

THE WALKER SERIES



REVENGE OF THE  
WALKER

TO FIND REVENGE, YOU MUST LOSE YOURSELF

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CORALEE JUNE

# REVENGE OF THE WALKER


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CORALEE JUNE

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*For the Cat's Pajamas.*

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## CHAPTER ONE

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“We can’t keep doing this, Ashleigh,” Huxley said with a groan. I trailed my eyes down his muscular chest as sweat dripped down his abs. “It’s not fair to the others. You can’t ignore them all day then spend your nights with me.”

There was a small part of me that felt guilty, but I focused on the pain of my sore muscles, dulling my thoughts. I knew that sneaking off to work out my frustrations with Hux wasn’t a permanent fix. But there was something freeing about giving in to my anger, if only for a couple hours. My nights with him helped me forget the sadness I felt whenever I thought about Cylar, Maverick, and Jacob. This was the only reprieve I had.

Tonight, at the camp meeting, a team of scouts informed us that Dormas was now completely overrun with Ethros troops. Dormas was the last bit of hope I’d been clinging to. It was my piece of paradise, now tainted by Cavil’s reign. Was nothing sacred?

My arms shook with exhaustion and adrenaline. Six hours of fighting with Huxley wasn’t enough to calm my nerves. I felt murderous. Channeling my anger into Huxley was the only thing keeping me sane. So, if I had to be selfish about our nights together—so be it.

“Are you going to keep talking? Or are you going to fight?” I challenged, keeping my voice even despite the exhaustion I felt.

I raised my fists up to a ready position, my curled hand blocking my jaw but giving me a clear view of Hux. It took a

while to get used to the fighter's stance. Two weeks to get the shape of my fist down. Three weeks to remember to protect my face. Four weeks to build up my strength so my punches actually meant something.

It did, however, only take a day to learn how to kick Huxley in the balls. That lesson was almost instinctual.

I stared at Huxley's expression, expecting to see his plump lip quirk up like it usually did when I got like this. He liked to see the fight in me. He liked to push my buttons and make me work for the hit. It made my pulse thump to see his bright eyes hooded with desire as I landed punch after punch. But tonight, he gave me a grimace.

"When you first asked me to help you, I thought it meant that you were finally working through your grief—"

"Don't say grief. Grief is for people who've lost something. They're not lost," I choked out with a jab that connected with his side. He didn't flinch, though I wanted to shake my fist out. Technically, I *was* grieving. Losing Josiah had affected me in ways I still couldn't come to terms with. I'd expected it, almost. I'd prepared myself for his loss.

But what I hadn't expected was for him to die saving me. I hadn't expected the guilt. I hadn't expected to doubt everything I knew. Most of my free time was spent analyzing what happened. I had gone from falling in love with the boy I knew to hating the man he'd become, then grieving the stranger that died for me.

"You *have* lost something," Huxley said, interrupting my thoughts. He wasn't wrong. I'd lost Cyler, Maverick, Jacob, and Jules. Although the news reports had briefly mentioned Cyler, there was no news on Jacob. Since he and Patrick separated in Ethros, we'd been staring down the dark pit of the unknown, and it infuriated me.

"I entertained these nights together because I thought it would help, but you're not..."

"What? I'm not what, Huxley?"



“You’re not healing.” He dropped his hands to his side. I didn’t want to see his defeated stance. Why did he have to make this harder than it was? I *needed* this.

How was I supposed to heal? There were still so many unanswered questions. Josiah’s death was devastating enough, but knowing I didn’t have my guys to help me navigate my grief was just too much.

“I don’t know how,” I replied, my voice thick with emotion. “I’m so angry, Huxley.” I pushed thoughts of Josiah from my mind. I didn’t love him. But I did. I missed him. But I didn’t. I hated him.

I hated him.

When I looked at all the steps that led to this point in my life, it infuriated me. Anger was the only emotion I had left, and I clung to it like it was a weapon. I was angry at Josiah. I was angry at Cyler and Maverick and Jacob. I was angry at Hux. Patrick. Kemper. This empire. And above all, I was angry with a ghost. Emperor Lackley was at the top of my list, and he wasn’t even alive to feel my fury.

Spinning around, I made my way over to a tall, white tree where my canteen of water was resting at the base. Unscrewing the top, I chugged the tangy water without flinching. The tainted Deadlands’ water tingled down my throat. At first, I had hated the taste of it and had to choke down even a drop. Over time, I’d gotten used to its sharp acidic flavor. It didn’t even bother me to bathe in the creek anymore. The burning sensation almost felt soothing on my sore muscles now. Time changed things, I guess.

I’d stopped looking in the mirror a few weeks ago when I saw that, at the very base of my scalp, the strands of my hair were turning white. I’d been here long enough for the Deadlands’ water supply to bleach my coarse chestnut hair. Ingesting it was making my new growth turn white.

Five months. It’d been five months since I’d seen Cyler, Jacob, and Maverick. Five months of living in the Deadlands with a Scavenger tribe on the outskirts of the empire. Five months of hearing the reports filter in from the scouts.

One by one, Cavil claimed the people of Dasos. The death toll was insurmountable. His rise to power, unprecedented. Without Emperor Lackley and Josiah, there was no one powerful enough to stop him. No one brave enough to try. He had the weapons, the influence, and now the rejection cure. Lackley was an amateur in comparison.

Maverick managed to fix the rejection phenomenon—at the expense of the cure. Maverick and Allaire’s vaccine made the cure for influenza X impotent and obsolete. Everyone was now susceptible. But many considered this the lesser of two evils: most could avoid exposure to X but couldn’t avoid the internal ticking time bomb of the cure. However, Cavil demanded submission in exchange for the rejection cure. Members of the Elite now donned fetters and spent their days hiding in their manors to avoid exposure to X.

Since our escape, Huxley treated me like a wounded animal. He used to stroll up to me with confidence, claiming the parts of my heart and body like they were his for the taking. It killed me to see him have so much pity in his gaze. I hated the pity. Pity was a wasted emotion, it did nothing but accentuate a person’s suffering and enable self-loathing. It’s one of the reasons I enjoyed our nights sparring. Here, in the shadows of my anger, Huxley looked at me with that half smirk, half determined scowl I loved so much. But I guess I had to ruin that too. I was ruining everything lately, and they pitied me for it. Just a toxic cycle that made sinking into my emotionless state more appealing.

“Tell me why you want to fight,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest. It was a question he’d asked me many times before. They say that before you start a war, you have to know what you’re fighting for. But I was at war with myself. I swallowed, visions of an ivory room and the bloodied face of a guard filling my vision.

I still couldn’t say it. Couldn’t even think about it. I shook my head, willing the flashbacks and Josiah’s dead body to disappear from my brain. I had to fight. Punch. Scream. Anything to keep those thoughts away.

A byproduct of these nights was that it exhausted me to the point of dreamless sleep. I spent my days in a sore, tired stupor, but at least it kept the nightmares away. Huxley observed my face with interest, patiently waiting for my response. He was so damn patient lately. I wanted him to fight back. "I like punching you," I replied with a smirk, but I wasn't fooling him. I wasn't fooling anyone.

My time in Ethros broke me.

Commodore Cavil taught me how dangerous the world was. I wasn't prepared to fight for my life. I was a sheltered Walker. Stonewell Manor might have been a prison, but I was cared for. Josiah kept me safe from the evils of this empire. Then, when I moved to Dormas, that care and responsibility transferred to my guys. I loved knowing that they could protect me. Since experiencing true blinding fear, I would no longer take for granted the privilege of sleeping soundly. But I craved feeling confident in my own abilities. I wasn't strong enough in Ethros, but I'd be strong enough now.

Fighting also helped me reclaim parts of my broody Huxley. He stopped treating me like a glass figurine during our nights together. He made me feel capable, strong, and sexy. I treasured the moments that he let his guard down and let me forget about the anxiety and regret. Here, we were just two bodies being pushed to the limit.

"How about this," Huxley began, walking closer. He took the canteen from my shaky fingers and placed his plump lips around the opening and gulped. Droplets of water fell down his chin, and I licked my lips. He was so handsome. Our fights had helped him become even more toned. The white shirt he usually wore had grown tight, and I found myself getting distracted throughout the day. I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy looking at his bare, muscular torso every night.

He caught me staring out of the corner of his eye. And after pulling the bottle from his lips, that damn lip quirk I loved so much appeared in a flash, disappearing before I could enjoy it.

We had agreed to hold off on all physical aspects of our relationships until we knew more about Cyler, Maverick, and Jacob. I was too traumatized by everything that happened and still recovering from our escape. It made sense at the time, but lately, my nights with Huxley had reawakened the craving I felt in Ethros.

“I’ll spend an hour with you in training for every hour you spend with Patrick and Kemper.”

I scowled, earning another lip quirk from Huxley. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to spend time with them. I craved them on a visceral level. I longed for normalcy and their touch. I wanted Patrick’s playful jokes and Kemper’s heated words saved only for me. But fighting with Huxley was easy. We didn’t talk. We just moved until there was no strength left. If I were to open up to Patrick and Kemper, they’d want to talk. About my feelings, my reservations, my...*grief*.

I hated that word.

In so many ways, I was still the same girl from Galla. But Ethros had hardened me, and I wasn’t sure how to bridge the girl they fell in love with to the girl I’d become. I started off feeling sad. I cried, circling around hopelessness and devastation like it was a prison of my own making. Then I felt nothing. Aside from the bursts of anger and lust I experienced during trainings with Huxley, I spent most of my days feeling nothing at all. I was numb. And somehow, I knew that being numb was worse. Much worse.

I debated arguing with Huxley, deflecting his offer with a snide joke—something I’d become good at. But instead, I let my shoulders slump.

“I...I can’t.”

I couldn’t stand knowing that I was hurting them by staying away. Seeing the pain in their eyes, the disappointment, was killing me. They were mourning the loss of their best friends too. I was being selfish by shutting them out. Maverick always told me to not play the martyr. But here I was, feeling sorry for myself when I should be fighting.

“Yeah, you can,” Huxley said while stepping forward and abandoning the canteen. It landed in the dirt with a thud. With his thumb, he lifted up my chin, forcing me to stare into his green eyes. “One hour, Ash. That’s it. Then I’ll let you try and punch me all you want. You know it makes you feel better,” he said, gaze bright and daring.

“Fine.”

“Good girl,” he murmured while stroking a sweaty strand of hair behind my ear. There was a fire in his expression that wasn’t there before, making my breath hitch. His smoldering hands left a blazing trail of tension down my neck. I wasn’t the only one craving more. But I wasn’t ready for that. At least, not until I had the rest of my guys back.

“As much as keeping you to myself has been nice, I’m kind of tired of hearing them mope.”

I’d spent time with them. We ate our meals together—in silence. We shared a tent. Hell, most nights after training, I’d crawl into bed beside Patrick or Kemper. The Scavengers assigned each of us jobs, so we were busy throughout the day, but I’d still see them, kind of. I just wasn’t present. Not really.

I was hollow. A shell of who I was before. We’ve all changed. Patrick, my handsome and playful twin, wasn’t smiling as much. I missed his sweet lullabies and kind smile. Kemper lacked his usual ambition. He felt like he’d failed us—failed me. And he’d practically given up on trying to fix everything around him.

Despite this, they pushed the boundaries I drew around myself. They’d linger in the tent. Hold me while I slept. Kemper kissed my cheek each morning before patrol, and Patrick made me breakfast. Half of me resented them for it, while the other half wished that they would push more. I needed someone to force me to get better, I needed someone to force me to stop being so self-destructive.

Fighting with Huxley made me feel alive again, but even that wasn’t the real me. It wasn’t enough. I guess they were getting tired of loving a ghost. What if they left me? Would they grow tired of waiting?

My expression must have echoed the fear I felt because Huxley then wrapped me in a huge hug. I sunk into his sweaty hold. Silent tears fell down my cheeks, dampening his chest as sobs made me shake.

“I’ll talk to them,” I finally said.

## CHAPTER TWO

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Huxley and I walked back towards our tent on the outskirts of camp. We'd been staying with the Water Tribe close to the Eastern border. Huxley mentioned that Tallis regularly traded with them. It was a risk to come here, but it was our only option. Dormas was out of the question, for obvious reasons. And any alliances Cyler had procured dissolved once word got out that Cavil held him prisoner. The Elite blindly believed in Cavil's authority and didn't dare challenge him, and an alliance with us was exactly that—a challenge.

