

## No Choice, But Chosen

My name is Annabell. Like my mother, and her mother before that. Generations of Annabells, stretching behind me. The year is 2125, and the outside world is in ruins. Next week will mark my sixteenth year, and so tomorrow I will report for genetic placement. They say it is designed to ensure happiness, but all it really seems to ensure is limitations.

My door slides open. The hydraulics no longer squeal. It reminds me to wonder what will happen to my room after I'm gone. It reminds me to think of the brother I lost, who was transferred to the Maintenance Sector, and whose features I share. My mother stands in the doorway in her purple Domestic Sector dress. She is holding the gown I must wear to be placed. Its rainbow of colours is supposed to represent possibility, but all I see is empty promises.

"I wore this when I was tested," she says. And I know it's coming. The speech. I roll my eyes. "There used to be disharmony. The people were in disarray, before The Authority created this haven from the outside. The Authority is always present. They know what is best—"

"Do they?"

"Don't interrupt me. Tomorrow you are to go to Corridor Delta Nine in the Authority Sector, and from there you will be tested. Do you have any questions?"

I take my chance. It might be the last time I see my mother. "What's outside?"

"You know what's outside."

"I know what they've told us is outside. What do you think is outside?"

My mother frowns. "Danger is outside," she spits. "And death. If you were to go outside, nature would be unforgiving. It would take you before you drew even one breath."

I roll my eyes again.

"I want you to get dinner early and go straight to sleep. I don't want you to be late for placement in the morning. The Authority is not known for their lenience on in punctuality."

"Mother," I murmur. "I've been thinking."

“Thinking is a dangerous pastime.”

The speaker above my head crackles to life and emits its instruction “Annabell Four, please return to your domicile. Curfew is now in effect.”

My mother sighs, but does not move. “Your brother, Matthew, was a thinker too.” She hesitates. She reaches over and releases the door. It slides closed. “There is something I should have told you a long time ago. Sit.”

I do as I’m told. We perch together on the edge on my bed, and in a single show of compassion my mother grips my hands in hers. “Matthew was not placed in the Maintenance Sector.”

I open my mouth to speak, but she makes a motion to silence me.

“Matthew rejected his destiny. He chose to sacrifice his happiness. He went outside, and surely death came. You must not think as he did.”

The request from the speaker sounds again and she stands to leave. “Now go to bed. You need the rest.”

As I lie awake, I think about Matthew and about the last time I saw him. My father came on a visitor’s pass from the Logic Sector and we sat together as a family. I imagine I saw a cloud of doubt on my brother’s face. I dream of children playing in a meadow, and fresh air scented with daisies.

“Annabell Five,” a voice says. “Morning meal has been served.” And a small cube falls from a chute in the wall. I look at it with disgust as I wipe the fitful sleep from my eye. It has been the same every morning, for 5,835 days. Next week though, next week will be different. I will be placed, and destiny will be mine. Adulthood will be mine. Or, at least, that’s what the official dialogue proclaims. I don’t know what I believe anymore.

I nibble at the edge of my cube, synthesised bacon and eggs, and muse on the stories the old ones tell. Of when there was freedom, and real choice. Of children able to grow and learn whatever they wanted. Freedom, known only from these stories, passed down from generation to generation. Of a time when the land outside was concrete, and the roads were paved.

“Annabell Five,” the voice says again. “Genetic placement scheduled.” And I know that means I have to leave the only room I have known these fifteen, almost sixteen,

years, and report to the placement room. In it will be a table, with a handprint moulded in plastic in the centre, where I am to place my hand and await the testing scenario.

I walk silently down the hall, ignoring the posters as I pass them. They scream colourful slogans as I walk: Genetic Placement means Destiny Fulfilled, Genetic Placement means Embracing Adulthood, and Genetic Placement means Vocation Predetermined. The colours are meant to be childish, and inspirational, but to me they're just prison bars. Holding me for sixteen years, until I am forced into another set of bars.

