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opening extract from

Fearless

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Prologue

The Night They Came

The girl could hear sobbing in the front room. Her mother was always crying about something or other, so the girl didn't take much notice. She just kept staring at the vidscreen in the corner of her bedroom. There was an advert for a holiday showing, all blue sea and white waves and sand like a field of honey. She wished she could just climb into the vidscreen and stretch out on the sand, dip her toes into the water and never return. She would stay there and watch the world from the other side of the screen.

Then the knocking on the front door began. The girl thought that was odd, because they had a perfectly good doorbell. The knock seemed almost like a message. It went *rap-rap-rappety-rap*, as if it was a friend or a neighbour who always did their own special knock. But friends never came after dark, and the neighbours kept themselves to themselves.

The girl heard a noise behind her. She turned and saw her mother. A dark birthmark the size of a fingernail and the shape of a star protruded from her hairline. Her cheeks were still damp from crying; her eyes were red and scrunched up like meat from a butcher's shop. She hadn't answered the door. Instead she lifted the girl up and pressed their faces together. The girl kissed her mother, and tasted salt. Her mother smiled, as if to tell her that everything was OK. Then she said she had some presents for her. The girl didn't understand. Her birthday was months away.

Her mother produced a small cloth bag, and brought out three objects. The first was a picture of the girl's grandmother and grandfather, mounted in a bronze frame. Her grandfather wore a black suit with a cravat, and her grandmother wore a long pale dress and a floppy dark hat.

The second was a beautiful old silver watch with a fine leather strap that she said had once belonged to the girl's father. She said she ought to have something to remind her that she did once have a father.

Finally she gave the girl one more thing. A golden locket containing a tiny photograph of her mother on her wedding day. She hung it gravely around the girl's neck. Then she put the framed photo and the watch back into the little cloth bag, handed it to the girl and kissed her.

The knock on the door came again, louder this time. *Rap-rap-rappety-rap.*

Her mother left the room. The girl heard the door catch

being released and then her mother began to shout. She heard a man's voice, stern and official sounding.

A few seconds later, a man in uniform wearing a black peaked cap walked into the girl's room and, without a word, lifted her up. She could hear her mother crying. The man didn't pause to let her say goodbye to her mother. He started to carry her down the stairs. The girl went limp. She felt unable to speak.

The door closed behind her. Then she heard her mother's voice through the thin panel of wood.

"The locket. Read the words. Never forget the words on the locket."

In the harsh light of the street, the girl studied the back of the locket. She could just make out three lines of faint engraving. The girl pushed the locket inside her blouse, and closed her eyes. She didn't resist as the man bundled her into the back of the ugly grey car with no side windows, started the engine, and drove away into the darkness.

The Institute

When everyone has freedom, no one has freedom.
The Controller

"You're in trouble again, Little Fearless," said Beauty, idly inspecting her perfect fingernails, their cuticles like pink crescent moons, as the girls walked slowly out of the Control Block. The Sunday Gathering had just come to an end. She began smoothing the tips of her nails with a tattered scrap of sandpaper.

Now that the Gathering was out of the way, the girls had a few hours' free time before they were given a meal in the Food Block. Some of them were returning to their halls in the Living Block in order to catch up on sleep; others flopped down where they stood onto the hard ground of the exercise yard.

Soapdish, her scrubbed dark skin like polished mahogany, nodded gravely in agreement with Beauty. "Have you noticed how the Controller picks on you, Little Fearless?" Protruding from the breast pocket of her drab cotton drill overalls was a

small, threadbare, black rag doll, with hair made out of strands of wool, and grey button eyes. Soapdish had brought this doll with her when she had first come to the Institute and she treasured it above everything else.

"Why should he pick on me?" said Little Fearless. She fiddled distractedly with the battered old purple beret on her head. She absent-mindedly picked her nose, one of her less savoury habits. She was also untidy and washed less often than some – particularly Soapdish – thought she should. She almost looked ugly – until her hypnotic, mysterious eyes opened wide. They were extraordinary: one was turquoise blue like a southern sea, the other so brown the inky-black pupil was swallowed up by the iris.

"Because he knows trouble when he sees it," said a voice from behind them.

It was Tattle. She was tall, lithe and athletic, with shoulder-length fair hair compressed into tight natural curls. Her ears stuck out slightly and sported generous, fleshy lobes like purses of flesh. She turned to Little Fearless.

"LF, you must be crazy mad. Why d'you want to get yourself into hot water like that? You know the Controller's got it in for you, but you go and stir it up. I can't believe you sometimes. You must have ice water for blood. I wonder what they'll do to you? The old man looked bent right out of shape. On the other hand, maybe he'll let it go this time. I mean, you never can tell with him, can you? Maybe Lady Luck's coin will land in your favour. I didn't like the look of her,

though, writing away in her little notepad. Oh, I hate her more than any other X girl. I hate her more than Bellyache or the Whistler or even Stench."

