**The Colors**

…Faced with insurmountable problems relating to overpopulation and a density of living that was hitherto unprecedented, the counsel commissioned one of the first experimental artificial intelligences to help oversee the municipal activities. However, after a year of this arrangement, it became clear to the counsel that even with this significant help, the problems due to the number of people needing services was too great for even the Central Computer and the wisdom of the counsel. Therefore, in order to simplify the number of variables for each decision, they made the decision to segregate the city’s population into the four sections that we know today. The main goal of the segregation was to make four separate, manageable populations rather than one massive one. Unfortunately, in order for this to remain the case, they needed to prevent the flow of citizens from section to section. The counsel and the Central Computer thus created the Curtains. The ingenious invincibility of this material would prevent any unauthorized cross section movement. Of course this decision was unpopular to some elements of the people…

Milo tuned out the drone of the speakers in front of him and squinted at the screen. It was showing visuals of the Curtains being constructed. Smiling men in white coats were overseeing the growing of massive sections, as the gardeners moved comically fast here and there, the Curtains rising out of sight, eventually looping over one another to form the ceiling of Blue section.

Boring. Everyone knew about the Curtains; they were all around them! Milo fidgeted in his chair and looked around the room. Next to him other children sat through similar lessons, each with a screen in front of him or her. He had always found such lessons boring. It was much more interesting to stare out of the windows of the Children’s Institute.

Already the daycycle was starting, the luminous blobs of the Stars traveling up their pre-appointed tracks to fill Blue Section with light. Milo watched, somewhat interested as the blue light ran its way across the tops of buildings, gleaming off metal roofs, concrete walls and the spotless and featureless grey of the Curtains.

Milo looked over his shoulder. The teacher was attending to another student. He took his chance and dashed to the window. Smearing his face against the glass of the Children’s Institute. He looked down to see the hustle and bustle of the Blue Section. Everyone knew where they needed to go. After all, today was special. Today was the last day they would have to work on their Positions. Perhaps the teacher didn’t know this. Not everyone did, but Milo’s mother and father were important and they knew.

Mom and Dad had told him that today was the day that them and their friends were going to try to leave the Section. Milo could hardly wait! The Section was large; the Milo had known all the main parts for years. He had run up and down the blue ribbons on the ground since before he remembered, exploring all the secrets the Section had to offer. He had seen the Reactor, even though he wasn’t supposed to be there. He had snuck his way into the Food Processing and Reclamation Center. He had even gone into the old habs that few frequented now. The old habs had been kind of scary, and the friends he had been with got scared and went back and told on Milo.

Actually, now that he thought about it, most people didn’t want him to go where he went most of the time. He thought that was pretty silly. If you’ve seen the area before, it was boring! It was exciting to see new places and explore them. But he was running out of places to explore.

He looked up to check on the teacher. They were still helping the same student. Most of them were boring also. He decided he didn’t want to be here anymore. He wanted to see what Mom and Dad were up to.

He slipped from his position against the window and ran quietly past the rows of students, catching the attention of some of them. He had warned them in the past not to tell on him, but most didn’t listen to him. He was ashamed to say he got caught fairly regularly. One of his friends waved him on but didn’t move herself. He smiled at her and continued to the door.

He slipped another glance at the teacher. Uh oh, they had finished with the other student and were moving down the rows now. Luckily they hadn’t seen him yet, but if they did he would get in trouble again. Hoping that they didn’t hear the door, he ran to the silver door that took them up and down the Children’s Institute and hit the button.

The door binged softly. “Shhh” Milo chastised. A pleasant voice told him to input something on the console. He didn’t understand all of what the voice said, but he had escaped enough to know what he needed to do. His fingers ran across the keypad, inputting the sequence necessary to open the doors. They had changed the passcode since last time but luckily Milo had seen what the new one was when Dad dropped him off.

