

## PROLOGUE

The monkeys are asleep in the cages behind Lo. She can hear them snuffling as they breathe. They aren't going to wake up, but Lo can't stop herself from turning round to check that everything's okay. Their fur shimmers blue in the light of the hologram and one of the youngsters opens its eyes, looking at her with that disgusting empty gaze.

She shivers and bends over the desk again.

The guardists'll be here soon. She needs to finish and get out of here before then; her authorisation doesn't cover level four.

Words and pictures flicker past in front of her. She holds her wrist up to the light and the memory chip under her skin continues its search.

There! The right combination of words lights up in one of the documents. Without examining it she stretches her clenched fist into the hologram and streams the information to the chip.

The next document that's flagged looks like a letter. She's just about to stream it when she recognises a name. Her fist hangs in the air in front of the text and a cold sweat breaks out on the back of her neck as she realises what it is.

Shit.

Bastian had warned her. *We can't trust anyone*. She'd just laughed at him, said that he was getting paranoid, but if this document is genuine then it's much worse than he thought. The traitor is right among them. Lo's hand shakes as she puts it into the shimmering light.

The alarm sounds. Loud and harsh, just like during the monthly drills. The guardists have eight minutes to secure the building. She has to get out. Her hip slams into a workstation as she turns round and a large microscope falls to the floor with a crash. The monkeys don't even lift their heads when she rushes past them out of the lab. As she runs along the corridor she thinks about Levi. He'd been sleeping so deeply when she left. He'd stirred when she leaned over to stream the film to him, but not woken, and she'd risked standing a moment to watch him – his face scrunched up on the pillow and curly hair stuck to his forehead.

Yesterday he'd come to her asking for a haircut, but she was busy planning tonight and hadn't had time.

What would it have taken, half an hour?

If the security guardists find her now they'll be with him more quickly than that. She has to make it. Without her there's no one left to protect him.

She stops and listens in the stairwell. There's no sound of footsteps and she continues downward. One level. Two. A door opens further down, boots slam on the stairs. She presses into the wall, backs up to the landing. Her heart beats so fast it hurts. The door to the corridor clicks loudly when she opens it and she holds her breath as she creeps through.

She's in the department for permits and rationing. The corridor is wider than the one outside the laboratories. There's a blue guide light and she can see the bureaucrats' office landscape behind the wall of glass. Stairwell B is at the end of the corridor. She can make it. She has to make it.

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The footsteps are louder, getting closer. She pulls the gun out of her jacket pocket and transmits the warning to Levi. The capital, she might just as well ask him to travel to the moon. But she has no choice.

The door to the stairwell is right there, just a few more steps.

A metallic taste comes first. The light turns yellow and her body arches. Her muscles contract and she bunches into a foetal position, her fingers pressing hard against her palms, her hips and the side of her head crashing into the floor. A flame spreads from her heart throughout her body. Her arms and legs are on fire.

Darkness comes like a cool hand across her eyes.

## CHAPTER 1

Ava opens the door to the office and is met by cheers and whistles. She smiles and pushes into the room. The campaign workers are standing packed together and sitting clustered on the desks. She's not the only one to have heard the rumour that David's here this evening.

The results board on the wall has her name at the top. The five people who were able to download information to the most citizens that day get their names put on it. A little friendly competition raises working standards.

She asks for David. He's in the toilets and Ava wants to hurry there, but she has to stop and be congratulated, see their fake smiles. They all want her place.

If only they knew.

There are two small toilets at the back of the room. The one to the left is locked. Ava walks into the one on the right and lets the hot water from the sink run over her hands. Heat spreads through her body and the muscles in her shoulders relax. Outside it's just a few degrees above freezing. She's been hunched against the wind for hours.

Her mascara has run and she wipes away the black lines under her eyes, leaving a small smudge that ended up on her cheek. She pulls a strand of blonde hair from her bun and looks in the mirror. Now it's obvious that she's been outside all day.

The other toilet flushes. She straightens up and takes a couple of steps out into the corridor, so she has her back to David. So that he has to call out to her.

