

Egalitarius

by C. L. Wells

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Chapter 1

Tam

By the time I see them, it's too late to run.

I'm on the sidewalk about a block from the pickup point for the school shuttle, about to go under the over-pass, with a twenty-foot-high concrete retaining wall on either side of the street. Two uniformed officers are heading straight towards me from the other direction on what I initially hope is a routine patrol. But when I glance behind and see two more officers a dozen or so yards behind me, also heading in my direction, I know they're here for me.

I stop, unsure of what to do, but before I can decide whether to run or not, they're on top of me. The uniformed officers push me up against the wall, forcing my hands behind my back. The handcuffs they fit me with are uncomfortably tight and I feel a tap on my helmet as one of them places a jamming device on it to prevent me from warning anyone else. A van suddenly appears as if out of thin air. I'm violently shoved into the back and pushed onto a bench that runs along the side of the cargo hold.

Two of the officers get in, shutting the doors as they do, and sit down on either side of me. Soon we're speeding away to an unknown destination. My heart is racing a hundred miles an hour, and I'm scared out of my mind. In a panic, I wonder if they've arrested Veritas, too. God, I hope not. I hope she's spared all of this.

The whole event transpires in less than thirty seconds, and in that short period of time, I've gone from being a high school junior returning from winter break to a prisoner of the state.

The entire course of my life has just changed.

* * * * *

I'm guided into a small room with a two-way mirror on one wall. There's a grey prisoner's helmet on a shelf with laminated instructions taped to the wall beside it, but I don't have to read them. I've seen enough police procedural shows to know what I'm supposed to do.

A tired, monotone voice emits from a small speaker mounted near the ceiling, "Remove your helmet, place it on the shelf, and put on the grey helmet."

I know there's a watcher on the other side of the glass whose job it is to make sure I don't try to slip any contraband into the prison helmet. But I don't have anything on me. I'm not a criminal. I'm just a kid who wanted some freedom to be who I am.

And now this.

I comply with the instructions, noting the ID on the front of the grey helmet and my new name—00XJ5. Once my helmet is in place, the guard's voice sounds over the internal speakers.

"If you can hear me, raise your right hand."

I raise my right hand.

"For the duration of your stay, you will be referred to as Prisoner 00XJ5. Repeat your name, please."

"Prisoner 00XJ5," I reply.

"In a few seconds, you will hear a clicking sound. You will exit through the door behind you and proceed down the hall, following the yellow arrows and entering the interrogation room indicated. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

I hear a loud buzz behind me, followed by a click. I turn to find an unlocked door and follow the arrows to the previously mentioned interrogation room. It's spartan, with only a single chair bolted to the floor in front of a Plexiglas divider separating me from the other side of the room. There's a much nicer-looking chair along with a small table on the other side.

Countless hours spent watching crime drama online helps to lessen my fear a notch or two. At least I think I know what will happen next. At some point, a police detective will come through the door on the other side, sit in that chair, and start asking questions. But I don't just know *that*. I know what they're going to ask about. I know exactly why I'm here and what crime I've committed. And I know that the least serious penalty I could get is being expelled from school. The maximum sentence is five years in re-education camp.

It would make sense if I were in tears right now, overcome with fear, but all I feel is numb.

* * * * *

Earlier the same morning

My hair is a mess. I stare into the mirror and survey the mass of tangles and weirdly angled follicles sitting atop my head. Why even bother to brush it? Why does it even matter?

After a half-hearted attempt to tame the chaos with a brush, I grab my duffle bag and helmet, and head downstairs to say goodbye to Greg and Shantarius, my parental pair. My sister Philantrius is sitting at the kitchen island eating a bowl of cereal. I envy her freedom. She's nine years old, so she won't be sent off to state boarding school for another three years. I long for those carefree days when I could go outside the house without having to wear my equality suit.

"Good morning," Greg says as I put my duffle bag down beside the front door.

"Hey."

"Want some eggs benedict before you head out?"

"Nah. Not that hungry."