Sometimes there is a doubt that creeps, unwarranted and uninvited, into my head. I see the blank stares of the mothers in the Domestic Sector. Are they happy? Just because the ATA17 genetic marker says they are caring and nurturing, does that mean they should be parents? And then I ask myself if everyone has these doubts. The ones we never talk about.

In the octagon-shaped foyer, that joins the sections, I stop and stare at the solid glass wall. A single sentence repeats over and over along the join between wall and window: WARNING the natural world encroaches do not lean on glass. The trees outside rustle and scrape the window. Like fingers clawing for purchase. I turn away and stride to the red-striped door. Red means The Authority. The ones who dictate. The ones who monitor. The ones who control.

The door says 'Restricted to Mature Entrance', and beside it a spongy square pulses with light. My hand sinks into the gel when I press it to the square.

"Annabell Five," the speaker says. "Entrance granted. Report to Room 19 for Testing Scenario Gamma." I shudder.

The door schicks open, and I stand unmoving until it starts beeping insistently. I suddenly lurch through. Into the unknown.

The hallway is long, and I pass the eighteen doors before I get to the one I must enter. White and bright, so different from the domestic quarters, with their colour and decoration. This hallway has no decoration. The numbers adorn the doors with no fashion. No flash. They just are. The emptiness screams in my head. Is this what adulthood is like?

The door is old fashioned, with a handle, and I grip it in one fist. I have used them before. I don't know why I hesitate. Other than that I am afraid. Afraid of what comes after. Of what is inside. Of what I leave behind. As I hesitate I imagine I hear footsteps echoing from up the hall.

I swallow hard and push down on the handle. The door swings open. Inside is the table, but not like they describe. It's dirty, and scratched, and someone has etched the words 'who says' on the edge. And I wonder about that sentence. About how I have been told all my life that my genes hold all the answers. But who, then, is asking the questions?

"Annabell Five," a voice booms. "Place your hand in the receptacle." I do as I'm told. I sit and wait, until a sudden pain shoots up my index finger. I resist the urge to retract my hand. I ponder, as I wait, what the lines of gibbering flashing over the screen in front of me mean.

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1      CCTCAACTTTTTTAGATAACATGGTTA
61     CTCCCCGGGTGTGGCTCCTTCATCTGA
121    AGCGGACGGTGTGTCGTCATAGTTTG
181    GCTTCGCGCCGTAGTCTTAAAGGAAAA
241    CTGAAGCACGTGTATGTGGACGTGGCG
301    ATCTGGCTGCATGCTATGTTGATACAC
361    GGCCTGGCCGGAGCCCTACCGCATCGA
421    AAGCAATATTGTAGTCCGTCAATTTCA
481    CGTAGATCTGGATTGACTCTATGACGG
541    TCGGGCTATGTCACTAAAACCTTCCAA
601    CGCTCCCTTCCTTGAAAACGCATAAAC
661    AATACATCCAACACTCTACGCCCTCTT
721    GGGATTATCTCGTAAGGCAAGCTCGTA
781    AAGTAGGGATAGTTTCGAACCTCGGTT
841    TGAGTGTGAGCCAGTGTAAACCCGATGA
901    GGCCTAATGCACTCAATCCCGAGGCC
961    GTGTAGACCTTTGGGGTTGAATAAATC
1021   GACATATCAGCTAAGAGTAGGCCGGGG
1081   CAGTAGTCGAACTGGGCCAGACAACCC
1141   CCTAATAAGGGAACGCTGTTCTGAAGG
1201   TTCATGCGGAAGAGTTAACACGATTGG
1281   CTGGAAGGGCACCCCTGCACTTGGATAG
1341   GTGGGCAGATGATGCGTACGCCCTCT
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Scrolling endlessly and deciding forever.

Just when I think I can watch the screeds of letters no more, the screen goes blank. I dare not move.

“Annabell Five,” the voice says, soothing and placated. “Placement will commence in 5 ... 4 ... 3 ... 2 ...”

The screen jumps to life again, flashing genetic markers and their related traits faster and more insistently.

