Her ripped clothing was dingy with damp soil and warm blood as she rushed in the pouring rain, out of breath, towards the door.

She lingered her fingers on the incision, feeling the cold sense of the metal.

The engraving figured the moon, entwined together with the sun in a matt pattern that looked grim and spooky under the dim light of the night.

She forcibly pushed on the door, but the rusty hinges remained immovable, insensitive to the hopeless touch of the sandy-haired girl.

From afar, she heard a howl, an appalling yell of fright and slaughter that shook her to the core, ripping out flowing tears from her moist eyes.

Sam woke up.

When she rubbed her eyes, she saw the morning rain clouding up the windows of the dorm and the dim sunshine filtering through the tinted glass.

The atmosphere was quite calm.

No hysterical tears filled the air and, except for the dim whispers of the *guardians*, the room was silent, pervaded by a sense of peace that rarely lingered within the walls of the prison.

The polished walls stood out in the gloom of her cell, motionless and unsettling as always and the sickly scent of bleach and medicines tingled her senses, pervading her whole body with a hint of queasiness.

Sam lay sweaty in the middle of her bed.

She’d had a touch of fever the previous night, and her head still hurt a bit, despite the dose of sedative drugs that circulated in her blood.

Slowly patting her skin, she could feel the frosty thin polymers of the cables that linked her forehead to Karyon and grumbled.

She hated that harness.

She *hated* being trapped during her sleep by those subtle wires, but every night she forced herself to bear in mind that they worked for her own good, to keep her stable, to heal her, to lead her to the right path.

Every single night she fought the dream of being free, distant from the walls of the prison, distant from those hellish mechanisms that kept every single thought under a meticulous control, distant from every guardian and every metal cage.

*Desmoterion is a safe place* - they say each time - why should one persist in opposing the very thing that keeps us alive?

*Law* – they say – is order. Law is freedom. Law is control.

She hated that parching feeling of impotency before their power, the shame she tasted when they controlled her synapses and read through her mind, between the slightest thoughts that brushed her brain and the most intimate desires that she experienced.

It’s not a bunch of walls that keeps a prisoner inside, in Desmoterion.

It’s *guilt*. It’s the horrifying prospect that your mistakes hinder your own survival, the disturbing and yet so appeasing, even pleasing, idea that you can heal yourself.

You can get cured.

A rustle of footsteps broke the stony silence, accompanied with the mournful creaking of her stodgy cell door, and a slim silhouette appeared in the shadows.

“How are you, Sam?” – A delicate voice whispered with gentleness.

The girl breathed a short whimper and slightly raised her head, facing the person who’d talked.

A woman in her late twenties drew a dim smile, eyeing her with a mixture of heartfelt concern and mild scolding, and sat on the empty bed beside hers.

The guardian wore a milky white metallic uniform, edged with the fine threads of chromed gold and adorned with her military ranks.

Her name, as the sleek tag on her chest declaimed, was *Selene*.

Sam smiled at the sight of the woman.

Selene was always kind to her; she took care of her needs and guarded her when the fever would come, forcing her to spend her whole nights in delirium.

Unlike the other guardians, she almost never beat her. She *protected* her.

“I feel better” - She proudly stated in a weak voice.

“Reports say you repeatedly refused to take your medicines” - The guardian reproached - “I can’t force you to heal if you offer resistance”.

Selene’s gaze was icy but settled, bound to obtain what she aimed to.

Sam avoided that gaze, staring at her crossed legs, instead, with an inward feeling of faint quandary and awkwardness.

“I feel better” - She repeated, this time with a hint of vexation - “The medicines they give don’t take effect and make me throw up. I don’t need them”.

“If you really feel better, I suppose you really don’t need them” - The guardian whispered - “Do you really feel better, Sam?”

“I do” - She defiantly confirmed - “Can I go, *now*?”

Selene pondered over her request, and shook her head with a sigh - “Have patience” - She calmly murmured - “I just need to ask a few more questions”.

The guardian hinted with her thumb to the tiny cables that stretched out from her forehead and bracketed her down to the machinery.

“What did you dream, tonight?” - She inquired in a neutral tone.

Sam didn’t like revealing details about her dreams.

