

Tahani sat in the Waiting Room. It was aptly named, she thought. Or at least she supposed it would be, had it been named for her own activity. But there were tons of people coming in and out. Arriving and leaving in seconds flat. She was the only one, really, to have to wait. And she understood, really she did. She didn't think it was fair, but she did understand.

The doctor approached her, dressed in his typical uniform of dark gray and black precise seams. She had heard once that doctors used to wear light colors, long ago. It had been that way to make any blood visible so that they could know when their patient was bleeding. Now though, such rudimentary things were not necessary. Technology could tell them anything. Or at least that's how these people lived. Unworried and unconcerned, flourishing off the backs of *her* people.

Dr. Nikolai had always been a nice man, or he was as nice as he tried to be. But he could never understand her, never truly grasp her life. And he lived with that same superiority that his people were raised with. That understanding that he was better than her and that she was simply nothing more than a wounded animal begging for scraps. The only difference between him and most of his kind was that he liked to give out scraps. It made him feel better. Made him sleep well at night.

Tahani didn't like him. She hated taking his scraps, but she had learned long ago to use whatever she could to her advantage. And Dr. Nikolai was easy to use.

However, he always seemed to make it difficult. Like for instance the wait. She hated the wait. The public display of her desperation. As people came in and out and side eyed her, knowing exactly what she was. There was pity, there was disgust, and then there was outright cruelty. A few of the more straight-backed men and women would stop to spit at her or simply call her names. Dr. Nikolai didn't know of this, of course, or he did and deep down had a sadistic streak that Tahani had missed.

But she believed the man was doing simply what he thought of as right. Morals are a horrible weakness and very easy to exploit. Thankfully for her. So she waited. Waited because she was desperate. The world was not so kind to her and never would be. So she sat and she let them call her names and she refused to leave. Eventually the doctor always came. But the difficulties never ended there.

"Doctor." Tahani said, her voice a little too relieved for her liking. She pushed down the desperation, he could never know her true need. That was another thing easily exploited. She smiled easily at him and he gave a tight smile back. He was always a little stressed by her presence, but she understood, she was stressful.

"Tahani." The doctor swallowed before extending his hand out to her, she grasped it quickly before letting go. She understood that to him a hand shake was a polite greeting, but she was unused to casual contact with others. It was another reason she hated interacting with the Elites. They were all very casual with touch and it always managed to raise her hackles.

"How are you dear girl? Is your sister doing better?" Tahani licked her lips, trying not to remember when the Sickness had taken her sister. Rayan had always been a frail bodied girl and hadn't been strong enough to fight the infection herself. Tahani had run desperately through the night streets of the Dein, something nobody in their right mind would ever do. She had shown up on the Doctors doorstep and had begged him to help. He had acted quickly and supplied her with the right medication to save her sister. She would forever be grateful for his assistance but she still didn't like him.

“Yes, Doctor, Rayan has recovered wonderfully. She’s even back in the Till. Though we’re trying to urge her to take more time to rest.” The Doctor clicked his tongue, shaking his head.

“No, there's no need for further rest. She should be perfectly capable.” Tahani said nothing at this. She wasn’t about to argue with an Elite about the conditions of the Till. Nor was she going to discuss with this man the capabilities of her twelve year old sister. Not to mention his complete lack of knowledge regarding how the Sickness worked. The Elites had never had to suffer the plague of the Sickness, the disease only spreading through her own people.

“Do you have what I need, Doctor?” The man pursed his lips understanding that he had overstepped. He huffed out a breath part of him wanting to apologize as he had been trained, the other part knowing it would do nothing to pacify Tahani.

“Of course, of course.” He said deciding against unnecessary conversation. He turned away without any further words and walked out of the Waiting Room. Tahani followed after him, a few feet kept as distance. They turned down an empty hall and into a deserted room filled with boxes and bags. Each package had a label taped to the front. The Doctor pulled out a bin from one of the lower shelves and held it out to Tahani. She quickly took the package from him, stepping back as soon as it was in her arms. She nodded to the Doctor silently and turned to leave.

“Explain something to me, will you, Tahani?” She stopped right before exiting the little room. She looked back over her shoulder at the Doctor, he looked just as anxious as he typically did, but there was a serenity in his curiosity. Tahani knew herself to be knowledgeable, she understood more about the make-up of this world than most people. She spent time with both sides of the Dein, sometimes even acquainting herself with the occupants of the Dein itself. She was asked to explain concepts all the time, but she was surprised by the Doctor voicing his own questions. The Elites always supposed they knew best and would never admit to not understanding something.

“What do you want to know?” She asked, settling the weight of the box against her hip. Dr. Nikolai sighed, glancing down at the ground before looking up at her. He opened his mouth to say something but then snapped it shut, he shook his head and then tried again.

“You don’t like being close to me.” He paused after the statement but Tahani raised her brow, that wasn’t a question. He nodded his head and pulled at the fingers on his left hand. “I was just wondering why. You see, we’re raised, as Elites, believing that you don’t like touch because you have no empathy. No capacity for love.” Tahani flinched at his words, just barely. She knew those stories, had heard them all her life, the slurs and the taunting. But even now she hated that concept, it made them seem inhuman, made it easier for them to be slaughtered. “But,” The Doctor continued, not noticing Tahani’s discomfort. “You displayed great love for your sister the other night and so I realized that lesson to be false.” Tahani narrowed her eyes, she had never heard an Elite question the System before. And that’s what he was doing, asking her for explanation, for clarity. “So why do you flinch from my touch?” The man asked, finally meeting her eyes. Tahani sighed, she looked away from him and stared at the pale sad white wall. The answer was long and complicated and she wasn’t sure she wanted to go into it. She looked back at the man and saw the interest in his eyes, the sadness, and the worry. She set the box down on the floor and turned to face him.

