

The touch on the elbow meant death, but when Sasha felt it on her own, she was too numb to mourn herself. She had been drained, slowly over weeks, and there was nothing left to give. On that morning, she had been dragged out of her storage locker by two burly, anonymous men. Normally she could walk out without being propped up or dragged, but when the knock came on the steel door there was no feeling in her legs. They had ached abominably the night before, from the day's beating and the legacy of the days that had come before it. She had tried to get off her hard cot gracefully – honestly, truly tried, as she had begged and assured her handlers. They had said nothing. This was normal. They put no expressions on their faces or ever spoke to her beyond issuing curt, grunted orders.

She and the others were marched out to the brick wall that surrounded the place and made to stand with their left shoulders against it. A man with a long face and an old newsboy's cap would walk past them and, at seemingly random intervals, touch one of the prisoners on the elbow. The silent, bearded men would then approach, take that person by that same elbow, and lead them away, out the gate and out of the presence and mind of the remaining prisoners. None of those touched on the elbow were ever seen again. Sasha wasn't sure what the others thought about it, as they were never allowed to talk to each other. She knew, though. These were not soft people, in any sense of the word. When someone was hauled away, they weren't taken to a better place.

When her turn came, she didn't cry out, or fight back, or any of the things that had gone through her head on the long, sweltering nights when she'd laid on her cot and stared up into the darkness. On those nights, when she'd tried to block out the sounds of other prisoners wailing or raging through sheer hard thought, she'd imagined herself breaking free, grabbing the others, and fomenting a rebellion of some kind. Maybe getting free, hitting the road, and having an adventure all the way back to California. None of that happened, though.