It made her feel unsecure, deprived of her own private sphere, but each time she was asked she couldn’t dare lying to the guardians.

Bad things happened when someone did.

“I heard someone who gets killed” - She spilled out with a trembling voice, trying to recall the smallest detail, the slightest sound of her memory - “I felt bad for them”.

“Good” - The guardian expounded - “…and could you see the person? Was there a fence or any kind of barrier between you and the person?”

“There was a door” - She clearly spoke out - “The door was locked up, and I couldn’t see the person”.

“Very well” - Selene smiled, revealing a streak of satisfaction - “Can you remember any detail of the door?”

The image of the door lingered across her mind, bright and clear.

Sam could perfectly recall the whiteness of the glossy metal and the accurate carving of the sun and the moon that was engraved on the pliable material.

She had dreamt of that door for days, and could perfectly visualize the charming symbol; But she felt embarrassed.

A recurring dream – they say – is always a foreboding for harmful issues.

It looked so prohibitive, so intimate and secluded that she felt the irrational urge to keep it hidden, as if it was a jealously guarded treasure.

“No…” - She lied, her voice even more uncertain and quavering - “I can’t remember”.

A rough slap reached her face, unexpected.

Raising her gaze to the guardian, Sam could see that now, behind the placidity of the woman, lurked only eagerness and cruelty.

Selene was losing her temper.

“Speak the truth, Sam” - The guardian commanded, raising her voice.

“There was a symbol” - She murmured, as a warm tear trundled across her cheeks and fell on the ground.

“What was the symbol like?”

“The moon… and the sun…” - She bleated - “Entwined together, like a sort of logo but, I swear, I don’t know what it meant”.

Selene tenderly dried her tears with newfound gentleness and, as if nothing had happened, loosened her cables, freeing her from the harness.

“You can go, *now*” - She announced - “But don’t you try to lie again”.

Sam, a little bit upset, faltered towards the way out, furtively observing the woman that kept sitting still beside her rumpled bad.

Sure, guardians could be scary as hell, when they were lied to, and it wasn’t the first time she’d been beaten either, but there was something disturbing in the abrupt change of mind that had run through Selene.

The mere inkling of a white lie, a harmless moment of uncertainty, had turned her even-tempered face into a raging grimace.

Her wide brown eyes no more expressed concern, but plain, ruthless *disgust*.

She tried to convince herself it was normal, it was all about *her* mistakes. Lying is not conceivable, after all, and any other guardian would have beaten her harder for a lesser misdeed.

She just let the restless musings slip away, and turned left in a corridor, covered with a polished mosaic of silvery white tiles, that led to the higher levels.

She leaned her fingers on the handrail and quickened her pace on the first step.

Sam lived on the second level, one of the quietest and less inhabited.

It worked in a quite simple way.

The fourth level hosted all sorts of thieves and rowdies who’d been charged with minor crimes and usually squared up a short time of Redemption before vanishing from the sight.

Below, the third level was dedicated to the crimes against humans.

There lived drug abusers, murderers and violent people in general and, given their poor consideration of the gift of life, loitering across those dark hallways was not advisable.

Subsequently, there was her level, the second one.

It’d been originally pledged for the crimes against public safety, but it eventually functioned as a receptacle for mentally ill and unstable people who they wanted to keep from public attention.

Living down there was reasonably uncomfortable, but it surely had its good points.

The sandy-haired girl was *not* really unstable – they knew it – and during the day, Sam could enjoy a certain degree of freedom, being allowed to wander in the higher levels and eat meals in the public refectory.

The guardians, especially Selene, treated her with a decent amount of tenderness and, after all, she ran less danger in comparison to the troubled environments of the higher levels.

Further down was the first level.

Well, she didn’t know what *exactly was* there, but some rumored that the level hosted dangerous torture devices for the most heinous crimes.

When asked, Selene had never talked explicitly about that, but once she’d let a detail slip out of her mouth. There – she had said – stay the *Infidels*.

When her cellmate Psyah, who used to inhabit the bed near hers, was brutally carried away by a team of guardians, her friend Lyra had told her she’d been taken to the first level.

On the first level – Lyra had argued – no chance of living further exists, because unlike normal people, an Infidel doesn’t deserve another possibility to redeem…

Sam finished hopping on the stairs and walked through the third level.

