn't rehearsed this.

"Well... I was at the Libraversity yesterday, looking around. I saw this display—one of those bioprinted organs, a liver." He paused, the image still clear in his mind. "My brother... Jimmy. He died 'cause of liver failure, years back. Seeing that thing, just sitting there in a tank like it was nothing—it got to me. Made me wonder how the hell we even got to the point of printing human parts."

There was a brief silence on the other end. Then Valeria spoke, her voice softer. "I'm sorry to hear about your brother."

Marcus swallowed. "Yeah. Thanks."

"I can understand why that would make an impact," she continued. "Bioprinting is a field that changes lives—it's why so many of us are drawn to it. And you're right, the process behind it is incredible. The lab tech position is a starting role, but it's a foot in the door. If you're willing to learn, there's a real pathway forward."

Marcus nodded to himself. “That’s what they said at the Libraversity.”

“They were right,” Valeria said. “Do you have time to come in for an interview tomorrow?”

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Marcus hung up the phone with a mix of relief and unease, staring at the screen for a second before putting the phone down. The interview was set. Tomorrow.

He leaned back in the chair, his mind briefly drifting back to the display of the 3D-printed liver at the Libraversity, the strange, surreal idea of that being the future. The future.

Shaking his head, he pushed up from the chair and moved to the small kitchen. He was feeling restless, the kind of unease that always seemed to settle in when there was something new and uncertain hanging over him. Setting the kettle on the stove, he glanced over at the single shelf where he had piled some of his meager belongings. His few clothes were already folded neatly, but it still felt like he had so little. Just a bed, a chair, a dresser. The apartment was his. That much was clear. But it felt hollow.

The kettle whistled, pulling him back into the moment. He poured hot water into the mug of instant coffee he’d bought. There was no point in pretending he’d make something fancy.

After a few sips, he grabbed his phone again, scrolling through his contacts. He hadn’t been in touch with anyone much lately. A few old friends from his block, a couple people from the past. Maybe they were busy, but he figured it couldn’t hurt to reach out.

He tapped the screen.

“Yo, Marcus. What’s good?”

He smiled faintly, thumbs hovering over the screen as he typed. He let the conversation meander—catching up on old times, a little small talk. He felt a little better, a little more connected.

Then his phone buzzed again, this time a text. The automated AI from the Libraversity had sent him a reminder.

Reminder: The introductory biochemistry class meets at 1:00 PM today at the Parkway Central location. If you’re interested in attending, please let us know.

Marcus blinked at the message, holding the phone out in front of him as if it might disappear.

He hadn’t really thought about the class since he’d left yesterday. A part of him had wanted to dismiss it—to focus on the job hunt, to stick to what he knew. But now... the thought of it was gnawing at him. He glanced at the clock—11:15 AM. He still had time.

He set his phone down, rubbing his face.

I'll just check it out, he thought. Just see what it's like. He could always leave if it didn't feel right.

Without thinking much more, he grabbed his jacket, slinging it over his shoulder, and headed for the door.

Marcus stepped into the classroom, unsure of what to expect. The space still felt more like an interactive museum than a classroom—tables arranged in clusters, colorful visualizations on the walls, and an easy hum of conversation among the students already there. He was still taking it in when a warm voice called out:

"Alright, everyone, let's huddle up."

Dr. Avery stood near the center of the room, gesturing for the students to gather around. Marcus hesitated for a moment before stepping in with the others. He noticed how naturally they formed a loose circle—no desks, no rigid rows, just people standing together like they were about to start a team exercise.

"I'm Dr. Avery," she said, her tone warm but steady. "Before we dive into biochemistry, I want us to start with something just as important—each other."

A few students exchanged glances, but she continued without hesitation.

"I'd like you to pair up with someone near you," she said. "Take turns sharing two things. First, a time when someone helped you feel like you mattered. And second, a time when you faced a challenge that helped you grow."

Marcus found himself paired with a guy named Theo, a broad-shouldered man with long locs tied back. They sat down at a nearby table, and Theo spoke first, talking about a mentor who had pushed him to apply for a job he thought was out of his reach. Marcus hesitated when it was his turn. He hadn't expected to talk about himself right away. But after a moment, he told Theo about the way his cousin Shy had treated him like he still belonged after getting out.

They swapped stories about challenges, too—Theo talked about struggling with math until someone finally showed him how to see it differently. Marcus thought about all the jobs inside, the way he'd had to learn new things constantly just to survive.

After a few minutes, Dr. Avery brought the group back together. "Now, I want each of you to take something from the story you just heard and complete these two sentences: 'It's clear I matter when...' and 'I'm challenged to grow when...'"

One by one, students shared their sentences, and Dr. Avery wrote them on the whiteboard.

"It's clear I matter when someone takes the time to teach me something they didn't have to."

"I'm challenged to grow when I'm given responsibility and expected to figure things out."

"It's clear I matter when my mistakes aren't held against me forever."

"I'm challenged to grow when I'm thrown into something new but not left alone in it."