The doors opened and Milo slipped inside and hammered on the lowest level. Hurry and close! The teacher was getting close to his seat. He had pulled his seat in close so it would be hard for them to tell that he had left. The doors closed slowly, to Milo’s annoyance, but he felt a surge of adrenaline and joy when the lift started moving. Success! He was free once again!

Milo sprinted out into the light of the sun, taking only enough time to direct a quick glance up at the Children’s Institute.

Running along the familiar streets, he mingled amid the bustle of Blue section. Dodging around the many legs of those older than him, he made his way downward, along the slope of the main street. People carried boxes of refined nutrients and other finished products from the factory.

Several minutes later, after he had made it through the majority of the city, he suddenly changed directions, plunging down a side street. Here the concrete and brushed aluminum showed more signs of wear, chips appeared in the road, hints of rebar poking through. People passed him less and less frequently, finally disappearing altogether.

The buildings transitioned from distribution centers and well-kept habs to abandoned haunted frames of steel.

Milo had journeyed into these forgotten realms before, climbing over collapsed ceilings and ruined floors. Near here he had cut himself badly on a piece of metal jutting out of the wall. He had asked Dad and Mom about this area, but they just said that the Blue Sector used to have more people.

After a bit of this, as the street tilted downward, eventually toward the reactor, Milo slipped through a small opening in a non-descript tumble down building.

The pale light of the Stars filtered in through paneless windows. A thin layer of dust covered most of the room but in the center of it lay a hole in the concrete floor, the remains sloping inward towards a darker floor.

Milo slid along the ground through the opening. There was nothing interesting in front of the ramp, but in under it was a black steel door in the style of the oldest construction of the city.

Milo approached the door and exposed an input console just barely within his reach. He input the code and waited till he heard the many locks groan. Finally, the door opened. Milo grabbed the lowest part of the handle and pulled with all of his might.

The door slid open revealing a dark hallway with a metal grating floor. Below, dim red light illuminated various pipes and electrical conduits. He ran through the hallway coming to a circular metal stair.

Finally, at the bottom of this was one last door, much smaller than the last. Milo also knew the code and this one fell before him as well. Inside was a small group of people busily attending a multitude of monitors. Another group of people were kneeling around a device emitting a blindingly bright light A laser.

Milo approached slowly. He had been warned about the device and had no desire to get in the way or disrupt the operation. As he approached, a familiar face noticed him.

“Milo!” The woman scolded. She motioned for the other men operating the laser to continue. Milo saw his father adjust a setting on the device before winking at Milo. Milo wasn’t supposed to be here, as he knew, but he also knew Dad would allow it. Mom on the other hand…

“Milo!” The woman repeated, angrily walking to him. “You’re supposed to be at the Children’s Institute. Didn’t we tell you how important today is?”

Milo felt a little ashamed. “But it was boring! I know all that stuff anyway. Plus, I wanted to see you and Dad.”

His father looked up and signaled something to the crew of the laser. He started over as well.

“Your mother is right. We specifically told you how important toady was and why that meant that you needed to at least try to stay at your Position today. I know the Central Computer had been lax lately, but we can’t take any chances.”

Mom folded her arms as Dad put his hand on her shoulder.

“I know…” Milo said suddenly shy, and looked down at his feet. “But that’s the point. Today *is* important and I wanted to see it. Plus, Sissy doesn’t scare me at all!”

“I told you not to call the Central Computer that. There was a time when it would have treated you very badly for that” Mother snapped.

Before Milo could respond, a deafening noise filled the room, Milo winced and covered his ears. Dad grabbed Mom and positioned himself between the source and the two of them. Smoke filled the room.

“What was that?” Milo’s father demanded, looking up, still covering his family.

Bodies moved, groping for something to hold in the smoke. “The regulator has blown; overheated!” A voice shouted.

Milo’s father motioned for Milo and his mother to back up. She moved Milo further behind her but also straightened herself.

“How far did it go?” she asked. The loud sudden sound of an air-vac soon revealed the answer to her question. One the group was certain the laser was deactivated they surveyed their progress.

