

bird cage

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This book is dedicated to my loving parents and family who supported me on this writing journey.

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PROLOGUE
NARRATOR

Hello, this is the tale of a tragic story, containing tears, laughter, heartbreak, and frustration. Though I won't be the one telling it. I'll leave it to my dear friends Kenzie and Adrian. We'll have Kenzie start us off as she has the most unbiased perspective, though we'll allow Adrian his chance in a bit.

Our story will start in the confinement of the Inside. A place filled with hard workers devoted to a single factory. They do not have a choice of their devotion, the government forces it. Kenzie is beginning to question her loyalty, so is Adrian.

Let's follow them through their courageous story. A fair warning though, I regret to inform you this is long in the past. What happened in our characters' lives was millennia ago, and now long forgotten. My intention is to remind people, to inform people. This way communication may be more valued. Please sit back and enjoy as we dive into our first Chapter.

CHAPTER ONE
KENZIE

Finding ways to pass the time has become grueling throughout the years. I have tried countless things, including exercise, and braiding my hair; at one point I even tried to climb the walls. Nothing, however, has done the trick. Eventually, I stopped trying.

My days now go: eat, work, read, sleep. The highlight of my day is the factory; it gives not only me but many others a chance to do something productive rather than wasting away in our bunkers.

Slowly I get up, pull my hair into a braid and suit up. We are required to wear protective gear to prevent treacherous reactions to the toxic levels of chemicals used. Of course they only say it protects us, I doubt it has any actual safety aspects. I fumble as I put on the midnight black gear that always slows me down with its weight. Pulling on the top jacket, I zip up the front zipper. The side zippers are always more difficult; everyday when I get changed they get stuck. I place the fogged up helmet on top of my head. Immediately it tilts sideways.

It has always been too big for me, another reason I don't believe that our safety is a concern of theirs. I have sent five letters requesting a new one but so far no luck. I pluck my keycard off a tiny nightstand that was so generously given to me after I won "employee of the month". The ridges in the wood have deepened over the years, leaving a large

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crater in the center. I run my fingers through it as I walk towards the exit, a habit I began when I was first placed in Unit 16. I try not to think about the separation from my parents, it brings depressing memories to the top of my mind.

At age seven I was separated from my family and taken to an individual unit. Two scientists named Alexis and Trenton Scroll found out that the world could only support us for a little while longer.

The government never disclosed what was supposed to “end” the world. But whatever it is they had to avoid as much human contact as possible. Since then, I have been on my own which leaves a lot of unfilled time.

At work they give us a book every other month to keep us happy enough to keep coming to the factory. Everyday, when I get home, I read a chapter. Reading only a little bit every day helps give me something to look forward to for the next day. I like to pretend that the main character is me and that their story is my life. It takes me out of this hell hole for a little bit and takes me to a world with happy endings.

I take my thin plastic keycard and press it against the circular scanner. It only activates during 9-9:30 AM and 7-7:30 PM to make sure we don't leave besides to go to work. With a loud click the door slowly opens allowing me to leave.

Once I get outside I mindlessly join the long crowded line. It has become muscle memory at this point, all of us walking at the same pace to the same

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destination. Government officials walk on each side of the line making sure no one tries to run.

The only sound we hear are the clanging of each step from the officials' hard metal-bottomed boots. The rest of their uniform is a simple blue polo with khaki brown pants. Their pace is always unsynced to our perfectly timed steps.

They have nothing to weigh them down while we have 15 pound suits. Once we arrive we all hole punch our IDs so the government knows we came to work. Then we stand at our place next to the conveyor belt and begin to start building.

Slowly, out of habit, my hands start moving the gears into the correct position and tighten the screws. Correct, tighten, repeat. We do this for five hours before they release us to go back to our units. Before leaving I rub my fingers across the cold metal of the conveyor belt, another habit I had started since being alone.

The walk home from work is slightly different from the walk there. It's an extra mile to make sure we get enough exercise and are able to make the trek to work everyday. I always try to take in the setting around me, it's the only time I'm outside.

To my left a sandstorm is kicking up, blowing through abandoned buildings. Tumbleweeds fall out of windows and into the dusty abyss. Run down old shops stand abandoned with shattered windows and broken "open" signs. To my right is an endless dessert with a long fence surrounding it.

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Officials stand guard every twenty feet to make sure no one tries to climb the fence. We walk with our heads down to avoid attention; any sudden movement is met with consequences.

Abruptly one girl stops walking. I recognize her, she stands across from me at the factory. Her suit fits worse than mine. Her sleeves hang far beyond her waist and there are holes in her mask, leaving an area open for toxic air to float in. Her boots are torn with ripped edges. Her face is smudged with oil from a long day at work. She begins to start chanting.

“No isolation without representation!” others start to join in. Soon a whole crowd gathers around her. The officials rush towards them trying to separate them but they keep shouting. I begin to sprint towards the rest of the line which has quickened their pace.

No one wants to be seen as associating with the rebels. That would make us traitors. Soon, I catch up with the rest of the workers, a new hush falling on us.

We are always quiet but this is different. It was like we were scared to move. If we slow down too much, would the officials think we were trying to start another chant? Trying to run? In a way I resented the rebels.

They make it a thousand times harder to remain unnoticed, however I also envy them. They, for one, had good ethics and were brave enough to act on them, and their lives were exciting. They

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aren't safe but at least they have something driving them.

Finally, I reach my unit and, after scanning my keycard, collapse on my cot. I groan as I get up. My legs are sore and I'm exhausted, but I still have a routine to stick to. I grab a piece of jerky and the new book I got last week. *Animal Farm*.

I slowly open it breathing in the smell; the books are shipped in from the government library giving it the smell of the Outside. Nobody from the dust land has ever been to the Outside. We have heard about it, sure, but those are all old stories they'd tell us when we were younger and we still had the luxury of going to engineering school. No one really knows what's there, only that everyone wants to go.

I always try to see the good in things, for example I was granted direct access to water a little over a year ago, but it's hard sometimes. A few months ago, I packed a getaway bag, just in case. I don't know why.

It's not like I would join the rebels and I wouldn't even think about running away. The risks outweigh the benefits by a lot. If I get caught all the privileges I've earned over the years would go away.

They wouldn't put me in jail since they still need me to work but the consequences might be worse. The only benefit would be getting out of here but where would I go? I don't know what's beyond the fence. So really it's just there as a safety net.

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I sit down and begin to read my book. I get so entranced with the story I don't realize I've gone three pages into the next chapter. Panic fills me making my stomach warm and my throat close in.

That's three pages less for tomorrow. How could I have been so ignorant as to not notice. What will I have for tomorrow? These chapters are short, they take me maybe twenty minutes to read. I try to take some deep breaths. This shouldn't be a big deal, it's only a few pages I have to tell myself.

"It's only a few pages," I whisper. I let out a breath. Even though I feel more calm, there's still this feeling of disappointment. My mind keeps racing with all the things that would have made the outcome different. If I had just slowed down. If I had just paid more attention. If I had just not read the three pages. I was obsessing over nothing. I decide the only way to get this off my mind is to lay down and try to get some sleep.

"Come on!" A loud voice says. Why do I recognize it? "Kenzie we need to go" I follow blindly though I don't see where the voice is. We walk for what feels like hours. The voice doesn't talk and neither do I, but there's a comfort to it. We pass luscious green trees that I've only seen in stories and large fields filled with flowers. Each field had hundreds of lilacs, but the unusual thing was they each had a singular white dot on one petal. I crouch

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down to pick one but immediately it turns to ash in my hands. I ask the voice what happened but it doesn't respond. It doesn't appear to care so I move along with it. The air begins to turn a bitter cold and I start to shiver. The voice seems to notice and an instant warmth falls on me. It feels good for a moment but then begins to burn. I yelp and the voice gasps. The burning stops but I can still feel a lingering pain. I begin to grow wary of the voice. However I continue to follow it. It leads me through a dark cave filled with bats and various bugs.