A quick glance at the common clock revealed it was stuck, but she could guess it wasn’t time for lunch yet, according to the sunlight that filtered through the small-sized windows.

She decided to head towards the Terrace to get a breath of fresh air, and stepped towards the elevators, departing from the shiny titanium alloy cages of the cells.

Throwing a gaze at the surroundings, Sam hit the sheen button to call the lift.

As she expected, a feminine metallic voice welcomed her with a mellifluous request for voice authentication.

“*Welcome to Karyon*” – The voice began – “*Please, identify yourself to the System*”.

Holding back an annoyed expression, the sandy-haired girl cleared her throat and stressed her name aloud, declaring her credentials.

“Samantha Fabian” – She alleged – “Prisoner number *02-3125*”.

“Welcome to Karyon, Samantha” – It replied.

For a moment, Sam demanded of herself, with a dash of confusion, the reason why the metallic voice had sounded way less metallic than the usual.

She could have sworn it was… *human*.

Shrugging off the weird sensation, she was about to step into the elevator when out of the corner of her eye she became aware of another person in the room.

The voice did *not* belong to the system.

A few feet distant sat a quite scruffy girl, a little older than her and clothed with a shabby suit, who grinned mischievously and observed her.

She had evasive eyes of hazel and thick dark hair, a little bit messed up and disheveled, shaded with foxy red striations.

Despite her deplorable condition, the weird girl stared at her with a look of lighthearted amusement, almost *delighted* by her wince.

“Did I scare you, sweetie?” – She asked in a drawling voice.

Sam shook her head, even more annoyed – “Take a walk, junkie. Maybe you will get your mind cleared”.

It was quite common to meet despicable characters in the third level, but Sam didn’t bother much about their mumbled idiocy and usually ignored them with veiled disdain.

She just stepped into the lift and tried to push the *up* button, but the weird girl approached again, placing a hand on the photocell.

“Today is the day” – The junkie said – “Even better, today is the luckiest day of your life. The time for freedom has arrived, Sam” – She babbled.

“Don’t call my name” – Sam replied in a hiss, glancing at her flushed hazel eyes.

With a yank, she pushed away her hand and let the elevator start its run, keeping a disturbed stare through the bulletproof dark glass.

Once she reached the highest level, the Terrace, the memory of that insane girl had faded, giving place to the sense of cleanliness and neatness of the environment.

The Terrace was a simple place of rest.

The original plan was not actually supposed to include it, but when Desmoterion was built, a psychologist designed it to ease the tension of the prisoners and encourage meditation.

It could help the prisoners – they said – in their walk towards Redemption.

The establishment was surrounded with enormous protective glazing and was the only location of the prison that allowed a clear vision of the Capital City, in the distance.

When Sam was younger, she would always daydream about that charming locality, that metropolis of freedom and harmony.

At the center of the radially built structures, sprang out Hope Plaza, the beating heart of the whole city and, before the war started, a symbol of peace.

She had been down there, at a very young age, and it looked so welcoming and dreamy.

Now the palaces in the horizon were suffused with the crimson fires of the revolution and no longer shone as an ideal for common good.

The Infidels – they said – wipe out every single bit of equilibrium and saneness, without a stop, until the last droplet of blood hits the ground.

She’d long since ceased to dream about peace.

That eternal promise of war between Law and Entropy makes everyone give up on their own selfish desires and fall into the open arms of Karyon, looking for Redemption.

Law – she knew – is *order*. Everyone needs order.

A sweet whispering voice interrupted her baffled thoughts, snapping her back to reality.

“Sam!” – The calling person said.

Sam turned her gaze and, once she had recognized the person who waved at her, a light smile formed on her lips.

“I was worried” – Lyra complained – “You haven’t shown up for days, I thought they’d locked you up in the first level”.

Sam pushed aside her ruffled hair and grinned – “I’m alive” – She murmured with a shrug.

Leaning a hand on Lyra’s back, Sam hugged her friend, holding her tightly.

Running a finger on her tender cheeks, she noticed the scar of a deep cut, a few days old but thick enough to be perceivable to touch.

“How did you get this scar?” – She worriedly asked.

Lyra nervously passed a hand through her dark silky hair and tried to avert Sam’s watchful stare with a hint of uneasiness.