The four Y girls, Beauty, Little Fearless, Soapdish and Tattle, stood around in a ragged circle. There were only girls here; antisocial boys and young male juvies were expelled to the Outlands, far from the City. It was hard to tell the girls' ages, but none were yet women, and all were old enough to walk and talk and, most importantly, work – like the rest of the thousand girls in the Institute. The girls worked six days a week, dawn till dusk, in the giant laundry which occupied most of the Institute building known as the Work Block.

As usual, Tattle didn't stop talking until she was out of breath. Then a fifth figure, a Z girl, appeared behind Little Fearless, having broken away from the mass of the other Z girls, the youngest and most recent arrivals, who made up the bulk of the Institute's population. They got the worst jobs, and the fewest privileges. The Y girls were often snobbish about mixing with the lower-letter girls – but occasionally Z girls were befriended by the older ones. This girl had become close to Little Fearless, and so was tolerated by Beauty, Tattle and Soapdish.

Like the rest, she didn't have a real name – not the one she was born with – just a letter and a number, which were roughly cut into bracelets locked around their wrists at all times. All the girls were forced to leave their real names at the gates of the Institute and were forbidden from ever using

them. The Y girls had steel bracelets, but this girl's bracelet – since she was a Z girl – was brass. It was inscribed Z242, but she was known as Stargazer, because she liked nothing better than to gaze at the stars which could be seen wheeling and glittering through the pane of a small solitary skylight in the roof of Hall Seven, where she slept with Tattle, Beauty, Soapdish, Little Fearless and ninety-five other Y and Z girls. The X girls, of whom there were only fifty, had their own separate quarters in the Control Block.

When Stargazer spoke, it was so quietly that Little Fearless had to strain to hear her. The younger girl had pale, almost transparent skin and watery, greenish eyes. Little Fearless sometimes joked that she could almost see through her – as if she were actually made of the starlight she loved to peer at through the high window. Her hair was the colour of corn, and was by far the most beautiful thing about her.

"Will they put you in the Discipline Block, Little Fearless?" Stargazer murmured, her pale hands shaking slightly. Her high forehead, which when she was asleep was as smooth as a lake on a windless day, now rippled with lines of worry. Little Fearless didn't respond, but put her arm round the shoulder of the younger girl.

"What made you do it?" asked Beauty, a slight note of irritation in her voice, grimacing and showing the gold tooth that glistened under the awning of her perfect, scarlet lips. "It draws attention to us all, you know – not just you."

"That's not fair," said Stargazer softly. "I think standing up

to the Controller like she did was brave."

When at the end of the Gathering, the Controller had asked if there were any questions, Little Fearless had had the nerve to ask one – two, in fact. She had asked the Controller why they had to work so hard when they were only children, and why they were locked up when most of them had done nothing wrong. The Controller had been furious, and had left without answering.

Soapdish immediately rounded on Stargazer, a tiny fleck of white spittle appearing on her dark, almost earth-coloured lips.

"What do you know, *Yellow*? You don't know the difference between being brave and being a fool. You just worship Little Fearless because she protects you. Why don't you just slink back to your Z friends and have a game of hide-and-go-seek or ring around a rosy or something?"

There were girls who called Stargazer Yellow. For some it was because of her bright yellow hair, but mostly it was short for Yellow Belly, or coward. She was scared of everything – scared of her dreams, which were vivid like prophecies; scared of the other girls; and scared of the future.

"Please don't call me Yellow," begged Stargazer.

"Quite right," said Tattle cheerfully, and she sprang forward to within an inch of Stargazer's face, letting out a loud "boo!" Stargazer jumped and yelped in surprise.

Tattle giggled, her face radiating mischief. "You're scared of your own shadow – *Yellow*." She tried to catch Beauty's eye

so they could be partners in teasing Stargazer. All the girls tried to curry favour with Beauty because she was the best-looking and most popular girl in the Institute.

Stargazer hated herself for it, but she felt she was about to cry. She looked away, hoping no one would notice. Now it was Beauty's turn to chip in. She turned her head towards Tattle, causing a ripple in her perfect straight hair, black and blue like midnight. Her skin was the colour of milk chocolate. Her small, slightly upturned nose was pierced with a single silver stud.

"Stop bickering. What's done is done. Little Fearless is our friend and we need to stand by her. And Stargazer is Little Fearless's friend, and so we should try to be kind to her. But I still would like to know, LF – why *do* you always seem to want to bring trouble on yourself?"

They all looked at her – down at her, in fact, because she was several inches shorter than any of them. She was tiny for her age, and scrawny.

Little Fearless looked steadily back at Beauty and wiped at a speck of dirt on her face with a grubby sleeve, extending the speck into a smudge. Then she said, "I hardly know myself. Partly, I think, it's something to do with the Controller. It's as if he wants me to stick my neck out, so he can chop off my head. It's almost as if he's daring me. And I find it hard to resist the challenge. I can't explain it. There's something that—"

Little Fearless stopped talking as her shoulder was sud-

denly gripped in a vice-like hold. She winced, and turned to see the X girl they called Bellyache standing behind her, face like a sour lemon. The other four girls shrank away. As they had expected, talking back to the Controller at the Gathering meant that Little Fearless was headed for the Discipline Block once more.

