

## The Heap

*This is an excerpt from story I am currently working on.*

### CHAPTER I

I always knew I was different. Different from the other hundreds of starving people living in the rubbish from many years ago. Yes, I lived with them. I starved with them. I loved them. But I was told I was better from the moment I was born. I was told I had a future, I had hope. My parents told me this. And they were right.

By the age of three, I could read. Other than my parents, I only knew of two other people in the Heap who could read. When I was five, I could solve simple math problems. Like  $53-48=5$ . No one else I knew could do that. And I was taught manners. Please and thank you, how to eat with a fork and knife, how to address an older man or woman.

Somehow I knew all of this would lead to something. Somehow I knew that the whispers of my parents as they opened the valuables box and counted and recounted the items would affect me in some way. So I wasn't surprised when it came. My twelfth birthday. The day of the test. The day that changed my life all started with Papa's tired face above mine, his rough and dirty hands gently shaking me awake.

"Come on Adelle." His coarse voice grated my eardrums. He was wearing a warm red shirt that was actually clean. Clean! There was no easy way to clean clothes in the Heap. I didn't get a chance to ask questions, though, because he pushed away the blanket doorway to my cave and disappeared.

I rolled off my bed of old clothes and stood up on the dirt floor. I looked around the familiar surroundings, taking them in, letting them comfort me. Magazine pages glazed with old Elmer's Glue acted as my wallpaper against the compressed rubbish beneath. A small hole in the ceiling allowed a strand of rare light to trickle through. It had taken weeks to scrape away the dirt in the Heap carefully, finally reaching the top with a broom handle. I touched a finger to my lips and brushed the walls as I pushed out the door. The main room of our home was empty, so I walked through a short tunnel into open air.

The Heap extended above me as far as I could see and encircled me from all sides like a giant arena. Only fifty yards below me was the ground, speckled in trading tents. There were people everywhere, hundreds of people already roaming the markets, hundreds tending gardens

the size of basketball courts. I knew there were at least five hundred more still hidden in the caves around me, homes dug into the trash. All of the people were dirty. All of the people were starving.

Suddenly there was a chopping of blades rushing through the air. A helicopter appeared from over the Heap and slowly landed in a large empty spot reserved for government visits only, at least that's what the sign told us. No one really knew where the helicopters came from, just that they came, and very often. The helicopter landed next to the small white building and extended a tube completing the airlock. No one ever dared enter the building. Even if they wanted to, it was secured with alarms and locks. But everyone in the Heap had fantasized, at least once, of finding piles of food inside, of clean water, of a better life.

My parents were at my side moments after the helicopter landed. Mama was holding a dress, pale yellow with elegant lace, and a small pair of black shoes. "Adelle, you must put these on. And hurry," Mama said. She did not explain anything. I didn't understand the dress. Yellow was such an impractical color, as every dirt stain would show up on it.

"Why?" I asked. They remained silent, but Mama pulled on my arm. She dipped a rag in a bowl of our precious water and ran it over my hand. A layer of dirt washed away and a pale yellowish pink showed through. She dipped the rag again and again, slowly revealing my skin all over my body. She helped me remove my pieced together shirt and pants and slip on the dress and shoes. My feet felt pinched and strange, confined in one place and not in contact with the ground. Finally, she gathered my knotted hair back in a yellow bandana.

When she pulled back to look at me, her face was red from silent tears. She hugged me tightly and whispered in my ear. "I love you. Make me proud." I didn't understand what she was saying, or why she was crying, but I held tightly to her. Papa cleared his throat, and she leaned in close to me for one last kiss on my forehead. I memorized the feel of her papery lips as I turned and took Papa's hand. He had washed himself too, and was sparkling in the sun. I wondered what I must look like as we started the long trip down the makeshift stairs. He had to catch me twice as I nearly tripped because of my shoes.

Eventually we reached the bottom and he led me a short distance to the restricted white building. I didn't say anything, but my thoughts were racing. As we neared the building, I could read the sign engraved with five words, "Property of the Laoin Government." Suddenly, Papa turned and drew me into a tight hug.

