



Book 1 of The Fiery Spiral



The Thousand Steps



Helen Brain





The Fiery Spiral Trilogy

— BOOK ONE —

The Thousand Steps

BY HELEN BRAIN

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For further information,
write Catalyst Press, 2941 Kelly Street,
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*For Denise Ackermann
who knows about the goddess.*







Prologue

Long ago, gods and mortals, once they had proved themselves ready to leave their current worlds, moved easily onto the next.

Each new world brought its own trials, and, god or mortal, they were transformed by these struggles. World by world, life by life, they progressed, until at last—perfected and complete—they joined with the heart of all that is; they attained the Fiery Spiral.

But a conflict over a necklace turned the gods of Celestia away from this journey. They forgot to move onward, and cared only for tearing each other apart.

The battleground where their conflict played out was Earth.





Chapter One

I jolt awake, drenched in sweat. I dreamed the walls were crushing me as the roof and floor pushed together, squeezing the air from my lungs. No matter how long I stare at the ceiling—tracing the pattern of speckles in the rock, waiting for my heart rate to slow—the sense of foreboding doesn't leave.

I roll over. Is Jasmine awake? Her bed is empty. Letti's in the bed below me, mouth open, snoring gently. She stirs as her twin Fezile coughs in his bunk across the aisle. She murmurs something, a frown tugs her eyebrows, and then she's asleep again.

I swing my legs over the edge and find the rungs of the ladder in the semi-darkness, trying not to wake Letti. She and Fez need to sleep. They must look as strong as possible today.

I pad quietly down our sleeping chamber—fifty sabenzi groups, a hundred double bunks, one hundred ninety-eight sleeping sixteen-year-olds. How many beds will stand empty tonight?

At the end of the last bunk are the small cells where our housemothers sleep. I check Ma Goodson's door, closest to the entrance. It's firmly closed, and the light is off. I tiptoe past—she's a light sleeper and has a sixth sense about her three sabenzi groups. At the slightest sound, she comes to check on us.

Jasmine must be in the bathroom. But the fifty toilet stalls are empty, the stainless steel showers and basins



gleaming against the rock. She's gone.

I sink against the wall as a thought hits me like a falling rock. What if they've come in the night and taken her? Keep calm, I tell myself. Why would they take Jaz? She's healthy as an ox and strong. It's not her we have to worry about.

I creep back through the sleeping cell and out into the wide corridor that runs in a circle around the ventilation shaft. It's a little lighter here—the year threes have started their treadmill shift, generating the electricity we'll need to get going for the day. I peer into their two sleeping cells. Both empty. Those who aren't running on the treadmills are preparing breakfast and tending to the animals.

My heart starts pounding as I near the last of the ten sleeping cells. I'm almost back to where I started, and there's no sign of her. An armed guard sits in front of the metal door to the stairwell. He's staring into space, half asleep, and barely registers my presence.

I'm about to go and wake Ma Goodson when I hear a sob.

Of course. She's in the cupboard, under the stairs. It's where the memory boxes are stored—all 1,999 of them, deep square metal cases issued to each set of parents to fill with memories for their child to know where they came from. And one non-standard, non-issue cardboard shoebox with a necklace and a baby blanket inside it. The shoebox Ma Goodson found for me so I—the only person without a memory box—wouldn't feel left out. The memory cupboard was our secret hideout when we were small. I should have guessed Jaz would be here.

I open the door a crack. There she is, huddled under the shelves. I crawl in next to her. "Tight fit, huh? We used to all fit in easily, remember?"

In the half light from the ceiling bulb, I catch a glint of tears in her eyes. She brushes them away, and the mask



of "I'm feisty, don't mess with me" is back in place. It's become almost part of her lately, and I don't often see the laughing, mischievous girl who has been my best friend for sixteen years.

"Couldn't sleep?" I ask.

She shakes her head, her corkscrew curls bouncing.

"Me neither. Too many nightmares."

She bites her lip. "You know this is just the start, hey."

"What do you mean?"

"Last time the High Priest chose three of us to be sacrificed. Today he'll take double that. He won't stop there. He'll be back soon, picking off the weak and sickly. And there are going to be more and more of us becoming too weak to work."

"It's the growing medium, isn't it?" Our sabenzi group works in the plant nursery, preparing the seedlings for transplanting into the revolving planters. They have to be fed regularly with a liquid growing medium that gives them the nutrients they need. It's that liquid that is running short.

