

First Place
Grades Nine/Ten

The Glass Cage

by Hannah Blaaux

Bright lights, white walls, and pain; they were all part of my ordinary day. The bright harsh white lights were always glaring down on me, while the white walls kept me closed in. I was rarely without them, in my room, in the halls, in the testing rooms. Then there was the pain. It came in many forms. Pain at being kept in one glass room, pain at being viewed as a scientific experiment, and of course, physical pain from when they tested me.

I used to have a handler. Her name was Amy and she played with me when I was little. She was there as long as I can remember. She taught me how to talk, how to play, and how to laugh. When I was a bit older, she transformed from my playmate to my school teacher. She'd sit on the floor of the glass room with me and show me how to read, and recognize colors.

"What color is this?" Amy would laugh and toss me my bright green ball.

"Green!" I knew the game well. Amy would quickly ask me the colors of items in my room and I would have to answer as quickly as I could.

Suddenly in the middle of the game, I began to get very excited. "White!" I laughed happily, pointing at the wall. "White!" I pointed at Amy's coat, which was always white, every single day. "White!" I pointed at my own clothing. "White!" I was unstoppable, pointing at my bed, the floor, the ceiling. Everything was white. Then I began to get scared, and suddenly I started crying. *What if all this whiteness swallowed me up?* The tears blurred my vision, and suddenly all I could see was white, white, white. Amy quickly wrapped me in her arms, glaring at some watching scientist. She placed the ball in my hands, and I stared at it, calming down slowly, reassured by its bright green color and its solid feeling in my small hands.

Amy never played that game with me again.

"What letter makes a 'kkk' sound?" she asked me one day, sitting cross legged on the ground, looking at me from over her metal glasses, her pencil poised at her clipboard. I pointed to a spiky letter, one line with two sticking out of it in opposite ways.

"K," I told her, looking at her anxiously for justification. Amy would brush her short brown hair out of her eyes. She was always doing that- her hair seemed to be in a perpetual state of resistance against her hair band.

"Good job!" Amy gave me a hug, which I wriggled out of. "What's the matter?" she asked, her green eyes concerned.

“K for cage?” I asked her solemnly. It was a word I had picked up from one of the scientists. “*Yeah, we’re done testing for today. It’ll take a bit more time for it to be fully developed. Take it back to its cage.*” The scientists had then taken me back to my room where Amy had been waiting anxiously.

Amy froze at my question.

“No, no that’s a C, a curvy C,” she said finally. “Not a K.” Her eyes were filled with a sadness I didn’t understand.

Every day, Amy would have to leave, giving me a hug and kiss before she left.

“Where are you going?” I’d ask, but she’d never tell me. The glass room was my world. The only other place I had been was down the hall to the testing room. It was a quiet room, filled with the humming of various machines. They’d hook me up to one or another, and make me run, or jump or just move. It was just part of life, the way things were. I got up in my glass room, played in it with various toys Amy had given me, went to the testing room, learned letters back in my room, and finally went to sleep in my room. I knew of nothing else.

Then one day, Amy gave me a book. It was a large picture book, the letters big and it mostly consisted of very simple words. I opened the book gleefully, and stopped and stared at the first picture. It was a little human, which I learned later was a boy, throwing a ball in the air. I put my finger over the blue space behind him. It seemed to cover the whole page, but had bits of white floating in it.

“What’s that?” I asked Amy. She hesitated.

“The sky,” she whispered.

“The sky,” I repeated it to myself, making sure I wouldn’t forget the new word. Another image caught my eye. It had a long brown rectangle and then a green top. It looked like it was moving, the shades of green bending and twisting while bits of green fell to the earth. “What’s that?” I asked again.

“A tree.” Amy glanced fearfully at the camera which watched my room. I read the book, stumbling over words and pausing over pictures. The boy, named Alexander, was playing with his ball, which got blown away by the wind, “*What’s the wind, Amy?*”, and he had to go run and get it. I read it three times through, fascinated by the strange world that the boy lived in.

“Where’s his glass room?” I asked Amy. I knew that my room was made of glass. I had asked Amy about what the clear hard stuff was, and I had learned a new word: glass. Amy’s expression changed, a shadow falling over her face as she bent down to pick up the book.

“He doesn’t have one.” Amy once again glanced at the camera. I felt bad for the boy. How terrible to not have a glass room like mine! Suddenly something occurred to me.

“Do you have a glass room?” I asked seriously. Amy paused, biting her lip. An entering scientist saved her from answering. Amy jumped up. I watched silently.

“Ms. Maxwell.” The scientist nodded stiffly.

“Dr. Bane,” Amy greeted him back nervously. Dr. Bane frowned. He was a tall man with a crop of thick black hair, and one of the only scientists I recognized who had no glasses. He was always there when I went to the testing room, and I could tell he was some sort of leader with his commanding presence. His long white coat was spotless.

