

<<<<<<-- **From Up There** -->>>>>>

Hannah D.

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Dedicated to my sister

I absolutely guarantee that no one a hundred years ago knew how cruel and unsatisfactory winning a war was. They never would have predicted that we would be living with the consequences.

Every day, I climb the rusty and slightly wobbly ladder from the ancient attic in my house to the rooftop. From up there, I no longer see endless bickering between the Subchorans and the Chitchorans, news of terrible bloodshed and war, or a new piece of land conquered.

I don't see the brutal and war-ridden world around me. I get to see the world as peaceful, relaxing, or understanding. I get to stop and witness the quietness of it all. Of course, my "completely absurd" imagination must be taking over me again and transporting me to another planet because in 2098, those types of thoughts are far from the reality.

"Aquene! Snap out of it!"

A sharp and irritating voice registers in my whirl of thoughts.

"What do you think you're *doing*?!"

My mother grimly plucks off a handful of dust from her plaid shirt that came from the filthy attic windowpane. She looks hard at me, with those faded blue eyes. My own eyes stare right back at her.

"Ugh!" I think. "There is rarely enough time for me to think to myself!"

Even when I don't have that much homework from my public school, she always finds *something* for me to do around this house.

"It is your turn to clean the table and wash the silverware!"

"It is my turn every single-"

A muffled voice comes from the landline.

"Rosaline? you still there?"

“Yes Richard. Continue.”

My mother finally walks back into the house to talk to her colleague and leaves me to think some more.

Well, I do know that the world wasn't *always* split into these two tribes. There was a time when everybody lived somewhat happily and peacefully.

My mother writes books to support our family. When I was very little, my mother tried to give me the impression that Chitchorans are very greedy and unacceptable people. I should *always* stay in the other tribe. My tribe. The Subchorans. My mother would read her picture books to me, which I absolutely loved, that always ended with the same resolution: a big, hairy, angry, smelly, red-eyed, sharp-fanged monster named Chitchoran would be killed and a dazzling hero, who went by the name Subchoran, would get the monster's house and all of his lovely belongings. Her ultimate goal was to traumatize me into never wanting to like the Chitchoran tribe, but I was a lot more interested in the fact that the monster's house had a movie-theater, video game center, spa, pool, and lemonade maker.

A breeze blows by me and I brush my jet black hair away from my face. I sigh and pull my knees toward me. If only I could actually *see* what Chitchoran people look like, or even *talk* to them. It must be exciting to live on the other side of the world like Asia, Africa, and Europe. I've only been able to see North America, South America, Australia, and Europe. Well, I visited Europe before most of it was conquered by the Chitchorans and all of its Subchoran residents were forced to evacuate.

I don't really know if I hate them or like them, those Chitchorans. They have killed so many people and stolen so many resources from us that sometimes it's hard to think of remotely liking that tribe. However, not *every* Chitchoran is like that. I am curious about their lifestyle,

how they talk to each other, and how they feel about *us*. Besides, we are scheming against *them* just the same.

“Aquene! I’ve *had* it! Clean up the dinner and get ready for bed! School is only in a couple of hours!”

I jolt upright in my own shock, realizing that the sun is slowly melting away into the horizon, leaving a thick trail of pinkish orangish haze. Have I been thinking for this long? Shoot. I didn’t even do my homework!

“And I hope you did your homework!”

I carefully unlatch the ladder attached to the rooftop and climb down the rungs quickly, taking advantage of my legs that were twice as long as the legs of everybody I know. I hurry down the stairs, almost tripping over myself. I glance at my math homework and try to focus on the problems. I scrawl my best guesses on the paper, shove my notebook in my backpack, throw the dishes into the dishwasher, and run to take a shower.

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“Okay! After school today, as I am positive your parents already announced, you will all be reporting to the Marcella Military Training Center.” My advisory teacher, Mrs. Jennings, always speaks with a bark in her voice that keeps me from slipping into daydream mode. This announcement grabs my attention rapidly and leaves me in a whirlpool of thoughts.

The Military Training Center? My parents? Why did they *never* tell me?! Of course, mom is way too busy to tell me that I’ll be training for the M.M.T.C! Well I could’ve asked her... No! It’s her responsibility! Words can’t explain how much I am not ready! I knew it would happen to me *sometime*, but... why so soon?!

