

2158

Timidly, Layla stepped onto the platform. She straightened her name tag. Test number 2158. An experiment, that was what she was. A thousand eyes stared her down, ever so eager with their clipboards and pens, waiting in the darkness, ready to dissect her every move. She glanced behind her. A man waved her on, frowning. What was she doing? She had to get out of here. She begged the voice to help her, to free her. The eyes were looking away now, disappointed in their experiment's failure. She heard them uttering to each other, "She can't do it," "Another failure," and "Dispose of her. We can try again with 2159."

Blackness was closing in on her, creeping closer and closer. She could feel it now. It brushed against her ankles, curling around her legs. *Sister*, it whispered, *friend*. She closed her eyes. There was no going back now. She took a deep breath, savouring the taste of the blackness. She let it into her heart. A slow smile curled across her lips. She opened her eyes and looked straight into the pasty, scowling face nearest to her.

She stretched out her arms and the darkness followed her lead, reaching for the woman and sinking under her skin. She watched as the woman's eyes rolled back and she crumbled to the ground. Layla turned to the next man. One by one each of their smug faces were wiped clean. The darkness reached out for more, so eager to be released.

*Calm*, she told it.

It protested, pulling her out of the room, down the hall to the room where the test subjects were contained. *More*, it begged.

*No.* Layla walked over to what had been her home. It was like a massive, glass-encased coffin, standing upright next to all the others. This was where she had stood, for so many months. Needles, tiny lasers, x rays, more and more radiation. There had been no escape. Layla ran her fingers over the outside of the coffin, distracted.

Something pink on the ground caught her attention. She crouched and peeked under the scientists' table. A small, fluffy teddy bear sat in a crate. She took it. Something tingled in her brain. A faint memory, soft and... happy? She was someone. In a place that was not the lab. A smiling woman stood in front of her. She was giving her the bear. A man came to them. He put his arm around the woman and took Layla's hand. They were talking. Layla couldn't hear what they were saying, but they were happy.

What was that? Layla thought. Where was that? The darkness came back to Layla. It nudged her ankles like a dog, reminding her that they didn't have much time. Layla was shook back to reality. She grabbed the bear and ran out of the room, away from what had been her life. Eyes followed her from the other coffins on the wall. She ran faster. The darkness pointed the way out. Hallway after hallway, until they reached a very small room. Instinctively, Layla entered the room and pressed one of the buttons on the wall. She could feel as the ground lifted and she was brought up. The doors opened to open space.

Layla stepped out into the light, clutching her pink bear. She squinted at the beauty around her. Flower's heads reached for the sun, bees purposefully buzzed around them. Pure white puffs floated against the pastel blue sky. In the distance, tall, gleaming pillars of silver awaited her, the man and the woman from her memory somewhere within those walls. Her heart leapt. She was free! Layla turned, waiting for her friend to follow her. The darkness reached for

her, eager to join her. But the bright golden light of the sun scalded it. The darkness hissed and curled back into the tiny room.

*Go*, it whispered.

Tears glistened on Layla's eyes. She looked at the city and the colours longingly, then down to her bear. Wistfully, she propped her bear up carefully, in the sunlight by the door. Maybe one day he would be reunited with the nice man and lady. She wouldn't be, though. Layla turned away from the sun. And she walked back into the elevator with the darkness, with her friend.