It wasn't easy getting settled. Aside from Aarav, the Chief, most of the Scavengers thought it was too big a risk to hide us in their camp. I couldn't necessarily disagree with them.

Rumors of Cavil's instabilities traveled far and wide. We knew there was a target on our backs, and if found, we would put everyone at risk. Scavenger communities were constantly being pushed deeper into the Deadlands by Cavil's growing army. The glowing woods weren't suitable for habitation, and the further you went, the worse it got. But the Scavengers adapted as much as they could, and we learned to adapt alongside them.

I learned more about the Deadlands and its toxic water supply during my time here. Long ago, a contamination bled into the soil and the water, making everything glow. Long term exposure weakened a human's immune system. It also made their bodies run less efficiently. It took more work to keep warm in the winter time, and they suffered many food allergies

too. It was interesting to learn all they'd suffered just to escape the rule of the empire.

We made sure to settle far away from the others and tried to make ourselves scarce yet useful. Huxley, Patrick, and Kemper rotated patrol shifts, and I worked with the camp healer, Lilly. I liked my job. It helped me feel closer to Maverick. She was an old, grumpy woman with a mischievous attitude. She taught me about the different plant properties and methods of healing while chastising me for moping about. Each time I learned something new, it felt like I was honoring Maverick. And each time she insulted me, my skin thickened. I appreciated the tough love.

We had a routine. It wasn't ideal, it wasn't home, but it was enough—for now. The worst part about the Deadlands was living next door to Linda Stonewell. Since escaping with us, she'd also taken up residence in the Deadlands. "I need to fetch water for Linda again tomorrow," I told Huxley in a low voice as crickets chirped around us. The canopy of glowing trees overhead shielded our view of the stars.

Huxley sighed before replying, "I don't understand why you help her." Serving Linda was a habit of mine. I'd spent years tending to her every need. Even with my new found freedom, I couldn't crack my instinct to care for her. I couldn't help but feel like I owed the widowed woman, somehow. Josiah, the only family she had left, died saving me. So if I had to bring her buckets of water to cope with the guilt I felt, then I'd gladly take the penance.

"She's grieving," I told Huxley, not quite sure why I was defending her. I've comforted myself with the idea that grief is just love with no place to go—Linda Stonewell had no one alive to pour herself into. Since Josiah's death, she has bottled up all the affection she never showed her son, and twisted it into a toxic rage she unleashed on me daily. She hated me because I didn't have words left unsaid. I got closure. Dark, painful closure—but closure nevertheless. He died, and she never got to say sorry for her hand in his suffering. For all my talk of hating pity, I pitied her. Therefore, I was content to be her emotional punching bag. Just because I helped her didn't



mean she made it easy on me, though. She called me every name in the book, spitting at my feet as I brought her food.

“You’re grieving t—”

“Please, don’t finish that sentence.”

We continued to walk in silence as I thought of my strained relationship with Linda. She was struggling to acclimate to Scavenger life, and I understood her anger now. She spent a lifetime in posh comfort, then lost everything and everyone she’d ever known. Linda Stonewell had a loveless marriage and a loveless affair. The only person that actually loved her back was her son, and he was dead.

They all were dead.

“Payne was asking about you yesterday,” I told him.

Payne was the one bright spot in our lives. His naive innocence was infectious. He made even Huxley smile and thawed Linda’s icy heart. It wasn’t self-preservation keeping her here, it was Payne. Payne also lived in the small tent next to ours with Mistress Stonewell. Their dynamic was odd at best, but it worked. She spent so much time fussing over him that sometimes she’d go an entire day without complaining.

“What did he ask?”

“He wants you to take him fishing again. He enjoyed that.”

I wasn’t sure what it was about Payne that made me less reluctant to share my feelings. He wanted to know about the brother he never met. And since I’d known Josiah the best, I found myself offering him little pieces of information when I could handle it. I’d even caught Linda leaning forward to hear my stories of her son. I wondered if she knew how truly close we were. Payne was a sweet child. Genuine. Kind. But terrifyingly smart.

Exactly like Josiah.

We were almost at our tents. I couldn’t wait to wash off in the water basin and go to sleep. Today, I’d pushed so hard that I was certain I’d have a dreamless night. I was about to descend the path to our home when the drums started.

The thudding beat had no repetitive cadence or method. It was madness, thumping and filling the Deadlands with its warning. One of the first things Chief Aarav taught us when he agreed to let us seek refuge in his camp was if you hear the drums—run.

It was a warning repeated many times, chanted at dinner and whispered at night. “Is Patrick on patrol?” I asked Huxley, whose eyes were on alert as he scouted the woods around us. White, glowing trees cast shadows in the dark, and towered overhead. The drums made it impossible to hear anything else.

Looking to the sky, I saw the dim, green embers of the Chief’s fire in the distance. We were only a few minutes away if we sprinted. “We have to go to him,” I said as adrenaline flooded me. I started to turn towards the flames when a calloused hand wrapped around my elbow, pulling me back.

“You’re not going—”

“Sorry, were you just about to tell me not to go? Because it sounded like you were about to make another decision for me,” I said with a growl, yanking out of his hold. I looked over Huxley’s shoulder and saw the bushes shifting. I managed to shove Huxley’s broad frame aside and crouch into a ready stance. I was ready for an attack—eager for it.

But instead of all the enemies I’d conjured up in my mind, it was Kemper that was barreling towards us. His long, lean legs moved impossibly fast.

“Ash!” he yelled, his voice frantic but determined. I warmed at the tone. Normally, he was so soft-spoken. It had been a while since I’d heard the commanding voice he reserved for our moments alone. He collided into me, cupping my warm, flushed cheeks. His blue eyes squinted as he looked me over. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“We have to get to Patrick.” I pulled away then looked back towards the flickering flames and smoke off in the distance. My heart was racing. Kemper and Huxley exchanged wary looks when I turned my attention back to them. I saw the caution in their expressions. They had no intention of letting me anywhere near the danger, but I was done letting them

control me. I stopped letting them make decisions about my safety when I lost Cyler, Maverick, and Jacob.

Within a flash, I was sprinting towards the center of camp. My tired feet pounded the hard ground as my warm muscles shook with adrenaline. I felt Huxley and Kemper at my back, following me as their shouts blended in with the warning drums. I could handle this, I could save Patrick.

I could save them all, right?

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I imagined all my guys at the finish line. I was no longer in the Deadlands. I was in Ethros. I was running towards the men I loved. Dodging fallen branches and hanging tree limbs, I leaped over a puddle and stumbled a bit when my feet hit the muddy ground. This was my moment to help. I could fight. I wasn't helpless. The grass crunched beneath my feet, and the smoky air filled my lungs. I breathed in the woodsy scent, sprinting as I thought of all the people I'd failed—and all the people who had failed me.

No more. This was what I'd been training for, right?

Kemper called to me. He wanted me to wait. Huxley grabbed the back of my shirt, but I slipped from his grasp. My curly hair caught on a branch. My heart caught in my throat.

Tents started to appear along the trail, scattered around us. Men and women with white hair and deep frowns ran in the opposite direction, darting by us as we headed towards the camp's center. Their fearful faces were nothing but a blur in my peripherals.

“Ash, wait, let's see what's ahead.”

But I didn't want to wait. I didn't want to be the girl that waited for others to right the wrongs of the empire. “We don't even know if Patrick's there,” Kemper added. “He could be on the outskirts of the camp. I don't know his patrol route!”

When I broke through the clearing, a group of Scavengers had formed a circle around the fire. As I searched for Patrick in the haze, an arm wrapped around my waist, yanking me back. The air was knocked out of me when I collided with his

chest, and I let out a hoarse scream. Nothing but strained air escaped past my teeth.

“There’s a difference,” Huxley began while trying to catch his breath. His chest heaved against my back. “Between being the hero and being fucking stupid.” His lips were against my ears as he spoke, and a tear fell down my cheek. I wiped away the stupid display of emotion. It was blurring my vision, stopping me from tackling the task at hand. I wanted a fight. I wanted an excuse to prove my worth.

Huxley sunk backward towards a tree as I fought to pull away from him. My feet hovered off the ground, and Kemper gave me a look that made me fill with shame. I couldn’t tell the difference between the pounding drums and my heartbeat. The loud beat, a thundering cadence of chaos.

There, in Huxley’s arms, the warnings faded away. The adrenaline subsided, and all that was left was shame. I knew I was being reckless. But that’s what happens when you have nothing to siphon your disappointment and anger into. You start looking for ways to let the pain out. Slowly, the thudding pulse in my ears calmed. I looked around, trying to get a sense for my surroundings. A clear voice echoed over the commotion, making my heart race.

“Are you an idiot? She needs a doctor. I demand you get your best healer here at once, or so help me, I will burn this camp to the ground. Don’t you know who I am? I’m Jules. Motherfucking. Black.”

Huxley dropped me in shock. It took me a moment to clear my head. Did I hear that right?

Jules?

I sprinted towards the fire where a group of men crowded around. I broke through the group, ignoring the various grunts of disapproval. I waded through the Scavengers until all I could see was sleek black hair and a scowl deep enough to wage wars.

“Jules?” I cried out, more tears streaming down my face. When her eyes met mine, her expression softened a bit, but not

much. The last time I'd seen Jules, she was a pale skeleton on the brink of death. The vaccine rejection was claiming her bright life. Now, she had scratches on her cheeks and circles beneath her bloodshot eyes. She was thinner than before. Her frame looked malnourished, but she still commanded the attention of everyone within the vicinity. She was alive.

I didn't care that we only tolerated one another, I ran forward and wrapped my thin arms around her in a tight hug. "You're alive," I cooed as white-hot tears streamed down my cheeks. "I've been so worried."

A tentative hand patted my back, and I pulled away to stare at her. She stared deeply into my eyes, seemingly moved by my display of affection. I saw her relief, her fear, her sadness. It all swirled within the black depths of her gaze, and I let out a sigh I didn't know I'd been holding. "You smell awful," Jules replied, her nose wrinkling. I couldn't help but smile. I knew that was her way of saying that she missed me too.

A moan nearby made me pause. I looked down at the ground to see Mia in the fetal position, clutching her stomach as blood the color of scarlet flowed from her chest. I knelt at her feet and screamed.

"Mia!"

Behind me, Huxley and Kemper took turns giving Jules hugs and murmuring their shocked greetings. But I had tunnel vision on my Scavenger friend writhing in pain on the ground beside me. I tried to move her arm to look at the wound, but she swatted me away while rocking back and forth on the ground. I screamed for the healer as Chief Aarav crouched down at my feet and said, "*Agrio*, I sent my brother to retrieve Lilly."

"What happened?" I asked Jules who was clutching Kemper's arm and staring at us. My eyes began scanning the camp. Were Maverick, Cyler, and Jacob here? Where were...

"They're not here," Jules said, answering my unspoken question. "Mia and I came alone. We ran into an Eastern Scavenger about a mile outside of your camp. He..." Jules

looked down at the ground before looking back at me. The green glow of the campfire illuminated her pale face as she crossed her arms over her chest, emulating cool defiance. I saw the crack in her carefully constructed facade though. I understood her persona. “He wanted something he couldn’t have. I killed him.”

I opened my mouth in surprise and...jealousy. My eyes drifted down to take in her appearance. Before, I was so excited to see her that I didn’t notice her torn shirt or the blood on her forest green pants. She’d defended herself. Fought her way out of a deadly situation.

“How do you know them?” Aarav asked, bringing my attention back to a moaning Mia. He brushed Mia’s blood-stained white hair aside, revealing her pale face and blue lips.

“She’s the one I told you about. The one who called me *Agrio*.” My chest seized as emotion coursed through me. I’ll never forget when I earned the nickname meaning Wild One.

When I’d first met Aarav, he asked me what he should call me. At the time, even hearing my own name hurt. I wanted to steal a bit of Mia’s confidence. I wanted to claim some of the Scavenger lifestyle for myself. So I’d told him to call me *Agrio*.

