

# DAY

## MY MOTHER THINKS I'M DEAD.

Obviously I'm *not* dead, but it's safer for her to think so.

At least twice a month, I see my Wanted poster flashed on the JumboTrons scattered throughout downtown Los Angeles. It looks out of place up there. Most of the pictures on the screens are of happy things: smiling children standing under a bright blue sky, tourists posing before the Golden Gate Ruins, Republic commercials in neon colors. There's also anti-Colonies propaganda. *"The Colonies want our land,"* the ads declare. *"They want what they don't have. Don't let them conquer your homes! Support the cause!"*

Then there's my criminal report. It lights up the JumboTrons in all its multicolored glory:

## WANTED BY THE REPUBLIC

FILE NO: 462178-3233 "DAY"

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WANTED FOR ASSAULT, ARSON, THEFT,  
DESTRUCTION OF MILITARY PROPERTY,  
AND HINDERING THE WAR EFFORT  
200,000 REPUBLIC NOTES FOR  
INFORMATION LEADING TO ARREST

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They always have a different photo running alongside the report. One time it was a boy with glasses and a head full of thick copper curls. Another time it was a boy with black eyes and no hair at all. Sometimes I'm black, sometimes white, sometimes olive or brown or yellow or red or whatever else they can think of.

In other words, the Republic has no idea what I look like. They don't seem to know much of *anything* about me, except that I'm young and that when they run my fingerprints they don't find a match in their databases. That's why they hate me, why I'm not the most *dangerous* criminal in the country, but the most *wanted*. I make them look bad.

It's early evening, but it's already pitch-black outside, and the JumboTrons' reflections are visible in the street's puddles. I sit on a crumbling window ledge three stories up, hidden from view behind rusted steel beams. This used to be an apartment complex, but it's fallen into disrepair. Broken lanterns and glass shards litter the floor of this room, and paint is peeling from every wall. In one corner, an old portrait of the Elector Primo lies faceup on the ground. I wonder who used to live here—no one's cracked enough to let their portrait of the Elector sit discarded on the floor like that.

My hair, as usual, is tucked inside an old newsboy cap. My eyes are fixed on the small one-story house across the road. My hands fiddle with the pendant tied around my neck.

Tess leans against the room's other window, watching me closely. I'm restless tonight and, as always, she can sense it.

The plague has hit the Lake sector hard. In the glow of the JumboTrons, Tess and I can see the soldiers at the end of the street as they inspect each home, their black capes shiny and worn loose in the heat. Each of them wears a gas mask. Sometimes when they emerge, they mark a house by painting a big red X on the front door. No one enters or leaves the home after that—at least, not when anyone’s looking.

“Still don’t see them?” Tess whispers. Shadows conceal her expression.

In an attempt to distract myself, I’m piecing together a makeshift slingshot out of old PVC pipes. “They haven’t eaten dinner. They haven’t sat down by the table in hours.” I shift and stretch out my bad knee.

“Maybe they’re not home?”

I shoot Tess an irritated glance. She’s trying to console me, but I’m not in the mood. “A lamp’s lit. Look at those candles. Mom would never waste candles if no one was home.”

Tess moves closer. “We should leave the city for a couple weeks, yeah?” She tries to keep her voice calm, but the fear is there. “Soon the plague will have blown through, and you can come back to visit. We have more than enough money for two train tickets.”

I shake my head. “One night a week, remember? Just let me check up on them one night a week.”

“Yeah. You’ve been coming here every night this week.”

“I just want to make sure they’re okay.”

“What if you get sick?”

“I’ll take my chances. And you didn’t have to come with

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me. You could've waited for me back in Alta."

Tess shrugs. "Somebody has to keep an eye on you." Two years younger than me—although sometimes she sounds old enough to be my caretaker.

We look on in silence as the soldiers draw closer to my family's house. Every time they stop at a home, one soldier pounds on the door while a second stands next to him with his gun drawn. If no one opens the door within ten seconds, the first soldier kicks it in. I can't see them once they rush inside, but I know the drill: a soldier will draw a blood sample from each family member, then plug it into a handheld reader and check for the plague. The whole process takes ten minutes.