"Mrs. Pascoe has started watering it down. Haven't you noticed how pale it is?"

"And the seedlings are spindly. None of us are getting the nutrients we need anymore." I don't want to think about where this is going, but I must. "And when it's all used up?"

Jasmine's hair falls across her face, but not before I've caught the shine of rising tears. "They'll shut the ventilation shaft and bury us alive."

"What if we—if someone like Mr. Dermond or Ma Goodson, or all the mentors even—what if they spoke to the High Priest and got him to change his mind?"

She rolls her eyes. "Ebba, you think he cares what we think? He's been down here once—maybe twice in the sixteen years we've been shut inside. He doesn't even



consider us human. We're just machines to feed him and the army. No, we have to find a way to escape."

"And then what? Everything is destroyed out there. The nuclear fallout killed every living thing, remember? How are we supposed to survive with no food, and water that's probably still contaminated?"

"We've only got the High Priest's word for it. Who's to know if he is telling the truth? It might be perfectly safe—it's been sixteen years. Surely the contamination is long gone? Things must be growing again by now. I would rather take my chances out there than die in a rock tomb. Just once I want to see what the world is like. Even if it's destroyed, which I don't believe."

We lean against each other, lost in our thoughts. It's the sky I long to see. I've seen it in Kinetika movies, of course, and in the reference books Mrs. Pascoe has in her office, but I want to see the real thing—does it really go pink at sunset? Do the clouds really change from bits of fluff like the feathers from a plucked chicken, to massive brooding mounds of grey and black? And rainbows—do they really exist? Or were they imaginary, like unicorns?

Jaz pulls her knees up to her chest and hugs them. "If I got out of here, I'd cross to the Mainland. I'd travel through every valley, climb every hill, search every cave, every scrap of land around Riebeek Kasteel to see if anyone in my family survived. My mom was a scientist. She must have made a plan. I'm sure she found somewhere to hide."

"Then why haven't they come to find you?" It's too late to stop the words from coming out of my mouth, and her mask cracks. I see the real Jaz, the vulnerable, gifted, sensitive girl who feels too much and has to pretend to be tough to hide it. Because down here in the Colony, any sign of weakness is jumped on and attacked. We year fives are easy targets for the year ones. They're twenty-one



soon, and they like to pull rank as much as the guards who watch us every waking minute.

"We've got to get out," she mutters. "There has to be more than one way out."

She's talking about the ventilation shaft that runs down the center of the mountain, through all the layers of the Colony from the High Priest's quarters, the army barracks, and right down to the sanitation and composting department at the bottom. Not that we've ever seen the shaft—the doors are heavily guarded.

"They'd never make a bunker with just one entrance," she continues. "It's common sense to have an escape route in case something blocks the main entrance."

"Jaz..." I take her hand and hold it tight in mine. "Remember what happened to Micah. Please don't go asking questions and causing trouble. What will Fez and Letti and I do if you aren't around anymore?"

She looks at me sideways from under her hair, and the tough mask is back. "They probably won't be around much longer."

The sirens go off then, and we race to fetch our towels and soap and get to the bathroom before the morning rush. Letti is already there in the last cubicle, along with seven other girls. There's room for two more next to her, so we strip, hang up our clothes, and push our way through to the two last shower heads. Then there's the moment when we wait, holding our breaths, for the tap to be turned on and the water to hit us. We're so deep in the mountain that it's always freezing cold. Usually we're all still half asleep, trying to remain in that half-conscious space where we haven't remembered that the coming day will be as tedious and tiring as every other day. But today we wait, shivering, filled with unspoken tension, and instead of ignoring the naked bodies we've seen every day for the last sixteen years, we're glancing surreptitiously at



each other, checking for signs of weakness or illness that might make us a soft target for the High Priest.

I'm shocked to see that everyone has lost weight lately. Ribs, once lightly covered, are emerging as bony ridges, and even Letti, who is naturally short and plump, has sharp collar bones and a deep hollow at the base of her throat.