“Adelle, what does  $x$  equal in  $36-x=256$ ?” I quickly did the subtraction in my head.

“Negative 220?”

“Yes, Oh, I love you Adelle. You’ll do fine, you’ll be perfect.” It sounded like he was convincing himself.

“Papa, what’s happening?”

“Adelle, you are going to take a test. A very important test. Please do your best on it. Your very best. And remember to be polite.”

“Of course, Papa.” He guided me along to the door of the white building and pressed a silver button. A bell sounded inside the building, and the door swung open moments later. A tall white man stood in the doorway. His clothes were a spotless light blue, a tight suit with a belt. A seemingly-pointless hat was perched on his head of flowing brown hair. The black shoes on his feet looked agile and durable. He motioned with a perfect hand for me to step inside. Papa started forward, tightly holding my hand.

“No, only the girl.” The man spoke in a tight, clipped, unfamiliar accent. Papa pulled me into a last tight hug and let go of my hand. I followed the man inside, my hands shaking. What was happening to me? Where were they taking me? Why were Papa and Mama so worried? I looked around at my surroundings. We were in a tiny room, with barely enough space to sit down in. The door behind us swung closed, and a purple light briefly filled the area. The light switched off, and the door slid open in front of us. It must have been some kind of scan, but what for?

We stepped into the next room, and I looked around. Inside, it was white. One single room full of a blinding whiteness. I had never really seen white before, not when everything in the Heap was covered in a layer of grime. I turned around to see the door slide closed. A lock clicked.

The man standing next to me spoke. His voice was calm, but it wasn’t kind. It was cold, absent of emotion. “Adelle, you are going to have three hours to complete this test. Please sit down.” I sat in the only chair and a beam of light appeared in front of me. It was a translucent projection buzzing with electricity. A green button sat in the middle of the white screen.

“Excuse me, sir,” I started timidly, “but I don’t know how to operate this technology.” I tried my best to sound polite and educated. He looked surprised at my words.

“It’s a simple touchscreen,” he replied in the same cold voice, as if I were wasting his time. “Touch your finger to the correct answer. Press the green button to begin.” He turned back to a small table where he was examining the contents of my parents’ valuables box. I pressed the green button.

The next hour passed in a blur as I answered many questions. Some of the questions were simple math and word problems which I answered with ease. Others were strange, asking what I would do in certain situations, like if someone needed help. I answered honestly that I would help them in any way I could.

After an hour of constant work, the screen flashed to a display of numbers:

Laoin Admission Test

Math Skills: 98%

English Skills: 99%

Psychology: Acceptable

Time taken: 1 hour 3 minutes out of 3 hours

Pass/Fail: Pass

A short beeping sound prompted the man to turn around from his preoccupations. His face had a stunned expression.

“You’re done? Already?” He partially regained his composure and pressed a button on my chair. The display flipped, showing him the results. The look of surprise on his face deepened.

“Well, I guess you will be coming with me, then. To Laoa.”

The inside of the helicopter was just like the room: an empty white box. Two seats were bolted to the floor in the middle. I turned to the man.

“Will I see Papa and Mama again?” I was afraid of the answer, and very confused. I had no idea what was going on. What was that test? What was all of this technology? What and where was Laoa? I had always heard that the Heap was the only place inhabited by humans. I had never really thought about the government helicopters before; they were just part of the scenery.

The man’s voice answered in the same accent, but it was slightly warmer. I think he respected me more since I had passed the test. “No. Now you are going to Laoa and you will live

with an adoptive family. Now sit down, please. We must get out of this place.” He looked out the large window in disgust. I looked out of it longingly. If I looked carefully enough, I could see my family’s cave. I could imagine Papa and Mama waving to me. I could imagine that nothing had changed, that everything was going to turn out alright. I sat in the smaller chair and the man sat next to me.

“Home,” he said.