"Iris!"

She turns around. Iris is the name at the top of the board, her name here.

David pulls back the corners of his mouth, opening it to show white, even teeth. It's supposed to be a smile. Someone should tell him it makes him look like an animal.

"Congratulations on your win," he says. "Again."

"Thank you."

Her smile is mostly in her eyes. That's how she makes it seem genuine.

"We need more campaign workers like you."

He's right about that. In eight weeks he's going to be tested for his candidacy to the Territorial Council. He studies every day to pass the testings that will evaluate his integrity, analytical skills and logical thinking. He won't fail.

But that won't matter unless his acceptance points improve. On the last day of the testings, all the high class citizens choose among the approved candidates. With points as low as those he had when the campaign started, David doesn't stand a chance.

"It felt good today," she says. "Lots of people had heard about you. I think there's talk in the southern sector."

People don't care enough about the testings to talk about them. Most of them looked puzzled when she mentioned David's name, but the important thing is what they looked like when she left. And that she tells him what he wants to hear.

He loosens his tie and undoes his top button. A second's hesitation, as if he's unsure whether he should be this intimate, then he reaches his fingers in under the fabric and massages the back of his neck.

"I could do with some good news today."

She doesn't ask what he means. Plenty of girls hang on every word he says. He could have any of them, but what David can have is not what he wants. That much they'd managed to

figure out before the summer. They'd tried a different tactic then, and never got close to him.

"Sometimes I wonder if it's worth it," he says, sighing. "They're always talking about how we need more influence, to push our issues."

The Party speaks as one, so it shouldn't matter which candidates are selected for the council. But behind the unified front, different groups are fighting for power. This campaign is run by traditionalists, people who want to take the System back to its foundation. David's one of several candidates nominated to give the traditionalists a greater say.

He runs his hand through his hair.

"All this effort, what's it really for? Guarding a machine. TeDES is the one that decides, isn't it? Is that what I'm going to do if I get onto the council, feed facts into the decision system?"

The Territorial Decision-making and Evaluation System's designed to take the most rational decision based on the available facts. Ava'd also rather it disappeared. But not for the same reasons as David.

"You get the answers you ask for," she says. "The input determines the decision."

"I guess so." He sighs and straightens his tie. "You don't want to listen to me complain."

Before he leaves, he puts his hand on her upper arm, just briefly. She doesn't think he planned to do that.

He'll be ready soon.

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Ava doesn't stay at the campaign office for long. Tonight she's not going to Iris' apartment across the square. Tonight she's going home.

There's a shuttle at the platform and she hurries to catch it. The shiny metal cars reflect the illuminated glass walls of the buildings around her.

Few people have a reason to leave the peripheria at this hour, just a few cleaners and housekeepers. She sinks into a seat near the rear entrance, tries not to draw any attention to herself.

The journey takes an hour. She falls asleep almost immediately, but is woken by the sound of dogs barking and muttering voices.

Where've they stopped? She can see the second to last station outside the window. And a glimpse of black uniforms as the security guardists step into the shuttle. It's going to take a while.

The guardist who enters Ava's car is just a few years older than she is, perhaps around twenty. A white dog pants beside him, tongue hanging out. He keeps pulling its lead and talking in a loud voice. A piglet, one of all those guardists who love the power the shield gives them.

There's an elderly lady in the seat in front of Ava. She doesn't start the holo quickly enough, doesn't manage to control the memory chip with her thoughts. A dog dribbling on your knee could be enough to break your concentration.

"Come on, I don't have all night."

The guardist even sounds like a little pig; his voice high and uneven. Ava looks down at her lap and presses her lips together to hide her smile. The woman eventually succeeds in projecting the holo and he checks her authorisation.

“Faster next time, or there’ll be fines.”

His face is tense as he turns to Ava, ready to shout at her. But his gaze lands on her blouse and the pinstripe blazer that cost a fortune. He straightens up and smiles.

“Good evening,” he says.

“Good evening.”

