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## PROLOGUE

'Where is the child?' the man says coldly.

He takes a step into the flat.

'Are they in the bedroom?'

'No, there's no one here,' I say, in a half-voice, paralysed.

'There's no one . . .'

The man strides forward, opens the bedroom door, and looks in.

'Come on, son.'

Son. He's not your son.

He goes inside and pulls Isaac out by his arm. Isaac screams.

- 'No, please,' I say desperately. I try to take Isaac's hand, but the man pushes me to the floor. Isaac is crying softly, reaching out with his free arm, his eyes red and small. The man stares at me.

'Under the Atavism Act of 2043, your son is being adopted.' His tone is officious, short. He's reciting a script. 'Accordingly,

he will undergo genetic testing at your local centre, and if he passes, he will be taken into the care of the State. If not, he will be returned to you. Do you understand?’

‘No, I don’t. I don’t.’ My heart is cracking. ‘Please don’t take him. I’m . . . I’m Dr Hannah Newnham. Do you know that name?’

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# PART ONE

## CHAPTER ONE

I turn over and look at Isaac. He's sleeping on his back, so soundly despite the heat and light. I don't know how he does it. Even after years of sleeping in the day and working at night, I'm still not used to it.

For the next few hours, I travel in and out of consciousness, waking each time with sweat dripping down my legs and head, letting sleep find me when it can.

*I'm alone, suspended in a world of infinite stars and black sky, all compressed, just space and still water.*

I open my eyes with the alarm. Isaac is already up. He's left his CD player and headphones behind, sitting in the small indent in the mattress left by his body. I fold his sheet over and re-align his pillow. They need washing; the smell is deep-rooted. I'll do it later if I can get some soap.

I hear him in the kitchen, humming to himself, and I stop at the bedroom door and listen for a while. His voice is sweet and thin, like air passing through straw, and he's singing a tune I haven't heard before. One of his own melodies. It's fragile, like the nursery rhymes I used to sing with Theo when we were young, but more angular. Isaac looks at me when I enter, but he keeps humming, holding on to the last notes of his song. I bring his drawings on the kitchen table into a rough pile, put them to one side, and make him breakfast. Some of the bread isn't mouldy, and we have a small chunk of butter left over from last week.

'I'll try to get you something nice,' I sign. 'Some fresh food.'

His hum gets louder and opens up into a bright *ah* sound.

'Remember, to yourself,' I say.

'To myself,' he signs back, and he stops singing, out loud at least.

We make our way down the stairs, past graffiti, empty cans thrown into corners, a bald man I don't recognise. The turnover in this place is rapid. I glance behind me, and notice he's wearing a UV suit, similar to those worn by the police, but he disappears around the corner before I can see if there's any writing on the back. Isaac pulls me forward, and I'm hit by the acrid smell of fresh paint. Some new tags have appeared, one in bright green letters with liquid still running down the edge of a newly formed *t*. I don't know what most of the words mean – new gang names, or just kids making things up.

A column of hot air rushes up the stairwell, and with it a deep, resonating sound. Isaac breaks free of my hand and

skips down the next few steps, running towards the noise. He reaches a balcony looking out over the river and starts jumping up to try to hear the sound more clearly. I catch up to him. 'Okay, headphones on.' I take his CD player out of my bag, put fresh batteries in, place the headphones around his head, and press play. He disappears into the music.

Jarvis is sitting at his desk when we reach the bottom of the stairs, his head down, writing. When he sees us, he smiles, and starts jogging towards Isaac, raising his hand when he reaches him. He looks tired. Isaac is staring at the spinning CD in his player. I gently press his shoulder, tip my head towards Jarvis, and Isaac reaches up to complete the high-five. A little ritual turning over.

'Hi, Isaac,' Jarvis says, signing the words with his speech.

'Hello, Jarvis.' I respond on Isaac's behalf. The high-five is enough for him and he begins to pull at a loose thread on his hoody.

'Busy day?'

'No more than usual.'

Jarvis turns and walks back to his desk.

'Two patrols have been past, disturbances from Flats 5 and 21 again. A gunshot just after midday. Couldn't place it. You're the first person I've spoken to since handover.'

'I saw someone new upstairs. Do you know who he is?'

'What does he look like?'

'Bald, middle-aged, that's all I caught. He had a UV suit on.'

'No, sorry. I've not been told anything yet,' he says. 'Might be official.'

Isaac looks into Jarvis's office, then back to me, as if waiting to be told what to do next.

'We'd better go,' I say to Jarvis. A look of disappointment flashes across his face.

'Sorry.'

'Don't worry,' he says. 'I understand.'

Isaac starts poking his big toe through a growing hole in his shoe. I raise his chin with my hand and take his eyes into mine.

'Okay?' I sign, and he nods back at me. I look up at Jarvis. 'Will we see you in the morning?'