The dull and vacant classroom is filled with worried comments and a couple of whispers. Some people look brave, determined, and completely undisturbed by the news. Still feeling as though the world was turned upside-down, I gawk at them. I don't know if there is that much hate built up inside me that I would be perfectly fine going to war with the Chitchorans.

The remaining time of the class is understandingly devoted to each person having time to think about this announcement. I am drowning in a tsunami of apprehension, unsure of what is actually going to happen later today. English class, which is usually the highlight of my school day, is also hazy and unimportant to me.

After school, I walk past the hundreds of buildings as slowly as I possibly can, trying to hold on to the last bits of my normal life. I should be able to face the reality and know that this is what Subchoran life is like. I guess I reached that certain age. Everyone my age knows that at some point during the year they would need to train for war. They would get assigned a specific role to play during the war and they would have to be ready to fight when needed, which could be a couple of days later, considering war over resources is constant. I don't know if I can handle the responsibility, whatever task is assigned to me.

My other classmates are long ahead of me and some are even beginning to enter the big and sterile doors of the Center. I reach those doors after thirty long minutes of hesitating. I am immediately scanned with information about myself and taken to a dull and simple room in which all my classmates are sitting. I sit down to hear of how our duties reflect order, importance, and loyalty. Regardless of what task you are assigned, you are to protect your tribe, and show complete disregard to the Chitchorans. After a long speech about the expectations and boundaries for each role, our names are read off a long, traumatizing list, along with our roles in war. A slow, eerie voice fills the room and we are completely stiff.

“Adam Walker. Chitchoran Battle Plan researcher.

Naomi Matthews. Photo and Information Analyzer.

Aquene Hudson. Detective and Investigator of Chitchoran Life.

Jack Fisher. Chitchor.....”

I guess I would be able to cross Subchron boundaries and spy on Chitchoran lifestyle. I guess that was what I always wanted. I guess I’ll be safer that way and will never see horrifying photos or battle plans. I would play the role of a true and average Chitchoran.

I shouldn’t speak with anybody unless I absolutely have to. That shouldn’t be too hard. I am not sure what I am feeling. I am protected and safe; I will get my lingering questions answered. I will get to wear cool arm gear that scans the underground area to warn me when I am near danger and lets me know when I would be protected by some tech-y force field. I will just act normally and be aware of where I am or who I am talking to. But spying starts in those next two days, unlike every other role. I have *one* more day to be normal. *One more day*.

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There, finally in a piece of Chichoran land, I sit dumbfounded. I learn so many things about the Chitchorans in one glance. There are ramshackle houses that look vacant and ghostly, torn apart health centers and technology centers lining a jagged and unpaved street. I see women and men in uncolorful and, for some, ragged clothes. The sky seems to hold gloomy clouds, which just add to this new scene. I am unable to move. Was this what other spies saw on their journeys? Did they see how some Chitchoran people lived? These people are clinging on to the bare resources they have.

I am thoroughly confused. In those pictures that some of my friends showed me on the internet, Chitchorans lived in big houses and had all of these plants and medicines that were

essential in life. The children were privileged and went to fancy schools. They laughed at the name “Subchoran” and only cared if they had what they wanted. Well, maybe some Chitchorans are like that, but this was not what I observe.

I decide to get off the hill from which I am carefully observing and continue spying some more. I notice that in the run-down and far from advanced health center I am in, there is no talk of Subchorans. I do see quite a few of the medicines that my tribe needs, but I refrain from taking any. I am only to observe, not to steal. I also notice that all around the village to which I was assigned, there is not one talk of war against my tribe. The pit inside my stomach is growing larger and larger and is going to swallow me whole as I begin to realize that this is never what anyone thought this tribe was. Not one gun, or one talk of battle? They all seem completely peaceful, like one big family, struggling with the harshness of their world.

After a while of observing, I slip into an unoccupied house and realize there is only one room. There is no heater, no rug, no shower. I feel empty as I realize there is only one bed, a used stove and a damaged cupboard. I quietly drop to the floor in a pool of thoughts. A trickle of water comes down from the rooftop. Before I realize where it is coming from, I feel the skies opening up and heavy rain falling upon me. I am on the verge of a melt-down. My mind forces me to replay the scene from earlier today when I was watching children playing in a schoolyard, from a tree directly above.