She could remind him that his duty is to protect all citizens, regardless of their class. But they both know that’s not how it works. Instead, she smiles at him, turns her hand palm up, searches for the holo with her mind and projects it just in front of her. The guardist puts his scanner to it, but barely looks at the picture of her face and the information about her home zone, class and authorisation.

“What a night, eh?” he says. “I thought I’d end up freezing my arse off when the call came.”

“What’s going on?”

“A tip-off about a suspected rebel on the shuttle. Probably nothing. I think they call in the tips themselves, just to keep us busy.” He laughs. “But I’m not complaining, I get to come into the warm for a while.”

“It wasn’t great weather for knocking doors today either,” she says.

Her holo shows that she works in the campaign. And her blouse has tiny amber circles. She’s entitled to wear the Party colour, but it doesn’t hurt to remind him.

“I can imagine,” he says. “What’re you doing in here anyway? I’ve never seen any campaign workers in the centre.”

“I’m going to my parents for the night.”

“They still live here?”

He smiles gently. People who believe in the System always smile when they hear that her low classed parents still live in the centre, even though she works for the Party.

Class is nothing you inherit, it’s decided only by your results in the tests. Citizens are expected to accept their class and live accordingly. Ava not attempting to have her parents moved to a better area is proof that everything works as it should.

That story’s opened a lot of doors for her.

“I’m working all night,” says the guardist. “If there’s a new alarm tomorrow morning I might see you then.”

He puts the scanner away and winks at her. Ava smiles back, but her gaze is drawn out through the shuttle window.

There are two other guardists there, a young man and a woman who must be at least fifty. They’re dragging a middle-aged woman between them. She’s struggling and Ava can hear her shouting, but not what she’s saying. Then she turns her head and spits on the older guardist.

Not a clever thing to do.

The guardists look at each other and drop the woman, who staggers a few steps forwards. She won’t get away now. The younger guardist’s already drawn his shock baton, and he sends a yellow flash after her. Her body convulses and she falls hard on the platform.

Losing control when you’re arrested is a mistake. The woman should be glad they didn’t let her get further and set their batons to lethal.

“No false alarm this time,” says Ava, nodding out of the window.

Her voice is calm, as if they were still talking about the weather. Her heart is beating

fast, but it doesn't show. As long as she breathes deeply and doesn't tense her shoulders, nobody can tell.

The young guardist smiles and tugs on the dog's lead.

"We'll scare out the snakes, one by one," he says, walking towards the exit.

Ava watches him laugh and pat one of the others on the shoulder when he gets onto the platform.

You could turn out to regret that, she thinks. Poking a snake's nest.

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The shuttle's half an hour late by the time they get to the final stop, and Ava still has some way to walk. She hurries across the bridge over the river, towards the clock tower. The face turned towards her has collapsed. She's always thought it looks as if it's lost an eye.

The Bicentenary Tower stretches towards the dark sky. A tall obelisk in glass and steel, lit by a strand of orange lights that makes the whole thing look cheap.

She can remember them building it. Everyone who lived in the centre was hoping for a party, it was all people talked about for months. Two hundred years since the end of the many wars, two hundred years of the System's governance. The bureaucrats should see that as a reason to celebrate.

TeDES produced the decision that a three-hour reduction in working hours on the inauguration day was adequate. Attendance at the ceremony was obligatory. Ava stood in the crowd in front of the tower, trying to ignore the broadcast.

It started with a recitation of the Articles. Even the kids know them by heart, but the bureaucrats never start anything without reading them first.

Article one: All people are part of the System, and everyone is equal in citizenship. People are not discriminated against due to race or gender.

Article two: The System shall always offer the citizen adequate resources for survival. In return, the citizen offers his or her skills in the work for which he or she is most suitable.

Article three: The System is free from the repression of religion and ideology. A person who practices political or religious convictions shall be regarded as an enemy of the System, and judged accordingly.

The ministers for the five territories each held a speech, and that alone took more than three hours. Everyone muttered about it, but no one did anything. They went to their work units as normal the following day.