“The Dein, as you know, splits the world into two divisions, the Elites and the Dregs.” The doctor nodded along, agreeing with her words. “The Elites live in the High House, living the lime life and not worrying for anything. While the Dregs are left to the Low, left to survive off of nothing, minding the Till just so the Elites can live another glorious day. Do you know what the Till is, Doctor?” The man pursed his lips at her question, narrowing his brows.

“Of course, it’s the machine that filters the air and the water. It’s the main reason why we’re alive. Without the Till we die.” Tahani nods along with his response.

“Yes, that’s true, but do you know how it works?” The Doctor glanced over at the wall and then shook his head. Tahani sighed, she knew that the Elites never questioned their *perfect* world but it still rubbed her the wrong way. “The Till is a shortened version of its actual name: *Until the Final Breath*. You can look through the history browsers and you’ll never find it mentioned. But ask any Dreg and they can tell you the story. Now the history of how it was built and why, is a very long story and I don’t have the time. But essentially it was made as a temporary solution. Managing the Till took too many people and was too dangerous to consider long term. However, when the Split happened and everything went to shit the limit of the Till was forgotten. The Dregs were commanded to work the Till or be sent to the Dein, either option was a death sentence. The Elites rose up off the backs of our labor and became the tyrants we now submit to today.” The Doctor grimaced at her words, licking his lips before meeting her eyes.

“What does that have to do with...touching?” Tahani smiled slightly at his discomfort.

“The Till is filled with sharp blades and fast moving parts, Doctor. People need distance to actually work. You stand too close to another and you’re both dead. The only reason we touch another is to alert them of danger. The spinning blades and machines are too loud to hear over, physical touch is the only way to get others attention. So when you touch me my lizard brain reacts, believing there to be danger. My natural disposition is to give space. It’s a show of respect among the Dregs, space means survival, if I stood too close they’d likely die.” Tahani shrugged as the Doctor stared.

“How-” He took a gulp of air. “How many people die in the Till?” Tahani put her hands on her hips glancing sideways at the Doctor. For a moment she had thought he was kidding but then she saw his genuine ignorance.

“I can’t answer that, Doctor. The Till is very big and thousands of people work there. Yesterday, five people died on my shift. Two of them I knew very well. They had been very kind people, they will be missed.” The Doctor blinked.

“Do people know about this? I’m sure if-”

“Doctor.” Tahani interrupted before he could go further. “This is the way the world works. And the Elites in power know perfectly well what goes on in the Lows, they made it that way.” Tahani bent down to pick the box back up. “It’d be best if you didn’t question it any further. Thank you for the supplies, Doctor. I’ll see you next month.” The Doctor said nothing more as Tahani walked out of the room. She made her way out of the building and didn’t look back.

It was true that she was unhappy with the forming of her world. The unfairness of how it all developed, but there was a certain balance to it that she was used to. She didn’t know if she’d be able to survive without the desperation. And she knew for a fact that she never wanted to be an Elite.

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“What’d the Doc give ya this time?” Tahani rolled her eyes at Scalin’s question. He asked her the same thing everytime she returned from the Doctor and she never gave him an answer.

“Just open the Gate, Scalin. It’s cold as Hell out here.” Scalin huffed a breath.

“What ya goin’ on ‘bout girl? It’s always freezin’.” Tahani shivered as he pushed in the numbers of the pin to unlatch the Gate. But she didn’t argue, he wasn’t wrong. It was always cold. After all, the world was dying.

They had realized that centuries ago, but hadn’t done anything to stop it. So now the sun was a dim glimmer in the sky, barely passing over the horizon. The temperature had dropped and stuck, over a hundred years ago. They had first named it the Eternal Winter. But that was back when the clouds were still in the sky and rain and snow was still a thing. Now the sky was just a green haze, the blue that it had once been, tinged with the yellow of pollution. The trees were bare and dying where they grew, rotting from the inside out. And grass and flowers are just a thing to read about. The Eternal Winter was quickly renamed the Eternal Death.

After that the world spiraled further. With limited oxygen and whole forests dying out, that’s when the Till was created. And it had worked for a time, the world continued to turn and scientists began working on ways to grow plant life in the new environment. But then the Split happened. It had started with the oceans. Global warming had left its scar, the waterways so high that coastal cities had all been evacuated. But when islands started to sink and tsunamis became a monthly occurrence, that’s when people started to worry. It wasn’t until Japan disappeared, completely sucked under the water, killing millions in under 24 hours that true panic emerged. And with the displacement of the smaller pieces of land the larger continents began to shift. Earthquakes racked the world like nothing ever seen. And as the world Split into pieces billions died. Within just a few months of each other the natural disasters destroyed the world reducing the human race to only 10 percent of its population.

After that the new world order was built, what they called the Reimagining. Survivors from all over went to the largest land available and the world restarted forming the castes that we see today. The Elites took the power for themselves and outcast any who didn’t agree with their plans. They decided against fixing the world and just wanted to preserve what they had left, living the life that they felt they deserved for surviving the Split. Those that had openly campaigned against them had been sent to the Dein, the large canyon that split the city in two, after the earthquakes. Those that had any affiliation with those that spoke against them were sent to the Lows to work the Till, on the other side of the Dein. Essentially dividing everyone from the Elites and leaving the world exactly as it always was. Fucked up.

Tahani sniffed as she rushed into the heated metal room. The floor was muddy and the air smelled like burned plastic but it was better than the frigid cold. She turned to face Scalin as he pulled the lever and the little room started to descend into the Dein. His bushy red beard speckled with frost and his pale skin red and splotchy. He was decked out in three coats and two scarfs, his gloves had holes in them but they still worked, or so he said. He used to have a knitted hat that would cover his head and ears but it went missing a few months ago. Scalin was a big man and most found him intimidating but he was sweeter than honey on toast. Tahani had always suspected that the man had gifted his hat to one of the children of the Dein. His clothes

tended to go missing a little too frequently to be an accident. Part of Tahani understood how his heart went out to the starving bird-bone children, but the other part cared too much for the man for him to die from the cold. Scalin had chosen his position as the Gatekeeper, most were forced into service. But after his sister died and he was left to care for her two children he wanted a safer job so that they didn't have to worry over his dying. But the pay as a Gatekeeper was shit and the risk was still there, very few good folk traveled across the Dein.