"Where are we going?" I ask

"Somewhere safe."

"But where?" I pry, this time it doesn't respond.

I begin to get frustrated.

"Why won't you respond?" I shout

"Don't get mad I'm just trying to help" BANG

BANG

I startle awake to the banging of the wakeup bell, and sit there for a moment. I am not supposed to be able to have dreams. They drug our water and our food.

In dreams you might talk to the figments your mind creates; the government is worried that could be considered human interaction. But that was definitely a dream. In the stories I read they are always confusing and don't make much sense, or they could be something the character aspires to do or be.

I assume that mine was the former. It must have been a fluke. I need to just shake it off and

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continue with my day. On the walk I notice something different than the usual long road of dust.

A small lilac had grown on the side of the road. I almost stopped walking when I saw the white dot complementing the light purple of the lilac.

CHAPTER TWO

KENZIE

I stumble forward trying to readjust myself. It had to be a coincidence, except flowers don't grow here. They are basically extinct in the Dust Land. And one with the exact same markings as the one in my dream, which by the way wasn't supposed to happen either, was even less likely.

I take a deep breath and continue walking. A few minutes later, I arrived at the factory. I take a moment to scan the area around me. The large metal building looms ominously in the air with a frightening amount of smoke sprouting from the top. If you ask me, that's what's going to end up killing the world.

Behind me lies a cloud of dust slowly moving along the gravel road. Guards stand at every corner holding large metal objects. One shoots me a glare giving me the hint to move inside.

Once I get to my station I notice the girl who normally works across from me isn't there. Suddenly guilt runs through me. How could I have said I envied her just yesterday. Now who knows where the hell she is and if she's okay.

I try to continue building, but throughout the day I notice how many empty spots on the line there are. I thought the officials had to make you come everyday, I thought there was nothing close to a jail here. But maybe there's something worse.

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From time to time we all give each other a worried look. This is a big leap for us and probably the most interaction we have ever had with each other. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

The thing is, many rebellions had occurred in previous years but the next day, they came back. They still were badly bruised and injured but they continued working. The guards let them continue working.

This time I had a bad feeling that they were not coming back. I turn my attention back to my work. I'm building a little clay doll that a boy from the Outside had requested. It has bright blue eyes with wavy chestnut hair.

I cling onto it a second longer than I need to before placing it in neat packaging and pressing a stamp on it. I don't know why they bother writing the city address. We all know it's going to the Outside. I doubt they would even allow a package for one of us into the area.

Even if they would, who would send us anything? No one from the Outside cares and no one here has the materials or money. The currency for the Outside doesn't exist here. There's no purpose for it.

If an official came to live here they would be as broke as us, which doesn't give them pleasure. I place the box in a large bin traced with a silk red fabric.

As I'm walking back a sudden pain in my gut catches me by surprise. I wince as I bend over

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clutching my stomach. Suddenly bile floods up my throat gushing out. I managed to get my helmet off just in time.

Officials race towards me shoving the helmet back onto my head trying to secure it, though failing as it has never fit. I am taken immediately to a med bay and placed onto a cold blue cot. I've only been here one other time.

Food shortage had made food supply short and I was trying to savor every bite, the hunger got to me and I passed out. But this felt different. Instead of being put on a cot near all the others I am rushed to an isolated room connected by a storage closet.

Before I can think, a plastic mask is put over my face and the room goes dark.

I blink a few times before fully opening my eyes. The room is too bright with pearl white countertops and white tiled walls. To my left lies a window that lets in the morning sun.

My body feels lighter than ever before. I look down and see that my heavy suit has been replaced with a thin dotted gown. Groggy and still exhausted, I try to grasp my situation. I start with the facts, I have been here for at least a night. And I am not in any harm. An official comes closer and yells to someone I can't see.

“She is awake sir.” He says stepping back so the man can come closer. He’s wearing a royal blue suit with a cyan tie to complement it. Strapped to his pants is a walkie talkie buzzing with static.

“There she is!” He says with an over enthusiastic voice. “How’s the patient?” Was this permission to speak? Before I can decide he moves on. “You seem to have come down with a virus,” he says, clearing his throat. “We will be putting you in quarantine for a week or so depending on your symptoms.”

My eyes go wide. What about work? What about my books?

Before I can think it through I say, “Can I grab some things from my Unit?” I say it in a weaker voice than I mean to. He looks surprised that I said anything at all, but quickly covers it up with a smile.

“Unfortunately you yourself can not go, but we are happy to grab anything you need.” I tell him about *Animal Farm* and he promises to bring it to me.

The rest of the day goes smoothly. I’m practically waited on by the officials, which is a significant change in the power dynamic. Once my appetite comes back, a fresh meal is brought to me.

My mouth begins to water as I take in the view. In front of me lies a heaping mound of soft buttery dough cooked to be soft and warm. On the side is a bowl of fruits filled with different variations most of which I had never heard of.

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I reach for a small, round, marble looking piece. Its bright purple surprises me, I have never seen such a bold color on a food item before. Warrily I place it in my mouth.

As soon as the juice hits my tongue I want more. It has a weird tang to it but also a smooth sweetness. Soon I devour the whole bowl. Not all of it tasted the same, some were orange wedges that had a bitter sweetness to them, others were round and red but had a sour taste to them that made my face pucker.

Once I finish I move onto the soft pastries. They practically melt on my tongue. They have a rich taste to them and tastes similar to the bread we get every month. That bread, however, was chewy and hard, this is soft and smooth.

I practically inhaled the whole thing by the time the guards had come back in. In his hand he holds a bulky box labeled *med bay*.

“This has all the essentials you will need for the next few days.” *Few days?* I’m about to voice my concern about missing work but then I stop and think.

In here the food is better, and that box definitely has more “essentiels” than were ever an essential for me. Slowly I nod as I reach for the cardboard box. With it he hands me a note. It’s not fancy like most I’ve seen. But a simple folded piece of paper with my name on it.

He gives me a slow nod before leaving the room. I carefully take the lid off to reveal what's

inside. Sitting on the top was a crisp hardback copy of an animal farm. It definitely isn't from my bunker.

The corners glisten as they reflect the sun. I start to flip through the pages. The ink is a bold black written in a messy font that I can't understand. The letters loop together in strange ways making them appear as one.

I blink a few times seeing if maybe my vision is just blurry. Setting aside the book, I see what the rest of the box contains. Inside are treats that I have only imagined.

Bars of chocolate lie in piles alongside bottles of water and tea bags. At the very bottom lies a large loaf of bread dusted with flour. My stomach rumbles with hunger, somehow still hungry from my last meal. As I reach down for the treats I remember the note. Careful not to rip it, I unfold the creased paper.

CHAPTER THREE

KENZIE

My eyes slowly scan the single sentence. *Meet me in the courtyard at half past noon.* Half past noon. I roll the term around in my mind. Half past noon...And that's when it clicked.

Sometimes, during work, if they wanted to let us take a break, they would say "half past noon" to each other as they heard us towards the doors. I remember only vaguely as breaks were a rare occurrence.

The sunlight gleams at its fullest, making our backs burn with heat, our foreheads grow wet, and our masks foggy. I could see that the sun was almost in the center of the sky. Snapping back to reality I look out my window resting my gaze towards the sun.

