Sam ran through the forest at breakneck speed, slipping away from the sharp thorns and the enormous leaves of the plants that grew everywhere across the walk.

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

Only a bunch of millimetres separated her from the most atrocious and pitiless death.

As the abundant vegetation grew thinner, she spotted a nest of rocks, a small slit in the mountain that marked her only feeble chance to survive.

She quickened her pace and raced towards her salvation.

The sandy-haired girl quickly sheltered in the hole, escaping the paws of the bloody animal by a hair’s breadth.

She slithered backwards, dodging the strikes and the thrusts of the growling creature.

The beast had almost managed to creep into the gap, it dug, it excavated, and she was almost resigned to her certain dead, when a metallic knife hit the monster’s legs, making it howl loud in pain and draw away its attention from the sandy-haired girl.

Out of the cave, someone fought with the beast.

Their yells of agony filled the air, as Sam’s body grew weaker, 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, making her pant.

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

Her cerulean eyes were swollen, flushed, 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, quickly bringing it to the mouth.

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 night a new sliver of that bloody scene were revealed before her eyes, like a limitless puzzle of images that slowly combined and never converged into one picture.

Those visions got more and more vivid, a thousand times more unsettling than every dream she’d ever had and each time more cruel.

It dimmed the border between reality and dream, and it scared her, it made her paranoid.

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 properly, sparing the physical pain and avoiding leaving a bruise on her cheek.

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 for that.

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.

But Sam knew she couldn’t trust their tempting lullaby, she had to resist their deceitful attempts to sedate her doubts and make her harmless.

That image of Selene, who appeased her and calmed her down, still lingered in her mind.

A moment earlier, she held the girl in her arms, bestowed charming reassurances and then hit her in rage with no mercy, just to tear off the truth out of her mouth.

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.

She could have stolen a dose of paracetamol to placate the symptoms of the fever.

There was a medicine cabinet in the public laundry, and it was luckily 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 very lightly.

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

*I don’t care if they catch me* – She would say – *They can’t change me*.

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 their 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, steal a pill, and to come back in just a few minutes.

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 and 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.

Not a single noise infringed the dead of night, except for the lightweight hiss of the wind that flowed into the windows and froze the air.

Sam took courage and crossed the threshold, stepping out in the large hallway.

Unlike the daytime, the area was cleared out empty.

Not a single cart of medicines was dropped off on the cream-white tiled floor, no confusion, no yells and no people massed up crying on themselves and triggering fights.

It was completely quiet, even *calm*, and yet she couldn’t help feeling unsettled.

She could hear the muffled clacking of her socks on the cold floor, the flat hiss of her breathe, the dim creak of the heating system.

It almost looked like someone of something was cautiously observing her, checking on her moves and following her as she walked.

Everybody there were security cameras strewn all over the place, but most of them were automatic, and didn’t activate unless they sensed a critical problem for the System.

*Karyon doesn’t care if I hang around at night* – Psyah used to say – *The guardians are hypocrites, they want us to believe they rule the world, but they’re just pawns of a greater game*.

Sam didn’t like asking too much questions.

She didn’t quite understand why an automated system should have drift from the purpose it had been built for, but it was one thing that both Psyah and Lyra agreed on.

The System is not ruled. *It rules*.

Sam kept proceeding through the corridor, walking at a swift noiseless pace and heading towards the public laundry. In just a few moments, she’d reached an intersection.

Going straight, the hallway led to the staircases while the ramification on the right brought to the public services, including the local sickbay and the laundry.

She knew too well that corridor.

When she was younger and less wise, she used to get hurt in every conceivable way, and over time, that path towards the infirmary had become almost familiar.

She was about to turn when a sudden creak from the staircases made her freeze.

Someone was strolling on the metal steps, coming down in the second level, and judging from the volume of the sound, that person was in a hurry.

She had a bare handful of seconds before that person would have reached her position.