

# Thaw

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I  
The Cube

*Nobody is coming after me. It's just me. But my feet don't stop. They carry me swiftly forward, away from the steelhuts into the dewy lushness of the woods. Grass tickles the soles of my feet. Wind flaps my hair onto my face. I brush it off and keep going. My breath is shallow in my throat, but smooth. Smooth like whipped cream melting on barley bread.*

I open my eyes to the bright sunbeams sifting through the tiny slits of windows on the solid steel wall of my chamber, my dry throat itching with longing. I lie still a minute, trying to calm down.

I haven't had a dream about running on grass in so long.

I haven't run on real grass in so long. For the past nine years since I was seven, I've been inside the Cube like every other boy and girl in the Society from age seven to seventeen. The Guardians say the Cube is more than a school; it's a home. But to me, it's more like a prison. I'm counting the days until my seventeenth birthday, which is only three weeks away. I can't wait to get out.

But at the same time, I'm afraid of that day and of what lies beyond.

Dex, our leader Guardian, appears by my chamber door at exactly a quarter to eight. He has come to summon me for my physical, just like every other start of week.

The Guardians are the enforcers of the rules here in the Cube. I never tell people this, because I'm not supposed to, but I don't like the Guardians. They make me obey. I don't like to obey, not people who take things away from me.

My past, namely, is one of the many things they took away from me. I remember the day I arrived at the Cube; the Guardians in the Welcome Hall made me drink a vial of blue liquid called the Potion. It's a memory suppressant—I forget where I came from, what my full name is, what the world outside the Cube is like.

These things are reserved for the Re, for seventeenth birthdays.

Or so I hope. All they ever promised about the Re is grand metamorphosis, whatever that means.

"Ignia," Dex calls my name. On that cue, I stand up from my bed, walk to him. Giving my cramped chamber one last glance, I shut the door behind me.

My chamber is on the farthest end of the hallway. We walk down the steel-walled hallway in silence. Dex makes a stop at each chamber, calling out the name of its resident. Soon, the line behind me grows long. I spot a few familiar faces, but before I have time to react, they disappear into the line. I would've chosen not to say hi anyway. Not many of them like me.

We march rhythmically in the direction of the Health Administration, where the physical will take place. Dex's red velvet shirt and pants produce soft shuffling sounds as he walks in front of me, making me wonder what that smooth fabric would feel like on my skin.

I wipe my palms on my black cotton t-shirt—a habit from nine years of military training. It's always handy to have your hands dry when you have to shoot a gun at a moment's notice; it helps you aim better.

We are Warriors. Warriors don't do mistakes, because we can't afford to fail. I fail, I die. Warriors are fighters, protectors, soldiers. What I should be.

What I'm not.

What I am, my training partner Fray calls an escaper. Running is all I'm good at. Running away is my only defense.

Every time during training when I'm about to avoid an obstacle and just run away, Fray gives me that look. A look that says, "Why am I partners with such a wimp?" A look that never fails to shame me.

And every time that look would turn me around to face the challenge, whether it be lifting hundred-pound weights or swimming five miles. I just can't stand the disappointment in his eyes. Well, I guess he sort of has the right to give me the look. It's Fray, after all, the acclaimed Warrior who excels at everything. But still.

I put one foot in front of the other mechanically, stepping to my fellow Warriors' rhythm. My eyes are fixed on Dex's heels so I can stop being self-conscious about the back of my head, which the person behind me must be staring at.

I have an unusually thick skull. The Guardians say it's difficult to see my brainwaves during physicals because of that. I've always wanted to see what the shape of my head must look like, being so "hard to crack," as the Guardians call it. Unfortunately, Warriors aren't usually offered mirrors, because vanity is discouraged.

The sight of the Health Administration's double doors relieves my meaningless thoughts about the back of my head. The doors glide open at our approach, the immaculately polished metal glinting a bright silver.

The Health Administration is crawling with people: red-clothed Guardians, white-clothed Nobles, gray-clothed Drudges. It's hard to find a spot to lay my eyes on; everyone is so similar it starts to get dizzying after a while. Everywhere I look, it's brown hair, brown eyes, fair skin.

In other words, we are one person.