A loud cough erupted from Mia’s chest as she rolled to face me. “*Agrio*? Is that you?” she asked, eyes half open and swimming in tears. She was struggling to stay awake, and my heart clenched at how weak she sounded. This certainly couldn’t be Mia. Mia was strong. Mia always survived.

I leaned closer to stare into her brown eyes. How did Jules survive? How did they make it all the way here?

“Ah, *Agrio*,” she began, flickering out of awareness, “you look like shit,” she blurted out before losing consciousness.

## CHAPTER THREE

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**I**t took all night to stabilize Mia. Lilly and I bustled around the healer's tent, struggling to keep her alive. Fourteen stitches lined her chest, and it's a miracle she didn't lose too much blood. I didn't have the opportunity to ask Jules how she got here and who she was with. I was too busy helping gather supplies and create antibacterial salves for Mia's wound care. Scavengers that had long-term exposure to the toxic water supply were more susceptible to infection. It affected their immune system, and they couldn't fight off normal sicknesses like others.

After six hours of stabilizing Mia, Lilly sent me outside to replenish her supply of herbs. Outside near the creek, I was digging up a root needed for pain relief when Patrick came up behind me with food. "You need to eat," he said while thrusting a bag of fruit my way. My stomach was too twisted with anxiety, but instead of refusing him, I took it from his outstretched hands then stood and dusted the dirt off of my skin.

"Thanks," I replied. I wondered if he would want to talk about what happened. Would he be mad that I ran to his rescue? Would he be relieved that I still cared? Worried that I was so reckless?

"I'm not going to scold you for running to danger," he answered my unspoken thoughts. "I stopped making decisions for you when I saw how hurt you were that we removed your choice in Ethros." He bent over and efficiently helped dig up the rest of the root I needed before continuing. "Especially

now that you're getting fighting lessons from Hux, I don't wanna piss you off." He chuckled while pulling the root up and standing.

The morning air felt electric. Bugs that lived in the glowing trees of the Deadlands were alive and buzzing, sticking to my sweaty neck. I felt more alive too.

I smiled at his joke. Despite the exhaustion I felt, Patrick's lighthearted nature still managed to make me happy. "I could totally kick your ass," I choked out, willing this conversation to be normal. I was determined to try, not just because Huxley was threatening to stop our fighting lessons. I wanted to reconnect with them all. Maybe I was finally done with being numb? I was willing to risk being devastated again because at the end of the tunnel was hope.

"But I will say," Patrick began, taking a step closer and placing his fingers beneath my chin and lifting my gaze up, "I'm flattered that you were worried about me, but I'd rather have you safe. I'll always pick your safety over mine." That was the problem, wasn't it? I was in love with men all wanting to jump in front of danger for me. I was a Walker, I was used to having my decisions taken from me, but I didn't want that now. They couldn't tease me with freedom then steal it back when it was convenient for them.

"Even now? Even after five months of..." of my mourning. Of my distancing myself. Of giving into my hurt and grief and letting myself fall into the pit of self-loathing and denial.

"There's no amount of time or distance that'll separate us," he replied, his tone earnest and deep. "This is unconditional, sweetie. I even love the parts of you that you think are hard to love." Patrick leaned forward and placed his lips against mine. I was covered in dirt, sweat, and grime. I was sure my curly hair was a mass of tangles, and Mia's blood covered my dress. But all I could think of was how good his lips felt. He didn't push too far, probably worried that I'd sink away again, but still, I found myself craving his contact. He threaded his fingers through my hair, getting caught on various tangles, then he smiled against me.



“I should bring you a comb,” he chuckled, pulling away.

“Thank you for waiting,” I whispered back. I knew that we weren’t where we were, not even close. I knew that the new normal would take a while to get used to. Hell, I wasn’t even used to the old normal before it was stolen from me. But I would try. My guys were worth trying for.

Patrick walked me back to the medic tent, and we held hands. He was practically glowing with excitement as we moved, but there was an edge of uncertainty to his walk. I worried that I’d ruined his confidence with my distance, and resolved to remedy that immediately.

“Try not to kill Jules,” he said with a kiss on my cheek. “I’m going to go and get some sleep before patrol again tonight.”

He turned to leave, but I wrapped my arms around his waist. “Sweet dreams, Patrick,” I whispered into his back as he stroked the tops of my hands. After a moment, I reluctantly let him go and entered the crowded medic tent.

Although Lilly and I were able to stitch up Mia’s stab wound and make sure that no vital organs were punctured, it was her fever that had us worried.

The Scavenger medic tent was already small, barely big enough for Lilly and me to shuffle about. But with Huxley, Kemper, Jules, and Aarav all fussing over Mia, I sensed that it was only a matter of time before Lilly snapped.

“Hovering over her won’t help her heal faster. She needs to rest,” she scolded, swatting at Huxley who was thumbing a vial of rosemary. “The only person who should be here is *Agrio*, and even she gets on my nerves. Out with you.” The guys left with small frowns, Huxley and Kemper pausing to kiss me on the cheek goodbye, but Jules remained. I wondered when she and Mia became so close. Thinking back to their petty rivalry back in Dormas, I’d never imagined that they would become friends. But five months was a long time, and disaster breeds companionship. Fear makes you cling to people you normally wouldn’t. We all just want to feel like we belong. Like we’re safe. Lilly was getting tired of her hovering

though. Jules might have grown more compassionate towards the Scavengers, but she was still the same old ray of critical sunshine I'd come to accept.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing? What is that stuff anyway?" she asked Lilly as I made quick work of getting set up at the lab table and grinding the Kava root I just collected into a wooden bowl. It was commonly used for pain but also could be used to fight an infection.

"It'll help fight off the pain and help fight off the infection," I answered.

"Keep asking questions, and I'll have Aarav remove you from my tent, *Malakas*," Lilly sneered.

"*Paliá trelí gynaika*," Jules responded with equal venom, causing Lilly's eyebrows to shoot up in shock. "I can insult people in the native Scavenger tongue too. Worry more about Mia and less about what I'm doing, and we'll be good." Jules threw Lilly a self-satisfied smirk. I wanted to urge Jules not to tempt Lilly. She'd openly described how she poisoned her deceased husband when she caught him with another woman. Lilly was not someone you wanted to mess with.

"Just stay out of my way. She won't get any better if I have to spend time maneuvering around you," Lilly finally said. Jules tapped her foot against the floor of the tent, crossing her arms over her chest to stare at Mia before moving to a nearby chair.

After a while, Lilly ventured back into the meadow to collect more Kava root as well as another leaf I'd never heard of. My plant identifying skills were basic, and Lilly somehow always managed to find the rare medicinal herbs with ease.

Mia let out a moan, and Jules quickly grabbed a cloth to wipe her brow. "That pain relieving root doesn't seem to be working," she murmured, teeth clenched.

"It's not foolproof, unfortunately. We need a real clinic. A healing pod. They don't have the same technology as Dormas, but they make do." I was pretty impressed with how the Scavengers managed to survive. Despite every disadvantage,

the Scavengers still persevered. Little to no food, no electricity, and no clean water made them resilient, but it also made them defenseless.

“Is she safe for transport? We could be at Dormas within a day.” Jules stood up to pace the floors of the medic tent once more. My eyes watched her pacing, and I found myself smiling a little. There was a time that she criticized me for pacing and worrying about my men; it made me happy to see that she’d found people she cared enough to worry about.

“I shouldn’t risk it until her fever has gone down, and even so, Dormas is taken over by Ethros guards. It’s not safe to go there.”

Jules let out a throaty humorless laugh. “It’s not safe to go anywhere, Walker.” I took in her bloody clothes and tight-lipped grimace and knew she was right.

“I have clothes. Would you like to change into something less...bloody?” I asked, still unable to comprehend that Jules had killed someone. She’d managed to defend herself.

“I’d prefer to wait until her fever is down,” Jules replied. It was odd seeing her so vulnerable and frazzled. She’d always seemed unaffected before. Mia had become someone that meant a lot to her over the last five months.

“You might be waiting a while. Where is Tallis?” I asked. Last I’d seen them, they were in the beginning stages of a relationship.

“He’s in the Walker Zone.” Jules’ voice had a dreamy quality to it that made me think that they were still together.

“Why is he there?”

Jules turned her attention towards me before answering, “He’s joining the Resistance. We’re going to fight Cavil.”

Absorbing her words, I finished smashing the Kava plant into the paste and made my way back over to Mia. I felt Jules’ eyes on me as I lifted Mia’s dressings to look at the stitches covering her torso. Using my gloved hand, I slathered it over her. Mia bucked when my hand touched her, and she moaned at the contact, her teeth gritted in pain.

“I thought that was for pain management,” Jules said, crossing her thin arms over her chest and eyeing me with scrutiny. “It doesn’t seem to be helping with any of her pain.”

“If ingested, it can relieve pain, but when applied topically it prevents infection. It’ll sting, but it’s keeping it clean.” Mia let out a moan, and I went to check her temperature once more, worried that an infection would set in.

“So why are you here?” I finally asked, working up the courage to know how Cyler, Jacob, and Maverick were. Did I want to know? Many nights I spent wondering if they’d moved on. If they were happier without me. It seemed silly now. Everyone’s lives were at stake, and I was worried about unrequited love.

“I’m here because, even from across the empire, you’re proving to be a gigantic pain in my ass.”

The tent was dark despite the morning sun peeking through the entrance. But it wasn’t dark enough to hide her angry brown-eyed stare directed right at me. “How are you even alive?” I asked, not taking the bait for her argument. I knew that she wanted a fight, but I wasn’t going to give it to her. Jules was so stubborn, her heart seeking each and every opportunity to argue in order to avoid the pain it was feeling with each beat.

“I guess I have you to thank for that.” In the corner of the tent was a bucket of Deadlands water and a small mirror propped up on a shelf. She made her way over to it and began washing her face, wincing when the acidic water touched a cut on her lip. “I was about a breath away from death. In fact, I did die. For two minutes to be exact. When you crossed the boundary, it activated my fetter, and the electric shock activated the rejection cure.”

Jules turned around and began rolling up her stained sleeves, showing me her arm. There, where her fetter once was, was a purple scar wrapped around her bony wrist. How was that even possible? “Did you know that when a host dies, the fetter is programmed to detach itself?” She then nodded at my wrist where the reminder of my time at Ethros still sat

proudly. “That fetter of yours has probably had dozens of owners before you.”

“How...economical,” I said with a shiver. It bothered me to think of how nonchalant she was about it all.

“So I guess since you fled to this little vacation of yours, nearly killing me, I should thank you. Your selfish little stunt saved my life. I escaped Ethros in a coffin. My brothers asked Cavil to bury me in Dormas. Maverick gave me some medicine that put me in a deep sleep, then I woke up in the Zone to Tallis and Mia.”

There was so much in that statement that had me stuttering, but I clung to one part. “Selfish? I had no choice. You have no idea what happened to me,” I growled while stomping towards her. “I woke up in the very same bed Mia is in. It wasn’t until I was in the transport that I realized what was happening. I would have stayed, Jules.”

“You had to have known, anyone with half a brain would have questioned things,” Jules retorted.

“I didn’t have time to question things. I was fighting for my life!” Jules simply smiled in response. Maybe it was my pent up anger at how everything happened. Or maybe I was angry because she was right. I should have known that Cyler would have planned something like this.

I wound back my arm and smacked Jules across the cheek. All earlier joy at having her and Mia back, safe and sound, was gone. Now, all I wanted was to hurt her. I needed to hurt someone.

I expected her eyes to water. I wanted the gratification of seeing her reaction, but what I got instead was like a knife twisting deep in my chest. Jules smiled. A wide, genuine smile full of promise and happiness.

“Look at you,” she began while turning to inspect the red mark I left on her cheek in the mirror above the washbasin. “You got some bark now. I think you’re ready.”

“Ready for what?” I asked, my earlier anger fizzling out into nothing. What was happening? Had Jules completely lost

her mind during her time away?

“Tallis and I made some friends in the Walker Zone. Friends that want to help us get my brothers back.”

“Okay, well, let’s do this, then,” I said. Adrenaline flooded my veins. I’d been waiting five months to act, five months for the opportunity to claim my revenge.

Jules shuffled closer to me until we were nose to nose. “Are you willing to do anything?” she asked, her voice soft now. “Cause I’m about to do something that many wouldn’t approve of.”

