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Opening extract from

The Fall of Five

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I

Tonight's escape fantasy stars Six. A horde of Mogadorians stands between her and my cell – which isn't technically realistic. The Mogs don't usually devote any manpower whatsoever to keeping watch on me, but this is a dream, so whatever. The Mog warriors unsheathe their daggers and charge forward, howling. In response, Six tosses her hair and turns invisible. I watch from between the bars of my cell as she slices through the Mogs, blinking in and out of visibility, turning their own weapons against them. She twists her way through an ever-increasing cloud of ash, the Mogs soon completely decimated.

'That was pretty awesome,' I tell her, when she reaches the door of my cell. She smiles nonchalantly.

'Ready to go?' she asks.

And that's when I wake up. Or when I snap out of the daydream. Sometimes it's tough to tell whether I'm asleep or awake; every moment tends to take on a drowsy sameness when you've been kept in isolation for weeks. At least, I think it's been weeks. Hard to keep track of time since there are no windows in my cell. The only thing I'm really certain of is that my imaginings of escape aren't real. Sometimes it's like tonight and Six has come to rescue me, other times it's John, and other times I've developed Legacies of my own and I fly out of my cell, pummeling Mogadorians as I go.

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It's all fantasy. Just a way for my anxious mind to pass the time.

The sweat-soaked mattress with broken springs that dig into my back? That's real. The cramps in my legs and my backache? Those are real, too.

I reach for the bucket of water on the floor next to me. A guard brings the bucket once a day along with a cheese sandwich. It's not exactly room service, even though, as far as I can tell, I'm the only prisoner being held in this cell block – it's just rows and rows of empty cells connected by steel gangways, and me alone.

The guard always sets the bucket down right next to my cell's stainless-steel toilet, and I always drag the bucket over next to my bed, the closest thing I get to exercise. I eat the sandwich right away, of course. I don't remember what it feels like not to be starving.

Processed cheese on stale bread, a toilet without a seat, and total isolation. That's been my life.

When I first got here, I tried to keep track of how often the guard came so that I could keep count of the days, but sometimes I think they forget about me. Or ignore me on purpose. My greatest fear is that they'll just leave me in here to waste away, that I'll just pass out from dehydration, not even realizing that I'm living my last moment. I'd much rather die free, fighting the Mogadorians.

Or, better yet, not die at all.

I take a deep swig of the warm, rust-flavored water. It's disgusting, but I'm able to work some moisture back into my mouth. I stretch my arms above my head, my joints popping in protest. A jolt of pain comes from my

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wrists, my stretch pulling at the still-fresh scar tissue there. And that's when my mind starts wandering again – this time not into fantasy, but memory.

I think about West Virginia every day. I relive it.

I remember darting through those tunnels, clutching that red stone Nine had loaned me, shining its alien light on dozens of cell doors. In each one I hoped to find my father, and each time I was disappointed.

Then the Mogs came, cutting me off from John and Nine. I remember the fear that came from being separated from the others – maybe they could fight off that many Mogs and Piken with their Legacies. Unfortunately, all I had was a stolen Mog blaster.

I did the best I could, shooting any Mog that got too close, all the while trying to find a way back to John and Nine.

I could hear John shouting my name above all the fighting. He was close, if only we weren't separated by a horde of alien beasts.

A monster's tail lashed across my legs. My feet went out from under me. I lost my grip on Nine's stone and went tumbling to the ground. I hit face first, opening up a gash above my eyebrow. Blood immediately started trickling into my eyes. Half blinded, I crawled for cover.

Of course, considering the lucky streak I'd been on since arriving in West Virginia, it wasn't that surprising that I ended up right at the feet of a Mogadorian warrior. He aimed his blaster at me, could've killed me right then, but reconsidered before pulling the trigger. Instead of gunning me down, he clipped me on the temple with the butt of the gun.

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Everything went black.

I woke up suspended from the ceiling by thick chains. Still in the cave, yet somehow I could tell they'd taken me deeper, to a more secure area. My stomach sank when I realized the cave was still standing at all, that I was being held prisoner – what did that mean about John and Nine? Had they gotten out?