“Ms. Maxwell. I have something to discuss with you.”

“What is it?” Amy’s gaze slid away from his, and she stood tensely.

“You are getting too attached to the specimen,” Dr. Bane began, not even looking at me. I stared at his eyes, dark and steely. “I know you’re still fairly new here, but didn’t we clarify that you were to spend less time with it? It will be getting a new handler, who is a bit more... hands off. There’s a new ward, and we’re going to be transferring you, so please make yourself ready for that when the time comes.” Dr. Bane’s voice was like ice. Amy’s brown eyes grew larger.

“You’re transferring me?” she asked, glancing at where I sat silently watching.

“Yes. There is need for you in the disease immunity ward. You have done an excellent job. In fact, it has survived much longer than we expected, although I suppose that is not your doing.” Dr. Bane paused. “So, it’s time for you to move on.”

“Sir,” Amy stopped, took a deep breath and began again. “I request to stay here. She’s just a little girl, only three years old. She needs me; I’ve spent almost every day of her life with her!” Her voice was beginning to sound more desperate, her hands clasped tightly behind her back. I stayed perfectly still, watching Dr. Bane’s dark eyes.

“Maxwell, it is not a little girl, it is a science experiment.” Dr. Bane’s voice was as hard as steel. “You cannot allow yourself to become attached. You’re a good handler, one of our best, but this is your weakness. These are not children. They are experiments. We will never be able to do our job unless we think of them as so.” Dr. Bane glanced at me, and I ducked in an effort to avoid his cold gaze. “The specimen will begin undergoing serious testing. We think the quality we have created in it will begin to show itself. You have one week before you are transferred. I trust you will be prepared.”

Dr. Bane left, long legs carrying him out of my room.

Amy stood still, her body rigid.

“Amy?” I hugged her leg and gave her what I knew was a charming smile in an effort to cheer her up. I didn’t understand what the conversation was about, but I understood she was upset. Finally Amy picked me up, and hugged me wordlessly. I smiled, thinking everything was okay, and wriggled to get to the ground. I turned to one of the pages in the book. I found the words I was looking for.

“The boy, Alexander, threw his ball up into the air. Oh no! The wind blew it away! Can you see the ball?”

I stumbled over the word I wanted. *Alexander.*

“What does Alexander mean?” I asked Amy, eager to understand every single part of the story so I could read it to myself when she went away at night. Amy sat down beside me, her face tired. Something was hurting her, but I didn’t know what.

“It’s a name,” she told me. “Like my name is Amy.” She pulled her hair back into a ponytail. I stood up and played with it thoughtfully, loving the feeling of the sleek soft hair under my fingers. Suddenly I was puzzled.

“What’s my name?” I stopped playing with the hair. Amy didn’t say anything. She glanced at her watch.

“Time for me to go, honey. Be a good girl, alright?” Amy’s voice was held more concern than usual. Something was still bothering her, I could tell. She gave me one last hug, then left. I watched her go until she rounded the hall corner and I couldn’t see her anymore. I returned to my book, reading through it. Then I went back to the page with the strange word *Alexander*.

“Alexander,” I told myself. Then I decided that the boy in the book would just have to share his name, because I was taking Alexander as my name too. “Alexander,” I repeated and smiled. I had a name.

That morning, I found the picture of Alexander throwing the ball up in the air. I set the book out on the floor and waited for Amy to come. She finally did, slipping in through the door. I laughed happily and gave her a hug. She looked over me carefully, as though to make sure nothing had happened to me while she was gone. Then the open book caught her eye.

“Were you reading it?” she asked surprised. I nodded and pointed to myself.

“I’m Alexander too!” I said proudly. Amy gave me a puzzled look. “It’s my name!” I informed her. “Do you like it?” I crawled into her lap, looking eagerly for approval. Amy didn’t say anything for a long moment. Then she gave a little laugh.

“Yes I do, Alexander,” she told me, and her pleasure made me laugh with delight. Everything was okay again, Amy was laughing.

The next day, for the first time, I tried the door in my glass room. I was used to it being closed, and had never really wondered about it. But I wanted to see those strange things called “tree” and “sky”. I wanted to meet the strange boy without a glass room. The metal knob stayed firm, and the door didn’t move at all.

I twisted the knob again, but nothing happened. A scientist was walking by, and noticed me trying to open the door. He looked alarmed and shouted something I couldn’t hear. Suddenly Dr. Bane was there, Amy right behind him. I scurried back to my bed, feeling guilty. Amy let herself in, and for the first time, I noticed that she placed her hand on a sort of box thing which made the door open. Amy knelt by me, and I stared at the ground.