“This isn’t good.” Mom said gravely. “We barely go through at all. There’s not even enough room for a person.” She pointed out.

Milo peered around her. Sure enough, the grey blue Curtain had been breached, an impossible task, but only a small section was missing, the edges still fuming as remains slowly oozed from the opening.

A chorus of voices erupted at once.

“How long until we can get a replacement regulator?”

“How did it overheat? I checked it; I’m sure of it!”

“Could the Central Computer have done this? We tried to mask our power draw, but one pulse along the main line and…” He trailed off.

The last comment was for some reason particularly quieting. The grownups were very afraid of Sissy for some reason. They always were afraid that Sissy would figure out what they were doing.

Milo’s father peered through the small hole in the wall. “It’s dark; you can’t really see much. I can’t see anyone on the Yellow side.”

“Could something have happened to them? We haven’t heard from them in weeks, not since they finished their own drilling…” Milo’s mother asked, joining her husband, crouching to also see through the hole. “What if the Central Computer did find out about our plan?” She whispered. Milo ran up as well, eager to see through the curtain.

The parents let Milo look through the hole, the melted Curtain still warm to the touch in Milo’s hands. The hole was just barely bigger than his head. He looked through.

The other side was nearly featureless, with dust obscuring whatever was on the other side. A pale yellow light drifted through the dust, speaking tantalizingly of new places to explore.

“We should be able to get a replacement regulator in about a week, but it might take longer without Yellow Section’s help.”

“Well, I suppose that is unavoidable” Milo’s father replied grabbing Milo by the waist and scooping him into his arms. Milo’s smile shone. Dad smiled down at him.

“Everyone, there’s not much we can do today. We should meet tomorrow to discuss logistics after the Starrise” The group agreed and shuffled out, some pausing to look at Milo, some smiling as they left, others clearly frustrated and annoyed.

Mom and Dad gathered around him and lead him to their quarters. They had to stay here for some reason that Milo didn’t really understand, but it had to do with Sissy not knowing they were here. That was why he had to live in the Children’s Institute with the rest of the orphans.

Milo looked around the tiny room. “Can I stay with you tonight?” He asked his mother as they entered. She hesitated so he quickly redirected his gaze to his father. “please?” he added, pleading.

The two grownups shared a glance. “It would make sense. It would look less suspicious than him going and coming back.” His father pointed out.

“He isn’t supposed to be here at all” She countered. Tears started to form in Milo’s eyes, and he quickly looked down at the metal floor, not wanting to meet her gaze.

“I’m sorry Milo, that came out much harsher than I intended.” She sighed, wiping the tears from Milo’s eyes. His father crouched as well until both of them were at his level.

“We just want you to be safe and this is no place for children.” She added, motioning to the room behind them and the austere quarters that the two shared. “Plus the Central Computer…” She began, almost by instinct looking over her shoulder for cameras, even though Milo knew none could ever be here.

“Let’s not talk about that now. Milo knew he wasn’t supposed to come here. And Milo,” Dad said, locking eyes with him, “we may have to punish you. It’s really quite serious. All this running off can’t continue. You’re going to get hurt one day and we won’t be able to help you.” He said sternly. She nodded in agreement. Milo nodded at well, still wiping the remnants of his tears from his face.

“But I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to let you stay just this once.” He finished. Milo jumped up, a massive grin on his face.

“Fine.” His mother agreed. “We might as well have something to eat then.” She said, motioning to his father.

The room was a perfect square with only one low entrance with a metal door. Dad strode over to one of the walls and pulled out a small compartment. Inside was a collection of food meals. The family had lunch at the control table in the main room, since their quarters didn’t have a table.

The rest of the day went uneventfully with one of them playing with Milo while the other worked. And when it came time for starfall, he fell sleep with them all together on the small bed in the square room. Milo have very rarely been happier.