Squinting, I see the sun's place is low in the left section of the sky. I should have at least a few hours until the sun was a little more than centered. I had learned to track the sun from an early age.

Keeping track of time has helped me go on. It gives me a purpose of sorts. I like to think to myself *you have a few more hours until the sun's centered. Then a few more until dark.* That way every moment is accounted for and I'm always waiting for something.

For the next few hours, I try not to fidget. After I finish my chapter of animal farm, there is

nothing much else to do but to read and re-read the note.

Should I go?

I try to weigh the pros and cons. A government official did give it to me so did that make it mandatory? Or was it to test my allegiance? Then I think about the rebel who worked across from me.

I remember my jealousy towards her so called “exciting” life. If I had wanted that life then why am I not taking this risk? With a deep breath I look towards the sky. Slightly past center. I make my way to the door, slowly lingering for a moment at its frame. I shut my eyes and walk through.

As soon as I step out into the light, panic floods through me. This was a mistake I know it is as I see guards storm towards me. The note must have been a mistake, it had to be.

My breaths start to get quicker the closer the guards get to me. My heart begins to pound in my chest and my foot starts to bounce. *Should I run? Hide? Is there even time? When they get to me what would I say? Sorry my mistake, I thought this was the bathroom?* Their footsteps get closer and closer and I begin to feel like throwing up again.

Suddenly they stop. I look up to two massive guards looming over me. They both wear the traditional uniform except for an ironed on clover. Their eyes glare down at me with a hint of disgust behind them. The one to my left opens his mouth to speak while the other continues to glare.

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“Why are you outside your quarters?” he barks. I don’t know how to respond so I just stand there quivering. “Well?” he shouts. I let out the first thing that comes to my mind.

“Half past noon,” I managed to push out.

CHAPTER FOUR
KENZIE

The guard's glare softens as she says to her partner, "She's with me, I just got word to escort her to the courtyard." He nods as she takes me by the arm. "Where the hell did you learn that?" She hisses in my ear.

I stay silent, assuming it is the safest action. She allows this and an uncomfortable silence falls on us. We pass large buildings I have never seen before. Instead of cracked broken windows, shiny glass seals in the air. The large oak doors were being painted a bright white, the bristles splashing paint on the tarp surrounding the painter.

The cobblestone road we walk on has no deep ditches like the one I spent hours walking home on. I turn to my left to take a look at her. She has jet black hair swooped into a tight bun. Her eyes are a striking blue but yet have an undertone of gray. Her eyebrows are knit tight and from the looks of it, it seems this is a frequent position of theirs. She notices my stare and returns it with a nasty look. I quickly jolt my head the other way pretending to be smelling the flowers.

Once we arrive at the courtyard she points towards a large fountain shooting out water that falls elegantly over the sides and collects in a moat surrounding the structure.

"Stand there and wait, he'll be with you in a minute." With that she practically shoves me

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forwards. Hesitantly I walk forward looking around me for anything out of the ordinary. I was slightly worried that another guard would pull me over.

I look over my shoulder. The guard who escorted me here stands a few feet away, hands pressed to her side. She seems to be warding off other guards. All of this is confusing to me but I decide to take a breath and walk forwards. Once I reach the fountain a hand grabs mine and pulls me inside a nearby building. The hand clasps over my mouth to muffle my scream.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to hurt you.” As soon as he speaks I recognize the voice. It was the one from my dream. I stumble backwards, swatting away his hand.

“What the hell is going on?” He looks at me with sad eyes

“You really don’t remember me?” he asks in a soft voice. I shake my head, a hint of guilt rising. I don’t really remember anything from before. And I definitely haven’t seen him otherwise.

For a brief second I wondered if he meant the dream but I quickly shove that thought out of my head, that wasn’t possible. Dreams weren’t supposed to be possible.

“Well it doesn’t matter.” He directs my attention towards a window, “Do you see that?” I raise my eyebrow.

“The window?” He rolls his eyes.

“No look farther.” I squint my eyes, trying to see what he wants me to. All I saw was the

courtyard. I look back towards him and shake my head again. He sighs.

“Look,” he says, pointing to a small wrinkled box around twenty feet from the glass. “That is a box of discarded chocolate. The officials here are so spoiled they would throw away a not fully finished portion of food. Not just food but also a rare and luxurious one.”

I nod thinking back to the meal I was given earlier. I had not left a crumb as I was worried that I might never be able to eat such food again. For someone to just discard something so rare is hard to even imagine.

“Okay but aren’t you an official?” He rubs his forehead as if he had a headache.

“Don’t you get it?” he asks, eyebrows raised. I was starting to get annoyed at myself for how little I did get. But that wasn’t my fault was it?

I was isolated for basically my entire life. And just now I was plunged into this world that I am extremely unfamiliar with. It’s been a total of five hours. I should not be expected to just magically know all of this.

Closing my eyes tight I strain myself trying to think of something, anything I could say. My mind comes up blank. I didn’t have the courage to speak so instead I slowly shook my head with shame.

“It’s fine, for now let’s get you out of here,” he says with only a hint of disappointment. He starts walking towards the door so I follow.

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His footsteps pad softly against the floor despite the hard metal bottom. Unlike the other officials I've seen, he doesn't try and assert his dominance. He walks at a fast pace but slow enough that I can keep up.

I try to keep quiet so as to not disturb but so many questions run through my head it's nearly impossible. Why would I, of all people, be given that note? He mentioned we might have previously known each other but that seems near to impossible as there was little time before we were all put in bunkers.

Maybe the note was given to me because of my accessibility. I am in an enclosed sick bay where any official had access to me. Though the most pressing question was: *Why was an official sneaking around? If this was government business then why would the secrecy be necessary?*

For a moment I consider the possibility that—nevermind I wouldn't bother thinking about those things as they couldn't possibly be accurate. I continue on our journey to an unknown destination. Suddenly we're outside again. The bright sun blinds me. I put up my hand to shield my face.

"Here," he whispers, "Put these over your eyes." He hands me a pair of glasses with tinted lenses. "They're supposed to help block out the sun," he explains.

I place them atop my nose and everything dims, I take them off again and everything regains color. How odd. I place them back on my face happy

with my new token. A souvenir you could say, to remind me of this bizarre adventure that must be a dream. We continue walking for another twenty or so minutes before we come to an abrupt stop.

“Wait here,” he says with a confidence in his voice I find annoying. It was a demand, an order that I was required to follow. As he was an official I couldn’t say no.

I stand there afraid of another guard approaching me. The man had never briefed me on what I should say if I were to be asked what I was doing. I didn’t even know what I was doing.

Trying to take deep breaths, I think of covers. This was ridiculous since my actions were government business; however, with no tangible proof, who would believe me? I could say that I was lost, that was technically true as I had no idea where I was.

I rack my brain for other ideas but none came. Luckily I saw the man walking back before I needed one.

CHAPTER FIVE
KENZIE

He stops a few feet in front of me shielding me from the view of the rest of the courtyard. He leans in close whispering in my ear.

“To your left is an exit,” he says, tilting his head in the general direction of the gate. “We need to make our way towards it without raising unwanted attention.”

I nod, making my glasses slide down my nose. Pushing them back up I start to stride towards the gate. He shoves an arm in front of me. “What the hell are you doing?” he mutters trying to remain quiet but still get his point across.

“You said we needed to leave,” I respond, about to continue walking. His eyebrows crease.

“Just...” he trails off, “Just follow me.” He rubs his temple as if he has a headache again but begins to slowly advance towards the exit. I have long dreamt of this moment. An escape from this horrid place. But yet I never imagined it coming true.