Marcus listened as the board filled up. He hadn't expected this. He thought about his own answers but didn't say them out loud. Still, seeing the words written up there, he felt something settle inside him.

Once the board was full, Dr. Avery stepped back. "Biochemistry might not seem connected to this at first," she said, "but this class is about more than just molecules and reactions. It's about understanding life. Growth. Change. Systems that adapt to challenges. And you'll find that the way we learn here mirrors those same processes."

She turned to gesture around the room. "The course is broken into modules, each one building on the last. You'll start with the basics—molecular structures, biochemical pathways—and move into more applied areas, like medicine and bioengineering."

She pointed to different stations. "We've got self-guided exploration areas, small-group problem-solving tables, and a few hands-on lab setups. You don't have to follow a set sequence—work at your own pace, and I'll be checking in along the way."

Marcus glanced around, taking it all in. He had never been in a class like this before. It felt less like something he had to get through and more like something he could figure out for himself.

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A year had passed in what felt like a blur. Marcus had fallen into a rhythm—work at Bansen Labs in the mornings, then over to Parkway Central in the afternoon. At Bansen, he had settled into the routine of lab tech work—cleaning, taking inventory, and prepping materials. He was familiar with the process, but the more he learned at the libraversity, the more he started to crave something more hands-on. The basic tasks weren't bad, but they felt like they were only the first steps into a much bigger world he wanted to be part of.

The morning's shift at Bansen wrapped up, and Marcus made his way to the lab's back exit.

"See you tomorrow, Marcus!" Valeria, the lab coordinator, called as he passed the door. She had become a sort of unofficial mentor to him, always checking in on how things were going and pushing him to try new things, even when he doubted himself.

"See you," he answered, waving a hand over his shoulder before stepping out into the cool Philadelphia air.

He caught the Fairmount Trolley up to the Parkway, the rhythmic rattle of the train against the tracks settling him into his thoughts. He knew the drill by now—get in, get to class, learn as much as he could, get back home. But today was different.

The huddle had just wrapped up when Dr. Avery walked up to him, arms crossed, a knowing smile on her face. "Marcus, looks like you've knocked out all the modules for Biochem 1 and 2." She arched an eyebrow. "How's it feel being a certified science nerd?"

Marcus huffed a laugh. “I don’t know about all that.”

“Well, like it or not, you’re ready for the next step.” She pushed off the table and gestured toward the workstations. “What do you think about putting together a skills demo? I don’t know how Bansen runs things, but a lot of labs use something like this to let folks show they can handle more than just wiping down counters and running inventory.”

Marcus frowned. “A test?”

Dr. Avery shook her head. “Not a test. A chance to show off.” She grinned. “You know how to prep a substrate, run a centrifuge without launching it into orbit, follow safety protocols. This is just a way to prove it. If you want, I can set up the recording gear at the lab station.”

Marcus shifted, suddenly aware of the weight of the suggestion. “Man, I don’t know... I ain’t exactly great with being recorded.” He rubbed his jaw. “Feels like... I don’t know. Like I’d mess it up soon as the camera turns on.”

Dr. Avery nodded, like she’d heard it before. “That’s fair.” She tapped a finger on the counter, thinking. “How about this? We do a trial run, no pressure. I’ll review the footage, give you some notes. If it makes you nervous, you can practice and record another one later.” She tilted her head. “Worst case? You learn what to tweak before you show it to anyone who matters. Best case? You walk into Bansen next week with proof you’re ready to step up.”

Marcus let out a slow breath. He wasn’t sure he liked the idea of being on camera, but he couldn’t argue with the logic. He’d spent the last year pushing himself in ways he never thought he would. What was one more step?

“Alright,” he said finally. “Let’s give it a shot.”

Dr. Avery clapped her hands together. “That’s what I like to hear. Gimme five minutes to get everything set up.” She winked. “And don’t worry—I’ll make sure the lighting makes you look extra smart.”

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The early afternoon sun was warm, but the shade of the tall trees around Parkway Central offered a welcome coolness. It had been five years since Marcus first walked into the libraversity doors looking for a job. The park near the library was alive with people—40 or so freshly graduated students stood in a loose circle, with the older cohorts filling in the rings around them, stretching back in time. The innermost circle, where the elders and children sat, was sacred, holding space for those who had been through the system long enough to see the transformations that had happened over the years. The air buzzed with the energy of celebration, the hum of cicadas mixing with the chatter of friends and family.

The ceremony was small but full of meaning. This wasn't the grandeur of a massive university graduation—it was something more intimate, a department's ceremony, a moment for those in the same field of study to reflect on their growth together.

Marcus stood at the edge of the circle, his feet planted firmly on the ground. His body, once tense and unaccustomed to the weight of academia, now felt comfortable in the ceremony's rhythm. Today marked a significant moment—a culmination of years of struggle, learning, and transformation. The years spent at Parkway Central, at the Public Libraversity, had not been about degrees or tests. They'd been about learning to truly see the world differently—and then acting on it.