I cocked my eyebrow, unsure of what she meant. Jules was speaking in riddles. I watched as she dug inside the pocket of her pants, lifting a pill up so that it was eye level with me. “What are you going to do?” I asked. Jules seemed unstable yet determined. Her movements were planned like it was something she’d dreamed about for a while.

“You’re only good to me dead, Walker. I’m going to kill you.”

Before I could react, before I could stop her, Jules shoved me to the ground. Pinning my arms to my sides with her knees, she smiled with a grunt before shoving the pill in my mouth and clamping it shut. The pill was bitter and dissolved on my tongue the moment it hit.

She kept her hand over my mouth, and I fought my fading energy, bucking beneath Jules. I was dying to break free from her hold on the dirt floor of the medic tent. Behind her, the door to the tent opened and a shadowy figure entered. My vision began to fade as yells erupted, and Jules was pulled off of me.

“Enjoy death, little Walker,” she screamed. The last thing I saw was a tall man picking her up off the floor and hauling Jules outside. A hand touched my cheek.

“Stay with me, Ash! Don’t go! Please, don’t go.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

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*“Ash, come on! Tag—you’re it!”*

*I blinked, forcing away the hazy blur that filled my eyes. I tried to focus on the blond-haired little boy in front of me, but it was like I had tunnel vision, the edges of my gaze were white and milky with smoke.*

*“Payne?” I asked with a frown. From my limited view, I gathered that we were in Stonewell Manor, hiding beneath the dining room table, to be exact. I held my hands out in front of me, taking in the soot and grime that covered them.*

*“I’m not Payne, silly. I’m Josiah,” he said. My eyes shot back to the little boy in front of me. His slick blond hair was swept to the side, peach lips framing a wide grin covered in chocolate.*

*“Josiah?” I asked in confusion. It was like I was wading through my thoughts. My limbs felt slow and heavy. My thoughts delayed as I processed each distorted moment. The lights flickered.*

*“Shh,” he said, holding a small finger up to my lips while shifting further under the dining room table. “Mother is coming!”*

*I crouched lower, feeling dazed and disoriented. It was like I couldn’t hold on to my body, my memories. While I tried to grasp hold of my surroundings, heels stepping on the tile made their way towards us. “Lackley, why must you go back to the capital so soon? You only just got here, and my husband isn’t expected back for a week!”*

*Mistress Stonewell's voice echoed around us, and my eyes flashed to Josiah. His gaze was wide as he silently giggled, shoulders shaking with amusement. "I have business to attend to at the capital. One of my scientists has made an important discovery that I must deal with."*

*"Everything is always more important to you than I am," Mistress Stonewell cried out. All I could see from beneath the table was her pale pink heel stomping on the tile to accentuate her words. I tried to shift closer, to look at their faces, but Josiah's hand jetted out to stop me.*

*"Don't be so dramatic, Linda. Some things are more important than your need for validation, you know. I'm an important man."*

*Mistress Stonewell heaved a long, steady sigh before responding. "Of course I know, Lackley. It's all you ever remind me of."*

*My brow shot up, and I looked to Josiah. He was tracing lines in the fibers of the rug beneath us, no longer listening and looking wildly sad. "I suggest you tread carefully," Lackley replied, drawing my attention back to them. "Remember who you're speaking to, darling."*

*"I know exactly who I'm speaking to," Mistress Stonewell replied, her tone dark and foreboding. "I also know that you're sleeping with this scientist you're always raving about. You're putting a lot of faith in Dominique. I don't think her views align with ours."*

*A hand slammed down on the dining table, making Josiah and me flinch. "She's the brightest scientist in the empire. I have to protect her. Don't think you control me. Don't think you have any say in who I see or who I fuck. This thing between us is nothing, so next time you want to tell me who to see—don't."*

*From under the table, I watched as Lackley left, leaving Mistress Stonewell in a stupor. His polished dress shoes clacked against the tile, and once he was out of sight, Linda collapsed on the floor in a heap of sobs, cradling her head in her hands. Josiah then laughed at his mother's defeated*



*posture. The chuckles erupting from his mouth cruel and uncaring. Mistress Stonewell snapped her attention towards us with a ferocious scowl.*

*“Were you spying on me, Walker?” she asked while crawling towards me.*

*“No—” I choked out. With one swift movement, she swiped the dining chair aside, leaving me vulnerable. When it crashed to the wall, I jumped. Her bony fingers wrapped around my ankle as she yanked me out from beneath the table and towards her. I lay on the floor staring up at her as she lifted her arm.*

*“I’ll show you what happens to little Walkers that eavesdrop,” she screamed before backhanding me. My vision went black, but I clung to the memory as I felt a hand grasp mine.*

*“Remember, Ash. Save them, Ash,” Josiah’s voice said, no longer sounding boyish. “Save them. Save them all.”*

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WHEN I WOKE UP, my chest felt tight, but my limbs light. “What happened?” I croaked as memories of Jules pinning me to the ground and forcing a pill down my throat assaulted me. Looking around, I gathered that I was still in the Scavenger medic tent. I wasn’t sure how long I’d been lying there, but my growling stomach made me think that it had, at the very least, been a day since I’d eaten.

The door to the tent opened, flooding the room with bright sunlight. I winced as my head and eyes burned from the intrusion. Throwing my arm over my face to block my vision, I froze when I didn’t feel the familiar metal of a fetter on my wrist.

“Ash?” a familiar voice called out to me, and I moved my arm to see Payne.

He had dirt on his cheek, and the back of his hair stood straight up. I imagined that he hadn’t seen Mistress Stonewell

recently, because if he had, she'd not let him walk around in "such a condition."

"Hey, kid," I smiled.

"I'm glad you're okay," he replied. "Huxley is mean when you're not around," Payne pouted as he climbed up onto my legs. I looked towards the far side of the tent where Lilly was messing with herbs on a table and giving me sideways glances.

"What happened?" I asked her.

She took a while to respond, shuffling various plants around before turning to face me. "That *treli skyla*, Jules, is what happened," Lilly finally said. "She shoved some empire medicine down your throat. You died. That *thing* popped off your wrist, and then you were back. You've been asleep for a couple hours."

I shook my head then ran my finger along the purple scar where my fetter once was. "It's really gone?" I asked. Somehow, this felt like a trick. Like the empire was playing one giant joke on me, and Cavil would pop out from under my bed to clamp a new one right back on.

"She's insane!" Lilly added, throwing her hands up. "Chief took her to the solitude cage for review, and she didn't even bat an eye. In fact, she almost looked *pleased* to be punished for killing you!"

I turned to look at the bed beside me and smiled when I saw Mia shuffling beneath her blankets. "*Agapimenos* has some balls," Mia said, her voice hoarse, and the moment sound escaped her lips, Lilly fluttered over towards her, bending over to check her wound and fever.

"Hey there, *Agrio*, long time no see," Mia finally said once Lilly mumbled to herself something about "crazy visitors" and went back to mixing another one of her concoctions.

"Mia," I cooed while sitting up. Payne got off of my lap, and I shifted to place my feet on the floor of the tent. "How are you?"

She flashed me her signature sharp-toothed smile, but it looked weak and half-hearted. "I've been better. But that sexy

Chief you've got is making me feel *much* better," she replied while throwing her hand up to her face in mock-swoon.

"Glad to hear you're making new friends and not throwing knives at the locals," I joked, thinking back to her aptitude with weapons.

"No, it would seem that Jules is the one angering the locals. I'm pretty impressed that she killed you. I thought for sure she'd at least talk to you first. But no! She went for the sneak attack." Mia then wiped away a tear that hadn't fallen. "I'm so proud."

Payne giggled at Mia, and she flashed him a teasing smile and a wink. I was about to ask where she got that medicine to temporarily kill someone, but the tent door opened, interrupting us.

"Ash?" Kemper asked, slumping with relief once he saw me. "Jules is *damn* lucky you woke up." Kemper made his way over to me and sat down on the cot. Wrapping his arm around my shoulder, he gave me a side hug before kissing my forehead.

"I could have done without the theatrics, but look," I said, holding up my bare wrist. "I'm fetter free!" It felt like I was significantly lighter. I didn't realize how much of a weight the fetter was. It was an invisible cage, reminding me of my time in Ethros. Reminding me of all I'd lost. I'd accepted that the fetter was just another consequence of Cavil. I even learned to avoid staring at the shiny metal wrapped tightly around my wrist. But now that it was gone, I noticed it more than when I'd actually worn it.

"Jules knew your bodyguards would never risk letting you take medicine that could potentially kill you," Mia said with a wave of her hand. "I was the one that suggested she just shove it in your mouth. I just didn't expect her to actually do it." Mia chuckled before coughing and gripping her chest. Lilly gave her a scowl, as if daring her to laugh again on her watch. The strict healer was not docile. She was crazy passionate and devoted to her patients.

Kemper went rigid beside me. “You’re lucky you’re still recovering, Mia,” Kemper said, his voice carrying a hard edge that I hadn’t expected from him. “I respect you and your brother, but I’d lock you in with Jules for this stunt.”

“And I’d gladly accept my punishment. Sometimes it’s better to ask forgiveness than permission, huh? There are much bigger problems at stake. The risk was worth it.”

I stared at Mia, looking into her deep brown eyes for a moment as her playful grin turned serious. She was always wild, but there was a maturity about her. What had happened these last five months?

Kemper spoke again while rubbing circles on my shoulder with his fingers. “We have a meeting in three hours with Aarav and the tribe elders. They want to discuss why you’re here and the safety of the camp. I’m happy to see you, but it’s brought up some concerns about us being here.”

“We won’t be here long,” Mia replied cryptically.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Lilly interrupted. Payne had moved to the floor, and she had him stripping the leaves off a plant. “You’re in no condition to be walking around—at least not until your fever is down.” Lilly crossed her tattooed arms over her chest. Long, grey hair with frizzy ends covered her shoulders.

“That might not be an option, Lilly,” Kemper said.

“Bah! I *am* the council. What I say goes. It doesn’t take a title to make decisions. It just takes having the power to kill or save anyone,” Lilly said while gesturing towards her work station. Wasn’t that the problem, though? I didn’t tell Lilly how much her views reminded me of Cavil, but I couldn’t help but shiver at her seemingly harmless comment.

“Can I go to the meeting?” Payne asked.

“Not today, buddy. And don’t let me catch you hiding in the woods and eavesdropping again, either,” Kemper replied. Something about his words made me pause. A memory as temporary as smoke tickled at the edge of my mind. I clung to

it. I slumped and put my head in my hands, trying to picture the fading dream in my mind's eye.

“You okay, *Agrio*?” Lilly asked. Kemper massaged my neck as I visualized my dream. I was at Stonewell Manor. Josiah was there. I'd never believed in ghosts before. I wasn't one to think that we were haunted by the dead. But maybe we could be haunted by the living, and the memories of life trapped in our heads.

“While I was asleep, I think I had a dream...or a memory,” I replied. My voice was muffled, but Kemper's hand froze on my neck. A thick finger landed beneath my chin and tilted my gaze up until I was staring into Lilly's grey eyes.

“You were dead for a short while, *Agrio*. I've seen many things in my time here. Many unexplainable things. Maybe you saw a ghost,” Lilly said, her voice ominous as she plopped a heavy hand on my forehead to check for a fever. “But, you feel fine. No fever. The only thing wrong with you is your smell. I thought I'd have to burn down the medic tent. What you need is a good bath.” Lilly looked to Kemper. “You said three hours?”

“Yes,” Kemper replied.

“She's going to need all three to get cleaned up,” Lilly said, wrinkling her nose, causing Payne and Mia to burst out in conspiratory giggles. I didn't bother to respond, I simply rolled my eyes and stood. I'd focus on the strange memory later.

Kemper stood with me, and Lilly made quick work of giving Payne more to do. “Aarav said that Jules could get out of confinement when you woke up,” Kemper said as we exited the tent.

“Well, then I guess I should have stayed dead,” I replied with a giggle. It felt easier to joke with Kemper. Losing the fetter and having Jules and Mia here was bringing back tiny parts of myself. Now, if only I could get back the parts I missed most: Cyler, Maverick, and Jacob.