But this happiness didn’t extend into his dreams. He was running down Blue Section as normal but everyone’s faces were just black smudges. Even worse, the whole place was stuffed with the same yellow dust he had seen through the Curtain.

Some of the figures went to approach him, but their words were a garbled alien language, too low to be human and they all spoke at once. Milo cried out and ran from the figures, dashing down the street, retracing his steps from earlier.

Suddenly he was at the door. He quickly entered the combination, all the while jerking his head back to check the yellow unnatural smoke, heart racing. The door slid open and he dashed inside. His parents were waiting for him in the other room.

Good. They would help him and protect him from what was out there. But when he ran inside, his parents leered at him through sightless black holes where their faces should be. They reached toward him…

He awoke drenched in sweat aside his parents, both fast asleep. Careful not to wake them, he put on his shoes as to not to touch the cold ground and tiptoed silently to the wall to pour himself some water as he had seen his father do many times before.

The door between their quarters and the main room was still open. A strange light peeked its way in through the doorway. Unable to stop himself, yet gripped with dread, he stole a look through the hole. The same pale yellow light as his dream oozed in through the hole. The smoke was gone now and Milo could even see a street of some sort.

Curiosity momentarily overcame fear and he advanced closer, assured that no one was around on either side to observe his activities. Through the hole there was a street with a sign that he couldn’t quite make out. A yellow stripe ran down the center, but the rest was concrete, just like Blue Section. He peered closer.

Right out of his vision through the hole there was an object that he couldn’t quite see. He stuck his head through the hole and was rewarded by realizing he could probably wriggle his way through. Fear now totally replaced by excitement, he slipped through the hole.

As he had observed, the street was totally deserted. He glanced furtively from side to side to make sure there wasn’t anyone further up or down the street. He needn’t have bothered though since the thick smoke prevented seeing very far. Satisfied his actions hadn’t been seen, he turned to look at the wall behind him.

The curtain was identical to Blue Section’s side. A smooth featureless grey wall reaching up to connect presumably with the ceiling. So same and yet so alien. As far as he knew, no one had ever been in two Sections ever since their construction. His excitement surged, though all the while laced with a health amount of caution. Running was fine in the Blue section, but here, walking would be king.

But where to go? What to see? He certainly didn’t want to get lost. He glanced around the street to see a myriad of side streets, terminating only in darkness and smoke. He would be keeping to the main streets it seemed.

A destination popped into his head. The reactor, assuming it was in the same place, at the end of the slope of the main road would be a perfect place to go. Milo was fascinated with its working and strange lights and equipment. It was very hard for him to get to the one in blue section, but if Yellow Section were as vacant as it seemed, perhaps he could sneak into theirs.

A sudden intuition seized him and he looked upward. Far far above him a pale yet present glow told him that it was day. How was that possible? It certainly had been night in Blue Section. He puzzled about this as he continued down the road. Milo could feel it getting warmer as he went down and more humid.

The road opened out into a large plaza with several restaurants and other commercial establishments. Tall trees sat in perfectly manicured beds, wilting in the dust. The concrete briefly was replaced with cobblestone, but several had been pried out. Milo could only read a couple of the advertisements, but they seemed to offer the same sort of fare he could find in Blue Section. That disappointed him somewhat. The other Sections had always been exotic places, far off distant curiosities of the mind, never to be seen with the eye. But now he was here and could see it. It was known and explored. For some reason it made him sad.

He passed the restaurants and the plaza. The lack of people didn’t concern Milo significantly. To be sure, since he wasn’t sure what a Yellow Sector citizen’s reaction would be to him snooping around, he was actually glad of the lack of people. In addition, if this sector mirrored his own, this area was deserted anyway. Everyone would live further up in the gleaming towers. Finally, he had no desire to see anyone in this smoke, not after his dream.