Philantrius glances up from her cereal and sees me in my suit, a frown immediately replacing her neutral expression.

“Don’t go!” she says as she jumps up and runs over to me, giving me a big hug. I’ll miss this, the hugs from my family. Staring at avatars on the viewscreens of other people’s helmets and hearing the computer-altered, androgenized versions of their voices all day gets old.

I return the hug, pushing back the threatening tears.

“I’ll miss you, too, Phil. I’ll be back again at spring break.”

“But that’s too long!”

“We can video-chat every week.”

“Don’t you leave without giving me a hug, too!” Shantarius says as she comes down the stairs and joins Philantrius in the hug-fest.

“I’ll miss you guys.”

Greg puts down his spatula and walks over. He waits until Shantarius stops hugging me before he leans in for a quick hug of his own.

“Take care out there, Tam,” he says as we embrace.

“I will. Well, the shuttle leaves in ten minutes, so I better get going.”

Greg pries Philantrius away from me, and Shantarius gives me a quick peck on the cheek before I put on my helmet. I wave goodbye as I head out the door.

Per my usual routine, when I get to the end of the walkway leading from our house to the street, I turn and look back, taking a picture in my mind. Our house is a remodeled 1960s style two-story with a partial basement nestled in a gently sloping hill with an exposed garage door on the lower level on one end. A rock wall that runs two-thirds the length of the house supports the front porch and comes up high enough to serve as the porch railing. Four columns of the same material rise up from the top of the railing and support the roof. The columns are wider at their base than at the top, giving them a pleasing geometrical shape that I’ve always found appealing. The house itself is hunter green with white trim and wooden shingles. Shantarius – one of my parental pair – has a green thumb and keeps the flower beds full of blooming flowers during the spring and summer. The shrubs are trimmed to perfection, and the thick,

well-manicured lawn is always lush and green thanks to the lawn service that comes by once a week during the warmer months. The whole place has a nice, warm feel to it.

Just then, I turn to see my next-door neighbor, Jeremy, heading up the sidewalk. The facial avatar on her viewscreen looks pensive.

“Hey,” she says flatly.

“Hey,” I reply.

Jeremy and I have known each other since kindergarten. We went to summer camp with each other every year until we went away to school. I know her well enough to tell when things aren’t so great at home.

“Your parents fighting again?”

“Yeah. You’d think they could get along for two weeks.”

Jeremy’s parental pair are both males – Javier and Sheila. Some parental pairs develop a close relationship like mine did and get along well. Others, not so much. Javier and Sheila have been fighting for as long as I can remember. They don’t even live together except for when they have to perform their parental duties. Jeremy once confided in me that she feels like Sheila resents her for the situation. I tell her it’s not her fault, but I’m not sure she believes me.

We part at the corner of Fifth and Elm, saying our goodbyes as we head to our separate pickup points. You aren’t allowed to attend state boarding school with anyone you grew up with. Knowing so much about them – their gender, race, and who knows what other identity markers – would violate the equality laws.

I give the command to my helmet to switch over to dictation mode, sending Cynthia a text as I walk.

“Good morning. I’m on my way to the shuttle now. Hope you had a good break. See you at school.”

I can’t say too much. We all know that Googlomerate monitors all communications for the government. We’ll have plenty of time to talk in private once we’re back at school. I wish I could contact Veritas, too, but the risk is just too great.

I wait for a response from Cynthia, but don't get one. And that's when it happens. That's when they arrest me, and my world changes forever.

Chapter 2

Tam

Six months prior

It's the first day of my junior year in high school, and I've got the first-day jitters. Who will my classmates be? Will I like my roommate? Will I do or say something stupid that will relegate me to the un-popular crowd? Will I be able to handle the coursework and keep my grades high enough to get into the professional training school I want?

I get off the shuttle in Egalitarius City and make my way to the receiving queue, lining up with everyone else according to last name. So far, I don't see anyone I know from last year. When I get to the front, I receive my welcome packet with my name and room assignment printed on it.

