

Miseria

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“Owww!” Reyes exclaimed after rolling out of the bed on to the cold, concrete floor. His room was dark, the sky grey as long as he could remember. In the corner of his room, an old stack of books made up for furniture reached almost halfway to the ceiling. There were books about math, physics, art history, and languages. The books that intrigued Reyes the most were about animals and plants, books that were full of life and had pictures of distant lands. Deserts, the tundra, jungles that held so many creatures that there were still some not ever seen by humans. Reyes stood up off of the floor and went to the small window that face where the sun should rise. The black and grey clouds loomed over Miseria, nicknamed “The Golden City” by the wearers.

In the city of Miseria, nothing was as it seemed. The wearers were the 3% families who had wealth and power, and the ones who had the privilege to wear virtual reality glasses since birth. Those who qualified to be wearers wore them for life, and with them, they could have the lives they choose. If they wanted to see beautiful fields of flowers that extended beyond the horizon, they could. If they wanted to see huge modern houses with the latest style of futuristic furniture and robotic housemaids and automatic microwaves that cooked food in an instant, it was theirs. The wearers attended lavish parties in elegant ballgowns made from only the biggest and best designers. Any life that the wearers wanted, they had the ability to control it.

Meanwhile, the other 97% of people in the city lived lives of poverty. Many starved and scavenged for the leftovers from the wearers and whatever rations the government gave them. Once a week, the poor citizens of Miseria gathered at the center of the city to receive bread, cans of soup, the basics. Reyes was on the way to the center, and took a different route that came

Autumn Raynne
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close to the wearer neighborhoods. Not that he had much to do other than go to work in the factories that produced food for those same neighborhoods while the rest of the population suffered. He was sick of being a slave to society while the rich and powerful did whatever they wanted and ignored the real issues within the city.

He needed to leave. His parents were taken outside of the city by police after they were accused of stealing rations from another family. They were giving some of their rations because that family had a baby on the way. Now he hadn't seen them since he was 6, and now he will be going on to his 18th birthday next week, and it was time he try to escape the gates and evade the police. Because no one ever sees the other side and comes back, everyone around him thought they were killed, but were they? Or were they released into a better world?

Just as Reyes walked down the last two blocks of the wearer neighborhood, he witnessed a protest going on in front of one of the major government buildings for Miseria. The government had to make cuts in the budget for rations so that the wearers could have more housing, and everyone else in the city had become enraged in the last few weeks. Yet the wearers were always oblivious to the outsiders and believed that everyone else saw what they saw, and that there was nothing wrong with their way of thinking.

A fight had just broken out as he was passing through the crowd, and sirens went off as the police began beating the protesters. Reyes tried dodging all of the riot police and the fighting in between to get to the other side before he was arrested. Everyone around him began to scatter between old junk cars and darted about while some threw makeshift molotovs at the riot police. Fires started sporadically, and just as Reyes reached the garage, he spotted a girl running from behind a car. What caught him by surprise, however, was not the fact that she looked healthy and was quick. She was a wearer.

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“Hey! Hey! Run, go go go, they’re coming!” He screamed at her. She seemed lost, but what was she doing outside of the wearer neighborhoods?

“Wait—wha-what’s going on?” The girl was panicking and spun in random directions trying to find where his voice was coming from.

“The riot police, there were explosions—they’re arresting everyone, you can’t be here!”

“Am I not in the wearer district?”

“No, there’s no time, just come with me,” Reyes grabbed the girls arm and pulled her away from the riot scene and sprinted for the other side of the parking garage. They could hear the police yelling at them, and their footsteps as they ran after the pair. Reyes kept going, pulling the girl with him until he couldn’t hear the sounds of violence behind them. The pair ended up at an old, dilapidated building that used to be a coffee shop from many years ago, and they went inside through one of the windows to catch their breath.

Reyes led the girl to one of the tables and had her sit down while he looked around for rations and water. After finding a glass bottle of water, he sat down across from her and asked, “What’s your name?”

“Chiara.”

“Are you hurt, Chiara?”

“I’m fine, are you?”

“Not even scratch on me thankfully.” Luckily she couldn’t see him staring at the clunky device covering most of her face.

“That’s good. Do you know what was happening out there?” She wasn’t even looking at him. Could she see his face?

“Protestors. They cut our rations a few weeks ago and now everybody’s starving these days. I was on the way to the center of the city to go collect mine actually, but I wanted to take the scenic route. Then, some fights broke out and the riot police started arresting people, and here we are.” He took a drink from the bottle and let out a long sigh.

Chiara went quiet for a few seconds before asking, “why did they cut your rations?”