“Don’t play with the door.” Amy’s voice was stern. I hung my head ashamedly. Dr. Bane nodded approvingly at Amy’s harshness. I began sniffing, and I could tell that Amy had to restrain herself from comforting me. I looked at her, silently begging for forgiveness.

Dr. Bane cleared his throat. "I think it is time we began testing it." Amy opened her mouth, but shut it, her whole body tense. Her brown eyes flickered concernedly from Dr. Bane to me. She walked close behind as Dr. Bane led me away to the testing room. I studied his face for any sign of emotion. We got to the testing room, and I was strapped into the usual machines. But something was different this time. Shadows loomed large behind beeping monitors and the white lights seemed harsh.

"Start with something small. It's not used to pain," Dr. Bane told a woman who was pulling out various utensils.

"How about a small puncture wound, no worse than a simple vaccine?" The woman pulled out a small silver sliver.

"That's good." Dr. Bane was breathing more rapidly. The room was filled with more scientists than usual; it seemed that something unusual was expected to occur. "Ready?" The scientist at the computer nodded. The lady with the silver sliver approached, and suddenly on the palm of my hand, I felt a prick of pain. I recognized the feeling from when I banged my head on the ground and when I stubbed my toe once. I screwed up my face and debated whether or not to cry. A small droplet of blood formed in the middle of my palm, then suddenly I felt a sharper pain, much stronger than the first prick, and a wisp of energy disappeared. The scientists all gasped. My palm felt itchy, I looked back at it. The small cut was gone; instead there was smooth uninterrupted skin in its place.

Dr. Bane's eyes grew large. His mouth formed words, but no sound came out. Suddenly he was able to speak.

"We did it!" he straightened and faced the small crowd of scientists. "We did it!" The scientists began clapping, disbelief still on their faces. "Do it again," Dr. Bane told the lady. I felt the slight prick, and this time, Dr. Bane showed everyone the small puncture on my small hand. The sharper pain came again, a much sharper pain that made me gasp, and I felt some more energy slip out as my skin began to itch. This time I watched the wound. The cut faded, blending into the rest of the hand. All that was left was a small smudge of blood. The scientists once again burst into applause, and Dr. Bane motioned for them to do it again, but I was done. I began screaming angrily, and wouldn't let them near my hand. Dr. Bane frowned angrily, and for the first time, I felt afraid.

Then Amy was there. She unstrapped me from the monitor and picked me up, where I sniffled and shot indignant looks at Dr. Bane.

"Maxwell, put her down at once." Dr. Bane's voice was dangerous.

"I will, but don't you think she... it's had enough?" Amy put me down, as though to tell Dr. Bane that she would follow his orders. I clung to her legs. "We don't want to overexert it. Did you look at the computer results? The healing process takes a lot of energy, in case you didn't notice." Amy's voice sounded like she could care less, and I realized that she had referred to me as "it" for the first time. Dr. Bane hesitated. Then he nodded.

“Perhaps I judged you too quickly, Maxwell,” Dr. Bane said thoughtfully. Amy nodded respectfully then picked me up. I was glad to be back in my glass room, comforted by its familiarity.

“Show me your hand,” Amy told me, sitting beside me on the floor. I uncurled it for her, displaying the tiny smudge of blood. Other than that, there was no sign of broken skin. Amy breathed in quickly in a small gasp. Then her gaze became angry, but it was not anger at me. “They’ll never stop now,” she murmured. Suddenly she drew me onto her lap. “What do you think, do you want to go see the sky?” she whispered to me, hugging me close. Then she left without another word.

For the first time, Amy came at night. She had always left before lights out, but suddenly she was there, a dark figure blending in with the shadows.

“Where are we going?” I asked as she ushered me out of my glass room.

“Shhh,” Amy whispered. “We need to be very quiet, alright?” Her voice was tense. I nodded. We wove through dark halls, past countless glass rooms. We weren’t going to the testing room; we were going somewhere I had never been. I stared into a glass room, and could see something stir in it. Amy pulled me along.

Suddenly red lights started blinking and a beeping noise filled the air. Lights switched on, and confused voices called out.

“There has been an escape. I repeat, there has been an escape,” a speaker blared. Amy’s face paled, the flickering red lights plunging her face in and out of darkness. She grabbed me and began running, doors now streaking by. I clung to her fearfully, feeling our hearts pounding in unison. For a moment I could see a door, with a glowing red sign. Exit. But it was hopeless. I hid my face in Amy’s shoulder, clinging to Amy for one last moment as the white coated scientists swarmed towards us. Her arms tightened, and I could feel her breath on my hair.

“Alexander, oh Alexander,” Amy whispered. Then she was pulled away.

I didn’t get to see the sky that day.

“Amy!” I screamed as they took her away. I was taken back to my glass room. But it was no longer my home. With a curvy C, it was a cage.