The water blasts suddenly, and I gasp for air. Thirty seconds and it switches off. In unison, we grab our washcloths and soap and lather ourselves. Then Letti drops her soap. It slides across the smooth metal floor and lands at the feet of Greta Taylor, a tall, athletic girl with blond hair and a tongue like a blade. I tense up as Letti squints at the floor, her eyes scrunched up. She bends down and starts feeling for it against the floor. Quickly I step forward and retrieve it as the water comes on again. The thunder of fifty showers hammering rock is loud, but not so loud that we miss Greta's high pitched voice. "I hope he picks you, Letti. You're blind as a bat."

Jaz is in her face straight away, glaring up at her, fists clenched at chest level like a boxer. "Just watch it, you hear me? Watch it. If you cause any shit for Letti in the meeting, I swear I will hunt you down and cut you."

The water switches off, and the next group of year fives are waiting with their soap and washcloths in hand. I pass Letti her towel, and we wrap ourselves up—as well as we can in towels that have been mended so often, they're as thin as rags.

Greta glares at Jaz, but when Jaz shoves her finger in her face and scowls, Greta turns away. Although she's the shortest girl in the Colony, everyone is wary of Jasmine. She's not afraid of a fight, she says it like it is, and she always keeps her word.

We're among the first at the refectory for breakfast. I take my tray and join the end of the nearest queue.



The noise is usually overwhelming, with chattering, joking, always gossiping. We're endlessly fascinated by our quarrels, our rivalries, and the budding romances that must remain secret from our mentors and the guards. We discuss the mentors and how they relate to each other. There are two hundred of them, and just like us workers, they have their cliques, their goody two-shoes, their manipulators and bullies. Then there are the guards who are so mysterious to us because they barely speak, appearing every morning at the same time to watch over us, revolvers tucked in their holsters, their dark blue uniforms spotless; they disappear into the ventilation shaft at bedtime through the doors marked "Out of Bounds," and we speculate about what they get up to in their barracks on the higher level.

But today nobody is passing the time with gossip or jokes. Instead, we wait in uneasy quietness for the bowls of porridge that will keep us going until tonight.

The boy at the front of the queue, Primod—a long skinny Indian boy with sticking out ears—is arguing with the year three girl behind the service hatch who is adding protein milk to the bowls. He says it's been watered down. She says he's talking rubbish. The guard watching over the queue paces towards them, hand on his holster.

I'm wondering if causing a scene and having sticking out ears is enough to make the High Priest choose you when the last group of boys troop in and join the end the queue. My heart drops as Fez enters and I compare him to the boys in the rest of our year. He's a full head shorter than the other boys, and his chest is sunken from years of wheezing. He gets his bowl at last and comes over to join us at our table. Jasmine has kept a seat for him and she squeezes his shoulder as he sits down. We have ten minutes left to eat before the year fours arrive for their meal. None of us have much appetite, even Letti who never says



no to food. I'm tempted to push our hardly touched plates across to Fez, but what good will three helpings of porridge do at this point? He's going to be chosen. I see it in the way Jasmine sits close to him, as though she's his body guard; in the way Letti stares at him with big, half-blind eyes; and in the way the other year fives whisper when he finally gets up to take his half eaten bowl to the sinks.

He's the cleverest person in the Colony, and that's something in a group of two thousand people chosen for the contribution their parents made to society. Everyone in the Colony is smart, but there are no lessons, almost no books. Yet Fez taught himself to read using Ma Goodson's first aid manual and the reference books in the plant nursery. Still, cleverness means nothing in a world where the ability to keep standing through twelve-hour shifts and to run fast enough and long enough on the treadmills to generate enough electricity to sustain us, are the only things that matter.

Ma Goodson meets us in the sleeping cell when we go back to brush our teeth and make our beds. She calls us into her room. We don't often go inside—it's her private space, and she's a private person who doesn't talk about herself much. Today her lip is giving that tiny twitch that means she's anxious, although she tries to hide it behind a jolly voice. She closes the door behind us, and I lean against the wall, breathing in the smell of her that fills this space, the sense of safety and love and warmth I always feel around her. Photos of a man and two children smile from frames on the wall. I asked her about them once, but she refused to answer, and I could tell from the tone of her voice that I shouldn't ask again.

Her room is the only colorful spot in the bleak grey rooms we live and work in. Her bedspread is a rich tomato red, although its got holes in it and the fringe is long gone. She's hung deep blue curtains on the wall behind her bed,



and the green and gold cushions are like the jewels in the ring she wears on her wedding finger.