While I was underwater, the world felt quiet. The only sound I could hear was the rushing water and my pounding

pulse. The lack of oxygen had my lungs craving air, and the tingling toxic water from the Deadlands had my skin humming. The river was a force to be reckoned with. When we first moved here, many elders warned us to be wary of the current. I liked to test myself. While under, I'd dig my feet into the riverbed and stand against the current until the need to breathe was too much and my muscles felt weak.

Since my time in Ethros, I'd spent a lot of time seeking opportunities to feel strong. Whereas in the areas of my life where genuine strength mattered, I was weak. I couldn't get over the betrayal. The abandonment. The anger.

When I emerged from the water, my eyes connected with Kemper. Once, I thought the kind, blue-eyed man from Dormas was shy. I believed him to be soft-spoken and timid. But the way his hungry stare trailed over my skin was brash and confident. He looked at me like I was his to look at. The brazen stare was unbreakable. I didn't cover myself. There was no need for modesty. Nudity was common in the Deadlands, and it felt freeing to see his attraction as he drank in my appearance.

When Kemp insisted on accompanying me to bathe in the creek, I knew the tension between us would return. It was palpable. Unavoidable. Although I'd been numb to the passion between us these last five months, it was like I had reawakened. I wanted to pick back up where we left off, but I didn't know how. Diving into the physical aspects of my relationships with Kemper, Patrick, and Huxley felt like giving up on Cyler, Maverick, and Jacob.

As I walked out of the water, droplets of the acidic water tingled trails down my bare skin. It left irritated streaks of red. The sun felt more intense here, and I noticed a healthy tan along my arms, legs, and stomach. When I stood on the bank, I stretched my arms high above my head, welcoming the heat of the sun as it dried me, and gave Kemper a generous view of my naked form.

My eyes were closed, but I could feel his appraisal of me. I knew that he was savoring each inch of my skin. "You're beautiful," Kemper said in awe. The Galla girl I once was

would have squirmed under his heated gaze, but not me. I opened my eyes to stare back at Kemper. No bashful blush donned my cheeks. I accepted his compliment and wore it like armor. I'd lost my timidness in Ethros. I might not have deserved the adoring look in Kemper's gaze, but I craved it. "I thought when I failed you in Ethros that perfection was unattainable. But looking at you now, it sure seems to exist."

"Why's that?" I asked, already sensing where this line of thinking was going. Why was Kemper so obsessed with perfection?

"You're perfect, Ash. Absolutely perfect."

I lowered my arms and wrapped them around my stomach, suddenly feeling less confident. Before Ethros, I liked the pedestal the guys put me on, but now I wanted equal ground. I didn't want to be worshipped and saved. I wanted respect and love. "I'm not perfect, Kemper. No one is. And you didn't fail." Dragging each step, I walked towards him with a frown on my face. "*We* failed. All of us."

Kemper reached behind himself, grabbing a thick blanket hanging on a low Deadlands branch. Once we were close enough, he wrapped it around my shoulders. His fingers lightly brushed along my breasts, making my heart race as he closed the fabric around me.

"How?" Kemper asked.

I wrapped the blanket tighter around me. "We didn't talk. We failed because we expected the intense love we had for one another to be enough. You self-sacrificing assholes didn't include me, and I blindly trusted that we'd never be apart. We failed each other."

"All my life, my grandfather taught me to fix the things that are broken," Kemper said while licking his lips. "Now I want to fix *you*, but I don't know where to start."

"Don't you think that's a lot of pressure to put on yourself, Kemper? My brokenness isn't your responsibility. Loving someone means accepting them as they are. I won't be... grieving... forever. But I'm not just some problem you can fix."

The sooner you realize that, the easier this will be.” For all my talk, I couldn’t help but feel somewhat insecure that my brokenness was pushing him away. Could the guys handle this sort of unconditional love?

Would they ever get the chance to try?

Kemper nodded his head in agreement, but the uncertain look on his face made me doubt that he’d absorbed my words. I didn’t like feeling like a broken project. I was sad. I was angry. I was experiencing the normal progression of feelings. When you’re trying to survive, there’s no time to process your grief. The empire was full of desensitized citizens, but I would rather be motivated by anger than be complacent.

“I know things are about to change,” Kemper said before tucking a curly strand of my hair behind my ears. “I’m thankful for our time here, but I’m done hitting pause on our relationship. I’m going to help you get mad. I’m going to bring you back, flaws and all. I can love your brokenness, Ash. I’ll cherish each little jagged piece of you.”

My heart clenched, and I squeezed my eyes shut. Kemper looked so determined. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that three of my jagged pieces were left behind in Ethros.



## CHAPTER FIVE

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“I knew you’d be fine. Maverick never fails,” she said with a flick of her wrist. Kemper and I had made our way back towards camp after I got dressed. The moment I heard Jules mention Maverick, I practically sprinted towards her, eager to hear more. I was like an addict for information.

“Is he okay? When did you see him?” I asked, done with dancing around what she knew. I wanted answers, *now*.

The cage was made out of carved wood and stood only about six feet tall and four feet wide. Although it was the camp’s makeshift prison, Jules made it look like she was living in a palace. With her sleek hair and rosy cheeks, you wouldn’t have known that, yesterday, she killed a man and, today, killed me. She was too relaxed, too unaffected. Aside from where Tallis and Mia were concerned, she was always unaffected.

“I didn’t actually see him. I have a contact in the Resistance that visits him regularly. She was able to bring me a note and the pill.”

I tried to ignore the ebbing jealousy that rocked through me like a punch to the chest. My mind lingered on the idea that a woman was visiting Maverick regularly. It sounded like they had a system of sorts, but I couldn’t help but consider he’d moved on during our time apart.

“What did the note say?” I asked.

“It was a short description of the medicine he concocted and how to use it.”

“What else has he said? Do you talk to them often? What happened to Jacob?”

“I’ll explain it all at the meeting.”

Behind me, Huxley and Patrick arrived, each wearing matching scowls. “Happy to see you’re okay. Kinda pissed we were the last to know,” Huxley growled at me before giving Kemper a pointed stare.

“Ash needed a bath, and I went to accompany her,” Kemper replied nonchalantly, but I heard the teasing edge in his tone, taunting the twins with the implications of his statement. Patrick’s lip quirked up in a smirk.

“I can’t even blame you, Kemp.”

I looked over my shoulder at Huxley and nodded, wordlessly indicating for him to let her out of solitary. I wanted to get to this meeting as quickly as possible. He took his time finding the key in his pocket. And before he could slide the metal into the lock, I shot my hand out and clamped down on his wrist, stopping him.

“Why?”

“Why what?” Jules asked. She was bouncing on the balls of her feet, ready to strike. I’d come to understand Jules well during our short time together. She enjoyed conflict.

“Why go through all those theatrics? You could have explained. You didn’t have to knock me over and shove a pill down my throat.”

I watched as Jules crossed her thin arms over her chest and looked between Huxley, Patrick, and Kemper. “For starters, while you’ve been hiding away here in the Deadlands, I’ve been fighting for my brothers’ lives. I joined the Resistance and helped come up with a plan. This is paradise compared to what I’ve been through. Maybe I was angry. Maybe I wanted a little revenge. Maybe I’ve become desensitized to death.”

I squinted my eyes in confusion. What did she expect from me? “I wasn’t trying to abandon anyone,” I said. “I had no choice.”

“There is always a choice. And you didn’t just abandon my brothers, you abandoned *me*.”

“I never abandoned you, Jules. I was grieving you. I thought you were dead.”

Her black pupils widened in surprise as if the concept had never occurred to her. She was so quick to assume that people would leave, she couldn’t comprehend that I had spent the last five months feeling devastated over the unknown. Jules was another person I’d lost before I ever really got her. We were at the beginning stages of a friendship and not knowing felt better than acceptance.

She coughed back whatever emotion was bubbling up in her chest before speaking. “Well. I’m alive. And fine. Your grief wasn’t necessary. It takes more than rejection to kill me.” I didn’t miss the double meaning in her words. “And now I need your help. So let me out of here so we can move forward.”

I released Huxley’s wrist so that he could let her out of solitary. And once the cage doors opened, she glided out with a frown. Passing me with her confident posture, she made her way towards the main campfire.

“Oh, and Ash?” she called out over her shoulder. “I should be honest with you. I didn’t sit you down to talk to you because I knew there was a very slim chance that it *could* kill you. Maverick didn’t know who the pill was for. We told him it was for another immune Companion. He has been against you using it because some people have adverse reactions. Some never wake up.”

I sucked in a breath as Huxley went still. His muscles tensed and shook, and I sensed that one of his episodes was imminent. “I was clinging to my anger because it was the only way I could do what I needed to do. You’re no use to the Resistance with a fetter.”

I understood better than anyone that we must do what we can to survive. Some risks are worth the reward. “Thank you,” I said. I appreciated that Jules never held back her punches. She was a realist and stuck to her decisions. I was glad she

took the risk because I'm not sure I would've ever been free had she waited for the guys to give her the okay. While wrapping my arm around Huxley's waist, I pulled my body towards his. I knew that he needed to feel me, to ground himself against me.

"You're welcome," Jules choked out before lifting her chin up and straightening her spine once more. Patrick and Kemper gaped at her as she walked proudly towards the meeting. They saw a heartless woman, but I saw the truth—she was just a girl doing what she had to do.

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THE HAZY GREEN smoke of the fire filled the space as the Scavenger elders and Chief Aarav entered. Jules sat across from us alone until, to my surprise, Linda Stonewell joined her. Linda sauntered over to Jules while scowling at me. I was sure she had to get her own water today and was not amused by my absence. Death wasn't an excuse.

When she settled by Jules, they didn't acknowledge one another. I often wondered if Linda Stonewell regretted bringing Jules Black into her life. It was her arranged marriage with Josiah that led to the sequence of events that caused Josiah's death. Even so, they sat side-by-side in wordless solidarity. Despite Jules' new infatuation with the Resistance, Linda Stonewell still viewed her as an Elite. It made me wonder if she shared Cavil's views on a person's breeding surpassing all. According to him, a person's worth was dependent on their ability to afford the cure.

Aarav made his way towards the fire, ignoring the huffs of Mistress Stonewell's disapproval at his bare feet and torso. She made it very clear what she thought of the Scavenger way of life. Linda couldn't see the beauty in their simplistic approach to living.

Just as Aarav opened his mouth to speak, it dawned on me that people from every class were here.

Walker.

Elite.

Resistance.

Scavenger.

“These new guests have raised some security concerns for our people,” Aarav explained. He gestured behind him to a row of elders with stoic expressions. “We feel that if you can be so easily found, then it is no longer safe for you to stay here.”

I wasn't surprised. Our time in the Deadlands was limited. In a way, I was happy that Jules and Mia found us. I was tired of feeling stuck in limbo.

“However, we do see the value in supporting your cause. We would like to listen to your plan for ending Cavil's reign. Then, we will make a decision about our involvement which will mutually benefit everyone. We want to know how best to support you all while protecting our community.”

Spoken like a true politician. The way Aarav commanded a space almost reminded me of Cyler. Aarav turned to stare at Jules who preened under the attention. “I guess it's my turn then?” she asked while standing.

Flipping her hair over her shoulder, she made her way towards the fire, stopping at Aarav to place her palm on his chest and bow, a sign I'd learned meant respect. She mastered the move effortlessly as if the Scavenger way of life had become second nature to her during our time apart.

“Tallis of the Western Scavenger tribe is recruiting a team of the best fighters to bring down Cavil from within. We are using a brothel in the Zone to infiltrate his home. At the end of the month, a small team of Companions is going to kill Cavil in his tower in Galla.”

“A brothel?” Huxley asked.

“Walker Companions have more access than members of the Elite. They're with Cavil and his team of soldiers when they are their most vulnerable.” It was brilliant, actually. Who else could slip under Cavil's radar?

“We’re working with a woman, Madam B. She has been very instrumental. Her girls exchange intelligence between our people. But lately, Cavil has been more picky about who he is letting into his home. With the cure becoming obsolete, only immune Walker Companions are allowed.”

I’m immune. This was my chance!

“Yes, little Walker,” Jules said, rolling her eyes. “This means you get to finally join the adults and help.” I was almost embarrassed at how pleased I looked. I rolled my eyes. When I first met Jules, I thought she was so naive. She might be younger than me, but now I felt inexperienced compared to her.