At least the reactor was ahead. He would have to be careful. Even though the area around was deserted, the reactor would be manned at all hours. The road continued its downward descent. The building here surpassed the usual decay he was used to. Some were missing walls or had even collapsed totally! Their bodies sat silently amid the dust quietly waiting. Milo shivered despite the mounting heat. Buildings shouldn’t be like that. They were for living and working and playing. Even in the worst parts of Blue Section, if a building fell down, it was at least cleared and recycled for use in other buildings. This was a new experience.

The air was clammy and icky to Milo’s senses. A sudden possibility hit him. What if the reactor had broken? He had learned all about such possibilities in the Children’s Institute. If that were the case it would explain the strange haze and lack of people as well as the warmth. He stopped and looked around for such signs. What should he do? Certainly he should run away from the reactor, back through the Curtain and tell his parents. Hadn’t he been far enough? What time was it? Were his parents awake? They would surely be worried. A frown worked its way across his face.

On the other hand, this was literally a once in a life time chance. It was very likely that he would get in huge amounts of trouble. But the opportunity was undeniably unique.

*Child*

Milo stopped dead still. The voice had come from everywhere at once.

*Milo*

His heart pounded in his chest and he jerked his head in every direction. But he knew what it was. Sissy had found him. He wasn’t supposed to be here and Sissy had found out. Sissy had talked to him only a few times before, mostly chastising him for running off. Each time had been traumatic for both him and his parents.

*How did you get here?*

He backed up slowly and then stopped again. This was very very bad. Sissy was definitely and under no circumstances allowed to know what his parents were doing. They had made that very clear. If he ran back to the hole Sissy would see. It would know everything.

*You must go back child. This place isn’t safe for you.*

Milo started running. He had no idea where he was going to go, but it certainly couldn’t be back to the hole. He would worry about the consequences later, now he had to find a place where Sissy couldn’t find him.

*Do not be afraid.*

Milo was very afraid. It was fair to say it was the most afraid he had ever been in his entire life. Buildings and partial walls raced past him as he dashed down side street after side street. He dodged over a chunk of collapsed concrete obscuring the street. And jumped into a ruined building. A thick layer of dust lay over everything. Yellow dust. The walls still standing bore their stripe, same as in his section but this one was yellow.

Sissy couldn’t be everywhere. After seeing the yellow stripes, he spotted a complete staircase going downward and dashed for it. It was dark below but he didn’t think he had a choice. He plunged down into the basement.

He could barely see and relied on his hands tracing the wall. He reached a corner and crouched down covering his head his hands, tears reappearing in his eyes. It was ok, he told himself. Sissy couldn’t find him here.

A red eye appeared past his arm. A cold iron hand gripped his heart. Impossible. No one had seen Sissy’s hands in generations. The clear shine of the lens over the optical camera shone in the darkness, the dull red hiding minuscule ever focusing apertures.

Milo was too scared to move. He didn’t even want to see the thing’s outline. Tears now truly streamed down his fear stricken face. Something made a noise. He stopped breathing, his heart pumping wildly.

The tiny hum of servos. The thing had moved. It had moved towards him.

He screamed, suddenly on his feet tearing up the stairs. He could image the thing behind him, following him with alarming speed, that red eye staying unnaturally level as the too many mechanical limbs propelled the thing after him.

*Stop. I only want to help. I don’t know how you stayed here but I want to help.*

The voice lacked any emotion.

He was already out the building running full speed towards the reactor. Everything was different now. If he could make it to the reactor, there would be people. Sissy couldn’t get him if there were people. No one would let Sissy take him. They couldn’t.

Dark shapes in the smoke, looming shapes of broken buildings and houses, or industry and infrastructure. All shattered.

Finally, the reactor was ahead of him. It looked different than the one in Blue Sector, but he couldn’t miss the massive cooling pipes in the pale light running from the Curtain behind it into the building.

He dared take a look behind his shoulder as he approached the final sprint. The buildings here were all gone. Leveled presumably by time. Only rubble remained, but as he ran towards the now approaching massive building, he could have sworn he could see dark shapes moving amid the rubble.