Fezile's whole chest shakes from a hacking, wheezing cough. Ma Goodson frowns as she rubs his back. She opens a drawer and takes out a small brown bottle, unscrews it, and hands it to him. "Here. Drink half now. It's buchu and aloe. It will stop you coughing for a while. Drink the other half just before the High Priest enters. Don't let the guards see you."

"We'll hide him in the middle of the row," Jaz says. "They won't see a thing."

"And Jasmine." Ma Goodson grabs Fez's cheeks between her thumb and fingers and squeezes until color runs into his ashy skin. "Pinch his face too. We need the authorities to think he's in peak health."

Letti squints at his face and Ma Goodson takes a second, smaller bottle from her drawer. "I don't know if it's still good," she says. "It's very old, but put a few drops into each eye before the meeting to take away the redness. And whatever you do, don't scrunch up your eyes to help you see better. Look at the ground throughout."

She hugs her, cradling Letti's dark head against her shoulder. She's always had a soft spot for the twins, and for me of course—the one she called her *laatlammetjie*—the baby who arrived after all the rest, when they thought the Colony was complete.

Next she turns Jasmine around and tugs her hair out of her face, tying it back with a length of stretched out elastic. "Let them see this strong, handsome face," she murmurs, giving her pony tail a twist. "My girl. As true and hardy as the plant you're named for."

Her expression softens as she turns to me. "My gentle Ebba. What are we going to do with your hair?"

Letti gasps. "Ebba's not in danger is she? Say she's not."

"We can never be too careful. People are suspicious



about redheads. When my grandmother was a girl, she said redheads were common, but nowadays—I mean by the time of the Purification—there were almost no redheads left.” Her fingers are pulling and twisting, working my tangle of tight curls into two plaits. Then she pulls them around my head, weaving them together until it feels as though nothing will ever get them loose again. Lastly she takes a bottle of oil from her cupboard, pours a little into the palm of her hand, and works it into my hairline so that not even a tendril of hair can escape.

A pile of clean tunics and pants lie on the bed as well as four of the caps that we wear when we go to Shrine. “Put these on,” she says. “I’ve been saving them for a time like this.”

Like us, the mentors wear v-neck tunics and loose pants, but theirs are striped green and blue, whereas ours are plain undyed, and worn thin. Soon they’ll wear through completely, and then we’ll have to wear the thick, prickly sackcloth the weavers make for the storage bags.

But today we’re in luck. The clothing Ma Goodson has put aside for us is virtually undarned, with no frayed edges. Ma Goodson takes care to pick the biggest cap for me. It comes down to my forehead, and as long as the High Priest doesn’t get too close, hopefully he won’t notice the color of my hair at all.

She takes us by the shoulders, one by one, and kisses us, her voice firm and sure. “I love you all. Stay positive, stick together, and I’m certain you’ll be all right.”

It’s time to go. The bell is ringing, calling everyone to the meeting chamber, the only space in the bunker big enough to hold all 2,220 of us at once.

I look back as we join the throng. She’s standing in the doorway, and she’s not looking firm or certain of anything. She looks worried to death.





Chapter Two

The meeting hall crawls with guards brought down from the barracks on level two. I scan the benches looking for the best place to be invisible. The hall is massive, a round room with rock pillars in rows holding up the roof, which is double the height of the ceilings in the rest of the bunker. Wooden benches are arranged in rows around the central altar.

When we were younger we fit into the meeting hall easily, but now we're all adult size, it's a real squash to get everybody seated. But today we can use that to our advantage by going into the middle of a row. So we're less visible for inspection by the High Priest.

We look for a bench near the back, where the rows are longer. But everyone's had the same idea and we're forced into a row about a third of the way from the front.

We push Fez right to the middle. His cheeks are still glowing, and he looks a bit healthier than usual. For now.

Letti is next to him. Then me and lastly Jasmine. Another sabenzi group fills the remaining four places.

Soon the hall is full, all five hundred sabenzi groups, plus two hundred and twenty teachers, mentors and cell parents, all waiting in silence for the High Priest to descend from the top of the bunker. At last footsteps ring in the corridor outside. We keep our heads down, trying to be invisible, as the guards open the doors and the High Priest and a team of worship leaders march up the aisle. Letti shivers as the most feared man in the Colony, General



de Groot, marches in, his medals glinting against his dark blue uniform with gold trim. I slip my hand into hers and give it a squeeze.