Still I try to keep my hopes under control. This exit could simply lead back to the bunkers. Disappointed by the idea of this not leading to freedom, I slow for a moment.

What if this gate would just lead back to my ordinary life? Then what, go back to being an engineer? I had been exposed to luxury and did not want to plunge back into my old, dull life. Trying to

compose myself I step forward through the threshold that presents itself as a gate.

As my foot hits the ground, I look up towards the dusty land laid out ahead of me. The man motions for me to follow him as he steps behind a large boulder. I begin to try and speak but he swiftly stops me by covering my mouth with his gloved hand. I stumble out of his grasp, swatting his palm away.

Stage whispering I say, “No. This is the point where I get to ask questions.” I say straightening my posture. “I don’t even know your name.”

He sighs, but indulges me, “It’s Adrian.” He pauses before continuing, as if considering his words carefully. Quickly looking around him he leans towards me to whisper, “I’m part of the rebel group.”

My mouth drops as I think back. In retrospect it made sense. The secrecy, the unwillingness to talk. But one question still brewed in the top of my mind. *Why me? Why was I the one chosen to be a “partner in crime”?* Slumping down on the rock I let out a breath of air.

“Shit,” I let out. “Why the hell did you bring me into it?” Anger starts to run through me. Why did he bring *me* into it? How could he have the audacity to involve me in something that put my life in peril. He purses his lips thinking of an answer.

“ I.. I don’t know,” He mumbles. “It was the most conventional option. You were sick which meant you were isolated from the rest.” I nod, it

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made sense except he had mentioned he had a past connection.

“And do you have any idea how I became ill?”

I press.

His eyes narrow. “For someone who’s an Insider you’re very observant.” This time my eyes narrow. Even though I’ve never heard the term I can guess it was derogatory.

“Or maybe you’re just a bad liar.” As I say it I know it’s not true. He had kept his identity secret from the government for at least a year, even if he had made one slip up it was definitely a rare occurrence.

Plus the dream. It was *his* voice in the dream. It could not be a coincidence that the next day I had become violently ill. “So how’d you do it?” I ask

“Get you sick?” I nod a little relieved that my theory was confirmed. “It was simpler than you would imagine. We drugged you, that little clay boy that you were making. The paint contained glunacin, a drug formed in the early years of confinement, you might have heard of it.” I placed my hand over my mouth as if that could stop the already existing contamination in my body.

“Is that what caused my dream?” I said mostly to myself

“Your dream?” He asks, confused.

“Nevermind it was nothing,” I say, trying to backtrack but he isn’t letting it go.

“You’re not supposed to have dreams, this is..it’s revolutionary.” He says, his forehead creasing.

I start walking hoping to distract him from the conversation. “Wait! What was it about, how did it feel?” He starts bombarding me with questions that come too quick for me to answer.

“Look, first you tell me what’s going on, then I’ll answer your questions, okay?” He nods.

“That seems reasonable,” he says, sticking out his arm. I stared down at his outstretched hand unsure what I was supposed to do. Seeing my confusion he chuckles

“You’re supposed to shake it,” he explains. “It marks the finalization of a deal.” Confused at how that finalizes a deal I am hesitant to embark on an unknown action. “It’s not actually bonding, it ’s just a demonstration of trust.”

Uncertain, I take his hand and shake it. He smiles, the tips of his lips turning upward. I haven’t seen a smile in awhile. It was uncommon for someone in the factory to grin as there wasn’t much point.

We weren’t exactly jumping up with excitement everytime a new order came in, but for some reason his wide smile made my mouth grow wide. Quickly, I try to cover my mouth, not understanding why I had found his smile amusing. I suppose it was for the reason of digging for joy, even if it might not truly be there. I remove my hand and instead look at him expectantly.

“Well?” I prompt

“Well?” He responds, I make an annoyed sound.

Bird Cage

“Well you told me you would explain this situation to me and so far I’m still in the dark.” I remind him, his smile turns into a smirk.

“Yes, however you never specified *when* this deal would take place, I have no obligation to tell you anything at the moment.” He says proudly.

I give him a death stare. He rolls his eyes “Okay fine, I’ll give you the barebones. We need you to infiltrate the official Technical Center and turn off the power connection.”

I arch an eyebrow, this may seem like an answer to most but it had left out too many details for my liking. For example, why did he need the officials to lose power? And why did this involve me? Instead of picking at his story I decide to go along with it.

“Okay... but how would I do that? We send packages out there all the time and it’s in the Outside.” We both knew that if it was in the Outside, safety was a bigger factor in people’s lives.

Officials would be stationed at every corner. It would be simply impossible unless we had an official with us. Then it hit me, as far as everyone knew Adrian was a loyal official. He had trust within the ranks, as his colorful badges were displayed across the chest of his uniform. “You’re going to get us in...” I mumble to myself. Hearing me, he nods in agreement.

“Well technically you’re our ticket in, as the guest of honor,” he says with a chivalrous bow. I give

him an unsure look which does nothing to stop his rambling voice.

“I’m going to explain to them you’re an escaped worker, we supposedly need a tracking device for you which will give us access to the facility.” It was actually a brilliant plan on paper but not well thought out.

As someone fantasizing about escape for years this seems like a once in a lifetime opportunity, and, afraid of overstepping my bounds, I decided to simply shake my head yes.

His grin widens. “Perfect, well let’s hit the road, it’s going to be a long walk,” he announces as he motions me forward.

In my mind nothing could be longer than the walk to and from work but from the looks of it, the wastelands went on for miles and miles, it appears endless.

“We can’t possibly walk all that way in this heat. We will die of dehydration, or starvation, or maybe heatstroke,” I say, getting myself wound up by all the nightmarish possibilities. He places a steady hand on my shoulder to calm my nerves.

“There’s a rebel tent about halfway through, where we can get extra supplies, water, food, etc. And for now we have this,” he reassures me whilst handing me a canteen, brimming with fresh water along with a full loaf of bread and a bar of chocolate.

My eyes go wide at the delicious delicacies displayed before me. Slowly, my mouth begins to water and I practically grab the food from him. I try

Bird Cage

to stuff the food in my mouth, but before it even touches my lips, they are seized from my grasp.

“You have to savor them as meals. It will be at least a day before we reach the tent.” I mentally admonish myself. Of course, I had been meal planning my whole life. How could this just slip under my nose?

I mumble apologies that I am not sure he hears. Before I can clarify, he reaches into the bulky bag he has been carrying and comes out with a lump of clothes. “Here put these on.”

Grateful for the alternative attire option, I thank him as he turns around to give me privacy. I begin to unfold the clumped together items revealing the fabrics’ designs.

It was a simple black short sleeve T-shirt with matching black pants. Slipping them on, I embrace the comfort the clothes bring. Whenever I wasn’t wearing my suit I was wearing the same worn down dress.

It was a nice change to have new clothes that weren’t made in the 1970s. Once I finish, we continue to walk in silence for a few minutes. The silence is comfortable to me; I am used to it. Though, today was full of changes, so why not go out of my comfort zone?

“So,” I say. “How long have you been in the rebel group?” He stops for a moment.

“I don’t think I can tell you that,” he responds with another smile teasing his lips. I gave him a playful shove even if I was a little annoyed with his

secrecy. He rolls his eyes at me. "If I told you everything it would ruin the element of surprise." I give him another shove.

"In books no one likes surprises, it's better to just know what's happening," I retort. He gives me a confused look.

"Nobody thinks that. The surprises are what makes it interesting," he rebuttals. I momentarily consider this; excitement is what drives a person I suppose.

