

## Freedom by Anna Yang

So there I was in my room, staring across at the pearly white wall: the closest ever I would get to the color of sun. Bright, blinding, beautiful. Nothing could replace the warm sun, at least a flash of the shining rays I had once felt. But it all went away that day. All gone.

I remember the day my mom opened the door to find a group of strangers, dressed in white, standing beside my neighbor. He had betrayed us. He led The Men here, into my safe haven, where I could be able to live a life wondrous beyond imagination. My confidante, my best friend, had turned into someone I no longer recognized, no longer knew; someone who would betray a friend for money, fame, for their own benefit.

I knew that if I wanted to live the life my mom wanted--the life she worked so hard for me to get back--I would have to do more than just sit back in my room and wait. Wait for a miracle to happen. Wait for her to come get me and my butt out of another situation. One last time. The only way to get out was to do something. But that was easier said than done. I should know better than anyone else here: this place is a vault. Nothing that comes in is planned on being returned. Until it's dead. How many attempted escapes had I heard of that had gone badly? More than I was able to count. A girl with a severed arm. Some who didn't make it out alive. One who was taken by the Leader and worked upon in his own private lab. Every single attempt left more and more people lose hope in themselves. Their flame slowly extinguished into a spark. And I was one of those people.

I was one of those people until my cellmate, Lizzie, finally ran free. The tiny spark alive in me turned into a bonfire. With the guards puzzling over her escape, they would never notice

me leave. Never guess that perhaps she had told her innocent cellmate how she managed to get her powers to work in such a magic crushing place.

The Men had been after a gold pearl Lizzie had inherited. Her grandmother was a figure of importance: an honored and admired businesswoman. Legend had it that the gold pearl was the key to her success. The pearl had powers that led the possessor to excel in the future. The pearl could sense the desires of its owner, and it would whisper exactly what was needed to be done to achieve that goal. But just a week ago, it had finally proven its powers stronger than the magic preventing us from escaping the prison. When she escaped was the first time I had seen such powerful magic take place. The pearl turned Lizzie into a madman, a master fighter. She had barreled out of the cell, grabbed the keys from the soldier keeping post at our door, and swiftly unlocked the door to freedom. It was as if she had become a ninja. And just as she stepped out the door, she was herself once again: waving goodbye to me and embracing her new future outside of bars.

If only she had left me her gold pearl. But she hadn't, and I had to make do for myself.

Every person in this facility had something The Men want: magic, an object, a gift, anything special. What I had, nobody knew of. How The Men had even found out about it, I didn't even know. Some said The Men had eyes that saw everywhere, ears that heard everything, brains that knew all. Maybe they had known I was special when I was born. My mother had known it the second I was dropped into her arms, still sucking on my thumbs. But unlike the other captives, I didn't have an object. My gift wasn't able to be taken away. The only way they could contain it was to contain me. The others had a choice when they were captured: to give it up, or to be taken away. I didn't.

Now, I wished more than ever to have been born a normal child, no matter what my mother had said to me. *You are born how you are because God willed it to be. Never regret it. I would forever rather have you for a daughter than anyone else's child. I will never doubt that you will live a normal life like the other children.* Tears welled up in my eyes, thinking about my mother. She had dedicated her life to making me happy, and she had died at the hands of The Men. How could I let my mom sacrifice her life in vain? I couldn't. If there was one thing that motivated me to get my hands dirty, it would be to avenge my mother. The very thought of it got me riled up. The more I pondered it, the more I knew I had to get out of this place. I only had a week left before examinations and testing began, and I couldn't stand another day of investigators trying to worm information out of me. Perhaps my powers would be strong enough to create a breach in the enchantment surrounding my cell, hopefully, undetected.

For the next few days, I tested my powers every few hours, gaining back the confidence I once had when mother had taught and helped me with. I had fun scaring the prison guards: flickering the lights on and off, creaking open the doors of empty cells, plucking their hats right from their heads and blowing them down the corridors. All this was simple magic, happening with just a blink of an eye. Opening the doorway out, however, was not. It was known to be protected by a series of enchantments, only able to be opened by a special key whose whereabouts nobody knew of. Luckily, I had been watching out for Lizzie while she had escaped, and I knew the general area where she had grabbed it: a hidden crack by the door.

At last, the fateful day arrived. I wanted freedom and I was going to get it. I watched the investigators go from door to door, and it seemed an eternity until they finally reached my room. I anticipated the creaking of the door behind me. Surely, it opened to reveal the skilled Men,

prepared for anything. But hopefully not prepared enough for me. They stepped inside, and I slammed the door shut, narrowly missing the man's white lab coat. I turned around from my position facing the back wall, and stared at them. With the blink of an eye, I heard their bones crack, one by one until each head lay lifeless upon the floor. I watched their suits soak in a bloody mess, their faces unrecognizable with the gas masks they were wearing. The echo of pounding feet grew louder and louder until it finally reached my door. This was my chance. The door flew open, slamming against the wall, and the many people prepared to open it. *GUARDS!* Someone cried out. I ran for my life. Of course, I was faster. After all, I needed it. They wanted it. I ran until my breaths became short bursts. I ran until my legs burned. I ran until my vision became blurry from the drops of sweat dripping down my forehead. I ran until my head was spinning.

*No, not now. Please. I can't stop running now.* I could hear the crowd behind me increase in size as I passed by each room. My body fell against the door. I struggled to find the dent along the doorframe where I had seen Lizzie grab the key. At last, I reached and grabbed the key. Shoving it into the keyhole, I leaned against the door, pushing with all my remaining strength...

No! This couldn't be! How stupid I was, to think the key would work, after the incident with Lizzie! Of course this key would be a decoy! I heard my body slump to the floor, yet I could feel nothing. My senses were numb, my vision fading. I saw fuzzy figures grabbing my limp arms. My memory wasn't working properly. Mother... my powers... Lizzie... escape... The Men... the fake key... I reached out to my disappearing thoughts like strands of hair, slipping through my fingertips, just out of reach. I struggled as I watched a nurse reveal a small syringe, and poked it into my arm. I took a breath, thinking about my attempted escape, hearing the hum

of voices talking over each other, and feeling free of all burdens for the first time since my mother was taken away from me. A wave of calm washed over me, and it left with all my worries, all my troubles, and all my thoughts. It left me free at last.