"Praise Prospiroh," the High Priest calls when he reaches the front. His golden robe glitters in the bright light ball above the altar.

"Praise Prospiroh," we respond in one voice.

I watch him carefully as he walks slowly around the altar with his hands in the air, followed by the six worship leaders, their long robes of rich purples, reds, and emerald greens the most majestic garments I've ever seen. I watch him, trying to read his face. His eyes are dark and large, his jaw and shoulders square, and his hands long fingered and expressive. He lights the big brass burner and the worship leaders pull on the chain that raises it to the roof. Fragrant smoke pours out as they swing it across the expanse of the meeting hall.

"We are gathered here for the Sacrifice," the High Priest calls. "Prospiroh, the Source of our Abundance, desires that we be purged of the weak. He blesses us with strength and prosperity, but those who do not please him do not thrive. Theirs are the weaknesses, the diseases. Their depravity infects each one of us. Prospiroh desires that only the best, the strongest, the most powerful abide in his Colony, preparing for the day when it is once more safe to return Above."

Am I really at risk of being chosen? I look different to everyone in the Colony with my red hair, green eyes, and extra pale skin. And then there's my birthmark. I pull my cap lower down over my forehead, and keep my left hand hidden.

General de Groot salutes the High Priest, then swaggers down the aisles, inspecting us row by row. He's a short stocky man with ruddy skin the color of aramanth seed, a jutting chin, and ice blue eyes that cut through the



crowd, zooming in on us one by one. Behind him walks the High Priest, chin in the air as he looks down his nose, scanning us for imperfections.

Don't cough, Fez, I think. Just don't cough.

The General calls Shameema in Year Three—she broke her elbow falling off her bunk and it's bandaged up. He pulls out Jaco, the guy who lost an eye when Major Zungu hit him for backchatting. He picks Thandeka, Flora, and Elton, three Year Ones who are sneezing and coughing.

He's walking away from us.

Thank you. Thank you.

But then suddenly he turns and strides down our aisle, straight towards our row. I bend my knees deeper, keep my head bent down. My thighs are burning. I dare not look but I can feel his stare drilling into me. Sweat beads on my forehead but I can't wipe it away.

He's going to see how pale and thin Fez is. He's going to pick him.

He comes closer, closer. My heart is racing. He's next to Jasmine, looking down our row, but...but...oh...he moves on to the next row. "You," he says to the person behind me.

When I hear her scream I know who it is. It's Tanaka, the girl from the weaving gallery with the crooked back. "No, no, no," she screeches. "Not me. Don't take me."

We're frozen. Nobody argues with the General.

"Fetch her," he snaps, and a guard pushes into the row behind me.

"Not me, not me," Tanaka screams. "Ebba's got a birthmark. Take her."

I shrink. Letti and Jasmine close in, packing me tight, gripping my hands. The General is examining me, assessing my value to him.

"A birthmark is nothing," he snaps. "She's strong. She can work."



The guard drags Tanaka out of the row. "No," she screams. "Not me, not me. Take Ebba. She's got witch's hair."

She grabs my cap. My hands fly up to save it, but it's too late. The cap comes away, it's in her hands, and the High Priest swoops our row, shoving the General aside. I don't move, I can barely barely breathe, Letti's hand shaking in mine. He points straight at me. "You—you with the red hair."

I look directly at the High Priest for the first time. His face is hard and full of contempt. Without dropping his gaze, he jerks his head towards the altar.

I've been chosen? They've taken me, and left Tanaka behind? It's impossible. Her back is so twisted, that she can barely work the looms. And I'm the best gardener in the plant nursery. I'm getting confused by the smoke swirling above our heads. It can't be me.

But he jabs me in the chest with his forefinger. "Do not waste my time."

Letti and Jasmine grip my hands like we're grafted together. But I've got to let go. I've got to leave them.

I want to throw myself at the High Priest's feet, beg for mercy—but I've seen his face. The sneer on his full lips. The hooded eyes burning with disgust. I stumble up the aisle and dare not look back.

The worship team steps forward and takes our arms. They lead us into the small room off the meeting hall where they keep supplies. It's been set up today with six chairs, and the worship leader—he's the one in the deep red robe—gestures to them and says, "Sit."