"How's Asa?" Tahani asked and Scalin smiled real bright as he rubbed his hands together, trying to get warm.

"She's the best part a' me, I'd tell ya, Tahani. I'd never wanted children a' my own, but just watchin' that lil' girl grow puts a new perspective on things. And Eris just started talkin' for himself. He's lovin' the colors as of now, pointin' out anythin' that's blue or green." Scalin laughs at the thought of the little boy. Tahani smiles, she loves talking with Saclin, he's good company, still smiling despite his circumstances.

"How's lil' Rayan?" He asks, sticking his hands in his coat pocket. "I heard she caught the Sickness." Tahani nodded, her smile fading at the unpleasant memory. Tahani was one of the only certified medical professionals in the Lows, she had watched many people be killed by the Sickness. It was an illness that only spread through the Lows, it was rumored that it originated somewhere in the Till but no one had ever found the source. But when Rayan started showing signs of the Sickness Tahani had acted fast. Yet still it was no use, watching her sister slowly die was a horror that she was certain would haunt her for the rest of her days.

"She's doing much better. The Spots have all but faded, she's running around and laughing, her cough has lessened and she's speaking, though still raspy." Scalin nodded a tight smile over his face. He knew what the Spots meant, he'd seen it in his sister. It meant that Rayan had been very close to death.

"Well, I'm glad she's doin' better." He shuffled his feet as the wind picked up outside, their metal shelter creaking under the pressure. "Tell her to stop by sometime, I'm sure Asa would love to see her." Tahani smiled and nodded. Rayan and Asa were a few years apart but the younger girl was always awed by Rayan and Tahani's sister thought the little girl was the cutest thing ever.

"I'm sure Rayan would love that too." Saclin raised a hand in goodbye as the exit door slid open behind her. Squeaking and shaking as it worked against the old rusted gears. Tahani nodded her head as she turned away from him walking out the door, and into the darkness of the Dein. The cold instantly bit at her exposed skin, she pulled her jacket closer to her body. Cursing the zipper that had jammed a few years ago. But she knew was lucky to have the coat at all.

Tahani drew her head down to her chest as the wind blew over her body and began her trek through the Path. The Dein was the home of the low lifes and criminals, everyone here was evil and desperate. The Path was the only part of the Dein that was safe for those not of the Dein. The little metal strips lighting a dim pathway across the bottom of the cavern connecting each Gate. Those tossed into were embedded with little metal cartridges filled with a lethal drug. The biggest rule when condemned to the Dein was that one could never leave. If a Dein got too close to the Path the cartridge would release the toxin and kill the perpetrator instantly and brutally.

Tahani had crossed the Path many times but only a few times had she gone out of the borders. She knew from experience that the occupants of the Dein were watching her, hidden under the darkness that they were damned to. But never once had Tahani ever seen a Dein when she crossed the Path, they never came so close. She when the figure emerged out of the shadows Tahani had froze instantly. The slight woman stopped right at the edge of the light, just visible enough for Tahani to make out. Her thinning white hair pulled into a tight bun on the back of her head and her body drowning in the saggy clothes she wore. The older woman was barely more than bones, her withered skin pulled tight over her defined skeleton. She looked frail and delicate, a half step away from dead. But Tahani knew better.

"Mora." She greeted the older woman, stepping closer to the boundaries of the Path knowing no one would try anything with Mora near. The woman was the single most terrifying person Tahani had ever come across. She ran the Dein single handedly, putting some order to the chaos that thrived in the dark. "What are you doing so close to the Path?" Mora said nothing, her face remaining as impassive as ever. But Tahani hadn't actually expected a response. The two women knew each other only briefly, their paths crossing only a handful of times, but Tahani knew Mora to be as tight lipped as it came. The two women had formed a sort of mutual respect for one another, each recognizing the steel within the other.

"Twenty children died yesterday." Mora said, her face emotionless and her voice a soft rasp that sent new shivers down Tahani's spine. Tahani swallowed thickly at her words, her heart throbbing at the new information. Mora knew more than anyone that Tahani could do nothing for the Children of the Dein, no matter how much she wanted to. Mora leaned back, balancing on the back of her bare feet, shadows rippling over her features.

"There's nothing to do, girl." Mora intoned, her worn voice cracking over the words. Tahani nodded mutely, knowing she was right.

"You've all been stuck here to die." Tahani said softly, the compassionate side of her raging against the unfairness of it all. Mora's lips thinned looking up at the sliver of the dim green sky that peeked through the top of the canyon, so far above their heads. She didn't say anything, just stared. Tahani wondered briefly if the woman was imagining what it must be like up there. Tahani knew that Mora had been born and raised in the Dein, the woman had never truly seen the whole of the sky. Tahani would tell her that it wasn't all that magnificent to behold, but she supposed that to the creature of the dark, their broken sky would be a marvel.

"What did you do with the bodies?" Tahani asked. Mora looked back down at the girl, returning to the darkness. The older woman bounced her thin shoulders.

"What we always do." Tahani nodded, she knew nothing of the Dein's memorial traditions, but she understood not to ask further. "The Sickness took em' quick, so at least they didn't suffer for long." Tahani blinked at the words, her brain freezing at the new information. The older woman smiled tightly, more a grimace around her lips, nodding once and turning to leave. Tahani watched as the little woman disappeared into the darkness, swallowed back up by the shadows. She stood frozen suddenly alone in the middle of Path, her brain trying to process this revelation. Tahani had suspected for years but to finally have it confirmed was life altering. This would change everything. If the Sickness was airborne then their world was doomed.