People are idiots.

It starts raining as Ava passes the abandoned rations unit, a heavy midwinter rain that feels like ice on her face. If she gets wet she'll freeze to death, the central heating's been acting up all week. She'll have to take the tunnel.

She turns right into an alley, past a bombed block of buildings. Collapsed brickwork is piled up along the pavement.

Almost all the streetlamps have been smashed, but one a little way into the alley is working. In its light, Ava sees four people crowding around a body on the ground. Skinny legs and short blonde hair. A boy.

"Snake bastard! Where're you going? Lie still!"

The voice is high, a girl's. She sounds out of breath, kicks the body so hard it moves on the tarmac.

Ava walks quickly towards them, breathing deeply and looking straight ahead. Her mouth is dry and she feels a chill across her back.

“What’re you doing?”

Her voice is deeper than usual. Good. She mustn’t sound weak.

“What’s it look like?”

The girl might be fourteen. She shakes her curly red hair out of her face and stops kicking. But she doesn’t step away from the boy. This is just the intermission. She’ll carry on soon, that’s obvious from her hungry eyes. They’re huge, like a doll’s, the pupils covering almost all the iris. High. That could be a problem.

One of the others straightens up. A few seconds tick by before Ava recognises him. He usually wears a grey suit and shiny black shoes, always with an orange handkerchief folded into a triangle in the breast pocket. In black jeans and scruffy boots, he seems younger. The dark hair that’s usually slicked back has fallen across his forehead.

Vic. David’s brother.

He’s too old to hang around with these three teenagers. His file says he’s twenty-two, but Ava’s heard him say twenty-five sometimes, when it suits him better.

“Well well,” he says, throwing out his arms towards her. He loses his balance and has to step to the side. His eyes are dark and shiny. “My brother’s star saleswoman. Shouldn’t you be out spreading his message?”

The others have stopped kicking now and are standing behind Vic. Ava can tell they’re wondering where this is going.

“What d’you think I’ve been doing all day?” She nods at the boy on the ground. “I don’t have time to amuse myself.”

“That? Hardly amusing. It’s my duty to teach him how to behave properly. We could’ve avoided this if he’d just given me his jacket.”

Vic has the same smile as David, the corners of the mouth pulled back. His upper lip sticks to his gums and he licks his teeth to free it.

“Ignore ’er,” says the redhead. “Let’s finish this.”

She kicks again. Not his head, but his stomach. Hard enough to break something.

Ava takes a step towards Vic.

“What do you think they’ll do to David if it gets out that you’re running around beating up innocent citizens?”

“Innocent?” The redhead grabs the boy and pulls the sleeve of his jacket up the elbow. “Would ’e ’ave this if he’s innocent? Just shurrup and let us finish.”

The tattoo stands out against the pale skin on the inside of his arm. A snake spirals around from his wrist, up towards his elbow. Its tail’s dark red, followed by three spirals of indigo blue, bright orange and forest green. Its head is a dragon’s, intense purple with a long tongue that splits into three.

“I saw the tail when he refused help taking his jacket off,” says Vic.

He stretches and laughs, it sounds fluttery and wild. Ava takes her eyes off the tattoo as if she doesn’t care about it at all.

“Were you going to fix him?” she says.

“This is a good place.”

But he doesn’t sound convinced anymore. She’s made him stop and think. Everything gets more difficult if you can’t do it all at once.

“See,” says the redhead. “This’s a good place. Let’s finish it.”

“And when they find the body and go through the footage? When they recognise you. What do you think’ll happen to David then?”

This is her only chance. If Vic has any sense left in his head, if he hasn’t already crossed the line. What his brother thinks matters.

“We sprayed the camera in the alley,” he says.

“Ah, well then. If you’re sure there’re no hidden devices, I won’t stop you.”

The redhead walks over to Vic, leans close to his ear.

“No one cares ’bout one snake more or less.” She winds an arm around his chest.

“Come on, yer know yer want to.”