I'm dumb with shock. A strange woman unplaits my hair and brushes it, letting it flow down my shoulders in red curls. "I'm humbled to be working with you today," she says, as she paints my lips with a red salve. "You are so blessed. Everyone dreams of being chosen for the Sacrifice."



Is she crazy? Why would we dream of being killed? "What blessing can there possibly be in being picked out for not being perfect?" I want to shout. But there's no point in protesting. Not when there are guards with rifles at the door, and she obviously has absolutely no idea what it's like to live like ants crowded into the lower levels where we spend our lives. When she's finished painting my face, she opens a basket and brings out a white shift, pulls it over my head, covering my tunic and trousers. Then she takes a wreath of silk leaves, and places it on my head, clipping it into my curls with a pin. I look in the mirror, and don't even recognize myself. As though Ebba is dead already.

We're already now. The six of us, scared and pale, looking unfamiliar in the ghostly white shifts that float around us as we walk. The worship leader rings a bell and calls, "It is now time to bid farewell to your sabenzis and houseparents. Praying that Prospiroh will strengthen them, and all of us, by your sacrifice."

He opens the door and Letti runs into my arms. I hold her away from me and wipe her cheeks. "No, Letti," I say, trying to make my voice firm. "If you cry, then I will too."

She hides her head in my shoulder, and soundless sobs rack her body.

I'm going to fall apart and I can't. They're not going to have the pleasure of seeing me cry.

I look over at Fez. The Adam's apple is going up and down in his throat as he tries to think of something clever or funny to say. Jasmine's face is ashen. She twists her fingers in the hem of her tunic. This is one battle she can't win.

"We can make a run for it," she whispers, leaning into my ear. "I'll distract the guards, and you run for the door to the ventilation shaft."



I take her hands. Squeeze them. "There's no point in both of us dying. You have to look after these two."

"I hate these bastards," she hisses. "If I get a chance, I promise you, I'm getting us all out of here. We'll find a way to survive up there."

"Jazzy, no. Promise me you won't do anything stupid...I don't have a choice but you do. You stay alive. You keep Fez and Letti alive."

Ma Goodson comes in then, trying to look brave. "This is wrong..." she begins, but instantly, at the hint of anger in her voice, the guard lifts his rifle.

Jasmine tugs on her arm. "Don't do anything stupid," she hisses. "We need you."

Ma Goodson sighs, reaches in her pocket and takes out my necklace. "You need to take this with you, wherever you're going," she says, her voice cracking as she lifts my hair to tie the clasp.

"Please, Ma, don't you want to keep it?" My throat is so tight I can barely get the words out. "It's not going to be much use to me now."

"You arrived with it, you should leave with it." She's finished clipping the clasp, and the necklace falls into place, the silver charm with the brown stone hanging just above my breasts. The chain is heavy, formed from multiple strands of carved gold twisted into an ornate rope. It's tarnished after so many years in the memory box, and she polishes it on her handkerchief. She can't look at me as the tears run down her cheeks.

I want to hug her, to thank her for everything, but the worship leader announces, "It is time for the procession," and they usher everyone out of the room, force us into a line, and give each of us a lighted candle to hold. They throw open the doors and we're led out, followed by the worship team, who are chanting the Processional for The Long Night. Billows of smoke from sacred herbs loom up



around us, and the tinkle of bells on the worship team's ankles and wrists gets inside my head until I think I'm going mad.

Back in the meeting room, the High Priest stands in front of the altar, chanting in his sonorous voice that resonates around the room. His hands are elevated as though he's pointing towards the world above.

When I'm two steps away from him, his chant falters. He's staring at me, at my necklace. Then his eyes flicker to my red hair and down to my hand, clutching the candle. He sees the birthmark and a strange, indecipherable look ripples over his face. I brace myself, thinking he's going to order a guard to shoot me right there and then, but his voice picks up the chant again, and we move on, down the aisle. My head swirls in the smoke and noise and heat. My knees wobble, and I'm going to fall. The faces of everyone I know, everyone I love, come in and out of focus as I stagger up the aisle.

Ma Goodson reaches out as I pass her in the front row. "Be strong. I love you."

The guard lifts his gun and hisses, and she drops back in line. I can't look when I reach the row where Jasmine, Letti, and Fez stand rigid with misery....I can't lose them. They are all I have.

"Open up," the General shouts.

The back doors open, and we step into the passage that leads to the ventilation shaft, the only access to the world above.

