Sam ran through the forest at breakneck speed, slipping away from the sharp thorns and the abundant vegetation that grew everywhere across the walk.

She was chased after.

Just a few meters behind, she could feel the heavy breath and perceive the bloodlust growing into the jaws of the fearsome creature.

As the plants grew thinner, she spotted a nest of rocks, a small slit in the mountain that marked her only possibility to survive and raced towards her salvation.

She quickly sheltered in the hole, escaping the paws of the bloody animal and slithering backwards on her back.

The beast had almost managed to creep in the gap when a metallic knife hit its legs, making it howl in pain and draw away its attention from the sandy-haired girl.

Out of the cave, someone fought with the beast; their yells of pain filled the air, as Sam’s body grew weak and her senses failed.

Slowly, she fell unconscious.

Sam woke up breathless.

She clang on the metallic edges of the bed and tightened the grip to soothe the poignant sense of disorientation that permeated throughout her whole body, giving her waves of heat.

Her forehead was beaded with sweat, and her heart pounded on her chest.

Throwing a glance over the mirror that hung on the opposite wall, she recognized her jaded face, examining her weary limbs that reflected on the frosted surface.

Her cerulean eyes were swollen, and her sandy hair soaked wet in sweat.

Running her fingers on the cold surface of the iron, she realized she was lying safe in the middle of her warm blankets, far from any dangerous beast or damp cavern and breathed a long sigh of relief.

It’d all been a dream.

Still in the grip of the shivers, she groped on the nightstand for her water bottle in the shadows, and finally spied out the aluminium of the flask.

Taking off the cap, she drank a long sip of cold liquid to quench her thirst, and then recapped it back, placing the bottle on the table.

Those nightmares had been going on and on for weeks.

Every single night she was forced to witness an unsettling bloodbath, each time more cruel and each time more beastly.

The scenes were uneven, but there was a constant: an unknown person saved her and died before she could even look at their face.

Each time she passed out, and woke up in her bed.

The girl pulled away her sandy hair and brought her hand on the back of her neck, trying to ease out the adhesive hooks that run across her skin up to her temples.

It hurt, but she’d learnt over time how to do it, sparing the physical pain.

As a rule, it was strictly forbidden to unlink from Karyon without the permission of a guardian, but she’d never ended up in trouble.

She stood up, and walked towards the mirror, leaning on the tough face of the wall.

Her fatigued look allowed clear glimpses of the apprehension she felt upon awakening and revealed outwards she’d had a nightmare.

Sam didn’t want to show it off.

She knew too well the reaction of Selene before the last one she’d had and wholeheartedly wished to avoid disclosing her weakness in front of the guardians.

In a couple of hours, the morning check would have started.

Karyon would have detected her accelerated heartbeat, her neural impulses out of norm, her feverish blood temperature, the droplets of sweat on the bed, all of that.

From a guardian’s point of view, it translated as one simple proposition: “*She hides something*”.

They would have asked her questions she didn’t have answers for.

*Speak the truth* – they said each time – it’s the only way to gain control over yourself.

The image of Selene that reassured her lingered in her mind.

She held the girl in her arms, bestowed charming reassurances and then hit her in rage with no mercy, to tear off the truth out of her words.

It’d made her realize she couldn’t trust anyone.

Sam slammed a furious punch on the wall, letting out all the sadness and frustration that shook her from the core.

Judging from the obscure contour of the window, the dawn wouldn’t have peeped out for a couple of hours.

She had a plenty of time to clean up her face, wipe and tears and calm down her troubled emotions before Selene would have walked across that hallway for the usual morning check.

Sadly enough, the bathroom of her cell had no running water.

To engage the shortage of drinking water sources, polluted by chemical weapons or blocked by the Infidels, the taps were blocked during the night.

There was a public laundry, open twenty hours a day for the guardians, but leaving a cell before the dawn would have been a grave violation of the disciplinary code.

If they had caught her hanging around in the corridors, she would have been put under seclusion for a couple of months.

When her cellmate Psyah was still there, she used to take those rules lightly.

That crazy girl sneaked out of the cell for mere pleasures, and under the dim light of the moon, when they both couldn’t get to their sleep, she always narrated the countless adventures she’d had out there at night.

Sam used to admire her.

But after she’d been sedated, tied down with chains and brought to the first levels just before her eyes, Sam had changed her mind.

Lyra was right; it was stupid and self-defeating.

Nevertheless, bending over to the rules was humiliating and she hated that heaviness, that continuous sense of having something wrong growing inside of her.

Her sweat, her tears, the dark bruise that had formed after having punched the wall, it all smelled like guilt and submission to the system.

She had to control her rage and conceal her emotions if she wanted to stand up to Selene.

The weird junkie was right; time for freedom had come.

Thinking about it… it wouldn’t have been too hard to sneak out, to walk across the two hundred feet of hallway that separated her cell from the public laundry and to come back in just a few minutes.

She could have washed her face to reduce the temperature and stolen a new clean uniform.

She quickly grabbed the water flask on her nightstand and removed the metallic cap, carefully inserting it into the electric lock.

Psyah had taught her that trick before she’d left.

Sam took one of the thin cables that surface from the machine beside her bed and pulled it out, stretching it up to the door.

Normally the cable wouldn’t have been long enough, but her linking terminal was an old model, a leftover of the former sector for mental illness.

The cables were extensible to allow more freedom of movement.

When the electrical source reached the aluminium of the cap, the current flowed in the circuit and the lock clicked, turning the door open.

The sandy-haired girl approached her ears to the door, checking with meticulous caution that no one was in the corridor.

As it looked empty and silent, Sam took courage and crossed the threshold, stepping out in the large hallway.