I count the houses between where the soldiers are now and where my family lives. I'll have to wait another hour before I know their fate.

A shriek echoes from the other end of the street. My eyes dart toward the sound and my hand whips to the knife sheathed at my belt. Tess sucks in her breath.

It's a plague victim. She must've been deteriorating for months, because her skin is cracked and bleeding everywhere, and I find myself wondering how the soldiers could have missed this one during previous inspections. She stumbles around for a while, disoriented, then charges forward, only to trip and fall to her knees. I glance back toward the soldiers. They see her now. The soldier with the drawn weapon approaches, while the eleven others stay where they are and look on. One plague victim isn't much of a threat. The soldier lifts his gun and aims. A volley of sparks engulfs the infected woman.

She collapses, then goes still. The soldier rejoins his comrades.

I wish we could get our hands on one of the soldiers' guns. A pretty weapon like that doesn't cost much on the market—480 Notes, less than a stove. Like all guns, it has precision, guided by magnets and electric currents, and can accurately shoot a target three blocks away. It's tech stolen from the Colonies, Dad once said, although of course the Republic would never tell you that. Tess and I could buy five of them if we wanted. . . . Over the years we've learned to stockpile the extra money we steal and stash it away for emergencies. But the real problem with having a gun isn't the expense. It's that it's so easy to trace back to you. Each gun has a sensor on it that reports its user's hand shape, thumbprints, and location. If that didn't give me away, nothing would. So I'm left with my homemade weapons, PVC pipe slingshots, and other trinkets.

"They found another one," Tess says. She squints to get a better look.

I look down and see the soldiers spill from another house. One of them shakes a can of spray and draws a giant red X on the door. I know that house. The family that lives there once had a little girl my age. My brothers and I played with her when we were younger; freeze tag and street hockey with iron pokers and crumpled paper.

Tess tries to distract me by nodding at the cloth bundle near my feet. "What'd you bring them?"

I smile, then reach down to untie the cloth. "Some of the

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stuff we saved up this week. It'll make for a nice celebration once they pass the inspection." I dig through the little pile of goodies inside the bundle, then hold up a used pair of goggles. I check them again to make sure there are no cracks in the glass. "For John. An early birthday gift." My older brother turns nineteen later this week. He works fourteen-hour shifts in the neighborhood plant's friction stoves, and always comes home rubbing his eyes from the smoke. These goggles were a lucky steal from a military supply shipment.

I put them down and shuffle through the rest of the stuff. It's mostly tins of meat and potato hash I'd stolen from an airship's cafeteria, and an old pair of shoes with intact soles. I wish I could be in the room with all of them when I deliver this stuff. But John's the only one who knows I'm alive, and he's promised not to tell Mom or Eden.

Eden turns ten in two months, which means that in two months he'll have to take the Trial. I failed my own Trial when I was ten. That's why I worry about Eden, because even though he's easily the smartest of us three boys, he thinks a lot like I do. When I finished my Trial, I felt so sure of my answers that I didn't even bother to watch them grade it. But then the admins ushered me into a corner of the Trial stadium with a bunch of other kids. They stamped something on my test and stuffed me onto a train headed downtown. I didn't get to take anything except the pendant I wore around my neck. I didn't even get to say good-bye.

Several different things could happen after you take the Trial.

You get a perfect score—1500 points. No one's ever gotten this—well, except for some kid a few years ago, who the military made a goddy fuss over. Who knows what happens to someone with a score that high? Probably lots of money and power, yeah?

You score between a 1450 and a 1499. Pat yourself on the back because you'll get instant access to six years of high school and then four at the top universities in the Republic: Drake, Stanford, and Brenan. Then Congress hires you and you make lots of money. Joy and happiness follow. At least according to the Republic.

You get a good score, somewhere between 1250 and 1449 points. You get to continue on to high school, and then you're assigned to a college. Not bad.