A fake voice filled the cabin. “Flight directed... home.” I jumped and the man turned to me with almost a smirk on his face. “This helicopter has voice command, as does everything else in Laoa. If you would like to explore our computer system, you need only say, ‘screen.’” A screen popped up in front of him, exactly like the one in the building. “I’m sure you can figure out the rest. You’re smart enough.” He turned to his screen and whispered a command. The screen changed, but I couldn’t see what was on it. I ignored the computer, instead thinking of my situation.

I was leaving the Heap, and it didn’t sound like I was ever coming back. I would never see Mama again, never play with Chessie around the trading tents again. I curled up into a ball on my seat, clutching my legs tightly to me. I felt tears running down my cheeks. The only world I’d ever known was disappearing through the window. I felt betrayed by my parents, but I wiped my eyes. I couldn’t be weak. I promised Papa I would be strong and do my best. I sat up and looked at the man, considering talking to him, but he was engrossed in his own screen. I needed a distraction.

“Screen,” I said out loud. A buzzing square popped up.

“Welcome to the Laoin Network, LN. What would you like to do first?” A group of commands popped up around the symbol in the middle portraying the letters LN. I looked over at the man, but he seemed to have heard nothing. As my vision trailed back to the screen, I caught sight of the window. No longer did the Heap surround us, but now we were in pure blue sky! It was marvelous, so clean and bright. My attention was drawn back to the screen when the question was repeated. I said the first command I saw.

“Laoa.” The symbol disappeared to be replaced with pictures of long white hallways, groups of people in light blue jumpsuits, and a teacher standing in front of a group of ten children, pointing to an image. They looked like pictures that I had seen on my walls, travel guide covers. Subtitles popped up underneath the pictures. I chose the one with the teacher.

“Technology,” I said. The screen spun in a dizzying twirl to display groups of pictures, each with a different word next to it.

“Food,” I said, remembering how hungry I was. I hadn’t had any breakfast that morning. The picture of a bowl of soup grew to fill the screen. The fake voice spoke.

“Our food in Laoa is of high quality and plentiful. Our food technicians, working in high-tech labs, invent new delicacies every day, playing with elegant flavors to make just the right ones for you. They encode the meals into programs, and after invention, the program is sent to a machine, located under Laoa’s city office. The machine has many different sections, including The Garden, which is full of a large selection of fresh vegetables, fruits, nuts, and many other exotic plants.

“The next section is called the Cloning Environment, which grows a variety of meats with no harm to any live animals. It simply takes the genes from a cow and reproduces only the steak that we need. It is also able to produce milk and eggs without the animal. The machine tends to the food production with sensors, robotic arms, and an advanced system of computers.

“To create the dishes Laoins eat every day, the machine reads the program sent by the technicians and takes what it needs from the Cloning Environment and the Garden and sends the ingredients into the Creation Room. Inside the room, the meal is prepared with accurate chopping machines and cooked in precision ovens. Finally, the meal is put on the expressway and delivered steaming to your door. To find out more, please ask.”

I was stunned. In the Heap, we ate what we could, and sometimes nothing at all. Often we would eat a simple carrot from a garden for our dinner. To live in a place where food was so simply made! Many people who lived in the Heap would kill for such a privilege. So what exactly was Laoa? And why had I never heard of it? It was obvious my parents knew something of it, or I wouldn’t have been allowed on the helicopter. I’d never really considered where the helicopters came from, only wondered if they had more food. Maybe that’s why no one ever figured out what they really were. They needed food, so searching for food was their primary goal in life.

I started to think through the rest of the ideas floating in my head, organizing and analyzing them just like Papa taught me. A wave of homesickness washed over me. I missed Mama and Papa. I hugged my arms tightly around my chest, mumbled, “Power off,” and closed my eyes. If I tried hard enough, I could imagine that it was Mama holding me, not myself. I let

myself feel her papery lips on my forehead once again. I stayed in my imagination for the rest of the flight.

I only knew we had landed because a voice spoke. “Welcome to Laoa.”