Dr. Avery stood first, her familiar calm energy filling the space. Her dark eyes scanned Marcus, a soft smile tugging at the corner of her lips. "Marcus, when you first stepped into my biochem class, you were all questions. But what stood out wasn't just your curiosity—it was the way you took that curiosity and used it to help those around you, too. You didn't just learn the material, you helped us all see it from a new angle. You've turned that curiosity into a profound care for others, and it will carry you far." She paused, taking a deep breath. "Thank you for teaching us all the importance of patience and persistence."

Marcus stood, shoulders straight, as he faced Dr. Avery. "Dr. Avery, I can't thank you enough for showing me what real commitment looks like. You taught me to slow down and think—about the science, but more importantly, about the people. I'll never forget the way you made me believe that knowledge can heal, just like medicine. Thank you for showing me how to ask the right questions."

Dr. Vishwanathan was next. With her sharp intellect and calming presence, she had been a constant throughout his journey. "Marcus, you took my cellular biology course and brought the kind of focus and work ethic that doesn't just meet expectations—it redefines them. You've demonstrated that understanding the fundamentals, even in the face of difficulties, is the foundation of true mastery. And beyond the science, you've found your voice in this field." She gave a thoughtful nod. "Thank you for reminding us all that the pursuit of knowledge is a lifelong endeavor."

Marcus nodded back, his voice steady as he spoke. "Dr. Vishwanathan, your class taught me how to see the pieces—the little building blocks that create everything we know. You've shown me that science isn't just about formulas or lab coats. It's about understanding the people behind the data, the lives that are changed by every discovery. Thank you for giving me the tools to think with both my mind and my heart."

Finally, Dr. Katonah, his anatomy and physiology professor, stepped forward. Her presence had been a steadying force during the more challenging parts of the program. "Marcus," she began, her voice warm, "in my class, you were the one who asked the question no one else dared to. You refused to settle for 'good enough' and pushed yourself—and us—toward a better understanding of how the body works. And now, I see you on the verge of something bigger. Thank you for challenging us all to keep striving."

Marcus smiled softly at Dr. Katonah. “Dr. Katonah, you made me fall in love with anatomy in a way I never thought I would. You taught me to look deeper—not just at organs and systems, but at the stories each one tells. You helped me understand that the human body is a map of our history, our experiences. Thank you for showing me how to respect the process of discovery.”

Each student spoke after their professors, offering heartfelt thanks to their classmates. Jake, a fellow biochem student who had worked with Marcus in many of Dr. Avery’s classes, spoke next. “Marcus, you taught me the value of pushing through the hard stuff. You helped me understand not just the material, but why it mattered. I’m grateful for all the times you stayed late after class to help me, even when you were busy with your own work. I couldn’t have done it without you.” Marcus gave him a nod, his smile genuine.

And then it was Marcus’s turn. He had learned so much not just from his professors, but from his classmates. He scanned the crowd and spoke from the heart: “Thank you all for pushing me to be better, for teaching me the things that I could never have learned alone. We’ve all been through different things, but we’ve learned from each other, and that’s what makes this more than just a degree. It’s a community.” His voice caught for a moment, but he quickly regained his composure. “We remind each other daily how much we matter. And we all grow better when we grow together.”

The ceremony wrapped up with laughter and applause. The food came next—spiced rice and grilled meats from a local vendor, homemade pies, fresh fruit, and drinks shared under the shade of the trees.

Dr. Avery found Marcus near the food tables, balancing a cheesesteak pie and grilled vegetables. She bumped his arm lightly. “So, what’s the game plan for next semester?”

Marcus huffed a laugh. “Man, they got me coordinating a tissue lab over at Bansen, plus I’m taking Bioengineering Fundamentals, so I’m already gonna be runnin’ on fumes. But, uh—you remember that *Sundiata Epic* course I took two semesters ago? Dr. Nfamara hit me up, said he could connect me with this professor, Mavungu, out at Kinshasa University. He’s running a seminar on the Bantu migration, pulling together all the newest research. It’s remote, so we gotta run it through the translation matrix—ain’t no way I’m picking up enough Lingala in one summer. And these days? All the best Bantu studies stuff is *in* Lingala.”

Dr. Avery let out a low whistle. “Whew. That’s a schedule. You’re really stretching both sides of the brain, huh?”

Marcus grinned, shaking his head. “Guess so. Every time I think I got my path lined up, something else opens up. But that *Sundiata* class? That one stuck with me. And Dr. Nfamara? Dude made history feel like a story your uncle was telling you at a cookout. Soon as he mentioned Professor Mavungu’s seminar, I *had* to jump on it. They’re tying together migration studies, oral traditions, *and* genetics? Man, that’s the kinda thing that makes you look at the world different.”

Dr. Avery crossed her arms, giving him a knowing look. “That’s the beauty of this place. You walked in here thinking about livers, and now you’re out here learning Lingala and tracking the movement of whole civilizations.” She raised an eyebrow. “Keep following those threads, Marcus. They’re pulling you toward something good.”

Marcus let out a breath, looking around at the crowd—friends, mentors, folks eating and laughing, swapping stories. He let it settle in for a second, the feeling of it.

“Yeah,” he said, nodding slowly. “I think they are.”