But Vic isn’t looking at her. He’s scraping his boot in a pile of wet gravel. There’s blood on the toecap.

Ava looks him in the eyes and smiles, as softly as she can.

“They won’t care about the snake,” she says. “But if it gets out that you fixed him, David can forget all about the council. He’d be lucky to get work at a rations unit. It’s not worth it, not for one of these.”

A few seconds pass, a few heartbeats. The three kids stand behind Vic, waiting. The redhead’s still hungry, but the other two look more sober.

“So what do we do with him?” says Vic, and pokes the boy with his foot.

He doesn’t want to be responsible for this any longer.

“What could you do? You’re not even here,” says Ava and smiles.

She shakes her wrist and a knife slides out, the blade catching the light of the sole streetlamp. She thinks she can see it reflected in Vic’s dark eyes. He blinks twice, then motions to the others to follow him. The redhead grimaces, but says nothing as she follows him out of the alley.

## CHAPTER 2

Gravel scrapes the side of his head. The kicking's stopped and he's got to get out of here. But the tarmac turns to water as he tries to sit up; his hands go right through it. He hits his chin and bites his tongue hard. His mouth already tastes of blood, he doesn't need to worry about that.

Why's there nothing to push up from? Everything's swaying as if he's at sea. Someone hits him in the back of the head with the tarmac. It's cold and wet and sends a sliver of pain down his spine. His hands find only air as he fumbles for a new grip.

A hand with slim fingers grabs his shoulder. Everything spins as he turns his head. His neck feels weak and tender, as if it could break at any moment. His eyes are full of something sticky and dark, but through it he can see a blazer covering a blouse in the Party colour. A pendant hangs between the collarbones, three interlocking circles that form a triangle. He'd seen the pendant as he was lying there, waiting for them to end it.

He'd seen the knife.

"Can yer stand up?"

He throws out a fist, knuckles hitting something hard. She clutches at her arm and shouts.

"Come on!" Her voice is high with pain. "We don't 'ave time for this."

The ground turns solid when she holds him by the elbow. His head is up and his feet are down. The tarmac's still swaying, but it holds their weight.

She's forgotten to protect her ribs, they're completely open. One good punch would be enough. But as he goes for it his hand takes his arm with it, and his arm takes his body, and he stumbles forward.

"Dontcha get it?" she mumbles.

His shoulder burns as his arm's pushed up behind his back. There's a glimmer in front of him. The knife. She rests her hand on his collar bone, places the blade up close to his throat.

"Now, let's go."

She grips his wrist tighter, presses it against his back and pushes him in front of her.

They move to the right, close to the wall. The street's wide, but there's nobody around. The houses must be abandoned; they've neither glass nor plywood in the windows. A traffic light leans over the pavement at the junction. She moves faster as they pass below it and across the empty street.

On the other side there's a rusty iron fence around a big hole in the ground. Steps lead down into it. Is this a shuttle entrance? He can't see the System's black cube anywhere. There's a large red circle with a blue line through it on a post next to the fence. Must be something old, something left behind.

His arm twists harder as she pulls him down the stairs. The wall in front of him is completely covered by graffiti, layer on layer of words and pictures. In the top layer, someone's written *Things fall apart* in big white letters and drawn a rough picture of a falcon. It stares at him as they walk down into the darkness.

The air's damp and smells of stone. This is no shuttle entrance. There won't be anything at the bottom of the steps. Just darkness. And a good place to dump his body.

His foot hits the ground hard where he thinks there'll be another step. They're down. So this is how it ends. He won't be found.

"Cocky tattoo, that." Her breath is hot on his neck. "The spiral, I've never understood the point of it. We all gonna be yogis in the end? Sit 'round meditating and never 'urt each other?"

"A Party official who doesn't understand the spiral. Well that's a surprise."

Warm blood in his mouth makes him slur. He can't spit it out, not with the knife against his neck. He tries to swallow, but it's thick and the taste of iron makes him want to puke.

"What makes yer fink I'm in the Party?" she asks.