Usarian, Tamika – Spivey Hall, room 411.

I arrive at my dorm room before my roommate, which earns me the privilege of picking the personal cubicle of my choice. The layout of the apartment-like dorm is simple. There's a common room with a small sitting area comprised of a burnt orange futon couch, a coffee table, and two matching uncomfortable-looking armchairs – also burnt orange. On the back wall, there's a shelf with a microwave and a mini-refrigerator underneath. Just in front of that is a table with two chairs. Off to either side are two personal cubicles, which are the only places we're allowed to take off our helmets unless we're in an identity-cluster group meeting or at the doctor's office. Each personal cubicle contains a bed, desk, closet, and private bathroom.

For no particular reason, I pick the cubicle on the left. I take a few minutes to set the door entry code on the touchscreen beside the door before going inside. Safety first. I enter my newly selected code once more at the end of the password dialog and the door to the cubicle slides open. I'm dismayed to see that the color scheme from the common area carries over into the cubicles as well. A burnt orange bedspread greets me as I enter, along with a matching colored cushion on the desk chair.

The first thing I do once I'm inside and the door shuts is remove my helmet, placing it on the stand next to the desk. The smell of the cleaning agent that the janitorial staff used to clean the room makes me smile. It's a slightly lemony scent, reminding me of the cleaner we use back home.

I remove my gloves and toss my duffle bag on the chair before plopping down on the bed and tearing open my welcome packet, removing the computer tablet that I'll be using for all of my classes. After turning it on and flipping past all of the informational pages, I finally get to my class schedule. Chemistry 301, Spanish 200, Archery, History of Equality, and Human Sexuality. I click on the 'map it' link, which displays a customized map showing the route I'll take to get to each of my classes, how far they are from the dorm, and the approximate travel time it will take to get to each location. When I'm done reviewing the routes, I breathe a sigh of relief.

I always feel a bit nervous at the start of the school year. All the change makes me feel off-center. Finding out where everything is and familiarizing myself with the class schedule helps me feel calmer. My therapist says it's a control thing and that it's completely normal. It doesn't freak me out as much as it did my freshman year, but it's still palpable.

Next, I flip back to the dorm map, review the best route to the cafeteria, and familiarize myself with the food service hours. I'm in the process of reviewing this week's menu when I hear the whoosh of the dorm room door – indicating my roommate has just arrived. I go over to the one-way viewing portal on my cubicle door and look out. My roommate has their back turned to me, so I can't see their avatar

image or their name. They turn in my direction just long enough for me to see 'Marcus' on the nameplate of their suit.

Once Marcus sees that my cubicle is occupied, they turn around and disappear into their own. I wonder if Marcus is male or female, but I'll likely never find out. I just hope we get along.

The rest of the morning goes reasonably well. I finish unpacking, and then Marcus and I greet each other in the common area, where I learn a bit about his background. I'm still not sure if he's male and his profile doesn't say, but we're allowed to use the historical gender association for someone's name unless they specify otherwise.

He's from some place upstate that I've never heard of, but apparently, they have mountains nearby where he hiked as a kid. I love the outdoors, so we spend a few minutes talking about some of the places we've hiked before an alarm goes off in my helmet. My visor's internal display screen shows that I have an appointment for identity-group assignment in fifteen minutes, so I say my goodbyes and head out.

I arrive at the testing site with five minutes to spare. It's located in the same grey, single-story nondescript building I'm used to from my previous years, right next door to the registration office. When my appointment time comes, I'm ushered into a test cubicle, punching in my name and student I.D. number on the old-fashioned full-size keyboard before I begin the evaluation.

The test is routine by now. I remember the first time I took it. I was so nervous I'd pick something I'd regret, but it wasn't so bad. They split the school year into quarters, and you can change identity groups at the beginning of each quarter if you want. They let you switch around a lot in high school so you can get a flavor of the different groups. Once you graduate, open enrollment for changing identity groups only comes once a year.

