

***Coil of Worlds***  
Excerpt from Book 1 of Coil Trilogy  
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## Chapter One

FOUR things came to Lara's attention when she opened her eyes. Her first thought was for the overpowering stench of unwashed bodies and the dire need for bleach and working facilities. Her nose wrinkled and her eyes teared up in reaction as the foul odor invaded her senses, and she sucked in air through her mouth to keep from retching.

The second, though, explained the smell's origin after she locked onto the two trembling masses huddled in the corner of the room. She would have taken the masses for animals except for the way the filthy rags covered the bodies.

The third had her unconsciously worrying her bottom lip. Keeping a wary eye on the two shaking mounds, Lara studied what she first thought was a windowless room. The room wasn't a room at all but the dead-end of a long hallway.

The more time she spent examining her surroundings the more she realized the hallway was outmoded, neglected for years. Lara spun around in a circle, and her confusion morphed into trepidation. Dirt and stone walls took the place of bricks and painted plaster. In some places the walls had crumbled, leaving small indentations in the surface, increasing the feeling of disrepair and dilapidation. She hunched her shoulders as an odd sensation crept across her skin. The hovering weight around her pressed inward, making a cave-in seem imminent.

No doors or windows meant she was in a tunnel and probably underground. A tunnel?

Lara searched for something, anything she had missed, scouring the place from top to bottom. Strewn with what looked like a millennium's worth of dirt and debris, the place gave the false

impression of a cylindrical-shaped tunnel. Lara shivered as it dawned on her she had no idea where she was.

Keeping the two in her peripheral vision and carefully breathing through her mouth, she took a step toward the wall, but stopped in mid-step when something crunched under her foot. Lara gasped at the flash of pain radiating through the sole of her right foot. The sound broke through the heavy silence blanketing the hallway, and she realized it was the first noise she'd made. Judging from the pajamas she wore and her lack of footwear, she'd been in bed mere minutes before opening her eyes. Absentmindedly scraping the sharp rocks from under her right foot, Lara leaned over to touch the wall. Beneath her fingertips, the wall's solidness sent a shudder through her.

The walls felt real. Traces of dirt clung to her fingers.

She scrambled back, rubbing her hands on her pajamas as her mind raced. What was going on? Where was she? Before she spiraled into useless panic, Lara forced her attention back to the corner where the two, small mounds still shook. Brushing her hair away from her face, she considered them with a slight frown.

Who were they? Where'd they come from?

Upon closer inspection, two girls cowered beneath filthy clothes and layers of grimy dirt. Mindful of the sharp pebbles under her tender feet, Lara inched closer for a better look. Though she wasn't certain, the two girls were young, perhaps six and eight years old. The horrendous smell punched through Lara the closer she came, and she gagged before she could control herself.

And that is when her brain acknowledged the fourth feature of the room, or rather the lack thereof. There was not a single source of light. And yet her vision was excellent. It was almost as if the room was subjected to daylight, the midday sun filtering into the room by some extraordinary means.

Though her mind threatened to overflow with the sheer implications and possibilities, she dismissed them. The children needed her. Turning back to face them, her mouth thinned with determination. If she didn't understand what was going on, they had to be terrified. She took another step forward, then froze.

In a synchronized movement, both girls turned their heads to watch her approach. Their wary eyes peeked out from behind masses of tangled, gnarled strands of hair. She stared right back.

It was impossible. No one had eyes that color. They were blue, but not any shade she'd ever seen. So light, they were almost translucent, and the contrast between their filthy black hair and pale skin and eyes gave them an eerie aura.

Visibly shaking herself and snapping her mouth shut, Lara took a steadyng breath of the foul air. In a low, gentle voice, Lara said, "I'm not going to hurt you. Are you okay?"

As soon as she spoke, the younger one pushed herself behind the other to hide, tucking her head into the ratty folds of the older girl's clothes. The older one hunched forward, protectively shielding the other from Lara's view. Then she ceased moving, staring at Lara with huge, leery eyes. In the silence that descended, neither girl breathed.

Thinking space would show she meant them no harm, Lara eased back, keeping each movement slow and precise. She tried again, attempting to coax the two into trusting her, "I promise I'm not going to hurt you. Are you okay? Do you know how you got here?"

The hallway amplified their harsh, erratic breathing. Lara frowned in concern. One of the children would pass out at the rate she was hyperventilating. They needed to feel safe, but no soothing words came to mind. She wasn't the nurturing type, having rarely been around children.

Tendrils of panic feathered through her. Clearing her throat, Lara opened her mouth to say something, but the older one released a fatalistic-sounding laugh.

"What does it matter whether we know how we got here? Our home is gone. Everyone we know is gone. They're all gone. We cannot go back."

The girl's words shook Lara to her core. No child should know the pain and suffering she heard in that short statement. Even as her anxiety grew for the two children, the girl's ghostly stare discomfited her.

She dreaded asking her next question. Lara fidgeted, her fingers twisting the hem of her shirt. She swallowed past the hard knot in her throat. “What happened?”

The girl’s bottom lip trembled ever so slightly. “They came with their fire, then they began killing everyone. Everyone is dead! Momma told us to run and hide. Made me promise. We ran. But the screams followed us, so we kept running. We stopped to rest, but then one of us heard them. And we ran again.”