I didn't have much strength in my limbs, but I tried pulling against the chains anyway. There was no give. I felt desperate and claustrophobic. I was about to cry out when a huge Mogadorian strode into the room. The biggest one I'd ever seen, with an ugly purple scar on his neck and a strange-looking golden cane clutched in one of his massive hands. He was absolutely hideous, like a nightmare, but I couldn't look away. Somehow, his empty black eyes held my gaze.

'Hello, Samuel,' he said as he stalked towards me. 'Do you know who I am?'

I shook my head, my mouth suddenly beyond dry.

'I am Setrákus Ra. Supreme commander of the Mogadorian Empire, engineer of the Great Expansion, beloved leader.' He bared his teeth in what I realized was supposed to be a smile. 'Et cetera.'

The ringmaster of a planetary genocide and the mastermind behind an upcoming invasion of Earth had just addressed me by name. I tried to think of what John would do in a situation like this – he'd never flinch in the face of his greatest enemy. I, on the other hand, started to shake, the chains that bound my wrists clanking together.

I could tell Setrákus appreciated my fear. 'This can be painless, Samuel. You've chosen the wrong side, but I am

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nothing if not forgiving. Tell me what I want to know and I'll set you free.'

'Never,' I stammered, shaking even harder as I anticipated what would come next.

I heard a hissing noise from above and looked up to see viscous black goo dribbling down the chain. It was acrid and chemical, like burning plastic. I could swear the sludge was leaving rust marks on the chain as it dribbled down towards me, and soon it was coating my wrists. I was screaming. The pain was excruciating and the goo had a stickiness to it that made it even worse, as if my wrists were covered in scalding tree sap.

I was about to pass out from the pain when Setrákus touched his staff to my neck, lifting my chin with it. An icy numbness flowed through my body and the pain on my wrists was momentarily eased. It was a twisted kind of relief; a deathly numbness radiated from Setrákus's staff, like my limbs had been drained of blood.

'Just answer my questions,' snarled Setrákus, 'and this can be over.'

His first questions were about John and Nine – where they would go, what they would do next. I felt relieved knowing that they'd escaped, and even more relieved that I hadn't a clue where they'd be hiding. I had been the one holding on to Six's instructions, which had meant John and Nine would need to figure out a new plan, one that I couldn't possibly give away while being tortured. The paper was now missing, so it seemed like a safe bet that the Mogs had searched me while I was unconscious and confiscated the address. Hopefully Six would approach with caution.

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'Wherever they end up, it won't be long until they're back here kicking your ass,' I told Setrákus. And that was my one badass, heroic moment, because the Mogadorian leader snorted and immediately pulled his staff away from me. The pain in my wrists returned – it was as if the Mogadorian goop was eating right down to my bones.

I was panting and crying the next time Setrákus touched his staff to me, giving me a reprieve. The fight, what little there'd been to begin with, had completely gone out of me.

'What about Spain?' he asked. 'What can you tell me about that?'

'Six . . .' I mumbled, and regretted it. I needed to keep my mouth shut.

The questions kept coming. After Spain it was India, and then questions about the locations of Loralite stones, which I'd never even heard of. Eventually, he asked me about 'the tenth,' something that Setrákus seemed particularly interested in. I remembered Henri writing about a tenth in his letter to John and how that last Garde didn't make it off Lorien. When I told Setrákus that – information I hoped wouldn't somehow hurt the remaining Garde – he was infuriated.

'You're lying to me, Samuel. I know she's here. Tell me where.'

'I don't know,' I kept repeating, my voice shaking more and more. With every answer, or lack thereof, Setrákus pulled back his staff and let me feel the searing pain again.

Eventually, Setrákus gave up and just stared at me, disgusted. I was delirious at this point. As if with a mind of

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its own, the dark ooze slowly crawled back up the chain, disappearing into the dark recess it had come from.

'You're useless, Samuel,' he'd said, dismissively. 'It appears the Loric only value you as a sacrificial lamb, a diversion to be left behind when they're in need of a hasty escape.'

Setrákus swept out of the room and later, after I'd hung there for a while slipping in and out of consciousness, some of his soldiers came to retrieve me. They dumped me in a dark cell where I was sure they'd leave me to die.