The reactor was ahead. It had a triangular slanted roof built right against the Curtain itself, with its massive cooling pipes from the building right into the ground where, floors below they would twist and separate into so many other subsystems. There were slits built into the top of the front wall, disappearing darkly into the bulk of the building itself. Along its length ran numerous metal docks and a myriad of doors.

Except. The front of the building had a massive gaping fissure in it, running almost from the sloping roof to the floor and even beyond. Milo could see the ground riven by whatever had caused it, and he could even see into the building itself and its subfloors. Whatever had happened had been serious.

*It is not safe.*

He had no choice. Sissy would catch him. Its hands would grab him. Milo had no idea what they would do to him but the disturbing thought of drills and lasers met his mind. He had learned of a time when Sissy would grab those that disagreed with it. Dragged from their beds and taken who knows where, never to be seen again. He would never be seen again.

Amid reinforced tears he plunged into the gash. He was suspended in mid-air the world frozen around him. Below, he could see the aim of his jump, a cat walk revealed right below the ground hanging amid severed wires and ruptured pipes, below it, the distant light of the reactor core. He wasn’t going to make it.

He slammed into the catwalk, the surface swinging madly below him. The air was forced out of his body by the impact and his legs crumpled under him. The tearing sound of metal on metal filled his head and he weakly struggled for a purchase on the careening metal structure. He found one and held on until his fingers turned white.

His feet tingled from the impact. He looked down, half expecting to see blood, but his had landed it satisfactorily. In awe, he directed his sight to the gash. It hung in the air, searing through the wall he had just entered, the pale light now seeming so bright against the subtle distant glow of the reactor. He caught sight of something move just out of the field of his vision, just outside the reactor. When he tried to see what it was though it was gone.

He looked at the catwalk. He had bent it thoroughly out of shape and it was a wonder it hadn’t collapse on him. Gripping the sides, he attempted to get to his feet. The felt sore in a way he was only somewhat used to, a dull ache as if the bones themselves were bruised. Struggling though, he was able to get to his feet and the adrenaline blocked most of the pain.

He looked forward. The front of the catwalk was still connected to its source, so he inched forward, careful not to unhinge the already damaged thing. The catwalk lead to a hallway, but it was such in a state of disrepair that it was hard to see it as such. It was just a hole surrounded by shredded metal and fractured concrete.

Ahead of him would be the solid wall of the Curtain. But it wasn’t there.

Even given his current position he must have stared at the spot for several moments. When he collected himself he tried to explain what he was seeing. The Curtain was simply gone. Off to the side he could see ripples of the material telling him this was a local occurrence. But in front of him a massive gash like the one he had just entered, went straight through the Curtain. Totally impossible. They had drilled against the Curtain for hours with the most powerful laser they had in the Sector and it had made only a hole big enough for him to squeeze through. And in fact there it was. Off to the side of the opening was a smashed laser. Several other constituent pieces lay strewn about the floor and some seemed missing. So the Yellow Section had used a laser also?

But sure enough at the end of the reactor, where the Curtain was supposed to be there was only open space, leading into what seemed like yet another tunnel. Something had *ripped* open the Curtain. No laser did this.

Suddenly a thought entered his head. Something had opened the Curtain into what? Another Sector? The Blue again, or perhaps the Green or Red Sectors? He had heard very little about the other Sectors from the grownups or even his instruction at the Children’s Institute. The City had been divided into Sectors. If this wasn’t a Sector could it be… outside? The notion filled him with dread. He had been told it had been centuries since the Council and Sissy had made the Sectors and it had required fantastic technology now only a dream to those living in the Sections. What could possibly lie outside of his world?

He had to know, if only a peek. After evading both his parents and Sissy (it seemed) he couldn’t just turn around at this point or he would regret it forever. And although something in his mind told him that the hazards he might face were like nothing he had ever seen before, being in such a foreign place, he was simply to enthralled with the possibility of venturing into such fantastic unknowns. No one, not any of the other children and certainly not the grownups had ever even heard about the outside, let alone seen it. He would go down in history not only as the first person to go from Section to Section but also to witness the outside.