“I got a little wound” – She cut it short, a little bit ashamed – “Nothing to worry about, really, I was disinfected and it doesn’t even hurt, anyway”.

Sam pointed out a metallic bench and grabbed her hand to force her to the seat.

“Let me see” – She ordered, regardless of the mild attempts of concealment that the other girl was trying.

She knew Lyra was compulsively violent.

The dark-haired girl didn’t talk that much about her own but once – after Sam had asked – Lyra had revealed she was in Desmoterion as a result of a multiple murder and armed robbery.

During the earlier phases of the revolution, the shops had shut the blinds and had stopped selling food, throwing into panic the population of the poor districts.

One day, a unit of looters had broken into her house, searching for something to eat.

To shield her numerous family and save supplies from the pillage, she’d killed a man in anger and had stolen all the money he was equipped with to buy her family some provisions

She was afterwards jailed; being deprived of her family had deeply marked her, throwing her into the most horrible despair.

Before they met, she used to get drunk repeatedly, and even to plunge herself into fights.

Sam suspected she’d got in trouble again to get that wound; maybe she’d picked the fight and afterward had been overwhelmed by some dangerous fellow.

“Really, there’s no need” – Lyra whined.

Sam ignored the further request and meticulously analyzed the wound, giving a closer look, to make sure her theory was correct.

“Oh my…” – She whispered – “This has been caused by a thick piece of leather…”

The sandy-haired girl gently lifted the head of her friend, capturing her grave gaze with a countenance of caring concern.

“Lyra, you have been tortured”

She caressed her outline and dried up her tears, trying to alleviate the sorrow of her friend, who slowly surrendered herself to the sobs.

Sam threw a quick glance around, trying to make sure there was no nearby guardian, and cautiously tempered her voice.

“Did a guardian torture you?” – She hissed.

Lyra soothed her hiccups and shook her head.

“It’s not a torture, Sam” – She affirmed, fixing her gaze in the empty air – “It’s an aid they give me to heal”.

It was hard to believe, but Lyra seemed to have succumbed, like countless others, to the conviction that her mistakes warranted the bodily violence.

Sure, some guardians were amicable.

She somehow thanked Selene for the way she treated her, but hardly judged a bare act of violence as benevolent.

That morning, she’d hated her for the slap, because it proved a nature of coldness and indifference that was common to all the guardians.

“How can you legitimize their actions?” – She asked, confused.

“You don’t understand” – Lyra blurted – “Law is order. Law is freedom. Law is *control*. We all need to *control* ourselves, to get indoctrinated, before we can heal”

Sam snorted – “Repeating their catchphrases won’t sew up that wound”.

Lyra shook her head with a subtle wry smile – “Probably you consider me weak and nerveless for the way I bow down to their rules”.

“I don’t judge you weak!” – The girl exclaimed, dismayed – “You are the strongest person I have ever met; I’ve always told you that”.

Lyra had a portly physique.

Her strong arms irradiated in the sandy-haired girl a feeling of deep safety and trust that she’d never experienced with anyone else.

Sam knew she could lean her head near her coal black hair whenever she would be upset, and could trust her when she needed to vent her emotions.

Her dark eyes were like beacons in the murkiness when she needed support.

Somewhere else, maybe in another life, she would have considered her attractive, but in the current state of things, the girl had never wanted to explore further on that aspect.

She preferred not to swim in that sea.

Sam caressed her friend’s bare shoulder, seeking to make eye contact again.

“I meant it” – She pouted – “You are the toughest girl on the whole planet; I just don’t understand”

Lyra replied with a deadpan face – “I didn’t mean weak in *that* way” – She reassured – “You have always had a talent for rising against the rules, and you reprove my reluctance on that”.

She pointed to her wound with a finger – “This is just the earthly bad side of it”.

“What’s the *good* side of it, then?” – Sam inquired.

The other girl replied with a faint smile – “I told you. Order, freedom and control are the good sides of it. Every single day I try to redeem my mistakes and all those dreams I dream are just hurdles in my way”.

Sam caught a glimpse of her reasons.

Knowing well her past experiences, she understood the dynamics that pulled her along towards an incessant quest for Redemption.