Once I finish entering my responses, the results screen displays my identity profile, which is pretty much the same as last year's. I pick the same identity group categories I had before from the selections displayed on the screen—I don't like to mix

things up during the first quarter since there's already so much change going on. I select the check-boxes for Outdoor Sports, the Reader's group, and Religion, and then click 'Next'.

I've been on a kick of surveying the different religious identity groups. Last year, I signed up for Christianity one quarter, then Islam the next. This time, I pick New Age on the sub-group selection screen. Next, I choose Science Fiction as my Reader sub-group and finalize my selections. A pop-up informs me that a copy of my selections has been sent to my school email account.

I spend the rest of the day going to the normal spate of orientation meetings and wandering around the campus near my new dorm, hoping to get a better feel for the area. It helps me calm down and not be so anxious about the start of the new year. By the end of the day I'm feeling pretty chill. I'm actually excited to begin classes tomorrow.

* * * * *

The next morning, I sleep through my alarm. When I see what time it is, I realize I only have thirty minutes to spare before my first class. No time for my normal routine, especially if I want to get some breakfast before class. One advantage of wearing a helmet every day is that you don't have to worry about combing your hair. I brush my teeth in a rush, slam on my helmet, and head to the cafeteria to grab a snack.

I cruise into chemistry class in time to get a seat near the front, which is my usual M.O. The teacher begins with roll call and then reviews the syllabus. As expected, the first few lessons will be a review of what we covered last year, giving our brains a chance to resurrect the latent knowledge that's atrophied over summer break. The professor is new, but seems pretty laid-back, which is a welcome change from last year. Mr. Epstein was way too strict.

My only other class for the day is History of Equality, a mandatory class for all juniors. Training on the equality laws starts in elementary school, and they cover some

of the history each year starting in sixth grade, but this will be the first time we spend an entire year studying the topic in-depth. I'm actually looking forward to it. I'm a bit of a history geek myself, so I guess that makes sense.

The classroom is rather large, with the chairs being arranged in a semi-circle around a five by eight foot raised platform in the front of the room. A sizeable viewscreen is mounted on the front wall, with a podium off to one side. Aside from the screen, the concrete block walls are bare and painted in the ubiquitous industrial white that seems to be the favorite of government contractors. The room rapidly fills to capacity – about fifty students in all. As I look around, I notice a pink backpack with various bright-colored patches positioned on the floor, two seats to my right. I immediately recognize it as belonging to Cynthia. We were study partners last year in a Western Civilizations class.

Lots of girls in school like to express their feminine side with their backpacks. Since it's illegal to wear anything but unisex clothing, it's one of the few ways to express your gender. Some trans and cross-gender students do it, too, and maybe even a few guys. Even though we've never talked about our genders, I'm pretty sure Cynthia is female. It's not just the backpack. Her mannerisms and even the way she walks seems feminine, too. I don't have time to say anything to her before the teacher begins to speak.

"Good morning, class. Welcome to the History of Equality course. My name is Zand Giles, and I'll be your instructor. I hope you all had a good summer break."

There's a comment I don't quite hear from the back of the room, and a group of students laugh a little too loudly. Mr. Giles stops and looks in the direction of the offenders.

"By all means, don't let me interrupt your reverie. You obviously have something more important to say than I do, so please entertain us all with your observations."

Silence follows.

“Very well. I trust we’ll have no more interruptions. Let’s go through an overview of what we’ll be covering in this course. You can follow along on your tablet or watch the main screen.”

Once the lights dim, slide after slide shows us what’s in store for us. There’s a short section on ancient times, a somewhat longer section entitled ‘Inequality in Early America’ that begins with the founding of the colonies, a section on the Civil Rights movement, and a large section dedicated to the Equality Revolution that occurred between 2016 and 2045. The last slide shows our study assignment for the next class, and then the lights come back up, revealing at least one student who’s nodded off during the presentation.

“Make sure you study the material and are prepared for the next class discussion. Have a good day, everyone.”

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