“Absolutely not,” Huxley murmured under his breath. I knew he would be an obstacle, but he didn’t have a choice. I’d do this with or without him.

“Rumor has it that you killed Lackley when the lights went dark. It’s how Tallis has been recruiting people. Everyone wants to help the “Queen of the Walkers.” She threw up finger quotations to stress her point. “Forget the woman actually doing all the hard work here,” she scoffed.

My mouth dropped open in shock. They thought I killed Lackley? They were calling me Queen of the Walkers? I was no queen. I was a coward.

“Don’t look at me that way, little Walker. I don’t like it any more than you do, but don’t go playing the victim now. Accept it. Hell, embrace it. It’s going to save them.”

Patrick stood and ran his hands through his hair, looking around at the elders while taking in a deep breath, “So, what about us? What can we do?”

“You can help the Resistance in however they deem fit,” she replied with a smirk.

“I don’t like this,” Kemper grumbled. Beside me, Huxley was sitting tall, his back straight and stiff.

“The database,” Kemper finally said. He had his hand on his chin and was deep in thought. “She can’t get past the database. They’ll scan her on arrival and know who she is

right off the bat.” Kemper sat up and snapped his fingers. “And what about her scar? Won’t Cavil and his men think it’s strange that she’s had her fetter removed? And what if Cavil recognizes her, or what if, as a Companion, she’s selected to do...well...what Companions do? Too many variables. I vote no.”

Jules seemed unfazed by Kemper’s line of reasoning. However, Aarav seemed interested in her response. “I agree. There seems to be a lot of vulnerabilities in this plan. We cannot provide our support unless we know it has a high likelihood of succeeding,” Aarav said.

“We have a hacker that will alter the database. He’s already working on it as we speak. We have dummy fetters that don’t electrocute but trick the guards. I’m handy with makeup, and her hair is already turning white. And she won’t be claimed by one of Cavil’s men because they’ll all be dead before it even gets to that point,” Jules assured him. Aarav stroked his chin, eyeing Jules with respect.

“So then what?” I asked. “Cavil still has guards eager to do his bidding. The problem isn’t just the men in power. There’s an entire way of thinking we have to go to war against,” I argued.

I stood and began pacing around the fire until I was standing in front of Jules. “I’ll help. But we need to have long-term solutions. We need to ensure that the next Cavil or Lackley doesn’t rise to power. We have to shut down the infrastructure.” A droplet of sweat rolled down my cheek from the heat of the fire.

“The night Cavil dies, we plan to start massive riots in the Zone,” Jules replied. “The hope is Maverick will escape and figure out this cure once and for all. Then we’ll get people in power that actually have good intentions for the empire. But there is a long road ahead of us before then. Right now, the priority is bringing down Cavil and his army.”

It was a plan. One without a high likelihood of succeeding. So much seemed stacked against us, but I clung to the hope

that we could actually leave this all behind and end up in a better world for ourselves.

“So what about me? What about Payne? Surely you aren’t considering bringing us along?” Linda said, clutching her pearl necklace and looking around the campfire at us. I had almost forgotten that she was here. It was unlike her to be so quiet and amenable.

I looked to Aarav, praying he’d let them stay if we agreed to leave. Behind him, the elders began frantically whispering to one another. It was no secret that Mistress Stonewell hadn’t made many friends here.

“You may stay until after Cavil has been unseated. We will allow it,” Aarav said with a definitive nod, ignoring the groans of the elders. I heard someone whisper “damn” but bit back my laugh. “We will listen for updates. Should you succeed in killing Cavil, I will send word to the other Chiefs, and we will join your cause.”

“Thank you,” Jules and I replied at the same time.

The elders stood, placing their hands over their hearts, then in unison said, “It is decided. Go with strength.”



## CHAPTER SIX

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**W**e walked in silence back to our temporary home on the outskirts of the Water Tribe's camp. Although feeling determined to follow through with Jules' plan, I wanted to comfort my guys. I held Huxley's hand as we walked, making sure to keep him grounded. I'd gotten to the point where I could predict his moods, and I didn't want him to slip into his triggered overprotective mode. It had been a while since he'd been destructive and closed off.

As we continued down the trail, Huxley's grip on my hand tightened. I welcomed the pain of his hold, knowing it was what he needed to feel strong. I'd prepared myself for his moodiness. But before we could get to our tent, he abruptly stopped walking and pulled me backward. Ahead of us, Patrick, Kemper, and Mistress Stonewell kept heading down the path. "We'll catch up," Huxley growled.

Kemper and Linda kept going, seemingly indifferent to his odd behavior. But Patrick paused, turning to look at us with uncertainty. Patrick needed to feel useful when Huxley got like this. It was his own personal atonement for what happened to his parents all those years ago. Huxley would never ask for his brother's help.

"Come on," I told Patrick. Unlike Hux, I wasn't too proud to say what I needed. I needed Patrick to be okay. I needed Huxley to feel like I was safe. Navigating Huxley's triggers was difficult, and more than anything, it was important to me that Patrick didn't feel distanced from his brother. I made a

promise long ago to Hux that I wouldn't come between them, and I wasn't going to start now.

Huxley didn't protest. He pulled me off the trail and guided us towards the grove where we usually held our sparring sessions. We'd spent so many nights walking these woods alone together, that I could have gone to our special spot with my eyes closed.

Once by our tree, Huxley pressed me up against the rough bark, the wood scraping along my bare shoulders. And when he crashed his lips to mine, it took my breath away. My heart lost its rhythm, and the steady balance of confidence I pretended to teeter on finally toppled over. I poured my doubts, my fears, and my inadequacies into the fire of his touch. With Patrick watching, Huxley darted his tongue out, tasting me. I felt everything and nothing all at once. He drank me in like I was the last drop of water in a large basin of disappointments.

He thrust his knee between my legs and ran his hands up and down my body. The tips of his fingers grazed the sides of my breasts as he moved from hips to chest. I couldn't remember why I was sad or what numbness I'd been clinging to. His kisses reminded me I'm worthy. His kisses tasted like home. Like Dormas. Like family and hope and all the things I'd been missing these last five months.

"You're not going," he growled against my mouth as I arched my back to get closer. Angry, I pulled back, but the hard bark stopped me from distancing myself too much.

"You're not going to stop me," I replied. I wanted my voice to sound harsh and unrelenting, but the words that escaped my clenched teeth sounded like a whimper. I craved Huxley's kisses on a visceral level—and he knew it.

Huxley danced the tips of his fingertips along my collarbone before pushing down the straps of my grey tank top. He dived into nibbling the defined bone, causing my sensitive skin to pebble wherever his wet lips touched. I opened my eyes and was gifted with Patrick's hooded stare.

The last time he watched us, he seemed uncertain. Now, there was nothing but hope in his gaze.

“Huxley, you can’t kiss me until I forget,” I moaned out as he dragged his teeth along my skin, knowing my words held no truth. Huxley’s kisses were already making me forget.

“Are you sure? It seems to be working,” he replied with a chuckle. His hot breath feathered along my skin, making me blossom with white-hot desire.

“I thought you needed me to help you...” I wasn’t sure if he was comfortable mentioning his episodes. Nor did I want to distract him from the delicious pleasure he was washing over me. As I writhed between the rough tree and his calloused hands, I appreciated this new distraction tactic.

“The only thing I need is you coming on my cock, little Walker,” he replied.

Patrick gasped, and the sound made Huxley pause and spin around to stare at his brother with a wide smile. This was interesting—and thrilling. “Come here,” he urged. There was something sexy about knowing Patrick wanted me.

Patrick didn’t need telling twice. He practically stumbled over his feet to get to me. Huxley moved aside, making room for Patrick, and I stared into the hungry eyes of my playful twin. For five months, I’d been in an emotionless haze, but now that hope was on the horizon, my feelings were flooding back.

“Kiss her,” Huxley ordered. Patrick was more forgiving than Huxley. He kissed me slow and sweet, licking the seam of my lips like he was asking for my consent. I was greedy with his touch, hanging on the edge of each of his movements and pressing for more.

“You’re not going, Ash,” Huxley said again. His voice was grave as he spoke. Desire dancing along each syllable of his demanding words.

I pulled back once more, earning a groan of disapproval from Patrick. “Yes, I am.” Patrick dipped his hand between my legs. Curling his finger, he stroked me with a grin as I gasped.

“You’re not going, Ash,” Huxley growled once more. “Tell me you won’t go, and we’ll give you what you want—what you need.”

I was too embarrassed to admit what his words were doing to me. I felt like a knot that had been tied tight, and the twins were pulling at the ends.

“And what is it you think I want?” I asked while placing my hands on Patrick’s shoulders. In my limited experience, I usually let the guys take the lead. But tonight, I wanted to show them just how capable I was. I ran my hands down his chest then over the bulge in his pants, slowly stroking over the denim material.

“You want us,” Huxley said while unzipping his pants and pulling out his throbbing cock. It was glorious and hard. He stroked it for me then, dragging my attention away from Patrick and onto his graceful movements.

I swallowed deeply before yanking Patrick’s hand out of my pants and dropping to my knees with a thud. The ground was dry and hard, but I kept my eyes on Huxley to my left while fumbling with the zipper on Patrick’s pants. “Are you saying I can’t have you if I go, Hux?”

He stopped mid-stroke to stare at me as I freed Patrick. The anticipation was carnal. Huxley stood still, holding tightly to his hardness while I let out an exhale of hot breath over Patrick. “Because there was a time I might have accepted that. But not anymore,” I said before twisting my head to look up at Patrick through my thick lashes. My body was straining to please him. I wanted to show him that his patience had been worth it. “Now? I fight for what’s mine. And don’t you forget that you all belong to me just as much as I belong to you.”

I licked my lips before lifting up on my knees a little. Gripping the base of his cock, I slid my mouth over the head slowly. Patrick’s want was palpable. I drew him into my mouth with patience, taking each incredible inch of him while Huxley watched. And when he bumped the back of my throat, Patrick let out a moan that made me preen.

“Fuck, so good.”

I moved up and down his shaft, sucking and savoring as he praised me with his gasps. Leaning forward, Patrick placed his palm against the trunk of the tree, squirming as I alternated between swirling my tongue around and moving my lips along his shaft. “Don’t stop,” Huxley ordered in a hoarse voice as I continued to give Patrick’s well-deserved pleasure.

I felt his cock jolt against my tongue, and I pulled away, earning a string of expletives from Patrick’s chest. “Fuck, Sweets, don’t stop. Please.” I loved the affectionate nickname that slipped. Hearing him beg ignited me. I’d never felt more powerful, and this was the most alive I’d felt in ages. Instead of giving in to his wishes, I turned to Huxley who was biting his lip and staring at me with his hazy green eyes.

“I’m going, Huxley,” I whispered. “But you’re going with me. We’re in this together.”

Huxley didn’t respond right away. I wondered if I had pushed too far. They could want to protect me, but I knew that this was right. I felt it in my gut. This was always how it should have been. Us trusting one another. Making decisions as a family. “Fine,” he finally whispered. With a nod, I turned back to Patrick to finish what I’d started. Up and down I went, testing different sensations. I hummed on his cock and kept moving until he was jerking in my mouth. Hot, salty cum slid down my throat, and I sucked off every drop like it was my job. Knowing I did this to Patrick. Knowing that he was at my will felt better than fighting, than numbing myself. If I’d known how good giving into my desires would be, I wouldn’t have waited so long.

Standing, I turned to stare at Huxley.

It was the most relaxed I’d ever seen him. His hooded eyes were free of stress and the responsibilities he wore every day. I slowly approached him, keeping my eyes on his broad shoulders until I was resting my hands on his chest. His hard cock bumped against my stomach. Soft wonder came over his face as he stared at me.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispered before stroking my cheek.

“What do you mean?”

A hand on my shoulder made me turn around to face Patrick. He intertwined our fingers and smiled down at me. “You know I’ve always had to do all the talking for him.” Hard hands jerked down my pants from behind, and when they landed on the ground, I stepped out of the heap of fabric and kicked it away.

While I stared into Patrick’s eyes, Huxley slid his hardness between my thigh gap, rubbing it against me and sliding along my bundle of nerves. I gasped while Patrick threw me a wicked grin.