"Come on, you don't want anyone to miss it do you? The Party-coloured blouse isn't enough, you've got to have the circles around your neck as well. It's a bit obvious, I think. You scared people'll doubt your loyalty?"

There's a dangerous silence behind him. Something rustles on the floor. A rat, or a lizard. Do they have lizards in the capital?

"We ain't 'ere to talk about me," she says. "I'm more interested in yer, and why yer here, so far from 'ome."

"What d'you mean? I... I was born here. On the other side of the river, I live on the other side of the river."

"Really? And what side'd that be? East or west?"

"The east," he says, without hesitating.

She gives a short laugh. The hand holding the knife shakes.

"South would've been the right answer. First I thought yer're a refugee. That's pretty common nowadays, trying to live 'ere without a permit. But yer'd've come up with better lies. And ditched the accent." She goes quiet and he wonders if he should say something. Whether he can come up with an explanation that works. "So, I'm wondering just what yer errand 'ere is."

Errand. His heart thumps, heavy against his ribs. It's a strange word, old-fashioned. Could she have used it on purpose?

Lo said he'd be asked what his errand is. She told him what he should answer.

"I have an uncle on C Street." He shuts his eyes so hard that his ears buzz. "I'm going to swing by and see him."

This must be what she's been waiting for. The final proof. Now for the knife. The muscles in his neck tense up, cramping from his collar bone to his chin.

"I know a man on C Street", she says. "He's crazy about apple doughnuts. Could that be your uncle?"

The ground sways below his feet again. They're the best words he's heard in a long time. He almost forgets there's one more line, but remembers when she clears her throat.

"I'll take two dozen with me when I visit him."

She lets the knife blade slide back into the handle, releases his arm before he's finished speaking. His skin's cold and tender where she gripped him and his shoulder feels as if it's about to dislocate.

While he rubs his wrist, she takes a lantern out of her bag. The silver pendant resting just below the hollow in her neck glitters in its light. Three circles representing the Party's motto. Efficiency. Determination. Unanimity.

And she's just proved she knows the Resistance's codes. Things fall apart as she offers him her hand.

"I'm Ava, welcome to us."

"Levi."

The handshake is warm and sticky from his blood. There's blood on her blazer too, several round stains on the sleeves and smears on the lapels. She doesn't seem to care.

"That new code's really somefing," she says. "Wonder what they were taking when they decided that one."

He laughs, but stops as a sharp pain shoots from his ribs and straight into his guts. He bites his lips and turns his head away. It doesn't make it hurt any less, but it feels better if he doesn't have to show her.

"So, didja just get to town?" she asks, as if she hadn't seen anything.

"Today."

He looks at her out of the corner of his eye. He needs more help if he's going to manage this. But that necklace with the Party symbol makes him shiver.

Lo said he had no choice but to trust those who know the codes.

"Um," he says, still unsure what he should do. Trust her or just try to get away? "I have... I guess you could call it a mission. A message that's got to reach the Order. Do you know someone who could...?"

She smiles.

"Would your uncle like something extra with his doughnuts?"

That wasn't supposed to happen. What did Lo say? The first phrases show that Levi is part of the Resistance, a rebel. If he asks for the Order they take him to a doorkeeper, someone in the inner circle, where he gets a new code to respond to. That sentence.

His head pounds. He shouldn't think so much. And now Ava's looking at him with a frown. Waiting for an answer.

At first it doesn't come to him. His thoughts are wrapped in soft cloth. Something stupid, something edible. Sweet. Yucky.

"Cherry jam! My uncle loves cherry jam. Do you know where I can buy a few jars?"

"I'll contact them now," she says, closing her eyes briefly. "It's me. Uncle Sid has visitors." More codes, the line must be bugged. "Can yer gather the friends? We're on the way to historic ground."

She waits and nods gently as the person on the other side says something.

"Good. See ya soon."

Her voice sounds different as she says that last phrase. Softer, younger. She turns to Levi.

"We'll be there in fifteen minutes. Can yer manage?"

"I've got this far."

Perhaps he can convince himself.