ATA7                      COMPASSION

My heart sinks. Compassion is for mothers.

FCT9                      PATIENCE

I start to sweat. Patience is for teachers.

SNC2                      PRECISION

Blood rushes in my ears. Precision is for cleaners.

ATA4                      AGGRESSION

Suddenly a full two pages of allocations fly over the screen in a blur and stop on IMAGINATION. The screen screams at me. The result bores into my brain.

**PLACEMENT ALLOCATED: MEDIC**

I stare at the word. Medic. And I question what that even means.

“Annabell Five,” the voice says. “Report to Room 78 for domicile reassignment.”

My hand shakes as I reach for the door. My brain refuses to form any one coherent thought. They race and swirl. I don’t want to be a medic, and I withdraw my hand. I don’t want to be anything. Or, more accurately, I don’t want to be told what I want. I don’t want to be *placed* or *allocated*. I want to choose. I want to be chosen.

My head whips around, but there is nothing. There is the table, and the screen. There is no escape.

“Annabell Five,” the voice insists. “Report to Room 78 for domicile reassignment.”

I reach for the door again. I turn the handle and step through. As I walk down the hall, I see the room numbers passing in silence. Mocking me.

24...

30...

47...

The endless expanse of whiteness unnerves me. Never changing doors. Every three steps a door. Step step step door. Step step step door.

58...

62...

78...

I stand in front of Room 78, gazing into the space between the eight and the seven, speculating what the numbers are made of. Plastic? Wood? Carbosilicon?

“Annabell Five,” the voice growls. “Report to Room 78 for domicile reassignment. Failure to do so will result in punishment.”

I hear footsteps behind me. It’s not my imagination. I hear my heartbeat thrum through my veins. When I look further down the hall I see a dead end. The last door on the right swings open. My itchy feet step away from Room 78 of their own accord.

I take a second step backwards. I feel the air rush as someone strides around the corner.

“Annabell Five,” he booms. “Testing Scenario Gamma has been completed. You are to report to Room 78 for domicile reassignment.”

I cringe away from his bulk. His head almost touches the ceiling, and I barely reach his elbow. In his hand, a laser taser reflects the halogens like they’re deliberately highlighting the weapon. I’m not sure that if I chose to run that I could outrun him when one of his strides is equal to three of mine. I’m not sure where I could run to.

“Failure to comply with this instruction will result in you being incapacitated and re-educated on the importance of genetic surrender.”

I look towards the dead end, and I see my life stretching towards it. I run. My heart threatens to burst from my chest. I imagine as I run wearing the blue gown of the Medical Sector.

A laser blast cracks at my elbow, and plaster shrapnel scatters the floor at my feet. A second blast hits my left leg below the knee. Heat spreads up my thigh and into my foot. My foot starts to drag along behind me.

94...

107...

111...

A hand reaches out and grips my arm. I let it pull me towards the open door. I stare into the eyes that mirror my own. Blonde hair. Rosy cheeks.

“Hello Annabell,” he says.

“Matthew,” I whisper. And I know the doubts plagued his mind too. I know he refused to be placed too. I know we are the same.

I waver on my feet as the laser blast spreads. Matthew catches me as I fall forward, and I see a shadow in the doorway. I close my eyes.

When I wake I’m lying in the grass. I can see the structure above me. Matthew crouches at my feet. I sit up. Suddenly aware that I’m in the grass, and a small rabbit is loping past my head.

“You’re safe here,” Matthew says. He inclines his head towards the rabbit. “They lied. It won’t hurt you.”

I watch it in distrust, and when I look back at Matthew he is laughing. He’s fallen back into the grass and is leaning on his hands. My mother’s words echo in my ears: outside is death and destruction, no one can survive beyond the structure. But I see that Matthew has.

Three figures burst from the trees. I recognise two of them. They smile and the youngest waves. I raise a hand in reply.

I realise that out here there are no lies. No rules. No placement. Only choice.

My name is Annabell. Annabell One.