'Yep,' he replies. 'The new night porter likes to leave early.'

'Okay,' I say. 'Have a good night.'

'You too.'

The Southern Bank is quiet this evening. By the river, a few homeless people sleep on benches or on the ground, a group of teenagers in hoods have taken over a skatepark, commuters walk towards the South Station. I stand still for a while, holding Isaac's hand, and look over to the northern side of the river. The setting sun brightens the edges of the dark buildings on the embankment, like they're being lit from the inside. I wait for the light to recede, but before it can, Isaac nudges my side with his elbow. I look down and smile, and we move on.

We walk west, following the river, and turn off towards the station. Commuters appear from all directions. Most people are moving quickly, but a few are stationary: standing in the

doorways of boarded-up shops, sitting on the steps, leaning their backs against railings and statues, all of them looking up to the sky. You can hear the Soundfield so clearly tonight. It's the humidity. The air is thick and hot, and the dull Hum from the Field is racing through it. It's easier to tune out the noise when it's just a distant drone, something that lives in a separate world, tens of kilometres above our heads, but today it's impossible to ignore. Some people have earplugs in, those who can't bear the sound, but it doesn't bother me that much. I'm used to it, and the earplugs don't stop the vibrations anyway. But I still won't look up like others, not yet. I'll just listen. Isaac has now tilted his head to the sky and has started humming along with the Field. A B-flat, I think, two octaves higher than the drone. To him, the Soundfield is beautiful. He doesn't know what the world was like before it arrived, so he doesn't fear or hate it. He loves it, and so I try to imagine what he's seeing. The first stars in the night, the dissolving sun, a shimmering field of dust and dark.

Isaac gets distracted by the preacher standing at the entrance to the South Station, and I have to pull him past her. She's half-shouting, half-singing, something about priests and trumpets, performing her lines as if she's in a play, and I can still hear her as we pass through the barriers into a world of glass and metal. This is the city I know – busy and anonymous. I look towards our spot. It's clear, but there's a police officer standing just next to it. I'll need to turn my back to him. Isaac knows what to do and runs ahead, letting go of my hand. He

turns towards me when I emerge out of the crowd. I crouch down and take his CD player out of the front pocket of his hoody. Battery level looks good, the headphones are attached, the CD spinning. I can't remember what music I put in yesterday, but hopefully he'll have enough for the rest of the journey. I return the headphones to his ears, pull his hood up around the cups, and push the player back into his pocket. I put my head against his head and close my eyes. I find his smell behind the days of dirt. The volume is too loud. 'A little lower,' I sign, and he reaches into his pocket to turn the wheel on the side of the player.

'Ready?' I say.

'Ready,' he signs back.

We stop at the sharp edge of a block of commuters flanked by a line of armed police officers reaching round to the left. The message from the two huge screens is read by a man today, and the novelty makes it harder to ignore. Notices about armed guards and unattended items, things we used to hear before the world collapsed, along with some new-world announcements. '*The Atavism Programme is our future: your child could be a part of that future.*' It's read as if it means nothing, but it means everything to me.

We filter into the crowd, joining a stream of people heading underground. Down below, the Hum of the Soundfield has gone, along with noise from the screens and tannoy, but it's louder than anywhere up top. I feel the weight of hundreds of people around me. The metallic air makes it difficult to

breathe. A train arrives. It's full, but a man in a string vest tries to force himself into a carriage. The people inside start shouting and push him back onto the platform. He tries again. A hand forces him out, and he falls to the floor. He picks himself up and feels the back of his head. I see blood on his fingers. The next train is nearly empty. We find two seats, Isaac opposite me, and I have to concentrate hard to stop myself from gagging with the smell of vomit. But Isaac doesn't seem to notice. His feet are jiggling.

'Hold still,' I sign, and he nods back.

I get out my notes for today's lecture and start looking over them. Reams of thumbled paper, slightly stained by coffee. I don't really need to do this but it's comforting, and I need something to distract me from the smell. '*Verbal dyspraxia . . .*', '*. . . genome sequencing*', '*. . . the KE family*', '*. . . transcription factors*', '*. . . the language gene*'.

'Do you know what makes you *you*?' I hear Dad's voice in my head. I was five, maybe six – a decade before the Soundfield arrived.

'Well, Hannah, it's your DNA. Deoxyribose nucleic acid,' he said, drawing two interlocking helical strands on a piece of paper. 'DNA makes up our genes, and genes are the things which make us *unique*.' He smiled at me. 'The structure of DNA was discovered by two scientists called Watson and Crick. After they had found this special shape,' – he pointed at his drawing – 'they ran into a pub in Cambridge and shouted that they had "unlocked the secret of life". Science is what makes the world come *alive*, Hannah. Never forget that.'