"Get lost," muttered Bellyache.

Little Fearless gave a barely discernible nod to her friends, and they melted away into a knot of other children who had gathered to see Little Fearless being marched off. Bellyache gestured angrily at the crowd and they quickly dispersed.

Bellyache, her narrow, horsy face grimacing, had not let go of Little Fearless's shoulder. As always, she slouched, carrying her wide shoulders low as if buckling under the weight of gravity.

"What did I do?" said Little Fearless angrily. "I haven't broken any of the rules."

"You'd best shut up," replied Bellyache. "You've got yourself into enough trouble as it is with your big mouth, Little Useless."

Pinching her arm, Bellyache pushed and shoved Little Fearless towards the squat, threatening ugliness of the Discipline Block. It was painted black and had a flat concrete roof. It was the size of an ordinary house, but had no upstairs – only a ground floor and a cellar.

"I did a few shifts there this week," said Bellyache, poking Little Fearless in the ribs to move her along faster. "Every

time, it seems to get worse – colder, darker, damper. Bad enough in there as a guard. It's like a punishment being sent to babysit you dribbling brats. I shouldn't like to be locked up in one of those cells, I've got to say, though. The rat problem's getting worse – they come over from the rubbish dumps and burrow in – and the toilets are all blocked up, so it stinks something terrible too. I hate it there. But then," added Bellyache almost cheerfully, "I hate it everywhere."

Little Fearless hugged herself as a sharp wind swooped over the low walls and bit into her flesh. She was not afraid of the Discipline Block – she knew the Controller wouldn't leave any girl in there long enough to do her any long-term physical damage in case it made her less efficient as a worker – but she let out a sigh of resignation as she contemplated yet more days in a draughty, lonely cell.

"Walk faster, Little Hopeless. You never walk fast enough. You're lazy and slack, like all the Y and Z girls."

Little Fearless flashed her a defiant glance and refused to change her pace, which was already so brisk she felt she was about to break into a run.

"Don't you dare look at me like that," snapped Bellyache. "Think you're so tough, don't you? Well, the Controller's got plans for you. Not that way, Little Clueless. This way."

Little Fearless had automatically wheeled towards the entrance to the Discipline Block, a route she had taken many times before during her long stay at the Institute. But on this occasion, Bellyache spun her round and pushed her towards

the rear entrance to the control block.

Little Fearless was surprised – and a little anxious. In all her years here, she had never been inside this part of the Control Block, where the Controller and the X girls lived. It was strictly forbidden for Y and Z girls to come here. Her mind began racing. Was there another place of punishment, perhaps, even uglier and colder than the Discipline Block?

The door to the Control Block was immense, and made of solid iron. It creaked loudly when Bellyache pulled it open. Inside, there was a dimly lit hallway, semicircular in shape, with four corridors leading off it. The second had a sign above it that read CORRIDOR ONE. The third was corridor two, and furthest to the right was corridor three. All these led to where the X girls lived and worked.

The first corridor, on the left, was numbered zero. Little Fearless assumed, correctly, that this led to the Controller's office. He didn't have a letter, but he had a number, and that number was zero.

"We'll be going along corridor nothing," muttered Bellyache irritably. Clearly she didn't like the idea of going there. There was a dead smell to the air, and the lights that illuminated the cramped corridor flickered yellow and orange, giving the impression of perpetual twilight.

After several minutes of marching in silence, the corridor opened out into a huge hall, an anteroom at least thirty feet high, with a domed ceiling. Bellyache was sweating profusely, either from exertion or from nervousness. In front of

them were tall double doors made out of thick, old wood and carved with numbers between one and a thousand. At the centre of them all, encircling the door handles, was a large carved zero.

Despite her sweating, Bellyache was also shivering. "I'm cold," she grumbled. "Give me your jacket."

"No," said Little Fearless matter-of-factly.

Bellyache, who was a good foot taller than Little Fearless, and the same amount wider, grabbed a handful of the copper-red hair that straggled out from under her beret.

"Give it to me!" With her other hand, she reached for her leather strap.

Little Fearless wriggled away from her furiously. "I won't. It's mine. You're fat enough to keep yourself warm."

Bellyache went red in the face and clutched at Little Fearless with her grubby fingers stained yellow with nicotine; Bellyache, like most of the X girls, smoked. But at that moment, although neither of them had knocked on the door, there came a voice from within the Controller's office.

"Enter."

Bellyache immediately stopped what she was doing – which was twisting one of Little Fearless's ears between her finger and thumb – and hissed, "Behave yourself." With that, she smoothed down her smart uniform: deep navy jacket, jodhpur-type trousers, knee-high chestnut leather boots and small military-style cap with a crescent peak. Then she slowly opened the door to the Controller's office.