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MAZE
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The Journal of Curious Letters

The Hunt for Dark Infinity

THE
MAZE
RUNNER
JAMES
DASHNER

Delacorte Press

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For Lynette. This book was a three-year journey,
and you never doubted.

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The Eye of Minds

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Excerpt from The Eye of Minds

CHAPTER 1

He began his new life standing up, surrounded by cold darkness and stale, dusty air.

Metal ground against metal; a lurching shudder shook the floor beneath him. He fell down at the sudden movement and shuffled backward on his hands and feet, drops of sweat beading on his forehead despite the cool air. His back struck a hard metal wall; he slid along it until he hit the corner of the room. Sinking to the floor, he pulled his legs up tight against his body, hoping his eyes would soon adjust to the darkness.

With another jolt, the room jerked upward like an old lift in a mine shaft.

Harsh sounds of chains and pulleys, like the workings of an ancient steel factory, echoed through the room, bouncing off the walls with a hollow, tinny whine. The lightless elevator swayed back and forth as it ascended, turning the boy's stomach sour with nausea; a smell like burnt oil invaded his senses, making him feel worse. He wanted to cry, but no tears came; he could only sit there, alone, waiting.

My name is Thomas, he thought.

That ... that was the only thing he could remember about his life.

He didn't understand how this could be possible. His mind functioned without flaw, trying to calculate his surroundings and predicament. Knowledge flooded his thoughts, facts and images, memories and details of the world and how it works. He pictured snow on trees, running down a leaf-strewn road, eating a hamburger, the moon casting a pale glow on a grassy meadow, swimming in a lake, a busy city square with hundreds of people bustling about their business.

And yet he didn't know where he came from, or how he'd gotten inside the dark lift, or who his parents were. He didn't even know his last name. Images of people flashed across his mind, but there was no recognition,

their faces replaced with haunted smears of color. He couldn't think of one person he knew, or recall a single conversation.

The room continued its ascent, swaying; Thomas grew immune to the ceaseless rattling of the chains that pulled him upward. A long time passed. Minutes stretched into hours, although it was impossible to know for sure because every second seemed an eternity. No. He was smarter than that. Trusting his instincts, he knew he'd been moving for roughly *half* an hour.

Strangely enough, he felt his fear whisked away like a swarm of gnats caught in the wind, replaced by an intense curiosity. He wanted to know where he was and what was happening.

With a groan and then a clonk, the rising room halted; the sudden change jolted Thomas from his huddled position and threw him across the hard floor. As he scrambled to his feet, he felt the room sway less and less until it finally stilled. Everything fell silent.

A minute passed. Two. He looked in every direction but saw only darkness; he felt along the walls again, searching for a way out. But there was nothing, only the cool metal. He groaned in frustration; his echo amplified through the air, like the haunted moan of death. It faded, and silence returned. He screamed, called for help, pounded on the walls with his fists.

Nothing.

Thomas backed into the corner once again, folded his arms and shivered, and the fear returned. He felt a worrying shudder in his chest, as if his heart wanted to escape, to flee his body.

"Someone ... help ... me!" he screamed; each word ripped his throat raw.

A loud clank rang out above him and he sucked in a startled breath as he looked up. A straight line of light appeared across the ceiling of the room, and Thomas watched as it expanded. A heavy grating sound revealed double sliding doors being forced open. After so long in darkness, the light stabbed his eyes; he looked away, covering his face with both hands.

He heard noises above—voices—and fear squeezed his chest.

"Look at that shank."

"How old is he?"

"Looks like a klunk in a T-shirt."

"You're the klunk, shuck-face."

"Dude, it smells like *feet* down there!"

“Hope you enjoyed the one-way trip, Greenie.”

“Ain’t no ticket back, bro.”

Thomas was hit with a wave of confusion, blistered with panic. The voices were odd, tinged with echo; some of the words were completely foreign—others felt familiar. He willed his eyes to adjust as he squinted toward the light and those speaking. At first he could see only shifting shadows, but they soon turned into the shapes of bodies—people bending over the hole in the ceiling, looking down at him, pointing.

And then, as if the lens of a camera had sharpened its focus, the faces cleared. They were boys, all of them—some young, some older. Thomas didn’t know what he’d expected, but seeing those faces puzzled him. They were just teenagers. Kids. Some of his fear melted away, but not enough to calm his racing heart.