During every physical, the Guardians inject us with nanobots that travel through our blood to keep our appearances in line by suppressing our innate facial features. In addition, the nanobots are also used as tools to keep track of our locations and to collect our training data, such as heart rate and blood pressure.

I try to push back the bitter taste on my tongue as I stand in front of a Guardian holding a syringe. "Neck," she demands.

I turn around and let her plunge the nozzle into the back of my neck. A tingling sensation jolts down my spine, spreading all the way to my toes. I wrinkle my nose.

Play along, Ignia, I remind myself. I've learned it's for my own good. If I don't behave myself, they will take me away; I've seen it. Kids disappearing after showing one hint of disobedience.

Weight, height, heart rate, same old routine. I lose interest in what the Guardians are measuring after a while. Until someone calls my name.

Lost in my own thoughts, the sound startles me, and I whirl around fully on guard with a Warrior's alertness. There is an instant when I want to ask Fray if he saw what I just did. Maybe I'm more than an escaper.

With a secret triumphant smile, I answer the person—an unfamiliar Guardian—who called me, "Yes?"

The Guardian nods once, his face muscles twitching into a tight, unpleasant smile. He beckons me out of the line.

I hesitate. Then, I do it anyway.

I cross the floor to where the Guardian is standing, hoping my movement is swift enough so nobody notices. I tend not to draw attention to myself.

“Come with me.”

His words make me uneasy. I glance back at the line. It’s still moving, moving without me.

“Take your time, girl,” an unfamiliar woman says to me somewhat kindly. I notice that she is dressed in a shade of pink only slightly lighter than the Guardians’ red. The woman points me in the direction of a bathtub filled with steamy rosewater.

I stare at the bathtub. It’s made of thick glass, and the iciness of it tickles my skin. I start to undress slowly, folding every piece of clothing into a neat black pile. Then, tentatively, I dip my toes into the water. It’s surprisingly warm. I take it one step further and slide in my legs. More warmth surrounds me. Finally, I immerse myself completely into the comforting rosewater, and allow myself to indulge in this rare luxury, to be momentarily distracted by the relaxing sensation.

The aromatic mist fogs my vision, painting hot white vapor over the opaque glass screens that divide this place into little square spaces, one of which I am in right now. There is muffled talking in the spaces around me, but I can’t see anyone.

Where is this? *What* is this?

A soft, soothing voice tells me to get out of the bathtub. I do so. It tells me to enter the square space to my left and lie down. I do so.

I lie down on a soft white bed surrounded by iridescent drapes, my mind racing.

Calm down, you idiot, I urge myself. I don’t want the Guardians to see my heart rate rise through the information my nanobots send back.

Two women enter. They are dressed in dark pink as well. “Ignia?” one of them says, lifting the last syllable into a question. I nod mechanically.

Standing on either side of me, the two women start to untangle my dull brown hair. Spread white paste onto my teeth. File my nails. Scrub my feet. Make me rinse my mouth at a sink that magically rises up next to the bed at a word’s command.

They must be Gilders. A word I’ve only heard of but never understood the meaning of, up till now. Gilders and Guardians are the only adults in the Cube. Gilders, like their name, gild you. Beautify you.

Warriors don’t have the need to be gilded because all the makeover effort will go to waste once the vigorous training starts. I don’t know what made the Guardians change their minds today. And why just me?

The Gilders and I don’t talk. They do their thing. I comply. The only thing besides running that I’m good at—obeying.

I focus on the curious nuances of the iridescent drapes and wonder what is on the other side of them. When the Gilders start plucking my eyebrows and ripping out the hair on my legs, it becomes a little challenging to concentrate on the drapes anymore. I try as hard as I can not to grimace, for that would indicate the faint of heart. An unforgivable defect in a Warrior.

When the two Gilders are finished with me, they retire without a word, leaving me lying in bed. Alone. And awake. Something that almost never happens.

I lie still, though, only letting my eyes roam the orderly, square space.

Then I hear something.

A cough.

The drape to my left rustles.

My eyes immediately dart toward the spot where it moved. Someone, or something, is behind there. I sit up. I don't realize I'm trembling until my toes touch the cold floor and tingles run up my legs.

When has it become so quiet? I glance behind me. Nobody is coming.

I lift my hand. With one quick pull, I part the drape.

He stares at me.