



Chicken House

SCHOLASTIC INC. / NEW YORK

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Published simultaneously in the United Kingdom in 2020 by Chicken House,
2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-58930-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

20 21 22 23 24

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, April 2020

Book design by Maeve Norton

DAY 736 IN THE LOOP

The harvest begins, and all that exists is fear.

This is how it goes, every night at the same time.

Minutes pass, or maybe hours—it's hard to tell—but at some point I begin to hallucinate.

My mind recoils from the pain and the panic, and I'm no longer in my cell. I'm standing on the roof of the Black Road Vertical, the mile-high tower block where I used to live. The boy with the blond hair is screaming, he's trying to pull a weapon from his pocket as he steps back toward the edge of the building, and the girl in the witch mask is getting too close. If I don't do something, he'll kill her.

“Stay back!” he screams, his voice cracking in his rage and dread.

One last tug, and he frees the pistol from his pocket. He takes another step back, increasing the distance between himself and the girl in the mask, and then he aims the gun at her head.

My eyes snap open as the harvest ends, and I'm left completely drained on the hard concrete floor of my tiny gray cell. My heart beats so loud and so fast that I can hear it echoing off the walls of the clear glass tube that surrounds me and reaches from the ceiling to the floor.

I try to brace myself for what comes next, try to hold my breath, but there's no time. The cold water falls from the ceiling so relentlessly and so powerfully that I'm sure I'll suffocate. My lungs are on fire as the tube begins to fill with the chemical-laced water. My exhausted body begs me to suck in oxygen, but if I do, I'll drown.

After what feels like a hundred years, the grate opens below me, and I'm sucked to the floor. The water drains away, and I'm left choking and gasping for air.

My breaths come out in ragged coughs as I lie naked at the bottom of the tube. The heated air comes next—a blast of constant wind that's so hot it's on the very edge of burning my bare skin.

Once I'm dry, the air stops and the tube lifts, disappearing back into the ceiling for another day. For the longest time, all I can do is lie still on the cold floor.

In the Loop, this is the closest thing we get to a shower—a government-approved waterboarding.

Soon it will be time for the rain; every night, despite the pain of the energy harvest, I force myself to stay awake and watch the rain. It comes at midnight—half an hour after harvest ends—and it falls like a monsoon for thirty minutes.

“Happy, talk to me,” I manage, through gasps. The screen on my wall comes to life.

“Yes, Inmate 9-70-981?” the screen says. The female voice is calm, almost comforting.

“Vitals,” I command.

“Heart rate 201 and falling. Blood pressure 140 over 90. Temperature 98.9 degrees Fahrenheit. Respiration rate 41—”

“Okay, okay,” I interrupt. “Thanks.”

I push myself to my feet, legs shaking and muscles straining against this simple action. I scan my cell; the familiarity helps settle my breathing: Same four gray walls, bare apart from a ten-inch-thick door in one, a screen in another, and a tiny window in the back wall. My single bed with its thin cover and thin pillow, the stainless-steel toilet in the corner and sink beside it. Not much else, apart from my stack of books and a table that’s welded to the floor.

I feel as if I haven’t recovered at all when I look at the dimmed screen on the wall and see that it’s five seconds to midnight. So, exhausted, I force my legs to move and take trembling, shuffling steps to the back of the room. I focus my attention through the small rectangular window and up to the sky.

I’m still breathing so heavily I have to step back from the glass so that it won’t fog up and obscure my view.

Hundreds of small explosions flash across the black night air. I can’t hear them because my room is soundproof, but I remember what they used to sound like when I was a child, and I can almost hear that ripping echo. Dark clouds plume out from the afterimage of the bursts and join together, forming a shadowy sheet across the sky. The rain comes down so hard that the first drops bounce off the concrete of the yard. Deep puddles form in seconds and the smell hits me—not a real smell, but again I remember the way it used to smell when I was young. A fresh, pure scent that—if I close my eyes—I’m sure

I can sense in my nostrils, and every time I think of it, I wish I could go out there and feel the wetness on my skin, but I can't.

The rainfall signifies a new day. The second of June, my sixteenth birthday. I've been here for over two years. This is the start of my 737th day in the Loop.

"Happy birthday," I whisper.

"Happy birthday, Inmate 9-70-981," the screen replies.

"Thanks, Happy," I mutter.

I lie down and tell myself not to cry, that it won't do any good, that it won't change anything, but I can't stop the tears from forming in my eyes.

I can feel the closeness of the walls, feel the thick metal of the door that I can never open, feel the futility of it all. I tell myself that I don't have to take the Delays, that I could refuse and accept that I was sentenced to death, and therefore death is the only way this will end. I don't have to keep fighting it.

This sense of futility, of hopelessness . . . this is what happens when you take compassion out of leadership, when you take mercy out of judgment, when you let the machines decide the fate of humans.