In the last few months the Sickness had gotten stronger, taking more children and killing them faster. She had lost twelve people to the Sickness this week alone. Eight more to the Till. And that's just the people Tahani couldn't save. There are six people in an induced coma in her

ward right at this moment. She had been working round the clock, barely getting any sleep. Teddy, Tahani's assistant, was taking as many shifts as he could but he was still learning. The only reason she had left today was because they needed the meds. She had been running out of their allotted medical facilities, more and more recently. She'd petitioned the High House to let them increase their rations but they keep shutting her down. She *had* to go to the Doctor.

Tahani sighed, straightening her back and continuing down the Path. It wasn't good for her to stay in one place too long. Tahani was tired and worn out. She hadn't talked to anyone about this. She hadn't wanted to worry her family, so they were left blissfully ignorant. But Tahani hadn't slept in days and the deaths were starting to catch up to her. Too many deaths, not enough saved.

And in the dark parts of her mind, in the nightmares that kept her awake she had softly wondered if the virus had gone airborne. Because the doctor in her knew that it would explain everything. But the Dreg in her knew that if the Sickness was in the air then they were all royally fucked.

Every child knew the horrors of airborne viruses and had been raised on the stories throughout their childhood. Warnings of the history of children dying, elderly dying, and hospitals over flooded. The nightmare scenario that was told as a bedtime story. The Quarantine of the masses, the total stop to the entire economy. No more work, no more going anywhere. The constant risk that the virus would catch and spread like wildfire. But the Dregs knew that they could never stop working. If the Till didn't run then they all died. The air would pollute and slowly they'd melt to death from the inside, all their organs rotting, one by one.

Tahani hadn't wanted to be right. In fact, she had hoped she was wrong. But the Sickness had only ever been in the Lows, only ever spread through the children of the Dregs. If the Children of the Dein were now infected then that meant only one thing. It meant that the virus was no longer contained, and that the Sickness was spreading.

Tahani reached the other side of Gate, the Gatekeeper pushing in the pin without a word. Tahani moved silently, like a ghost, dread covered her body like a lead blanket, pulling down any sort of hope she had remaining in her soul. Mora's words echoed over and over in Tahani's mind, reminding her again that the old woman was right. There was nothing they could do.

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The wind picked up Tahani's medium length dark hair pulling away from her face, dancing erratically in the wind. Tahani sighed, pulling the strands of her hair into a tight pony. It was her dark features that had always made her a bit different than those around her. The Dregs tended to be lighter in their features, but then so did the Elites. Tahani was pretty sure it had to do with the regions that had been destroyed during the Split. Those with lighter skin surviving in larger numbers, for whatever reason.

Tahani made her way down the streets of the Lows, the dry dirt lifting into the air as she shuffled down the road. Some people out and about waved at her and smiled, kids laughed and chased each other in the street. She made her way across the allies and under bridges, taking any short cuts through the packed housing of the Lows. When she made it to the street that her house was squished into she began to smile. She pushed open the metal door entering into her

house. There was no one in the main room of the miscellaneous placed spacing of the construct they called their house. It was really just an assortment of shipping containers welded together at odd angles. But it worked for the small brood of her family.

She had just placed the box of meds down when scampering and crashing could be heard above her. She smiled to herself turning towards the makeshift banister her father had made when her parents first started having kids.

“Tahani!” Came loud and excited voice’s from the top bunker. Little feet stomped down the stairs as they ran to greet their sister. Tahani laughed and crouched down bracing for the impact that was sure to come. The twins hit her hard, jumping into her arms and wrapping their little arms around her body squealing and laughing in happiness. Saida and Amal giggled as she hugged them back, they were joy and happiness personified. Their laughter was infectious and heard always throughout the house. She leaned back to look at the two of them. They had just reached age five about a month ago, both twins looking remarkably alike.

Saida had their mothers curly dark hair and dark skin, but her eyes were all their father's, green as the jewels Tahani sometimes saw around the Elite women's necks. Amal shared in their mothers curls and dark skin, but only one of his eyes was as green as their fathers, the other as dark as the night sky. He had been teased for his features by the other kids, but Tahani had always had a special love for her mismatched brother. Her own eyes being a tie-dyed mixture of both brown and green. Scientifically her eyes were referred to as partial heterochromia in both eyes, but she had never explained that to anyone, no one had ever asked.

“Did-did you see the Doctor?” Saida asked, always tripping over her words when she got excited. Tahani nodded, standing up from hugging the twins.

“Yes I did, and he gave me a whole bucket of medicine.” Saida and Amal’s eyes got real big turning to look at the table that Tahani had placed the package on.

“What’s in it?” Amal asked, reaching for the lid, but he knew better than to open it, he just liked to touch new things. Tahani cracked her neck pulling off her jacket to hang on the hook near the door. Thankful that the heating was working.

“Just the essentials probably, rubbing alcohol, bandages, pills.” Tahani trailed off as the twins continued to study the large bin. They knew all that was in the box, they had been around Tahani’s work all their life. But she always answered their questions, no matter how unnecessary.

“It’s bigger this time.” Saida noted and Tahani pursed her lips. She had noticed that too. But when she checked the label it had her name on it. Apparently she had won some sympathy points with the Doctor. The proud part of her hated the pity but the desperate part would take anything she could.

“It is at that.” Tahani agreed, stepping up to take the box off the table.

“Maybe that means you can save *more* people’s lives this month.” Amal declared his little voice bright with excitement at the prospect of it.” Tahani smiled at the little boy.

“Maybe so.” Amal nodded satisfied and the two twins sat down at the table while Tahani went to store the medicine in the back. Tahani had just finished coming back to the main room when the front door opened. Rayan walked in first, her little body still looked too frail but she had always been slight. When she was born too small their parents had worried she wouldn’t make it. But Rayan’s will had been strong, always had been.