"I'm going to choose not to respond to that so as to keep my dignity intact." At my words, he smiles.

"No you're right I guess predictably would be preferred for some," he agrees.

After our short conversation, silence fell upon us. This time though, it's uncomfortable. I had an urge to continue our talk, he was fun to discuss matters with.

It was also one of the only conversations I have ever had, and it came surprisingly easy. I think it was a result of the amount of books I had read; it gave me an idea of what the world is like.

Trying to spark another conversation I say the first thing that comes to mind. "Have you ever read Anne of Green Gables?" I prompt.

"Anne of Green Gables?" He repeats. I nod. "No I don't believe I have." It seemed to be the end of the conversation until he asked, "How did you learn to read?" It seems random and abrupt, for a moment I really had to think to find the answer.

Bird Cage

“I believe I began to learn when I first started at the factory.” I think back trying to remember the exact details. “It was the first month, and they had sent me a picture book called *Giraffes Can’t Dance*. The words were relatively simple so as they sent me more and more books I gradually began to understand them.”

“Huh,” was his only response. For the next few hours we chatted about various things. I was the happiest I had been in ages.

Suddenly, he stopped.

“What is-” but then I see it too, a large tent about ten yards away.

CHAPTER SIX
KENZIE

We begin to approach the large structure. Dust flew at us, blinding me momentarily. Still we walk on hurriedly driven by thirst, hunger, and exhaustion. We finally reach the flaps of the tent. Shoving them upon Adrian greets the people inside with a large bow.

“The hero has returned,” he declares. His enthusiasm was responded to with grim faces. Slowly, the smile falls off Adrians face while his eyebrows crease with worry. “What is it?” He asks wearily.

A girl with blonde curls holds up a slip.

“The government found us.” Adrian sucks in a breath. “They said they’re willing to let it go if we leave immediately.”

I turn to Adrian. “Why would they just let it go?” I ask. “I’m sure you saw what they did to those rebels in the factory,” I say, directing my question towards Adrian. To my annoyance the girl responds instead.

“If word got out that we were advancing, then others might have the motivation to as well.” I didn’t quite understand, though that is seeming to be a common motif.

“So we skip to step five then,” Adrian says, causing a round of gasps. “Come on guys, it’s the most realistic course of action here,” he says,

Bird Cage

pausing, looking for agreement which is hesitantly found. “Kenzie I’m about to tell you everything you want to know, well most of it anyway,”

CHAPTER SEVEN
KENZIE

Slightly disturbed by the use of my name when it was never given, I'm worried that if I speak he might change his mind, though looking at his determined expression I had doubts of this.

"We've scouted you for many reasons-" the blonde girl scoffs, but Adrian shoots her a glare before continuing, "You're well trusted by the government, you have privileges others don't experience, and you're one of the only ones who actually read the books they give out."

The blonde girl mumbles something under her breath. "Shut up Sky, anyway like I said earlier, we need you to sever the power connecting the government computers." His words begin to overwhelm me.

"Hold on," I say, stopping him, "What the hell is a computer?" Sky snorts out a laugh

"You don't know what a computer is?" I take a distasteful stare at her official uniform.

"Sorry I haven't had the privilege of living a life with access to computers, just like I haven't had the privilege to blonde hair dye," Adrian practically falls over laughing,

I give her a wide smirk putting an over enthusiastic snicker with it. If looks could kill I'd be dead. Her glare almost makes me wince but I fight the urge.

Bird Cage

Still laughing, Adrian starts explaining again, “Moving on, we need to get going if we're going to get there by nightfall.”

“Why nightfall?” I ask.

“The quicker we get this done, the better,” he answers, sounding stressed about the time.

“And what's the endgame? What happens when the power turns off?” I prod.

“You'll see,” is the only answer I receive.

Great. Once again I'm the only one in the room confused. I had dreamt about freedom for ages, but now that it's happening, it's so rushed. Everyone has been exposed to this life longer than I have, making me feel inferior and stupid.

Hopefully this routine of not filling me in ends soon. I walk forwards and grab a large bottle of water, I shove it into his arms wrinkling his uniform in the process.

“Ok then. We better get our shit together and go,” I say in a clipped tone.

“Well then, let's get to it,” Adrian says gathering his things. We collect the resources to continue our journey. Canned beans, frozen milk, and gallons of water.

The ripples in the small currents make me notice the dryness in my throat. Slowly, we trek towards the door hesitant to leave the comfort of the tent. With one big stride I push the flaps open bursting into the heat of the sun.

The wind has picked up, creating small tornadoes carrying grains of sand and depositing

them in our eyes and mouth. Coughing I place the glasses back on my head and pull my shirt up to cover my mouth. The next hour goes by quicker than expected.

Adrian and I have various conversations that are surprisingly engrossing, so we lose track of time. I nearly walked into a pillar before noticing where we were.

“Quick over here.” Adrian motions towards a bush. The branches hang low and only a few leaves remain, but it provides at least some cover. I crouch down next to him, taking my voice down to a whisper.

“What now?” I ask, realizing we never discussed what the next course of action would be.

“Put these on,” He hands me a pair of metal handcuffs and helps me clasp them around my wrist. The metal feels cold on my arm and sends goosebumps up them.

A slight dollop of fear strikes me; I had always been worried about actually ending up in one of these. My mind pictures me being carried off to an even more lonesome bunker than the one I already live in; me kicking and screaming but no one there to hear me.

The officials' expressions would be cold with no emotion being shown. Before I get any further I get up with Adrian's help snapping myself out of my thoughts. He makes his face go blank before grabbing my shoulders and shoving me towards the gate. “Sorry,” he whispers in my ear. I take a second

Bird Cage

to look at the building in front of me. Four thick pillars support an arching dome which leads into the main building. Station doutside with dozens of Officials marching back and forth.

The real Official at the gate puts a gloved hand out, stopping us. My forehead begins to bead with sweat.

“Please state your business,” he says in a robotic tone. Adrian steps forward holding an orange slip.

“Prisoner number 1230, she tried to escape her unit,” he states in a slow clear tone. “We just need to pick up a tracking device.”

The Official looks over the slip, his eyes forming a squinted shape. After what feels like hours he nods, entering a code into a gray plastic keypad. The gate opens with a loud clunk. Adrian pulls me forward into the unknown abyss.

CHAPTER EIGHT
NARRATOR

Sorry to interrupt so late, I just wanted to allow you to see the other perspectives of this specific tale. Now, let's get into it. The subjects were unaware that this action would subsequently start a ripple of effects leading to- well let me stop myself there. I want to keep this lighthearted as long as I can, though don't forget this story is a tragedy.

Moving along, the subjects ignorantly continued into the government facility unaware of the consequences that followed. Both subjects were hesitant but not enough to put a halt to this plan. Not wanting to spoil the rest of our story, I'll stop soon, however there's one more thing I should mention. The story up to here has been simple, easy to follow along. After this though it takes a morbid turn.

Please don't be alarmed by what you read, it is only meant to be informative to what happened millenems ago. Though if you want to stop now I wouldn't blame you, if you're more brave hearted then I wish you the best of luck. Enjoy this journey and make sure to follow along carefully.

CHAPTER NINE

ADRIAN

I stumble forward holding Kenzie. Excitement had built up in my chest and it took all my willpower not to let out a laugh. We had finally gotten here to the facility itself.

I drag Kenzie down a long hallway trying to be gentle while still maintaining an aggressive image.