“To make room for more wearers. Speaking of, why were you outside of your district?”

“Oh.” They both were quiet while trying to ignore the fact that she was the wearer in the room. “My goggles aren’t working, and I can’t see anything, just darkness. I was out taking a walk and after they started malfunctioning, I found myself feeling around on the wall and walked through an open door. I thought I was still in the district and then I heard screaming from the protest. That’s about when you found me.”

“You normally take walks by the wall?”

“No, not normally. I actually was trying to leave the district. Technically, running away. Something has been happening with everyone’s devices since the new laws were passed, and we’ve all been seeing things. Not what we normally see, but what actually is around us. My parents freaked out and it spread like wildfire. For a while yesterday, I could actually see the city for how it really looked. I tried to tell my parents and they became even more paranoid, and when others started speaking out against the government, they all became paranoid too.”

“Wow. Finally they can see.” Reyes felt nothing for the wearers. They have no idea what the city goes through for their pleasure.

“I didn’t know. It’s not my fault. I wanted to try to see more, to see what is even outside of Miseria, to leave this place and find out what else is beyond the gate.”

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Reyes sat in silence taking in what she was saying. He had been thinking the same thing for years. After a few moments, he asked, “What if we leave? Like together?”

“You’re trying to leave too??” Chiara seemed surprised. “But how? I can’t see anything, am I supposed to be blind for the rest of my life?”

Reyes rolled his eyes as he said, “no, you won’t be blind forever. I was told by some friends who work for people who make the goggles that once someone crosses the border of the city, they unlock. We just have to get outside of the gate, and then you could remove it.”

“How do you suggest we do that?”

“Well, if there was another riot close by the gate of Miseria, it would pull attention away from anyone leaving the gate and we would be free.”

“Have you ever started a riot?”

“No, but once one starts, another one is bound to happen. We aren’t too far from the gate now, maybe we can try to wait in a building nearby and see where the protesters have moved to.”

“Let’s go.”

Reyes and Chiara left the building and used back alleyways to get to the main gate to the city while avoiding the police patrolling the area. As they got closer to the gate, they could hear people yelling and would also see citizens marching in the direction they were going.

“Another one,” Reyes whispered. This was their shot at sneaking by.

Fifteen minutes of walking had passed before arriving to an even bigger crowd than the one Reyes ran into earlier. Hundreds, maybe even thousands were gathered at the gate, armed with nothing but pipes and wood as defense weapons. Everyone around them seemed even angrier than before, and the police surrounding them were becoming overwhelmed. Reyes pulled

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Chiara close to him as they weaved through, closer and closer to the gate opening. He could almost smell the fresh air of a jungle or forest, just like the one's that he imagined in his books.

At almost 100 feet away from the gate, a gunshot was fired, and the big panic began. The screaming began, and fights between the citizens and police broke out. The couple tried to dodge pipes, riot shields, and any other weapon that existed under the sun. They inched closer and closer, but then one gun shot became many. Bullets zoomed left and right, and above their heads. Chiara panicked and screamed, unable to see still. Reyes darted around nearby looking for something to protect her with, and found an abandoned riot shield. He picked that up and used it as a means to break through the crowd for the final push towards freedom.

As soon as they passed the last line of fighters, Reyes and Chiara took a breath of fresh air. Reyes looked around and saw all of the posts were abandoned. This was it. He grabbed Chiara and yelled, "This is it. This is our chance—run!" He pulled her and they began to sprint toward the exit. What he didn't see was that a guard saw the pair going for the exit and pointed their gun at the back of Chiara and fired a shot. However, he felt a sudden weight pull at his arm as a gun went off, and Reyes looked down to see Chiara fall. As he looked up, he saw the guard prepare another bullet and he picked up Chiara to make a run for it. He didn't go all this way to die at the end.

Reyes was 10 feet from the exit, exhausted from carrying and sprinting with all of his might. Then 7, then 5, and then just before passing the barrier, he felt a sudden jolt through his body. He stumbled and fell, paralyzed. A bullet lodged in his spine, and he couldn't move. He dropped down next to a downed Chiara, who was still.

In the last few moments of his life, Reyes crawled to the exit by his arms and wondered about what lay waiting outside of the gate. Were his parents waiting? Were there beautiful green

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trees and diverse wildlife living peacefully? Were there waterfalls and ponds to swim in? Was there life outside of misery? He closed his eyes and tried to imagine.

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“Ahhhhh!” Exclaimed Reyes. He had fallen out of the bed onto the concrete floor. A few misplaced books made themselves present in his ribcage. He must have dozed off while reading his books again. Reyes got up and went to his window looking for something different. The skies were grey, with no color or life in sight.