"Your back early." Rayan said as a greeting, her dark eyes scanning Tahani from head to toe. Tahani rolled her eyes, taking a seat at the table with the twins.

"It's nice to see you too, sis, glad you're not dead." Tahani narrowed her eyes at her sister as the twins jabbered on about nothing. "Didn't I specifically say not to go to the Till today?" Rayan rolled her eyes, stripping off her scarf and gloves.

"Didn't I say that I wasn't going to listen to you and that you weren't the boss of me." Tahani shook her head, her sister was the most frustrating person on the planet. "And besides I was with Mama all day, she didn't let me do anything."

"Do I hear complaining? You're lucky I let you come at all." On her cue their mother walked in. Issa had always been short and soft, her long curly hair always pulled into a loose braid down her back, highlighting the roundness of her face. But despite Issa's gentle appearance, it was her children's opinion that she was easily the scariest thing ever seen. She narrowed her dark eyes down at her younger daughter. Rayan was basically their mothers miniature look alike, and when both of their tempers collided the rest of the family ducked for cover.

"Of course not, Mama." Rayan placated. "I was just reassuring Tahani of my lack of participation." Issa huffed a breath at her troublesome daughter, turning to look at Tahani.

"Any trouble?" Tahani shook her head and Issa nodded, shucking off her coat and hat to hang with everyone else's. Rayan and the twins started up a heated discussion about something pointless, the three of them always getting along.

"Where's Nasir and Baba?" Issa grunted as she plopped down on the chair with her children.

"They found a cat and decided to bring it to Tashira." Issa rolled her eyes. "I swear if your brother doesn't propose to that girl at one point or another." Tahani smiled at her mothers grumblings. Tashira had been an extended family member for years now, first starting as Nasir's childhood friend and then gradually becoming his first love. They had been together for years now and Nasir had just recently turned 19. What Issa didn't know, and what Tahani did, was that Nasir had recently purchased a little flower from a local cart owner that grew his flowers artificially. It was expensive to buy any form of plant, but it was tradition to propose marriage with such a long lasting beautiful thing. The Elites, she knew, proposed with shiny rocks and hard metal. But she had always loved their tradition more. The couple would care for the flower and watch it grow as would their relationship, the romantic in Tahani had always loved the notion. Her own parents still watered and cared for their plant, even years after their union.

"Should I start dinner?" Tahani asked, standing up to turn on the oven. It always took forever for it to heat.

"No, no." Issa quickly corrected. "We're having dinner at the Hall today. There was an announcement." Tahani internally cringed. Tahani had nothing personally against the Hall's mandatory community dinners, the food was free and the company was pleasant. But it was the principle of the thing. The fact that she *couldn't* refuse that rubbed her the wrong way.

"Of course," Tahani sighed. "Then I suppose we should get going soon." Issa skewed up her lips.

"Don't look so disgruntled, Tahani. The people love you and they want to see you." Tahani sighed again.

"I know, Mama." Issa narrowed her eyes as her eldest child, reaching across the table to take her hand. Her mothers callused and work hardened fingers curling around Tahani's wrist.

"You're working too hard." Her mother warned gently. Tahani smiled tiredly at her Mama. Issa was the only one in the family with eyes like a camera, watching everything and knowing everyone's secrets.

"It must be done." It was all that Tahani could say. Issa tightened her lips but nodded. Issa understood that there was a lot her daughter never told her. She knew that Tahani's job was filled with constant death and pain, she worried for her daughter. But Tahani had always been strong, always ready to protect. Issa only feared that one of these days the darkness would catch up to her daughter, and take her away for good.

"Just be kind to yourself, blossom." Tahani smiled at her caring Mama.

"Of course." She promised bending down to brush a kiss to the top of her Mama's hair. But Issa just sighed, knowing that the promise held no actual weight.

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The Hall was warm and noisy. Smells of food permeated the air. As a child Tahani had always loved the Hall dinners. It was fun and yummy. The only thing the Elites did for the Dregs that she actually approved of. Even now she agreed with the concept of it, though she also understood it for what it was. A reminder of the control they had on them all. Telling them when to eat, who to eat with, and what exactly they could eat. A reminder that *they* controlled the food and one step out of line and they'd all starve.

Tahani sat at the table designated for their family. Issa sat down with a twin on either side of her. Rayan didn't even stop, just kept going to find her friends. Tahani shared a look with her mother. She was just at that age. And it wasn't required that you stay at your table; it was just to make sure that everyone had access to one.

"Can-can we go find Asa and Lincoln?" Saida asked over the thrum of the voices through the Hall. Issa pursed her lips as she weighed her options, eyeing the lively crowd and her two little children.

"Yes, we can go find them but give me your hands and don't let go, understand?" Both twins nodded excitedly, hopping off of the long metal bench and grabbing her hand. Issa and the twins quickly disappeared into the crowd.

Tahani looked around smiling at a few people she knew as they made their way past. As a medical professional Tahani knew many of them, having either treated them or their children. There were, unfortunately, many injuries that happened daily, Tahani was always busy, always overworked. But the work kept her out of the Till and she absolutely hated the Till.

"Hey gorgeous." Tahani rolled her eyes as Alec slid into the seat beside her.

"Alexander." She said in greeting, turning to face him as he slid her a cup of purified water.

"How was the Doc?" Tahani narrowed her eyes at her long time friend, she knew he didn't approve of her crossing the Dein.

"Alec, I've told you multiple times to back off. You know what I do is needed ." Alec clenches his jaw, his legs straddling the bench she perched on.

"You know the Elites don't like it when we impose." Tahani shrugged.