I was so wrapped up in my thoughts and concerns when I noticed myself slipping off the tree. I was shouting for help and hysterically thinking that I was not going to survive the fall when a hand shot out, grabbed me by the arm and helped me pull myself back to the tree’s safe sitting ledge.

“I’m Nevaeh”, a girl a little older than me said. “That would’ve been quite a fall! Cool arm band!”

When I could recover from my moment of shock, I found a person with a sharp nose and kind eyes sitting right in front of me. She was grinning and completely nonchalant despite her just having saved my life. Her light brown hair was tied back and she wore a tattered apron, along with a dirty white top and dark brown pants that ended just above her bruised knees. I wasn’t sure how she went up the tree just in time to catch me from falling. Maybe she was very quick! She looked like she was that sort of type. Or maybe she had been (creepily) watching me sitting on the tree from behind and was thinking about whether to talk to me or leave me alone-- until I had almost fallen. Either way, I was so grateful for what she did and saw her as a hero and a friend, not an enemy. I instantly talked to Nevaeh because I really wanted to show her how thankful I was and wanted to know more about her. She already seemed interesting to me.

We talked for a long time up there on the tree, as Nevaeh was unusually outgoing. She started to tell me about her family and her school. She talked with me about how she likes to draw and what she does after school. She talked about her life and I talked about mine, of course, leaving out parts that showed I was not from this town. We both loved to sit outside, and liked to rant to ourselves about how much we disliked fighting and war. I was holding back tears when I realized this common interest of ours. I wished so badly that I could be her friend instead of never going to see her again. I wanted to talk more about our ideas of peace and togetherness.

Flashing back to where I am, in the pouring rain, quietly contemplating all that I knew to be true, I am suddenly hit in the face with reality.

The Chitchorans are not battling with us. We are taking their resources from them, all that they have. We are the dominant tribe, sure to take over the Chitchorans within a matter of

time. But, I do not want that. How could everybody be so wrong in thinking about who the Chitchorans are? Why would the people who actually knew about the Chitchorans tell everybody these lies? So we would feel fine killing them all? How could they ever be so selfish? When will they realize that war was never the answer? That it tears friendships apart, even if those friends really want to be with each other and have similar personalities?

Even though my thoughts are becoming clear as I slowly find the answers, the thought of actually conquering this village is unbearable. I am crying uncontrollably and trying to figure out a way to actually stop this.

I feel so small. I also know how slim the chances would be of me making a difference in this world. I am scared to come home to my mother and friends. I am almost positive my mother would be humiliated by me and would forever despise me because I would not be acting loyal to her and my tribe. My friends would think I am weird for wanting to help people who have some of the resources that they need. I am not sure if I should take the risk of losing my friends' and family's trust and support, and try to stop this injustice.

War. Conquering. Resources. Chitchorans. Selfish. Cruel. Family. Liars. Thieves. Friends. Peace. Happiness. Harmony. Nevaeh. My roof where I sit for hours thinking of my life and wondering when peace will spread over the whole world.

I am taken over by one choice. I press one of the connector buttons to reach the Commander in Chief. I know what I need to say. I know I should be the one to stand up to this injustice. To make a change. My life. My responsibility. I will have to give something up, and I have chosen to jeopardize my family's love and support. The Commander screeches from the device.

“Aquene, you okay? Remember the orange button to the left of the right panel on-”

“I’m not okay. Stop this all. Every bit. You will thank me later.”

“I am sorry, Aquene.” I can almost feel the Commander grinning from the other side of the device. “We are actually already on the battlefield. We are ready to charge whenever you are out of the area. You must leave soon. Let me know when you are ready.”

The connection shuts off in the heavy rain. I lean back on the dusty and chipped off wall and watch the rain tap out a rhythm on the ground. I look up to the ceiling and think of all that I know. And knew. Everything is lost.

I am not ready.

About The Author!



Hannah Dagen is a twin sister and lives in an apartment on the Upper West Side with her mother, sister and dog, who has twelve middle names. She loves reading, drawing landscapes, photography, watching movies and eating Italian food. Her favorite novel in the entire world is The Fault In Our Stars by John Green, and her dream career for the future is an interior designer.