

Eden

Prologue

“Time for another upload.”

“Already?”

“Territory control. They’ve been dropping like flies for the past month.”

“Expected outcome, I suppose. Disappointing though. Version number?”

“Simulation C-9.347”

“Ah. Kaplan’s pet project then.”

A list of blinking numbers followed by lines of code appeared on a screen. They pulsed in a steady rhythm, like a heartbeat.

“Average personality vector?” A line was highlighted on the screen, blinding white against the dark background.

“No. Let’s try something new. Standard experimentation hasn’t produced anything worthwhile.” The numbers scrolled up in a blur until a line near the bottom was highlighted. “How about... this one.”

“Interesting choice.”

“They’re getting impatient upstairs. Can’t hurt.”

“Careful not to push the envelope too far. We don’t want another incident like what happened in B Wing. All the subjects had to be terminated. They had to start from the beginning again. What a pain.”

A new box appeared on the screen. *Selected for upload. Proceed?* In the dark a finger wavered for a moment before pressing down on a large button labeled EXECUTE.

“And if it fails too?”

“We can always make more. Remember, we’re doing humanity a service here.” The white of a smile flashed in the dusk. “Trust me.”

Chapter 1

Buzzing hot light.

Shadow lancing through shadow.

Misted palm prints on tinted glass.

An insect's legs in frantic motion.

Whispers in the velvet blackness.

Lightning crackles through sinew and bone.

The world is a kaleidoscope.

Wake up.

She awoke to the taste of metal on her tongue. It was the sour tang that you can smell on the surfaces of pennies, or from congealed blood. She was standing in an empty space, without any memory of having got there. She was dressed in a flexible, tight-fitting jumpsuit of a bright, electric blue. A black belt was fastened around her waist, with various sized pockets, all empty. She read the label, like a nametag, upside down over her heart: Sub. 1.8.25. What was her name? She could feel it struggling out from the depths of her mind, like a half-recalled dream or a photograph of her as a young child, plucked out of the scrapbook. Familiar but lost amidst the depths of memory, it was a part of herself she forgot to remember. She felt too foggy to panic yet.

Everything from the walls to the floor was white, shiny, perfect, like chiseled marble which stretched up into a large dome where one single beam of light shone. It wasn't sunlight, she could tell. It was a sickly yellow light like the kind they have in hospitals – clinical, unfeeling, always paired, it seemed, with that faint buzzing sound reminiscent of the static from TVs, low and slightly unsettling. There were no windows, no doors; only her and the white globe cocooned around her like an empty tomb. She took a tentative step forward and turned on the spot, drowning in the white. The air was too still, stagnant somehow. It felt too thick as she drew it into her lungs in a shuddering gulp.

“Hello?” she called. *Hello? Hello? Hello?* The words echoed back as they reverberated around the empty space, her anxious voice mirrored and directed back. Her voice sounded hollow and mocking, turned against her. She slipped toward the closest curve of the wall and stretched out a hand. The wall was

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cool and immaculate, without blemish or fault. It was beautiful but felt wrong somehow. Dangerous. The stone felt like it might suddenly reach out and swallow her whole. She could feel the warmth already leeching out from her fingertips and abruptly removed her hand. She scanned the room again, her stomach twisting. There was nothing. No seams, no flaws, no indication of an exit.

She began to panic, turning on the spot, vision assaulted on all sides by the blazing endless white. She felt as though her lungs were collapsing in on themselves. The faint static buzzing seemed to grow louder, droning beneath her skin and inside her skull. Sweat slicked the back of her neck and under her arms, hot and sticky. She strained to remember something, anything of what had happened before she got here or who she was. It was like trying to grip tendrils of fog which quickly evaporated into nothing. Her mind was one large, empty blank.

In a kind of frenzied desperation, she began to circle the room, fingertips brushing the walls, like a trapped animal in a cage. She felt as though the white was bleaching into her, through her. Soon she would fade into the floor and the walls, gone forever. White on white on white.

Just then her fingertips brushed across something that wasn't just smooth stone: a hard edge. Along the strip of wall there was a flaw in the otherwise perfectly uniform stone. A small square indentation about the size of her palm was carved into the rock, only about a quarter inch deep. It was so subtle that unless a person knew it was there or accidentally brushed against it, it was practically invisible. Her throat dry, she reached out a fingertip and touched the center of the square. Without warning there was a faint metallic whirring noise and to the left of the square an invisible seam in the wall split apart. What once had been the wall now formed the shape of a doorway and slid up and out of sight. She hesitated for a moment, fearing what might lay beyond. The buzzing of the white light pelted her back, running fingers down her spine. She stepped through.

She was in a narrow tube-like corridor, perfectly smooth and marble much like the domed room except that a single glowing white line ran down the center of the floor. To her right and left more corridors branched off from the first, twisting off into the unknown. Behind her the door slid shut, and as she turned, startled, she saw another small square indent on this side of the wall as well. She blinked, rubbing her head. The white was still bright here but not as harsh as the previous room. She felt clearer. But where to next? She picked the corridor directly in front of her and began to walk, listening for any other sound besides the light padding of her shoes. She quickly came to another intersection where three more corridors

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curved away and out of sight. She realized with a jolt that she could quite easily become hopelessly lost here if she wasn't careful. A rat in a maze rather than a rat in a trap.

She tried to take deep breaths, her heart pummeling at her rib cage. Maybe she could make markers to show which way she had come. She fumbled at the pockets on her belt before remembering they were empty. The corridors were completely vacant. There was nothing she could use to differentiate one from the rest. Just as she was beginning to feel sick with dread, a sound boomed from a place to her left.

“Looks like we have ourselves another Shiny,” called a male voice.