"It's not illegal to cross the Sectors, Alec. And the Elites can hate me all they want. We needed the Meds, they had it." Alec leaned back hearing the twinge of desperation in Tahani's voice and asking the silent question. Tahani sighed. "It's getting worse." I was all she would say. Alec was the only one really aware of how rung out Tahani was, but even he didn't know the full extent. His sharp eyes softened, sympathy gentling them out. He grabbed Tahani's shoulder , giving her one reassuring squeeze.

"You're the strongest smartest person I know, Tahani. I know you'll figure this out." But Tahani said nothing. The two of them sat in silence, watching the crowd of people around them. Listening to the laughter and the joy of those that they loved. The both of them feeling isolated in their island of negativity. Knowing the harsh realities of the world and that it would never change. Tahani opened her mouth, about to say something to try and brighten the mood but something caught out of the corner of her eye. Tahani stood straight up, instantly at attention as the lanky teen came stumbling towards her, his body still not yet fully filled into his long limbs. Teddy was out of breath and sweaty, his eyes wide with panic as they met hers. He didn't say anything, didn't need to, Tahani could feel the desperation radiating off of him. She was up and running out of the Hall, the both of them running hell bent back to the clinic. Tahani had no idea what had caused the typically calm mannered boy to be so unnerved, but she knew it couldn't be anything good.

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The outside of the Clinic looked exactly as it always had, the repaired mismatched metal working, patching up the walls and structure of an old warehouse. It wasn't perfect, but it meant there was plenty of room for her many patients. Teddy barreled through the front doors, leaving Tahani to saunter up the path, catching her breath as she slowed.

Tahani pushed open the door and came to a halt. Now, Tahani wasn't as fancy as the Elites and didn't have a room specifically named for waiting. But the first room of the Clinic was a large empty seating area, used generally for the waiting patients, but they tended to just call it the entrance. And right now, standing in her entrance, were five Elites.

Tahani had to blink. When the mirage of the Elites didn't disappear she squeezed her eyes together again, tighter this time. But once again the Elites remained. Tahani couldn't believe her eyes. In all her life and in all her interactions with the other Sectors, never, not once, has an Elite ever ventured into the Lows. And right now, standing before her, was not one but five Elites having crossed the Dein and trekked the streets of the Lows to end up in her Clinic.

Tahani's eyes snapped to the only person she recognized. Dr. Nikolai looked even more stressed out than when she typically met with him. The older Doctor obviously didn't like being here. But that begged the question, why was he?

Tahani's eyes scanned the other four strangers standing in her Clinic. One of the men was obviously a Guard, his red crisp uniform instantly depicting him as one of the Elites public protect service officers. He stood behind the rest of the group, impassive and detached, he was obviously here only for the job.

The only woman in the group stepped towards Tahani, her eyes tight with pain and worry, her hands clutched tight to her chest. She looked to be in her early thirties, her skin pale and soft. Her blonde hair intricately woven around her head, her dress a silk soft blue, shimmering around her as she moved. Her kind eyes matched the color of her dress, almost begging Tahani as she stepped closer. But the woman was pulled back by one of the men, his

darker hair and hulking body differing so well against the doll-like woman. Their only true similarities being the shared desperation in their eyes and his own impeccable taste in clothes. When the woman snapped her head back to glare at the man, she reluctantly let her go, love shining in his eyes as he watched her take a step towards Tahani.

"You're Tahani right?" The woman asked, her voice fragile with despair. Tahani glanced at Teddy as he emerged from the back, closing the curtains behind him so that their visitors wouldn't see the patients. Teddy made eye contact and nodded, urging her to answer.

"Yes, that's me." Tahani supplied the woman. The woman sighed, her shoulders falling in relief. She turned back briefly to make eye contact with, whom Tahani assumed was her husband. The darker man smiled back at her hopeful face, his own tension not so easily dispensed. The women turned back to face Tahani.

"My name is Abrielle." The woman introduced. "This is my husband Hairen and my brother Bashton." Both men nodded a silent greeting, her brother her male copy - blonde hair, blue eyes, and gorgeous. The men, however, didn't seem to share in her pleasure if being in the Lows. "I believe you already know Dr. Nikolai?" Tahani glanced at the ever anxious doctor, he had said nothing yet and it appeared he did not plan to.

"Yes." Tahani agreed, turning back to the woman. "Why exactly are you here?" Tahani asked and the pain drew up again in the woman's eyes.

"It's our daughter." Abrielle explained, her voice cracking. She bit her bottom lip and took a breath, steadying herself. "Zai started getting sick about a week ago. When it didn't get better we brought her to the closest doctor. They ran the test and the Tech said there was nothing medically wrong with her. The doctors gave her some meds and sent us home. The next morning Zai woke up coughing up her lung and wouldn't stop. We took her to a further doctor hoping for different results, but the same thing happened. It was when Zai stopped talking all together that we went from doctor to doctor just trying to find an answer. That's how we met Dr. Nikolai, he told us of your experience with her illness and that you could fix her." Tahani stared at the hopeful stressed filled mother. Her throat clogged tight with what she was saying, what it meant. Tahani finally looked up and met Teddy's eye, he nodded, once. Tahani swallowed thickly, so it was true. The Sickness had spread, and had taken the Elites.

A moment passed while she processed the information and then she snapped her glare over at the doctor. The frightened man sweating bullets in the corner of her very own Clinic.

"You are a cruel man." She practically spit at him, he jumped at the venom in her voice. His fingers fluttered nervously at his sides as he sputtered trying desperately to defend himself. "You *know* I can't save their child. Why would you promise them that?" The doctor shrinks into himself any argument he had dying instantly. But it's the pained whimper of what sounds like a wounded animal that has Tahani turning away from the weak man that was the Doctor. Abrielle has taken steps back, her face falling into devastation as her husband pulls her into his arms. Tahani cringes knowing that she had just slashed the remaining sliver of hope the couple had been holding on to. A throat clears and Tahani looks up to meet Teddy's eye.