As we walk, a slight guilt sparks at the back of my brain. I didn't need to get Kenzie involved, it was purely selfish. Though with being trapped in this world of isolation, seeing a familiar face was too tempting to turn down, even if she doesn't remember me.

I barely even remember to be fair. I was six I think, Kenzie was four. Our moms were best friends resulting in our families being together frequently. The only thing I remember vividly is when they were taken away.

Kenzie and I were playing in an inflatable blue kiddy pool, drinking lemonade that made our mouths pucker. Suddenly our moms snatched us out and hugged us close.

Soon after, our dads came rushing over joining the growing huddle. Men, with what I now know are Officials' Uniforms, marched over grabbing our parents away and separating them into different vans. The next part makes me cringe everytime I think about it.

A man comes up to us holding a lollipop in each hand, slowly luring us into separate cars. Once I was fastened in my seatbelt he handed the candy to my little hands, which were reaching out, trying to grab it.

Blissfully I enjoyed my sweet not giving the oddness of it all a second thought. Slowly I became drowsy and passed out.

Snapping out of my thoughts I hear a loud bang. In front of me prison doors are opening. Kenzie looks at me with fear in her eyes.

“Adrian do something,” she whispers.

Before I can think, the guard says, “We can store her here while we go to the tech lab.”

Thinking on my feet I respond. “Sorry, I have direct orders to keep her in sight at all times,” I explain, hoping it sounds believable. He gives it a second to think before nodding. I’m glad he allowed this but am almost sure it is the last thing he is willing to be lenient on.

“In that case give her to me. I’ll watch her while you get what you need.” Or maybe not.

“Sir, I don’t think you understand, I need to watch her. The supers only granted me authority” He now begins to glare.

“Did they now?” I gulp before nodding. He gives my one final look before grumbling, “Fine but I still need her to be handcuffed and accounted for every second she’s in this facility.” I let out a sigh of relief.

Bird Cage

“Roger that.” Grabbing Kenzie’s wrist, I motioned for her to follow me through an archway leading to a vast office space containing hundreds of boxed cubicles, though none contained anyone.

The computers seemed to be working on their own. “You need to get in there and flip the power switch.” I point to a boxed off space containing a singular button. There seemed no need for any protection of it as everyone was contained and those who weren’t were met by officials.

Kenzie nods and begins to walk forwards. Her feet drag slowly lifting from the hardwood floors. She looks back at me but I nod encouraging her to keep going.

As she moves closer to the door, the guilt piles up more. We don’t really need her, Sky was right. This was purely for my own good, I don’t know why it even mattered.

Though now that she was here I felt a blanket of comfort. I had this odd sense of coming home. As her braid swayed as she walked I was flooded with warmth, even though we were focusing on a specific mission I was on the verge of saying something just to create a conversation.

Slowly, she began to approach the door. With a look back at me, I can see her fear. I had never explained why we needed this. With no computers available, communication will be derailed allowing for us to lead the rebellion towards the Main Office building.

Our numbers will allow us to regain our rights to knowledge. Finally we will be able to understand what's at hand, maybe then we can prepare a more realistic solution. Kenzie starts to press her hand against the lever. Before she has the chance to pull it, guards storm in lead by the official who had let us in.

"You idiots didn't think we had security cameras did you?" Shit I was still getting used to the concept of video tapes. Before I can respond he starts to shout, "What the hell is she doing?" He walks forward and tries to grab her. She kicks him away but quickly becomes frozen. I rush forward to help, knocking guards out of the way.

"Pull it!" I shout. She grabs the switch and slams it down hard.

CHAPTER TEN
KENZIE

The world began to shift. Around me the walls began to fall and the setting started to change. Sand flooded in, momentarily suffocating me. I try to stay awake but slowly I lose consciousness.

My eyesight is blurred and red spots begin to appear. Slowly I prop myself up rubbing my eyes, “Adrian?” I call in a groggy tone. No response. I look around. Somehow I am in a desert landscape surrounded only by dunes.

As I stand, sand falls from my lap, some still sticking to my pants. “Adrian?” I call out again. Fear starts running up my spine.

I look around trying to figure out what’s going on. I’m alone again. No one’s around for miles. At least back in the Inside people were in a near radius to me, now it was just me.

I try to focus, though a small thought creeps in the back of my mind. *What’s the point?* If I went back and the movement failed I would be trapped, if I stayed here I would be trapped.

The choices were equivalent just with different context. Instead of walking forwards I collapse to the ground. Tears start to brim my eyes.

Alone. It was a funny word. It doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re lonely, it also doesn’t

mean there are people around you. I thought there was going to be no more isolation yet here we are.

I let out a sob. Maybe after it all I could find my parents, my family. Or maybe me and Adrian would spend the rest of our days rotting in a dingy prison cell, the only things to keep us company, ourselves and the mice that infested the Inside.

Or I could keep moving. Even if Adrian and I don't succeed, we would be in no different a place if we hadn't tried.

Cautiously, I get up. Scanning my surroundings, I find a small pond with a small but distinct bush in it blooming with a vibrant lilac decorated by a single white dot. I flashback to my dream; it was only a few days ago at most but it feels like a different lifetime.

Sprinting forward, I reach the oasis. As I reach to touch the water the world shifts again. Suddenly I'm lying face up on a floor that was cold to the touch. Adrian's sitting over me shaking me awake,

"Kenzie?" He screams, "Kenzie wake up we have to go!" As my eyes flutter open he lets out a sigh of relief. Pulling me up he practically carries me out of the facility.

"What the hell happened?" I ask, still dazed.

"No time to explain right now just run!" And so I do. Dashing with all my might I follow Adrian to nowhere in particular. We sprint through the hallways and push through the heavy doors we entered. We keep running and running. Finally we

Bird Cage

stop. At this point, we're at least a mile from the Tech Lab.

"I'm going to ask one more time. What. The. Hell. Happened?" He sighs, rubbing his temple. He looks exhausted with deep circles under his eyes and his mouth in a tight line, unwilling to lift upwards.

"Once you pulled the switch you immediately passed out. Maybe it was the anxiety? After that it was pure chaos. Officials rushed towards us and I was trying my hardest, but I'm not sure if the power is still off or not."

The only sentence I paid attention to was the first. I hadn't actually been transported; it was all a dream. Another dream. It contained the same lilac as before but still didn't allow me to come near it. I stumble backwards.

"Adrian," I ask, almost at an inaudible volume, "Have you ever had a dream?" He looks at me trying to figure something out though I'm not sure what.

"Why? Did you have another?" I nod

"Have you ever seen a purple lilac with a white dot on one of the petals?" I ask.

His eyes go wide. "We need to go."

CHAPTER ELEVEN
NARRATOR

I see you've met Adrian, sorry to introduce him so late but this is when it's essential for his view on things.

Our characters boldly trek back to the un-inhabited tent that was discarded merely hours earlier. With Kenzie in the dark and Adrian in a storm of worry, no polite chatter occurred. What Kenzie didn't know was that the flower that was such a frequent visitor was actually the logo for the study the Scroll brothers had conducted. Adrian was anxiety filled, worrying that Kenzie might be having side effects from the drugs he had provided to her unwillingly. Though in retrospect he would find his theory implausible and inconclusive. Still, for the time being, his mind filled with the worst possibilities.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ADRIAN

Were these side effects somehow my fault? And why was she picturing the logo of the Scroll brothers? We had to go see James; he had more information than me, more experience.

What would these dreams do? Could they be fatal? With so little modern research and so little interest, no one could know. As we walked, the dunes became higher and the sand seemed thicker.

With the heat weighing down on us our movements were slow and unproductive. Droplets of sweat trickled down our faces, leaving unwanted trails.