Someone lowered a rope from above, the end of it tied into a big loop. Thomas hesitated, then stepped into it with his right foot and clutched the rope as he was yanked toward the sky. Hands reached down, lots of hands, grabbing him by his clothes, pulling him up. The world seemed to spin, a swirling mist of faces and color and light. A storm of emotions wrenched his gut, twisted and pulled; he wanted to scream, cry, throw up. The chorus of voices had grown silent, but someone spoke as they yanked him over the sharp edge of the dark box. And Thomas knew he’d never forget the words.

“Nice to meet ya, shank,” the boy said. “Welcome to the Glade.”

CHAPTER 2

The helping hands didn't stop swarming around him until Thomas stood up straight and had the dust brushed from his shirt and pants. Still dazzled by the light, he staggered a bit. He was consumed with curiosity but still felt too ill to look closely at his surroundings. His new companions said nothing as he swiveled his head around, trying to take it all in.

As he rotated in a slow circle, the other kids snickered and stared; some reached out and poked him with a finger. There had to be at least fifty of them, their clothes smudged and sweaty as if they'd been hard at work, all shapes and sizes and races, their hair of varying lengths. Thomas suddenly felt dizzy, his eyes flickering between the boys and the bizarre place in which he'd found himself.

They stood in a vast courtyard several times the size of a football field, surrounded by four enormous walls made of gray stone and covered in spots with thick ivy. The walls had to be hundreds of feet high and formed a perfect square around them, each side split in the exact middle by an opening as tall as the walls themselves that, from what Thomas could see, led to passages and long corridors beyond.

"Look at the Greenbean," a scratchy voice said; Thomas couldn't see who it came from. "Gonna break his shuck neck checkin' out the new digs." Several boys laughed.

"Shut your hole, Gally," a deeper voice responded.

Thomas focused back in on the dozens of strangers around him. He knew he must look out of it—he felt like he'd been drugged. A tall kid with blond hair and a square jaw sniffed at him, his face devoid of expression. A short, pudgy boy fidgeted back and forth on his feet, looking up at Thomas with wide eyes. A thick, heavily muscled Asian kid folded his arms as he studied Thomas, his tight shirtsleeves rolled up to show off his biceps. A dark-

skinned boy frowned—the same one who'd welcomed him. Countless others stared.

“Where am I?” Thomas asked, surprised at hearing his voice for the first time in his salvageable memory. It didn't sound quite right—higher than he would've imagined.

“Nowhere good.” This came from the dark-skinned boy. “Just slim yourself nice and calm.”

“Which Keeper he gonna get?” someone shouted from the back of the crowd.

“I told ya, shuck-face,” a shrill voice responded. “He's a klunk, so he'll be a Slopper—no doubt about it.” The kid giggled like he'd just said the funniest thing in history.

Thomas once again felt a pressing ache of confusion—hearing so many words and phrases that didn't make sense. *Shank. Shuck. Keeper. Slopper.* They popped out of the boys' mouths so naturally it seemed odd for him not to understand. It was as if his memory loss had stolen a chunk of his language—it was disorienting.

Different emotions battled for dominance in his mind and heart. Confusion. Curiosity. Panic. Fear. But laced through it all was the dark feeling of utter hopelessness, like the world had ended for him, had been wiped from his memory and replaced with something awful. He wanted to run and hide from these people.

The scratchy-voiced boy was talking. “—even do that much, bet my liver on it.” Thomas still couldn't see his face.

“I said shut your holes!” the dark boy yelled. “Keep yapping and next break'll be cut in half!”

That must be their leader, Thomas realized. Hating how everyone gawked at him, he concentrated on studying the place the boy had called the Glade.

The floor of the courtyard looked like it was made of huge stone blocks, many of them cracked and filled with long grasses and weeds. An odd, dilapidated wooden building near one of the corners of the square contrasted greatly with the gray stone. A few trees surrounded it, their roots like gnarled hands digging into the rock floor for food. Another corner of the compound held gardens—from where he was standing Thomas recognized corn, tomato plants, fruit trees.