"She's here." Tahani freezes. That changed some things. Tahani glances over at the Doctor, the man still hunched over. She shakes her head at his characters and turns to face the crying family.

"I cannot promise that she will survive, but I will do everything I can for your daughter." Abrielle gasps and turns to face Tahani, hope lit anew within her soul. The desperate mother clinging to any fray thread of a chance they might find.

"If you cannot guarantee Zai's survival then what use are you? You impotent stray." Bashton said, stepping forwards to interpret any words his sister was about to say. "I will not let my niece die in this horrid dirty slum." He said turning to his sister. "She should leave this world in peace, Bre. She would not want her last moments to be with the urchins of the Lows." Tahani stepped forward, her eyes narrowing on the rude man.

"You came to *my* town, asking for *my* help. You will watch your tongue when talking about my *home*. You are a *guest* of the Dregs. But you will not find us so hospitable if you continue to slur our name. You might be used to your cushy life and your every need met, but you find that *here* you are not so *Elite*." Tahani took a step back, turning to make her way into the medical ward. "Now I *will* attempt to save that little girl's life, but I *cannot* promise her survival." Tahani drew back the curtains revealing the rows and rows of beds to the Elites. The sick and injured lined from wall to wall, some sleeping peacefully, some writhing in pain, their groans and whimpers echoing in the metal cavern that was their Clinic. Tahani could do nothing to alleviate their pain, she had run out of the pain meds weeks ago. Her only other option was to put them under, but most didn't care for that, the after effects tending to worse than their actual ailment. Tahani spotted the new patient easily, she always knew how many were in her ward. The small little girl laid curled up in their thin cotton blankets, her body shivering in her fever. Even on the far side of the room Tahani could tell that the girl couldn't have been older than four. Each of the Elites stepped in behind her, their wide eyes roaming the expanse of the room. Even the Guard gapped at the conditions. Tahani sighed, pulling on her rubber gloves and grabbing one of the charts from the wall to her right. She turned back to the appalled Elites. "I will do everything I can for Zai, but I am only one person. There is only so much that I can promise." It was Abrielle who broke out of her stunned horror first, her eyes meeting Tahani's and lowered her head in a respectful nod. It was the first time that Tahani had seen the steel inside of Abrielle, the strength currently hidden under the frightened mother.

"You must stay here." Tahani heard Teddy relay to their guests as she made her way down the rows of bed towards their newest patient. "Do not touch any of the patients. You may speak to the ones that speak to you, but try to be quiet, some are sleeping..." Tahani couldn't hear him any more, having traveled too far to hear his listing of the rules. She finally made it to Zai's bed and pulled out some of the more important papers on her clipboard. She checked the boxes that she already knew before waking up the child. Zai rolled over slowly, her eyes blinking awake red around the rims. Tahani narrowed her eyes at that.

"Hello Zai, my name is Tahani and I'm a doctor that's here to help you, ok?" Zai blinked fast, lifting her little arms to grasp at her throat. Tahani nodded.

"Yes, I know you can't speak thank you. You can just nod your head yes or no okay?" Zai tightened her lips and nodded her head softly.

"Your mom and dad are right in the other room and if you ever need them just make a fist like this," Tahani held up her own hand in a fist to demonstrate. "And I'll get them, ok?" Zai nodded, her smile a little softer. "Now I'm just going to ask you some questions and I want you to answer them as best you can, ok?" Zai nodded her head and Tahani smiled.

“Can you rate your pain for me on a scale from one to ten, one being I don't feel anything at all I'm ready to go play and ten being I think I'm going to die right now.” Zai smiled wider as Tahani's dramatics. “Just hold up the number on your fingers ok?” Zai nodded and paused for a moment considering. She inspected her hands, counting off on her fingers before turning them over satisfied, presenting Tahani with her chosen number. Tahani internally winced as the little girl declared her pain to be an eight, quickly jotting it down on the chart.

“Excellent, Zai. Are you ready for your next question?” Zai nodded, gently putting her hands back down.

“Have you found any red circles on your body, anywhere at all?” Zai nodded and Tahani tried not to wince. She hung the board on the clip at the end of the bed. “I'm going to point on your body and you nod if that's where you found the spot ok?” Zai nodded and Tahani moved closer to the little girl. She pointed first at the girl's arms, but Zai shook her head. Tahani moved down to her stomach but again the girl said no. But when Tahani reached her legs the little girl nodded.

“Both?” Tahani questioned and she nodded her head. “May I look at your legs?” Zai glanced briefly behind Tahani, eyeing her family from a distance. But the little girl looked back at Tahani and nodded. Tahani gently pulled the blanket off of Zai's body, and then rolled up each of her pant legs to the knee. There, stark against the little girl's pale skin, was the Spots. Big red circular blotches that formed on the skin and was the last stage of the Sickness. After the Spots, death tended to follow quickly. Tahani let out an even breath trying not to alarm the little girl. Gently she pulled the girl's pant leg and blanket back down.

“Thank you, sweetheart.” Zai smiled up at her as she stood turning quickly to face Teddy where he still stood monitoring the Elites. He met her eye and she raised her hand palm flat facing him, she turned it 180 degrees to face her and then formed a fist. Teddy nodded, knowing what that meant and sneaking out without ensuing panic to fetch what she needed. Teddy returned shortly with a small case in his hand, he passed the unit over to Tahani and she thanked him quickly. Tahani turned back to the little girl, pulling out the little glass bottle filled with a light purple liquid and a syringe. She carefully stuck the syringe in the top of the bottle, pulling out just the right amount of the liquid.