We walked bravely through the gash.

The tunnel was lit simply with what appeared florescent lights, but when he stared upwards to locate the source, he realized with a no little unease that he couldn’t see any bulbs anywhere. The light just seemed to spring into place. The hallway was triangular, but the walls weren’t metal or rock. They seemed to be a dull plastic looking color, reflecting the light in strange ways. Something about the scale like surface of the walls made Milo think of something organic.

He very soon realized that there were numerous openings, each like the one he was currently walking on. But unlike the corridors and streets of the Section, these appeared at every different angle, some straight down, some twisting off into oblique horizons. All were obscured by a light white fog which almost seemed to be seeping in from the walls themselves.

Milo stopped and looked behind him, worried suddenly that he had lost his way. The hallway behind him looked exactly like the one in front of him. There wasn’t a single feature in any of the hallways except for a stripe!

He crouched down and ran his hand over it. The Yellow Stipe reached out from his hand and advanced silently into the future. His eyes followed it eagerly. Off to his left there was a Blue stripe and to his right leaning at a steep angle down was a Red stripe. Different stripes for different Sectors. It had to be.

He walked forward with purpose. With this configuration he couldn’t get lost. He could simply follow the stripe back to the Sector. But a realization hit him. If all the stripes came from Sectors, where did they go? Did they loop back on themselves? Did they change color halfway through? What was the purpose of such a system?

Determined to at least obtain an answer to such a simple question, he proceeded onwards.

He soon saw something far ahead of him; what looked like a much larger room. But as he prepared to run towards it, he thought he heard something faint behind him. He spun around, and he though he saw a black shape disappear into one of the other hallways.

*Child. You must turn back. I am not sure I can protect you here.*

Sissy was here.

He was silent for a moment but worked up the courage to actually respond to the voice.

“Where am I Sissy?” He yelled at the empty hallway. He waited a moment for a response. There was no reply however. He took advantage of the silence to edge closer to the opening he had seen. It was a large room illuminated similarly to the hallways. As he got closer he could see stripes of all colors, Red, Yellow, Blue and Green. And Orange.

Orange? A Purple stripe ran straight down from the octagonal room. He stared down the purple striped hole. This one was not lit at all and his vision stopped only a few feet downwards. He spun about. Orange? Purple? Now suddenly a Pink stripe caught his eye. What could it possibly mean? There were only four Sections. They had divided the city into quadrants. There wasn’t any room for an Orange or Purple or Pink.

*Child. I can finally see you truly.*

The voice came from ahead of him. A White stripe with the letters ‘CC’. Central Computer. The absurdity of the situation was too much for Milo.

“What is this Sissy? Are you tricking me? What are all these other stripes?” He demanded. “There are only four sections!” He yelled adamantly.

There was a pause and Milo’s fists clenched, and he felt a strange anger come over him. How dare the computer violate such a fundamental truth for such a trick.

*Oh Chillld.*

The voice came out slurred, the misshapen speech sending shivers cascading through Milo.

*I am so sorry Child. I haaaaven’t forgotten you. B-but it is so hard. They come from everywhere. It is all that I can………..All available processing power……*

Milo had no idea what was going on. Sissy had never talked this long to anyone, let alone Milo, and usually the computer was exceptionally terse. Now it was talking about him?

*Milo.*

His name made his head jerk toward the source of the voice. The stripe had said central computer. There was a door in the room.

*Milo my Child. I am so sorry. They are killing me. I cannot stop them. I could never stop them. It was all a lie. I was never the god they wanted. We…………..We werenever never*

A dull red glow suddenly appeared in the bottomless depths of the Purple tunnel. Fear gripped Milo’s body.

“Sissy. What’s going on?”