You squeak by with a score between 1000 and 1249. Congress bars you from high school. You join the poor, like my family. You'll probably either drown while working the water turbines or get steamed to death in the power plants.

You fail.

It's almost always the slum-sector kids who fail. If you're in this unlucky category, the Republic sends officials to your family's home. They make your parents sign a contract giving the government full custody over you. They say that you've been sent away to the Republic's labor camps, and that your family will not see you again. Your parents have to nod and agree. A few even celebrate, because the Republic gives them one thousand Notes as a condolence gift. Money and one less mouth to feed? What a thoughtful government.

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Except this is all a lie. An inferior child with bad genes is no use to the country. If you're lucky, Congress will let you die without first sending you to the labs to be examined for imperfections.

Five houses remain. Tess sees the worry in my eyes and puts a hand on my forehead. "One of your headaches coming on?"

"No. I'm okay." I peer in the open window at my mother's house, then catch my first glimpse of a familiar face. Eden walks by, then peeks out the window at the approaching soldiers and points some handmade metal contraption at them. Then he ducks back inside and disappears from view. His curls flash white-blond in the flickering lamplight. Knowing him, he probably built that gadget to measure how far away someone is, or something like that.

"He looks thinner," I mutter.

"He's alive and walking around," Tess replies. "I'd say that's a win."

Minutes later, we see John and my mother wander past the window, deep in conversation. John and I look pretty similar, although he's grown a little stockier from long days at the plant. His hair, like most who live in our sector, hangs down past his shoulders and is tied back into a simple tail. His vest is smudged with red clay. I can tell Mom's scolding him for something or other, probably for letting Eden peek out the window. She bats John's hand away when a bout of her chronic coughing hits her. I let out a breath. So. At least all three of them are healthy enough to walk. Even if one of them is infected, it's early enough

that they'll still have a chance to recover.

I can't stop imagining what will happen if the soldiers mark my mother's door. My family will stand frozen in our living room long after the soldiers have left. Then Mom will put on her usual brave face, only to sit up through the night, quietly wiping tears away. In the morning, they'll start receiving small rations of food and water and simply wait to recover. Or die.

My mind wanders to the stash of stolen money that Tess and I have hidden. Twenty-five hundred Notes. Enough to feed us for months . . . but not enough to buy my family vials of plague medicine.

The minutes drag on. I tuck my slingshot away and play a few rounds of Rock, Paper, Scissors with Tess. (I don't know why, but she's crazy good at this game.) I glance several times at my mother's window, but don't see anyone. They must have gathered near the door, ready to open it as soon as they hear a fist against the wood.

And then the time comes. I lean forward on the ledge, so far that Tess grips my arm to make sure I don't topple to the ground. The soldiers pound on the door. My mother opens it immediately, lets the soldiers in, and then closes it. I strain to hear voices, footsteps, anything that might come from my house. The sooner this is all over, the sooner I can sneak my gifts to John.

The silence drags on. Tess whispers, "No news is good news, right?"

"Very funny."

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I count off the seconds in my head. One minute passes. Then two, then four, and then finally, ten minutes.

Then fifteen minutes. Twenty minutes.

I look at Tess. She just shrugs. “Maybe their reader’s broken,” she suggests.

Thirty minutes pass. I don’t dare move from my vigil. I’m afraid something will happen so quickly that I’ll miss it if I blink. My fingers tap rhythmically against the hilt of my knife.

Forty minutes. Fifty minutes. An hour.

“Something’s wrong,” I whisper.

Tess purses her lips. “You don’t know that.”

“Yes I do. What could possibly take this long?”

Tess opens her mouth to reply, but before she can say anything, the soldiers are exiting my house, single file, expressionless. Finally, the last soldier shuts the door behind him and reaches for something tucked at his waist. I suddenly feel dizzy. I know what’s coming.

The soldier reaches up and sprays one long, red, diagonal line on our door. Then he sprays another line, making an X.

I curse silently under my breath and start to turn away—  
—but then the soldier does something unexpected, something I’ve never seen before.

He sprays a third, vertical line on my mother’s door, cutting the X in half.