Days later the Mogadorians dragged me out of my cell and handed me over to a pair of guys with buzz cuts and dark suits, and guns holstered beneath their coats. Humans. They looked like FBI or CIA or something. I don't know why any human would want to work with the Mogs. It makes my blood boil just to think about it, these agents selling out humanity. Even so, the agents were gentler than the Mogadorians, one of them even mumbling an apology as he clasped a pair of manacles over my burned wrists. Then, they pulled a hood over my head, and that was the last I saw of them.

I was driven nonstop for at least two days, chained in the back of a van. After that, I was shoved into another cell – this cell, my new home – an entire block in some big base where I was the only prisoner.

I shudder when I think about Setrákus Ra, something I can't help but do every time I catch a glimpse of the lingering blisters and scars on my wrists. I've tried to put that horrifying encounter out of my head, telling myself that what he'd said wasn't true. I know John didn't use me

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to cover his escape, and I know that I'm not useless. I can help John and the other Garde, just like my father was doing before he disappeared. I know I have some part to play, even if it isn't clear exactly what that's going to be.

When I get out of here – if I ever get out of here – my new goal in life is to prove Setrákus Ra wrong.

I'm so frustrated that I pound the mattress in front of me. As soon as I do, a layer of dust shakes loose from the ceiling, and a faint rumbling passes through the floor. It's almost as if my punch sent a shockwave through the entire cell.

I look down at my hand in awe. Maybe those daydreams about developing my own Legacies weren't so farfetched. I try to remember back to John's backyard in Paradise, when Henri would lecture him about focusing his power. I squint hard and ball my fist up tight.

Even though it feels nuts and a little embarrassing, I punch the mattress again, just to see what happens.

Nothing. Just a soreness in my arms from not using those muscles in days. I'm not developing Legacies. That's impossible for a human being and I know that. I'm just getting desperate. And maybe a little crazy.

'Okay, Sam,' I say to myself, my voice hoarse. 'Keep it together.'

As soon as I lie back down, resigned to another endless stretch alone with my thoughts, a second jolt ripples through the floor. This one is much bigger than the first; I can feel it in my very bones. More plaster drifts down from the ceiling. It coats my face and gets in my mouth, bitter and chalky tasting. Moments later, I hear the muffled drumbeat of gunfire.

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This isn't a dream at all. I can distantly hear the sounds of a fight from somewhere deep within the base. The floor shakes again – another explosion. As long as I've been here, they've never done any kind of training or drills. Hell, I never hear anything except the echoing footsteps of the guard bringing me my food. And now this sudden action? What could be happening?

For the first time in – days? weeks? – I allow myself to hope. It's the Garde. It has to be. They've come to rescue me.

'This is it, Sam,' I tell myself, willing myself to move.

I stand up and move shakily to the door of my cell. My legs feel like jelly. I haven't had much reason to use them since they brought me here. Even crossing the short distance of my cell to the door is enough to make my head swim. I press my forehead to the cool metal of the bars, waiting for the dizziness to pass. I can feel reverberations of the fight below passing through the metal, growing stronger and more intense.

'John!' I shout, my voice hoarse. 'Six! Anyone! I'm here! I'm in here!'

Part of me thinks it's silly to cry out, as if the Garde could hear my cries over the massive battle it sounds like they're fighting. It's that same part of me that's wanted to give up, to just curl up in my cell and wait out my ultimate fate. It's the same part of me that thinks the Garde would be stupid to try to rescue me.

It's the part of me that believed Setrákus Ra. I can't give in to that feeling of despair. I have to prove him wrong.

I need to make some noise.

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'John!' I scream again. 'I'm in here, John!'

Weak as I feel, I pound my fists against the steel bars as hard as I can. The sound echoes throughout the empty block, but there's no way the Garde could hear it above the muffled gunfire coming through the walls. It's hard to tell over the increasing sounds of battle, but I think I hear footsteps rattling across the steel gangway that connects the cells. Too bad I can't see anything beyond the few feet in front of my cell. If there is someone in here with me, I've got to get their attention and just hope it isn't a Mog guard.

I grab my water bucket and dump out what's left of my day's supply. My plan – the best one I've got – is to bang it against the bars of my cell.

When I turn back around, there's a guy standing outside my door.

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