## CHAPTER II

I opened my eyes to see the door slide open to reveal a white doorway leading into a white hallway. Both the man and I stood up at the same time. He turned to me.

“There are a few basic rules in Laoa,” he said. “You must always be kind and polite, you must obey what the government asks of you, and you must never speak of your past to anyone. From now on, you are no longer Adelle, the dirty smart girl in the Heap. You are now Adelle, a citizen of Laoa.” I nodded and followed him down the hallway.

The hallway was long, with many doors and other hallways branching off the sides. Occasionally we would pass another person dressed in the same clothes as the man next to me, but sometimes a different color. They would nod, glance at my dress and dirty hair, and then continue on their ways. Eventually, we turned down the hallway and stopped at a door. The man tapped out a code on a keypad and the door slid open. I stepped through.

For once, the inside was not white. The walls were painted a cheerful yellow and the plush furniture was a bright red. It was a welcome sight to my deprived eyes. I stood still for a moment, soaking up the warmth of the colors. The man next to me spoke.

“This is the home of your adoptive family. It is late now, and they are asleep, so you will meet them in the morning. The bathroom is through that door.” He pointed to a plain white sliding door on the wall. “And your room is through that door. I’ll leave you here with your family now. I am your assigned guardian. If you need me, simply speak my name, Aimon, and I will come within a few minutes. I will also be visiting your new home after dinner every night to see how you are doing here. Sleep well.” The man turned and left through the sliding door.

I walked to the bathroom door that Aimon had pointed out. It slid open and revealed a plain room with a bar on the wall. I stepped inside and a voice spoke.

“Please remove your garments and place them in the provided bin.” I noticed a bin in the corner next to the door. I slid out of my dress, my bandana, and my shoes, gently placed them inside, and replaced the lid. The voice spoke again. “Thank you. Now hold on to the bar and close your eyes.” I did as instructed, and a warm stream of water mixed with soap engulfed my

body. I stood there for a few minutes, submitting to the water pounding my head and back. When the water finally stopped, a stream of warm air flowed elegantly down, blowing the water off. Ten seconds later, I was completely dry. The voice spoke. "Thank you. Please wait until the light is gone to exit the facility." A purple light filled the room, the same as the light in the building back at the Heap. It subsided after a few seconds.

I reached into the bin to put my dress back on, but everything had been replaced by a single dark blue nightgown. The dress was all I had left of the Heap. It was my only tangible evidence of my life there. These thoughts ran through my head, but I was too tired to care. I slipped the nightgown over my head, my fingers brushing my hair. My hair! I could actually run my fingers through it and feel strands run silkily past them. It was such a strange sensation, so different from the normal tangled mess it usually was. And my hands! I had thought they were clean when my mother washed them, but now there was no trace of dirt anywhere on my skin. They were glowing a healthy pink. I stumbled with sleepiness across the yellow room to the other door Aimon had pointed at.

I waited in front of the door for it to slide open, but it didn't move. I reached out cautiously to touch it, possibly push it open. There was a quiet chime and a blue outline of a hand appeared. I placed my hand on it, and the door slid open. I walked in and nearly fell into the white bed with weariness. I didn't have energy to look around the room, or even to pull the blanket up. I lay down and let memories of the Heap surround me as I fell asleep.

*Chessie ran over to me.*

*"What should we do today?" she asked, smiling at me. I giggled.*

*"I don't know!" I said. "Let's find something fun, though!" She smiled, but it looked strange. "What?" I asked. She giggled, and then covered her mouth. She was looking behind me. I started to turn around, but immediately two little kids jumped on me. It was her sisters! I fell to the ground. We became a writhing heap, tickling each other and screaming and giggling. Chessie ran around the pile, poking her toe in here and there, and then finally just threw herself in on top. Finally, I was able to wrestle them to the ground. We all sat up, panting.*

*"How 'bout we go see Popsie?" Chessie's littlest sister asked.*

*"Yeah!" I said. "Let's go!" We ran off together, a group of little kids ready to play the day away.*