“He means, even if he hates the thought of you going into danger, he’d go to hell and back to see you this alive again. You’ve been numb for so long.”

Huxley gripped my hips, his nails digging into my skin and lifting my shirt up. Patrick cupped my cheeks in his hands. “We know you need this, sweetie.” His voice was husky, his words slow and savory. “So we’re gonna do whatever it takes.”

Patrick then kissed me as Huxley continued to rub along my slick seam. I clenched my thighs tighter together. Huxley and Patrick owned my moans. The three of us went like this for what felt like hours. I craved Huxley inside of me but was glad that he didn’t cross that barrier. When things calmed down and I finally took that step with my guys, I wanted it to be special. And I wanted each individual to have my undivided attention.

I squirmed, grabbing Patrick’s hair to deepen our kiss. Each time Huxley slid along my clit, a sharp and wanton thrill flowed through my core, rising my pulse to a peak of ecstasy.

“Oh, God,” I moaned into Patrick’s mouth as I rode a wave of pleasure, and determination settled in my bones. I knew that this was it. There was power in accepting an uncertain future.

I spun around and grabbed Huxley, pumping up and down his shaft with my palm. Huxley, my wordless warrior, allowed

nothing but sighs to escape his lips as he came. It felt wonderfully wicked, like my needs were finally awakening.

“Just be safe,” he finally whispered before resting his forehead on mine.

We walked to the creek to bathe. Patrick massaged my back as Huxley kissed the tingly droplets of water along my skin. I wasn't sure where we went from here. And the rapid way their chests rose and fell made me think that there was still much more left unsaid between our hearts—and our bodies. No, this wasn't over. This was a battle I'd gladly be fighting until there was no longer air in my lungs.

But for now, there was work to be done. “We should go back and pack,” I suggested while wading over to the bank of the river.

“Are you sure you don't want to stay a bit longer and...?” Patrick offered, but I placed a hand on his muscular chest and grinned.

“There will be more time for that,” I replied. I was determined to explore everything with my men. I was done being the martyr. I was done keeping my emotions at bay or feeling guilty for the decisions Cyler, Maverick, and Jacob made. It was time to fight for what I wanted. It was time for revenge.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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**A**arav gave us two days to leave, but we planned to head out by morning. Luckily, the elders allowed Mia to stay while she healed, so Jules slept with her in the medic tent for the night.

Of everything, I feared saying goodbye to Payne the most. I knew Linda, Mia, Lilly, and Aarav would watch over him, but we'd built up a strong bond in the last five months. He represented everything I once loved about Josiah. He represented the naive innocence I'd abandoned when I left Stonewell Manor.

He couldn't come to where we were going. Although I didn't know Dominique well, she was the reason we were able to escape. I owed it to her to keep him safe and happy, which meant I'd have to leave him behind.

He was lingering outside the tent he and Linda lived in, watching Patrick, Huxley, and me approach. "So you're gonna leave me, huh?" he asked. His boyish face was scowling at us, and the bright, glowing trees of the Deadlands left ominous shadows along his pale skin.

"Ah, come on, kid. It'll be fine! We'll be back before you know it," Patrick joked while nudging his shoulder. I sensed that he was trying to lighten the mood, but Payne didn't budge.

"Why can't I go?" he pleaded. Linda emerged from her tent to see what the commotion was. She then frowned at his dirty shirt and began brushing off his clothes.



“How many times do I have to tell you not to climb the Deadlands trees?” she scolded. “I’ve told you numerous times, we need to keep your clothes clean.”

“I don’t care,” he said with a pout while pulling away from her. “Why are you leaving me, Ash? I can help!”

I knelt so that we were eye level, peering into his crystal blue eyes and forcing memories of a young Josiah from my mind. “You’ll be safe here. We’ll come back, and I’ll show you Dormas. Don’t you want to see Dormas?”

I’d been telling him about Dormas since the day we met. Keeping my memory of home alive gave me hope. He, too, seemed infatuated with the town of cabins and kind people. He wanted to visit my bakery and check out Cyler’s treehouse. I vowed to show him one day.

“I guess,” he said. “My mom said you’d play with me forever. She said you’d be my best friend and keep me safe.” My heart ached. Payne had been forced to grow up quickly, but he was still a child, after all.

“You know we can still be friends, right? Me being far away doesn’t change that. Nothing will stop us from being friends.”

I looked behind me, and Huxley and Patrick discreetly filed into our tent. Linda stayed put, eyeing Payne with annoyance and...jealousy? I knew that she’d always been jealous of Josiah’s and my close relationship. Now she was projecting onto Payne as well. I should have wanted to keep Payne from her. She was a major source of sadness in my life. However, I also wanted some small form of redemption for Mistress Stonewell. I wanted her to be loved. I wanted her to right the wrongs of her past.

“You know Mistress Stonewell will need to learn how to fish since we’ll be gone. Do you think you could be a big boy and take her to the creek and show her? I know she’s excited to spend more time with you. Mistress Stonewell loves you very much.”

Linda froze but kept her expression cool. I'd never heard her tell Josiah that she loved him. She never voiced her feelings, and looking back, I wondered if she regretted not letting him know. Josiah died thinking that his mother prioritized her affair with Lackley over his wellbeing. I knew, if given the chance to do it all over, she would pick Josiah. She would have always picked Josiah. But maybe now, she could pick Payne—in her own weird little way, at least until she returns.

Payne looked to Linda with a grin. “Do you really? Can we go?” he asked her. I found it funny how quickly a child's emotions could flip. He went from anger to sadness. Now he seemed excited.

Linda pressed her lips but didn't shoot him down. “Go clean up and get in bed, and tomorrow you can take me there. But I'm not touching a fish,” she quickly added.

“Yes, Mistress Stonewell,” he said, straightening his back and turning to obediently enter the tent. He paused at the entrance, though, and turned to look at me over his shoulder.

“If you see my mom, can you tell her I miss her?” he asked. I shouldn't make promises I couldn't keep. I knew that there were consequences for building up expectations in a child's mind when the world was ending.

Yet, I couldn't help myself. “If I see her, I'll bring her back.”

Payne bit his lip to hide his grin, but I saw it anyways. And despite the nagging feeling in my chest that I would fail him, I lightened at his happiness.

“Bye, Ash,” he said before disappearing into their tent.

I turned to look at Linda Stonewell. I didn't expect to exchange any heartfelt words of comfort and closure. She wouldn't hug me goodbye or offer me forgiveness for her son's death.

“Well, get on with it then,” I said, preparing myself for another one of her insults.

“Companions are a completely different breed of Walker. They’re coy and flirtatious. They are put together like an Elite but lack the same restrictions.”

I was surprised by her comments and felt unsure of where this was going. “Keep your eyes down, but don’t do that annoying thing you do when you clutch your dress in your fist. There’s an underlying confidence in the way a Companion is submissive.”

Instinctually, I lowered my gaze, feeling unsure of how to navigate this seemingly helpful conversation. Where was the insult? The pain? The feeling of unworthiness she so easily forced onto me?

“I never liked you. A pretty, little, immune Walker. A pet. Just another trophy on my husband’s mantle I had to compete with. Josiah clung to you, but I don’t think it was ever really love. My son was so starved for affection, he stole it from wherever he could. I failed him in that regard. He wanted me to be the bad guy. He wanted to blame me for Lackley’s influence in his life, but he craved a father just as much as I craved a husband. You know who the real victim is in all of this?”

I didn’t move. Didn’t breathe. This was the most authentic conversation Mistress Stonewell and I had ever had, and I was equal parts broken and thankful. Linda never respected me enough to tell me the truth. I was never deserving of her time nor her effort. These words hurt, they cut me to the bone, but it also meant that she found me worthy of her honesty.

“No one. No one is the victim. We all are a product of the decisions we make, and we all have to suffer the consequences. I’m not going to give you my forgiveness. Nor am I going to wish you luck. The greatest lesson I could ever give you is to never seek validation from others.” With that ominous statement, Mistress Stonewell left me to join Payne in their tent. And for the first time since knowing her, I didn’t leave feeling bad about myself.

The next morning, there was a strange mix of fear and anticipation in the air. We’d spent the evening not talking

about last night or the inevitable danger ahead of us. Aarav and a tired looking Mia met us in the camp center to say goodbye. She was pale but stubbornly trying to stand. Luckily, Aarav kept his hand on her shoulder, gently encouraging Mia to sit in the makeshift wheelchair they'd made out of a repurposed wagon.

Jules hugged Mia tightly, and for a moment I felt envious of their friendship. The Resistance had bonded them. Adjusting my pack higher up on my shoulder, I shuffled closer and grinned when Mia's face brightened.

"Ah, my *Agrio!* Look at you, dressed to kill and ready to take on the empire," she joked while holding her arms out for me to hug her. I leaned down and wrapped my arms around my Scavenger friend, breathing in her woodsy scent and reveling in the contact. "Do you remember what your name means?" Mia asked while pulling away. "It means Wild One. Remember that there is structure even in the wild. Act with intention. Take time to think, and give 'em hell."

My eyes watered a bit, and Huxley bent down to give his dear friend a hug as I went to see Payne. Linda had opted to sleep-in this morning, but I wasn't bothered by her absence. I was taking her advice to heart, I wasn't seeking her approval anymore.

"You listen to Mistress Stonewell," I said while smoothing his light blond hair, pausing when I realized I was mimicking her fussing so I ruffled his boyish tresses instead. "But challenge her to do fun stuff too," I added with a wink.

His bottom lip jutted out in a slight pout, but his steel eyes were locked on me as he nodded enthusiastically. "I'm taking her fishing today," he said with forced excitement.

"Be sure to make her hook the worm."

Standing, I looked around the camp as the sun rose over the white leaves of the glowing trees. I wondered where Lilly was but smiled when I heard her worn voice calling out with huffs as she climbed the hill in the distance.

“You idiots better not leave without saying goodbye to me, first.”

I smiled as Kemper ran to assist her. She was carrying a pack almost bigger than she, overflowing with various jars containing herbs. Her hair was frizzy and eyes red and puffy.

“I thought I had two days to prepare for your leaving. I’ve been gathering supplies all night,” she complained while rubbing her nose and fumbling towards me.

“I included the basics. I enjoyed tutoring you, *Agrio*. I hope to see you again.”

Lilly’s eyes shone with emotion, but she blinked it away before letting a single tear fall. Although our time together was short, I had grown to appreciate Lilly and her abrupt ways. “Teach them a thing or two, will ya?” she joked. We had spent many hours arguing over the benefits and shortcomings of modern medicine, and I genuinely looked forward to showing Maverick some of what I’d learned.

“Thank you, Lilly,” I said with a grin. The time and knowledge she’d poured into me were invaluable. I didn’t doubt for a moment that I would use it.

“I have something for you,” I said while snapping my fingers. Behind me, Patrick dug through my pack and pulled out the sketch pad I’d been working on since studying under Lilly. “It’s for your next student. I sketched all the plants and labeled them with their healing properties. Hopefully, it can help.”

Lilly greedily took the leather-bound journal from me and thumbed through the pages as a single, fat tear rolled down her cheek. She quickly wiped it away before it could fall on the sketchbook. We’d spoken briefly about how she wished there were a way she could share the information with more people, but she didn’t know how to write.

“You’re making an emotional woman out of me, *Agrio*,” she huffed. “Travel safe.”

She then clutched the journal to her chest and filed in line beside a smirking Aarav. It was rare the grumpy healer showed

emotion, and the moment she caught him chuckling at her, she popped him behind the head.

Huxley placed his hand on my lower back, gently encouraging me to leave. But Jules was less subtle in her desire to get moving.

“Alright, idiots, let’s get the show on the road. If we leave now, we can be there by nightfall.”

My guys looked to me, and I sensed that they were waiting for me to change my mind. I appreciated that they were willing to let me take the lead.

“Let’s save your brothers,” I said with a sigh. “So I can kill them.”

Jules whooped. “Now we’re talking!”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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I hadn't been in a transport since arriving in the Deadlands. Seeing the technology was jarring, almost. After spending so long in the simplicity of camp, I almost forgot we could travel with the push of a button. I'd spent hours walking to and from the creek each day for water, and other than Kemper's nights scanning the news reports, we didn't use our tablets. It was like we were suspended in a time where technology didn't exist.