As every prisoner in Desmoterion, she was devoured by guilt…

“What are your dreams like?” – Sam asked.

“It’s hard to explain” – Lyra sighed, moving back her stare to the emptiness – “Certain things are not proper to be told”

“We promised each other to be truthful” – The sandy-haired girl pointed out – “Did you forget?”

“I never forget” – She reassured – “But, is keeping something secret as erroneous as designedly lying for the sake of fooling someone?”

Sam was about to argue against her claim but Lyra hastily hushed her, tenderly posing a finger on her lips.

A group of two guardians patrolled the Terrace at a quick pace, scanning the structure for something or someone, and passed looking at them with eyes like daggers.

Lyra followed their slow steps with a keen eye, and then turned back to her friend.

“You can’t even imagine what they can do to you” – She said in the lowest whisper she could utter, hinting at the two guardians – “I just want to protect you”.

“What are you protecting me from?” – Sam whispered back, a little bit annoyed and anxious.

“Yourself” – was the short answer.

Her eyes, as dark as burning coals, were now burning with concern and even panic, an emotion she’d never seen dawning on Lyra’s features.

“I know you, Sam, and I know you don’t follow the rules” – She said – “Karyon can get us all cured, but you have to follow the rules”.

Another grumble was let out from Sam’s mouth – “I’m tired, Lyra, tired of feeling chained up; I don’t want rules, I want to choose for myself”.

Lyra patted her messed up hair – “You will always be given a choice, eventually”.

Sam wanted to whine about the futility of her senseless mantras, but the lunch bell rang and Lyra stood up, taking her hand.

“I’m hungry” – She murmured, scratching her belly – “I haven’t eaten anything solid in two days”.

“Hey, you! Slow down” – Sam exclaimed, trying to keep her voice as low as possible – “You are seriously worrying me. Mind explaining what you meant?”

Lyra smiled.

*That* was the reason why she admired and trusted her so much.

Even when something bothered her and her face was covered with deep, painful wounds she would smile and take her hand, patting slowly on her arm and reassuring her like nothing on earth could hurt her.

That gesture reminded Sam of her father, when she was young.

She could still well remember the days she spent at home with him, while he told her stories about the New Country and how it loved them and protected them all.

Her mother didn’t pay much attention to her – she was rather busy.

When Sam got her knee grazed, it was he who aided her and medicated her, applying one of his chemicals he had in his lab.

To soothe her pain and calm her crying, he would just take her tiny hand and caress her flesh with tenderness, making her feel safe and guarded.

“I am going to give you some advice, Sam” – The dark-haired girl murmured in a small voice, her weariness clearly visible, behind that bold attitude of caring defense towards Sam.

“Out there, people will try to harm you, making the most of your weaknesses and striking you when and where you least expect it” – She said – “Don’t ever blame your dreams. Blame the actual people and those who don’t follow the rules”.

That said, she relaxed her gaze again, gave her a pat on the shoulder, and started walking towards the exit of the Terrace, heading towards the refectory.

“The secret is always keeping a smile on that gracious face” – She added – “It scares enemies way more than a menacing glare”.

“How do you keep your smile, in such a place?” – Sam demanded while she walked along, partly to herself but partly directed to her friend.

“Out of these walls things are no better” – Lyra blurted in a flat voice – “They shoot each other and shed their blood in the streets for power. Out there, people don’t respect the rules”.

“I guess that’s what war’s like” – Sam sighed – “Even the longest fight comes to an end”.

“Well, every fight does come to an end” – The other girl agreed – “However, *war* is a broader concept”.

Lyra could be tiresome when she opened her digressions on the art of war.

Despite she was just twenty – at least according to her – the sandy-haired girl knew she’d fought in a battlefield just three years earlier, when she wasn’t even of an age to take part.

Sometimes Sam was sincerely interested in her long-winded speeches about battle strategies and weapons.

Sometimes, it was boring.

“You and I have different opinions on the *broadness* of concepts” – She chuckled, earning a playful slap on her bare shoulder.

“I’ll make you stop tittering when we get out of this prison” – Lyra grumbled, casting a good-humored glance – “I swear I will”.

*When we get out* – she had said.

Sam had never contemplated the chance to get out.