Across the courtyard from there stood wooden pens holding sheep and pigs and cows. A large grove of trees filled the final corner; the closest ones looked crippled and close to dying. The sky overhead was cloudless and blue, but Thomas could see no sign of the sun despite the brightness of the day. The creeping shadows of the walls didn't reveal the time or direction—it could be early morning or late afternoon. As he breathed in deeply, trying to settle his nerves, a mixture of smells bombarded him. Freshly turned dirt, manure, pine, something rotten and something sweet. Somehow he knew that these were the smells of a farm.

Thomas looked back at his captors, feeling awkward but desperate to ask questions. *Captors*, he thought. Then, *Why did that word pop into my head?* He scanned their faces, taking in each expression, judging them. One boy's eyes, flared with hatred, stopped him cold. He looked so angry, Thomas wouldn't have been surprised if the kid came at him with a knife. He had black hair, and when they made eye contact, the boy shook his head and turned away, walking toward a greasy iron pole with a wooden bench next to it. A multicolored flag hung limply at the top of the pole, no wind to reveal its pattern.

Shaken, Thomas stared at the boy's back until he turned and took a seat. Thomas quickly looked away.

Suddenly the leader of the group—perhaps he was seventeen—took a step forward. He wore normal clothes: black T-shirt, jeans, tennis shoes, a digital watch. For some reason the clothing here surprised Thomas; it seemed like everyone should be wearing something more menacing—like prison garb. The dark-skinned boy had short-cropped hair, his face clean shaven. But other than the permanent scowl, there was nothing scary about him at all.

“It's a long story, shank,” the boy said. “Piece by piece, you'll learn—I'll be takin' you on the Tour tomorrow. Till then ... just don't break anything.” He held a hand out. “Name's Alby.” He waited, clearly wanting to shake hands.

Thomas refused. Some instinct took over his actions and without saying anything he turned away from Alby and walked to a nearby tree, where he plopped down to sit with his back against the rough bark. Panic swelled inside him once again, almost too much to bear. But he took a deep breath

and forced himself to try to accept the situation. *Just go with it*, he thought. *You won't figure out anything if you give in to fear.*

“Then tell me,” Thomas called out, struggling to keep his voice even. “Tell me the long story.”

Alby glanced at the friends closest to him, rolling his eyes, and Thomas studied the crowd again. His original estimate had been close—there were probably fifty to sixty of them, ranging from boys in their midteens to young adults like Alby, who seemed to be one of the oldest. At that moment, Thomas realized with a sickening lurch that he had no idea how old *he* was. His heart sank at the thought—he was so lost he didn't even know his own age.

“Seriously,” he said, giving up on the show of courage. “Where am I?”

Alby walked over to him and sat down cross-legged; the crowd of boys followed and packed in behind. Heads popped up here and there, kids leaning in every direction to get a better look.

“If you ain't scared,” Alby said, “you ain't human. Act any different and I'd throw you off the Cliff because it'd mean you're a psycho.”

“The Cliff?” Thomas asked, blood draining from his face.

“Shuck it,” Alby said, rubbing his eyes. “Ain't no way to start these conversations, you get me? We don't kill shanks like you here, I promise. Just try and avoid *being* killed, survive, whatever.”

He paused, and Thomas realized his face must've whitened even more when he heard that last part.

“Man,” Alby said, then ran his hands over his short hair as he let out a long sigh. “I ain't good at this—you're the first Greenbean since Nick was killed.”

Thomas's eyes widened, and another boy stepped up and playfully slapped Alby across the head. “Wait for the bloody Tour, Alby,” he said, his voice thick with an odd accent. “Kid's gonna have a buggin' heart attack, nothin' even been heard yet.” He bent down and extended his hand toward Thomas. “Name's Newt, Greenie, and we'd all be right cheery if ya'd forgive our klunk-for-brains new leader, here.”

Thomas reached out and shook the boy's hand—he seemed a lot nicer than Alby. Newt was taller than Alby too, but looked to be a year or so younger. His hair was blond and cut long, cascading over his T-shirt. Veins stuck out of his muscled arms.

“Pipe it, shuck-face,” Alby grunted, pulling Newt down to sit next to him. “At least he can understand *half* my words.” There were a few scattered laughs, and then everyone gathered behind Alby and Newt, packing in even tighter, waiting to hear what they said.