“You see this here?” Tahani asked, showing the girl the syringe. Zai nodded as she watched the tool. “This is a magic potion that will make you go to sleep and when you wake up you're going to be all better, ok?” Zai nodded her understanding. “Is it ok if I give you this? All it's going to do is put you to sleep.” Zai nodded, finally looking away from the syringe to meet Tahani's eyes. Tahani smiled kindly at the little girl and gently grabbed her little arm. She squeezed a little until she found the vein and quickly injected it into her arm. Almost instantly the little girl's eyes started to droop until she was out entirely. Tahani sighed and looked behind her. Teddy had done his job getting the family out of the room, now it was just the two of them and the patients. But they'd be fine, everyone in the Dregs was familiar with how brutal the procedure is for the Sickness. Teddy rolled in the cart of all they needed. Tahani stepped forward and opened up the doors pulling out the trays of different tools. She pulled on a mask to cover her face and a net over her hair. She turned back to the little girl and sighed. It was time. Now to try and save her life.

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The little girl was waking up. The drug had officially worn off, her long lashes fluttering as she looked around. Her mother sat beside her bed, her head lulled to the side, passed out cold. Abrielle had refused to leave her daughter's side after Tahani had finished the procedure. Her husband had stayed with her for a time but eventually had to leave. He had promised that he would be back shortly and had left only the Guard behind. Before he left though he had pulled Tahani to the side, to speak to her alone. He had thanked her for saving his daughter and promised to compensate her whatever she was owed. Tahani hadn't wanted to take the man's money but she knew she needed it. So she had gratefully accepted.

After Tahani had finished her procedure she had returned to the entrance to find all the Elites sitting restlessly in her uncomfortable metal chairs. She had informed them that Zai would recover and survive. She then went through the list of things to expect during her recovery and how best to make her comfortable. The parents had thanked her over and over again, Abrielle instantly running to her daughters side. But Bashton and the Doctor remained silent, both men lost in whatever thoughts occupied their minds.

Before Bashton had left with Hairen the stoic man had glanced back at Tahani. He waited until everyone had left and then took a step towards her.

"I didn't know." I was all he said, his voice solemn, his eyes apologetic and self-deprecating. Tahani nodded once before he turned and walked out of the Clinic, disappearing into the streets of the Lows. Tahani understood that the Elites didn't know anything of the life she and the Dregs led, they were sheltered and ignorant, living in blissful happiness. Never question the hands that feed them, never pausing to smell the blood that stained their palms. Tahani didn't blame them, it was how they lived, how they functioned. Bashton was never meant to see the horrors that the Dregs were left to live in, none of the Elites were. Tahani had hummed to herself softly as the strong group of men left her Clinic, and she had wondered briefly to herself, what this might change.

When the men had finally left, leaving Tahani and Abrielle alone in the ward, the women had pulled up chairs and taken seats at the edge of Zai's bed. The two women had talked briefly about their lives and how much they differed. But they also found similarities within each other that had made them easy acquaintances. It was only when Abrielle had asked Tahani why the children wouldn't talk to her that there had been an awkward lull.

"I only ask," Abrielle had said. "Because when I tried to ask one of them a question he all but ran away screaming." Tahani had cringed just slightly.

"The children of the Dregs are raised on horror stories and warnings. It makes their instincts better, knowing that there's always something that they have to fear." Tahani had explained to the kind woman. "But one of the more popularly told stories is the cruelty of the Elites. Most children around here, you'll find, will be terrified of you. You're their monster in the closet, their Boogey-man under the bed." Tahani had shrugged at the shock that slammed Abrielle's face. "When we grow up we forget such nonsense, just like all children. We know you're just people, the same as us." Abrielle had fallen asleep shortly after that discussion. Tahani was half sure that the woman had slept since her daughter started getting sick. Even now, as the little girl stirred awake, her mother stayed fast asleep.

"How are you feeling, Zai?" Tahani asked, leaning forward to speak softly to the child. Zai smiled tightly at Tahani, her eyes still creased in lingering pain. But the strong girl slowly lifted up her hand, flashing a thumbs up. Tahani smiled.

“That's good, I'm glad.” Zai swallowed thickly and Tahani nodded. “Yes, your throat is going to feel weird for a while now. But the feeling will fade eventually.” Zai lifted her little hand and pressed her fingers to her lips, her wide eyes asking a silent question.

“You should be able to speak in a few weeks, sweetheart, but it will be difficult at first, ok? If you have any pain when you try talking you should immediately stop. Don't talk unless you feel ready, ok?” Zai nodded, putting her hand back down on the metal cot. The little girl gazed at her sleeping mother, her little eyes filled with love. Tahani smiled to herself at the love between the two of them. She sat back up in her chair, pulling out the chart to fill out some more information. After she was done, Tahani began pulling off her rubber gloves, her hands beginning to sweat underneath. Her darker skin on the back of her skin glistened with the clammy sweat. She froze as she stared down at her hands. Dark red circles crawling up her wrists and fingers. She stared and stared, fear trailing down her spine and ice spreading through her veins. A little rasping grunt snapped Tahani out of the trance, looking up to see Zai's wide worried eyes. The little girl lifted one of her shaking little hands and pointed at Tahani's hands. Zai then patted down her own legs, her worried eyes asking a silent question. Tahani smiled, slipping her gloves back on.

“Yeah, sweetheart.” Tahani nodded, her voice catching and rasping. She cleared her throat and stood up. “We're the same.”

Zai narrowed her eyes as Tahani turned away from the little girl, making her way out of the ward and into the busy streets of the Lows. Tahani kept going, never stopping. Walking and walking as her breathing grew difficult. She was sucking in rasps of air, her fingers starting to burn, the pain spreading up her arms. She sat down in an empty alley, laying down on the dry dirt ground. She stared up at the dull green sky and thought once more of its impressiveness. It made her think once more at Mora's words, the truth at their inability to anything.

Tahani laid there for what felt like hours. Watching the dying sky, knowing they shared a commonality. She laid there and stared doing nothing at all, as her breathing hitched and sputtered. Until her last and final breath.

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The End