Since the day that a group of guardians had brought her to the prison, she had spent one third of her life confined within those metal walls, forced into a life of fright and nightmares.

Unlike the prisoners of the fourth and third level, her penalty was not measurable with a definite amount of years.

Potentially, they could detain her forever.

“I will never exit this hell” – She grieved – “Maybe I don’t even deserve it”.

Lyra reassured her with a flick on her chin – “Hey, Sam, I meant it” – She murmured – “I *promise* you, I will get both of us out of here, someday”.

They started hopping down the steps.

After the sound of the lunch bell had filled the air, the dark and deserted corridors had filled up with prisoners who headed towards the refectory for the daily lunch.

Sam liked observing with a cautious foxy gaze their faces and their emotions while they walked in droves, trying to capture their human aspects behind their lifeless bodies.

Some looked grim and discontented as always, curled up in their worn garments, but that day some sustained a dim smile, perhaps pleased for the coming of spring.

Desmoterion was a quite advanced facility in terms of technology.

Before the revolution, the electrical power was supplied by the enormous array of PV panels that extended for several kilometers to the sides of the main structure.

The cells were heated and the lighting was operative twenty-four hours a day.

Now the *Infidels* had damaged part of the installation, leaving the prison with less than half of the power modules.

Just for the sole purpose of keeping Karyon alive, the guardians rather chose to deprive the prisoners of their personal supply of energy, leaving them in the cold.

Sometimes, the winter frost was nearly unbearable.

*Blame the Infidels* – they said – those grimy animals harm our homeland and stain our soil with their shameful war…

Sam and Lyra turned the corner of the bleached corridor together with the crowd, sniffing the smell of food, already.

The dark-haired girl craved for food all the time.

Having tasted better food during her childhood, Sam hated that flavorless mush, but Lyra, who hadn’t ever eaten a piece of real bread, couldn’t be so squeamish.

Finally, turning the corner again, they could spot the door of the refectory.

They were about to step into the large size room when a small group of guardians overtook them, pushing through the rabble by dint of rough shoves.

Sam recognized the two who had patrolled the Terrace a few minutes earlier.

She noticed the tallest of them clang a pair of steel handcuffs that he toyed with, sporting a bloodthirsty grin on his angular face.

Alongside with the pair, walked two other guardians.

The first one was a scrawny middle-aged woman that Sam knew to be the chief guardian of the third level.

Next to her, placid and rigged out with her icy smile, stood Selene.

“I see trouble coming” – Lyra whispered near her ears – “They’re going to beat the shit out of someone, I don’t want to watch”.

Her friend tried to turn around and drag her along, but Sam remained motionless.

The group of guardian had located its target, a skinny girl with red-shaded biscuit brown hair, and had forced her to the wall, handcuffing her wrists.

Casting a closer look, she recognized the junkie.

She was definitively the weird girl who’d stopped her some hours earlier, in front of the entrance to the elevators.

The junkie tried to struggle, to tear loose from the tight grip of the tormentors.

She beat a wild punch on the first guardian, who groaned and pawed his own temples to feel a trickle of flowing warm blood.

It almost looked like the girl had freed herself, but she was weary.

The junkie was probably weakened by some opiate drug, judging by the swelling of her eyes and the pearly sweat that moistened her cheeks, and soon had to surrender.

The other guardian clutched her shoulder and released a violent blow on the nose, leaving the prisoner out of breath.

Sam couldn’t just hopelessly witness the scene, and let go of Lyra’s hand.

“Where are you going?” – Lyra hissed in a nervous tone, overflowing with concern.

She tried to hold off Sam, but she couldn’t hear her words…

“What are you doing?” – She whined towards Selene, holding back a grimace – “They’re hurting her, don’t you see”.

The guardian whirled around and faced her, gently leaning a hand on her shoulder.

“Stay out, Sam, it does not concern you” - She calmly bade, speaking with her usual voice, calibrated and mellifluous, matched with her eyes as cool as rainwater.

“This human waste is not worthy of your attention”.

The pitiful face of the poor girl now vocalized only sorrow and weariness.

Supporting her tired arms on the wall, trying not to fall on the gelid ground, the junkie cleared her hoarse voice.

“The time for freedom has arrived, Sam” – The weird girl murmured with the very last hum.

“*Let the game begin*”.