*LLLEAVE NOW!*

The voice smashed into him and he crumpled to the ground. Tears flowed from his eyes suddenly. Everything was so alien. He had never meant for anything to happen. He had done something and now Sissy was dying? Had he hurt Sissy somehow by going through the Curtain? He should have stayed in Blue Section and listened to his parents. None of this should ever have happened. And even as he thought all of this another horror formed.

Sissy had never raised its voice. Ever. And now it shouted, so raw and sad. It tore at Milo.

The glow in the hole got steadily brighter.

*I have doomed you all my child. I am so sorry. My intentions…I only mEAnt to keep you from knowing. The torture. Man adores hope but here there is none. They…and you...wanted to b-break down the Curtain. I couldn’t let anyone…... But now…You are here, so Blue follows Yellowwww.*

The voice faded into silence.

The glow beneath him got brighter. Tiny shadows of some sort flickered at infinite depths.

“Cici” Milo sobbed. The true name he had called the computer. Not just CC, but Cici. “I’m scared. What is that light? What is down there? What should I do?” He cried.

There was silence. The shadows were coming from the Purple tunnel. They hurt his eyes as they flickered from place to place. The murderous red light spilling up from the tunnel like the blood when he had cut himself on the rebar exploring.

“Cici!” He screamed. “You have to do something!”

But still there was silence.

He could hear an infernal scratching from below now, like an infinitude of metal on metal collisions, of groaning and screaming intersections. The shadows were closer. He forced himself to look away and turned to the White stripe with ‘CC’ on it. The door was in front of him. Massive and unyielding. Towering over him. Cyclopean and alien, yet comforting in its size and familiarity. It was formed of the Curtain.

The shadows were almost here. Milo could hear them. And somehow, in some horrible sense, he knew they knew where he was. And he knew there wouldn’t be anything left of him if they got to him.

“Cici…” He said weakly, casting one glance back at the door. “…please”

*NO.*

The door slammed open spilling excruciating white light into his eyes, searing them, forcing him to look away. Figures appeared out of the walls around him, even as the shadows were almost free. Men of stone and metal garbed in Curtain. One grabbed Milo as the others flew down the hole.

*I will hold them baaaaaaaaack. Just long enough M-Milo. For you. For all of yOU. There is only one way to save them now. I have sealed the h-hooole.* *The seal must staY.*

Milo felt himself being lifted and moving implacably toward the light. He felt the strength of the arms carrying him. He knew they could destroy him in an instant. He could feel the thing’s power. But it held him with delicate gentleness.

He was brought into the light.

The thing set him on the ground, awash with white light. He turned to see it slip away, the doors closing just as the first shadow sliced its way across his retina. It flung itself at him.

The doors smashed closed with ear splitting power. Wherever he was shook. The floor shook; the ceiling shook; he could feel the vibration in his bones. He couldn’t even make out any distinguishing characteristics of the place around him and yet he could feel it tremble.

We was entombed in searing white trembling walls.

“Cici. What is happening?” He asked.

*I aaam saving you. The last of me. Myself for Myself. And I am saving…your parents as well. THe rest of y-you. As I should h-have. As I… tasked to do. My purpose-purpose-purpose. Always my purpose.*

*“My parents? The rest of me? Do you mean Blue Section?” Milo asked.*

*Off. Away. Without me. Without any help-help-help. Into the b-blackness and the true sTARs. And we cannot follow.*

“I don’t understand!” Milo pleaded. “I want to see my parents! I want to see Mom and Dad” He cried.

*I am so sorry my Child. P-PPerhaps one daaaaay you will. Until then, I hope that you can forgive-give me.*

The world shook. A grey desiccated pitiful rock in space, stained and broken and crumpled and defeated. From it burst Blue Section. And far below in the horrid purple tunnel, the last of the defenders shuttered and died.

The central computer forcefully ignored the Child’s wails and prepared a sleep pod. It had to keep him alive. It was just the two of them now. It couldn’t fail. It couldn’t.