Alby spread his arms out, palms up. “This place is called the Glade, all right? It’s where we live, where we eat, where we sleep—we call ourselves the Gladers. That’s all you—”

“Who sent me here?” Thomas demanded, fear finally giving way to anger. “How’d—”

But Alby’s hand shot out before he could finish, grabbing Thomas by the shirt as he leaned forward on his knees. “Get up, shank, get up!” Alby stood, pulling Thomas with him.

Thomas finally got his feet under him, scared all over again. He backed against the tree, trying to get away from Alby, who stayed right in his face.

“No interruptions, boy!” Alby shouted. “Whacker, if we told you everything, you’d die on the spot, right after you klunked your pants. Baggers’d drag you off, and you ain’t no good to us then, are ya?”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about,” Thomas said slowly, shocked at how steady his voice sounded.

Newt reached out and grabbed Alby by the shoulders. “Alby, lay off a bit. You’re hurtin’ more than helpin’, ya know?”

Alby let go of Thomas’s shirt and stepped back, his chest heaving with breaths. “Ain’t got time to be nice, Greenbean. Old life’s over, new life’s begun. Learn the rules quick, listen, don’t talk. You get me?”

Thomas looked over at Newt, hoping for help. Everything inside him churned and hurt; the tears that had yet to come burned his eyes.

Newt nodded. “Greenie, you get him, right?” He nodded again.

Thomas fumed, wanted to punch somebody. But he simply said, “Yeah.”

“Good that,” Alby said. “First Day. That’s what today is for you, shank. Night’s comin’, Runners’ll be back soon. The Box came late today, ain’t got time for the Tour. Tomorrow morning, right after the wake-up.” He turned toward Newt. “Get him a bed, get him to sleep.”

“Good that,” Newt said.

Alby’s eyes returned to Thomas, narrowing. “A few weeks, you’ll be happy, shank. You’ll be happy and helpin’. None of us knew jack on First Day, you neither. New life begins tomorrow.”

Alby turned and pushed his way through the crowd, then headed for the slanted wooden building in the corner. Most of the kids wandered away then, each one giving Thomas a lingering look before they walked off.

Thomas folded his arms, closed his eyes, took a deep breath. Emptiness ate away at his insides, quickly replaced by a sadness that hurt his heart. It was all too much—where was he? What was this place? Was it some kind of prison? If so, why had he been sent here, and for how long? The language was odd, and none of the boys seemed to care whether he lived or died. Tears threatened again to fill his eyes, but he refused to let them come.

“What did I do?” he whispered, not really meaning for anyone to hear him. “What did I do—why’d they send me here?”

Newt clapped him on the shoulder. “Greenie, what you’re feelin’, we’ve all felt it. We’ve all had First Day, come out of that dark box. Things are bad, they are, and they’ll get much worse for ya soon, that’s the truth. But down the road a piece, you’ll be fightin’ true and good. I can tell you’re not a bloody sissy.”

“Is this a prison?” Thomas asked; he dug in the darkness of his thoughts, trying to find a crack to his past.

“Done asked four questions, haven’t ya?” Newt replied. “No good answers for ya, not yet, anyway. Best be quiet now, accept the change—morn comes tomorrow.”

Thomas said nothing, his head sunk, his eyes staring at the cracked, rocky ground. A line of small-leafed weeds ran along the edge of one of the stone blocks, tiny yellow flowers peeping through as if searching for the sun, long disappeared behind the enormous walls of the Glade.

“Chuck’ll be a good fit for ya,” Newt said. “Wee little fat shank, but nice sap when all’s said and done. Stay here, I’ll be back.”

Newt had barely finished his sentence when a sudden, piercing scream ripped through the air. High and shrill, the barely human shriek echoed across the stone courtyard; every kid in sight turned to look toward the source. Thomas felt his blood turn to icy slush as he realized that the horrible sound came from the wooden building.

Even Newt had jumped as if startled, his forehead creasing in concern.

“Shuck it,” he said. “Can’t the bloody Med-jacks handle that boy for ten minutes without needin’ my help?” He shook his head and lightly kicked Thomas on the foot. “Find Chuckie, tell him he’s in charge of your sleepin’

arrangements.” And then he turned and headed in the direction of the building, running.

Thomas slid down the rough face of the tree until he sat on the ground again; he shrank back against the bark and closed his eyes, wishing he could wake up from this terrible, terrible dream.