My hair was now matted to my scalp; each step made my whole body ache. I look backwards at Kenzie, she has fallen behind a few steps and her eyelids were beginning to droop. We needed to stay awake so what better way than to tell a story?

“Remember when I implied that we knew each other?”

She nods. “And then you closed up and never mentioned it again.”

“Right,” I say, embarrassed, but still a little glad I didn’t tell her until now. “Our moms knew each other. They were always together which resulted in us being together just as frequently.” I pause considering if I should say the next bit.

Taking a breath I continue, “We were together the day we were taken away.” Once I finish I

expect a hug, or some tears, or at least a conversation. But all I get is silence. We walk for a few minutes, while I still wait for some sort of response. Eventually she whispers.

“Why can’t I remember?” A slow tear drips down her cheek. At this moment she looks so completely devastated that it makes me stumble backwards.

“If you did it would be a burden, trust me you got lucky,” I say in a comforting tone, or at least what I thought was one until she shoots me a glare.

“No Adrian, I didn’t get lucky. I got stuck in hell with only the memories of working at the goddamn factory. You got to be an official with memories of the good times, the times with family. How does forgetting make me the lucky one?” Her words make me wince. She was right; she wasn’t the lucky one, I was.

“Kenzie I’m-”

“ Save it, it doesn’t even matter.” Biting my tongue I follow her order and drop it, for about five seconds.

“At least now we can make new ones?” I say as a question. She looks at me with disbelief.

“You really think this is going to work? That a few random teenagers are going to free the world?” She shouts in frustration. “Adrian we’re going to end up dying alone in a caged up cell.”

What was her problem? I was doing all I could to keep the mood positive and light, trying to avoid the fact this was very likely to fail. It didn’t matter

Bird Cage

though, she was already so convinced we were going to fail she doesn't need my opinion.

"You know what? Fine if you think that then go home. I can save the world on my own. I can go down in history on my own," I yell back.

"Fine!"

"Fine."

She wipes the tears from her eyes and storms off to the middle of nowhere. "Kenzie wait, you don't know where you're going. Let's just go see James and then I can drop you off back in the Inside, Okay?"

She stops. Her back faces me and for a moment I don't know if she'll come. Finally she turns around and mumbles out a "Yes".

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
KENZIE

I was enraged with Adrian. The way he just assumed everyone had it better than him. We're *all* stuck in this hell of a world, not just him, not just me.

Before I can retaliate, we approach a daunting building made completely of stone. It looms over us, daring us to enter. Adrian walks forward not noticing I had stopped.

"Come on, if you want to get home we have to get this over with," he grumbles, letting out a sigh of exasperation. His arms fold as he grants me an arched eyebrow, questioning my decision. Eventually I groan and follow him.

"Where are we going anyway?" I prod. Getting fed up with the secrecy.

He rolls his eyes. "Do you always have to know everything?"

"When it involves me, yeah." He thinks for a moment longer than I would have liked before responding,

"How about this? I'll tell you once you're inside the building." I snort. *Yeah right, because that sounds trustworthy.* Although my clothes were almost soaked through with sweat, my throat was drier than the desert, and my stomach sounded like one of the machines back at the factory.

Desperate to be somewhere sheltered from the dessert, I reluctantly nod, making a dark brown

Bird Cage

strand of hair fall out of my ponytail and into my eyes. Blowing it out of my face with a gust of air I storm past him and into the building.

“Happy?” I practically yell.

“Very,” He says with a cheeky grin. “We’re here to get you an MRI.”

My eyes grow wet as I stare upwards into the ceiling light. The doctor begins to try and comfort me, he says to ‘focus on happy thoughts’. All I can think about is how pissed I am at Adrian.

Once he told me why we were here in the first place he slammed the doors shut and lectured me on the importance of safety until I finally agreed. Trying to redirect my thoughts, I focus on the plastic material I lie on.

It was navy blue with deep rips in the corners. Fuzz bled out in soft brown clumps. Coating the mattress was a thin sheet of wax paper, transparent enough I could see the blue seep through, but the fine details were unable to be seen.

I tap my finger up and down, up and down. Each time I do, I take a large breath in and out. With one last look at the blinding light I clamp my eyes shut, turning the world a pitch black.

“All we’re going to do is essentially take a photo of your brain, alright?”

Lulu Spitzberg

Even though I lacked the knowledge of what a photo was, I obliged. It took about forty-five minutes in which time all I could do was think.

I thought of the factory, my bunker, but most of all, I tried to recall memories of life before we were abducted. I could remember my mother's brown wavy hair, and my father's bright neon green glasses.

Even though I tried with all my might, I didn't have even the tiniest memory of Adrian. "All right we're all done, if you'll come into the back room I can show you what's going on."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
ADRIAN

I follow the doctor's pointed arm to where he has indicated in the picture of Kenzie's brain.

"You see how in the temporal lobe there is a small portion looping around? That's called the hippocampus. This allows you to remember certain events or occurrences. Your dreams have such a close relation to your memory that the hippocampus contains both aspects." He pauses to give us time to process.

"You can see that it has been more active recently. Adrian you mentioned that Kenzie can not recall anything before confinement yes?" Kenzie shoots me a glare that I ignore.

"Yes."

"Lovely well that might be intertwined with why you are having dreams. See, your inability to recall previous events might be why you're experiencing dreams. These dreams are to show you past events even if they may be slightly altered."

Kenzie steps forward before asking, "So you're saying my dreams represent things that have already happened to me?"

"Precisely, though there is a high chance that they are not the exact reality that happened. For example, you might have a dream that you're a bird flying high over a landscape when in reality you simply saw that bird or maybe you were in a plane

and saw a beautiful landscape. The point is, yes these are previous memories.”

Kenzie and I both look at each other stunned. “Wait, I had a dream where I was trapped in a desert, but that doesn’t make any sense. Why would a toddler be alone in the Inside?” She asks, confused.

“It could speak to a more recent memory, maybe this dream was a visual of the pain you feel when you’re alone,” She slowly nods at his response.

“Ok but what about the lilacs I saw? How would I have known such a specific design?” He sits down and motions for us to follow.

“I’ve been doing some research and managed to get my hands on the Lilac. I’ve done some tests and it seems like they are essentially drugs. I believe this is what the government has been drugging our food with. I think it may have also been tampering with our emotions.”

“Well that settles it,” I state, “We have to go to the Outsides headquarters.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN
NARRATOR

I'm going to allow you a sneak peek at a real government official before Kenzie and Adrian storm the castle. I see it as only fair to get both perspectives before setting one specific bias.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
ALLAN
(GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL)

My mind wanders as the window catches my eye. A single tree blooms outside of the conference room, carrying purple lilacs with white dots. I have been stuck in this meeting for hours with the head general and a few other high ranking officials.

We have been discussing the recent rebellions developments. They act without the knowledge of what's going on; they believe that we are the antagonists and are living the so-called high life. But, the true story is, we live in separate bunkers as well, only communicating when in meetings.

Recently, we have implemented drugs to calm civilians, though the effects have not been working as we would have hoped. Many officers have wanted to send out one of our defense missiles as a warning to rebel groups, but I feel as if that would cause more harm than it would fix.

Thankfully, my general agreed with me. I fidget with my Ski mask adjusting it to fit more comfortably. We are required to wear masks in meetings so as to not reveal our identities; only names are used.

“Official Allan, would you like to chime in?” My commanding officer says as a question but I know it is meant as an order.

Bird Cage

“Yes sir. I believe that with the power now down, communication is now at its lowest. Even though we all know communication might very well be the end of the world, we also know it is vital in times of need. We have withheld information for two decades and now I believe, to keep rebels at bay, we must make a statement to the Inside, releasing the research of the scroll brothers.” A chorus of gasps flood the room.

“You can’t be serious?” The head general asks with pure shock on his face.

“Sir, I am very serious. I mean think about it, the only reason they are rebelling in the first place is because of their lack of knowledge. If they knew the extent we go to to protect them, their views might alter.” This piqued the interest of the group but doubts were still held.

“You are correct about the need for communication but how can we balance that with what we know?” My commanding officer’s voice lowers to a whisper. “How can we be sure that the last line of the predication will not prove to be true?”

He was referring to the stone the Scroll brothers had scribed their research onto. Wanting it to preserve better than a simple manuscript, they etched their knowledge onto a rock. The last line read: *To those who read this, beware that in this land a tragedy will occur. With no specific knowledge other than the world will end in a war, one misunderstanding between three people ends it all. We must encourage you to isolate, limit forms of*

speaking, communication, or online communication. Please take this warning as not just a predication but a fact.

Anyone working for the government knows this excerpt by heart. I am aware of its vagueness but we must treat it as, like they say, a fact.

“This is true but what if by lack of communication it sparks a misunderstanding we must be cautious in the way we proceed.”

Just as I finish my sentence, a banging at the door occurs. My head swivels backwards as I see two figures walk in.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
KENZIE

We manage to make our way to the Headquarters in an efficient amount of time. We storm through the doors passing officials along the way. It again appeared as if I were a prisoner and Adrian was just another official.

Finally, we enter a long narrow hallway; Only one light flickers above us. Shivering, we proceed to the door at the far end of the passage.

“So do we just walk in?” I ask. “I feel like we should knock, we should just knock.” I bring my fist up to the door but Adrian swats my hand away.

“No! We just walk in. But we need to project confidence. They need to know we see ourselves as in charge.”

I bite my lip, he is right it just feels awkward. Then again they are never going to take us seriously if we don't look like we believe we were right. I bring both hands up and shove the doors wide open stomping aggressively, but with elegance, inside.

Five officials are sitting around a square table, discussing something I couldn't quite make up. Once they hear the doors slam open, their heads quickly turn in our direction. I look at Adrian, not sure what to do now. He looks back at me motioning for me to step forward.

“We came to demand our rights back,” I say with as much confidence I can muster. “You have taken every morsel of enjoyment from our lives and

kept it for yourselves.” I let my words float around the room content with my speech. One boy who looked to be my age with slicked back brown hair stood up.

“See this is what I mean,” He says, directing his attention toward the people at the table. “Citizens are starting to rebel, two of them even infiltrated our Headquarters. Soon we will be fighting off mobs. We need to have some sort of press address. Maybe even she could hold it.”

He pauses, a smile sneaking onto his face. “Actually that would be great, having a rebel explain our cause. Take them downstairs,” he orders. Soon guards are coming towards us grabbing our arms and thrusting us forward.

“What the hell!” Adrian shouts “Why would we help you? Especially with this as our welcome?” The grin disappears from the Official’s face.

“One day you’ll understand. You’ll understand the misinformation that has spread and maybe one day you’ll even appreciate us,” he says in a way that was mostly to himself.

“No way in hell,” I shout.

He sighs. “Take them away.” Slowly, they inject a purple liquid into our arms making the world slowly go black.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
KENZIE

Once my eyes readjust I take in our surroundings. In front of me is a long metal table that is cold to the touch. Bordering it are soft leather chairs, each holding an official.

The room was barely lit; the only form of lighting is three lanterns in the middle of the table. Murmurs come from the people sitting until they realize I am awake.

“Please take a seat,” The man I recognized from earlier says, “If you could just look forward and read what’s on the script.” He shoves a stack of papers towards me. My mind, still groggy, doesn’t comprehend what’s happening

“Where’s Adrian?” I ask.

“I’m right here,” a voice behind me says. Slowly, I turn to see Adrian standing, holding the same papers in his hand and facing a black object with a small red light blinking in its head.

His eyes have a red undertone with dark circles under them. “Read the script Kenzie, they’re right. The world could be a brighter place. After a few years, people will rejoice at family reunions. All we need to do is follow the orders the government gives us.”

His tone was robotic and his voice was dry, lacking any emotion. It was like someone else was talking for him. I slowly begin to panic; *is Adrian under some sort of control?*

“You see we’re live broadcasting our mission statement. But before we begin you might want to try our new remedy of Lilac juice. We just perfected the recipe,” the official says whilst thrusting a glass of purple liquid into my hands.

I look back towards Adrian now noticing the purple stains on his lips. The purple lilacs. That must be what they used to drug Adrian. My hands shake as I throw the liquid to the ground.

“No!” I scream. His once kind smile turns into a glare.

“If you don’t do this I can make things **very** difficult for you, and, unfortunately, we cannot begin filming without your...hydration,” he snarls.

Suddenly, I form a plan. Trying to make my apologetic smile believable, I form a grin attempting to hide my fear.

“I’m sorry, you’re right give me another glass,” I say, my voice higher than it should be. They hand me another one this time I take a sip but don’t swallow. I nod and they move the object with the red light in my direction.

“Just read what’s on the script.” He says with a snap, his fingers making a sound that echoed off the walls. I wonder what that would have done if I had consumed the glass. The red light starts to flash again and I begin to read.

“As you all are gathered in the Central Auditorium, I, on behalf of the entire government, would like to welcome you to the Outside!” I take a breath and begin to shout. “Everything the

Bird Cage

government has said is a lie! Storm the buildings, fight for our families!”

“Turn it off! Turn it off!” He shouts but it was too late. Suddenly the intercom comes on.

“Initiate Lockdown.”

Another official comes up to the man and declares, “Sir, they have infiltrated the Headquarters. I believe they have found-”

He was cut off with a loud bang. Suddenly guilt swells up in my chest. *What have I done?* I have sent thousands of people into an unknown mission. I have barely any information; how could I be so careless? My thoughts are cut off by another guard rushing in.

“They have found the weapons of defense, our land can only handle 4 launches.” Two more bangs went off. The last thing I hear before the final crack goes off was from the man,

“We tried, but we failed, I failed.” Then the room erupts in fire.

CHAPTER NINETEEN
NARRATOR
MANY YEARS IN THE FUTURE

The plain land had been deprived of its once natural beauty. Now all that stood was a barren desert land almost uninhabitable. Though it contained many precious materials such as gold, diamond, and steel. After a few decades had passed a new group of people found this land. They began to mine. As they dug deeper they found the stone tablet containing the Scroll brothers research. Fear struck the people, sending them into a frenzy of anxiety. Immediately, safety measures were put in place. The government created an isolated world where no one was to speak with each other.

Overtime, another rebellion formed. Unaware of the previous land inhibitors experience, they were not concerned with the possibility of citizens not complying to the rules. They were simply punished and deprived of privileges. Slowly, rage built up in these groups. A plan was formed. A one step plan. Gain back the rights they once had. However this sparked another war. These people met the same unfortunate fate as their predecessors.

Over millennia, many societies made this land their trade hub; however, with no form of communication with the previous residents, they were unaware of how to stop the same occurrence from happening over and over again. At some point in the last decade of earth this curse spread to the rest of the

Bird Cage

globe. The war had grown so big, had involved too many people, that this had been the end of the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



El Spitzberg loves to write. Her favorite genres are fantasy, romance, and dystopian. She also enjoys writing short poems. Her other time is spent hanging out with her friends or at rehearsal for her school musicals.