While we drove, I kept my eyes on the road, taking in the empire under Cavil's rule. For the most part, everything was still the same. Scattered, abandoned towns passed by in the early morning. Trains hovering over tracks blew past us, carrying boxcars of military personnel and weapons. But the land still looked dusty and barren, thirsty for life.

It wasn't until we drove through the metropolis of Saberus that I realized things had changed significantly during our time in the Deadlands. Ethros guards patrolled each street corner, and there were no pedestrians walking around. I'd heard rumors of Saberus. I knew it was a destination city for drugs, sex, and debauchery. But it looked repressed now. Shops along the main street were boarded up with X's spray painted along the windows and doors. Signs were shattered. Glass littered the streets, and the few people we did see were hunched over, marching like ants to their destinations while staring at their feet.

"Cavil occupies everything but the Deadlands, but it's only a matter of time," Jules said in a low voice. She pressed her

forehead against the window and peered at a burly guard spitting in the street.

“Where is everyone?” I asked. Although I’d spent most my life in the Stonewell Manor, I’d assumed that major cities were bustling with life. Saberus was empty.

“They’re either dead, hiding from Cavil’s men, or hiding from infected Walkers. Only the immune are safe since the rejection,” Jules said beneath her breath.

The transport zoomed by until we stopped at an iron gate leading to the main road. It slowly slid open for us, allowing the transport to pass through. Guards eyed us, and I held my breath as we passed, thankful that we had stolen an official Ethros transport back on the island. It let us travel without issues.

Just as we were about to pass the barrier and head towards Galla, an infected Walker with bloody eyes ran by. Crimson tears streamed down his face, and bursting blisters oozed along his arms. He wandered towards our transport, causing a frenzy of amusement to break out among the bored guards.

I expected them to pull the Heat from their holsters and ease his suffering, but they laughed at the Walker’s contorted face of agony. Pointing at the way the blood seeped from his arms onto the paved road of Saberus, they kept their distance but didn’t stop him.

I could hear their laughter echoing through our transport. They stared at the infected Walker’s hunched over form, snickering at the way he suffered, feeling no compassion or empathy for his pain. He was wearing dress pants and leather shoes, and aside from the blood, they appeared to be tailored and expensive. Evidence that this man was once an Elite. I stared at his wrist and saw that he had a fetter on. He’d sold his freedom to Cavil then ended his life as a Walker.

It wasn’t until the infected Walker was close enough to become a threat, that a guard with curly blond hair and yellow teeth shot him with Heat, ending his suffering. His remains were now just a cloud of white dust, billowing in the humid air.



“At least they didn’t electrocute him first,” Jules said in an emotionless tone. “Sometimes, if they’re wearing fetters, they like to do that.” I snapped my gaze to Jules then frowned. Was this something she had seen? Kemper grabbed my hand and squeezed as we passed the barrier and continued towards Galla. It felt so weird to be heading back to where it all began. I was born in the Walker Zone. I just wondered if it was where I would die, too.

Galla had more security than Saberus. A line of people in transports and wagons wrapped around the exterior fence, waiting to get inside. Jules informed us that Cavil would be moving to the capital soon but was staying in Galla to appoint new leadership. I bet he was there to boast about his conquests across the empire. In my short time with Cavil, I’d learned that he was arrogant and assuming. He’d request parades in the street every day he left his home if he had the manpower to do so. But with the rejection and X so widespread, there simply weren’t enough people these days. You’d think a man that wants the world to worship him would be more concerned about the dwindling population.

“Park at these coordinates, Tallis will meet us there to smuggle us in the Zone,” Jules said. She tossed a scrap piece of paper in Huxley’s lap. “Normally, it’s easy to get in and hard to get out, but until we’ve changed your file in the Walker database, we have to be careful. We don’t want Cavil to be aware that any of you are here.”

“Are you sure about this?” Huxley asked while eyeing the paper with scrutiny.

“We should probably just establish right now that I know what the fuck I’m doing. I’d say you need to listen to me, but I know you won’t. So at the very least, I need you to not ask stupid questions. Of course I’m sure.”

I eyed Jules and bit back a smile. I loved the way she asserted herself with the guys. As Huxley leaned over to punch the coordinates into the center console of the transport, Kemper whispered in my ear.

“If at any moment you feel unsafe or unsure, I want to have a code word,” he said mischievously. “I’m thinking I should make it something naughty.”

I threw my head back and laughed, earning the attention of everyone in the transport. “And what would you suggest?”

“I would say cock, but then what if we’re having a normal conversation about cocks? That wouldn’t work. How about muffin? Everyone loves muffins,” Kemp answered with a grin.

“Deal.” I imagined myself on some battlefield yelling, “Muffin!” and giggled.

When the transport came to a stop, I looked outside once more and observed an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of Galla. A tall figure with white hair and wearing black was leaning in an alcove of one of the buildings. Jules eagerly pressed a button to raise the transport door, then ran to the man as he emerged from the shadow. She launched herself, smiling as she collided with his chest, and he spun her around.

I exited the transport, and he spoke into her hair. “*Agapimemos*, you’re three days late,” he said.

I smiled, realizing it was Tallis. His seeking eyes grazed over us, and I sensed that he was looking for Mia. “We hit a slight snag,” Jules replied with a defeated look on her face.

“Where’s Mia?” Tallis reached out to greet each of us. With a tight smile, he performed the usual Scavenger greeting by touching Huxley’s, Patrick’s, and my chest over our hearts.

“We were attacked. She’s okay, but it wasn’t safe for her to travel. She stayed behind with the Water Tribe. A healer there is tending to her, and I’m pretty sure the Chief has a crush on her, so she’s in *expert* care,” Jules explained.

Jules stared up at Tallis with adoration, and I wished for a reunion of my own. I wondered what would happen when I saw Maverick, Cyler, and Jacob. Would they be happy to see me? Spin me around? Or would they be angry I risked myself?

I decided I didn’t care.

“*Agrio*, it’s good to see you. I’m happy you’ve come to help.”

“Of course,” I said. “I would have come sooner, but we couldn’t figure out how to get off my fetter.” I absentmindedly rubbed my skin where my fetter once was. Sliding my eyes towards Jules, I stared pointedly at her happy expression. “Plus, we didn’t know where you were or even if you were *alive*.”

“Oh stop,” Jules replied. “I came for you eventually, didn’t I? I had other things to worry about.”

I felt a hand on my back, and I turned to see Kemper with his mouth dropped open in shock. His face was pale as he stared to our right.

“I forgot to mention,” Jules said with a grin, “I have a surprise for you.”

I followed Kemper’s gaze in confusion, unsure of what she meant, but froze when I saw a familiar flirtatious smile standing off to the side. My heart stumbled over my pulse. Happiness and uncertainty fought for dominance in my gut, making me question if my eyes were deceiving me or if Jacob—*my Jacob*—was truly standing there.

“Jacob?” I whispered while dropping my pack to the ground and shuffling towards him. I didn’t run and launch myself into his arms. I didn’t embrace him like a long-lost lover either. I stared at the beautiful man right in front of me like this moment was too precious, too perfect to ruin.

“Jacob, please tell me it’s you.”

He was wearing a gray hood, but I knew those lips, that smile, anywhere. “A-Ash,” he said. His voice held reverence and a hint of disbelief.

I lifted up on my tiptoes, kissing his chin, his cheeks, his neck. I peppered him with my love, rubbing my face against the scruff of his newly grown beard. “Jacob,” I cried out like I couldn’t say his name enough. I wanted to look into his perfect brown eyes before kissing those plump lips I’d dreamt about.

Slowly, I lifted my fingers to remove the hood as his breath hitched. And he grabbed my wrist to stop me. Something wasn't right. I could feel the crackle of anxiety flowing off of him. "What's wrong?" I asked as he released me.

Pinching the fabric between my fingers, I pulled back the grey hood and went still when I saw the scar slashed along his forehead and over his eyebrow. It was deep and long.

*Oh, Jacob.*

Tears filled my eyes as I ran a finger along his wound. I leaned forward and kissed his lips, letting my tears of relief and sadness wash over us. Patrick had said that Jacob was with him when he went to the transport in Ethros, but they had gotten separated. I'd always just assumed that Jacob went back to Maverick and Cyler.

I had tried not to let my dark thoughts trick me into worrying that he was hurt. But as much as I avoided them, my worst fears were confirmed. Jacob was hurt, and it was all my fault.

"Ash," he whispered over my lips. My need for him was sharp, like a knife twisting in my gut and demanding to be felt. "Ash, so-so-sorry." He stuttered like his words struggled to escape his lips.

"I love you. I love you. I love you," I whispered over and over. I couldn't say it enough. I wanted to bathe in my love for him.

"I-I. I love. Love you." He struggled to force his words out, and I sobbed while peppering more kisses along his jaw.

"What happened?" I choked out. Jacob's shoulders slumped, and he looked over my head at Jules.

I felt a hand on my back, and I turned to see her sympathetic frown. I knew it was bad if *she* was showing empathy or emotions. "Jacob was attacked by guards while trying to escape. He suffered some extensive damage. He's still the same Jacob though. He just struggles to articulate his

words. He's gotten a lot better. I'm just happy the idiot is awake. He was in a coma for a while."

More tears fell down my cheeks. "I didn't want to tell you until you saw for yourself. He asked me to wait so you wouldn't worry," Jules explained while looking tenderly at her friend.

I placed a hand on Jacob's chest before wrapping my arms around him and hugging him tightly. "Tallis was the one that found him. He was coming to rescue me and stopped the guards trying to kill him. It's been a long road to recovery."

I didn't care. I'd take Jacob in whatever form I got him. I'd love him until my last breath. I'd support him. Help him navigate this difficult prognosis with love and respect.

"I love you, Jacob. I love you," I whispered once more. It was like I couldn't say it enough. I needed him to know that my love for him could overshadow the time that separated us and the pain he experienced. I loved him more than words could ever say. I pulled away as Huxley, Patrick, and Kemper came up to greet their friend. Jacob's eyes lit up, but he still struggled to speak.

"You scared the fuck out of me," Patrick said while patting him on the back. "It wasn't enough that you were the most handsome out of all of us, now you had to add a badass scar to the persona?" he joked, making Jacob let lose a hearty but choked laugh that sounded like pure music to my ears.

"Jacob might steal your role as the broody silent one," Patrick then added while nudging his brother in the side. Huxley simply rolled his eyes in response.

Naturally, Kemper began asking Jules a series of questions about Jacob. He was in fix-it mode, and for once, his need for perfection and peace didn't bother me. I wanted to help in whatever way I could too.

Another lost piece of my heart clicked into place, but also, my need for revenge intensified. Reuniting with Jacob brought the anger that had been bubbling below the surface to a raging

inferno. I had Jacob back but had lost another part of myself to the numbing need to kill Cavil for what he's done.

After our reunions were done, we made our way inside the warehouse. Tallis told us that we had to keep moving. He was eager to get us to the safety of the Zone, and I wondered what that said about Cavil's reign if it was safer there than it was in downtown Galla. Tallis had changed too. The wise way he carried himself had become more direct, more sharpened. Although I'd known him to be fierce and observant, he had also grown to move with a sharpness that I hadn't recognized before. His cool confidence was now quick and intentional.

Kemper sent the transport further out away from us so that if someone stumbled upon it, they wouldn't decide to snoop around the warehouse. Inside, the building wasn't particularly spectacular. To an outsider, it would simply look like one of the many manufacturing plants that have long since been abandoned. As with everything in the empire, it was in ruin. Holes in the ceiling allowed the bright moonlight to shine through, and dust covered every spare space. A rusted piece of metal was laying on the floor in the far east corner, and Jacob and Tallis lifted it up, revealing a tunnel beneath.

"It leads to the Zone. It's how we've been sneaking people in and out. It's a couple miles there. Hope you're ready for a walk."

I laughed, thinking of all the walking we'd done in the Deadlands.

"I think we can handle it," I replied.

As we traveled down the dark and damp hallway, rats scurried by our feet. I clung to Jacob's arm, gripping him tightly as if to prove to myself that he was really here. He kept glancing at me out of the corner of his eye, but every time I caught him, he would go back to looking ahead.

The humid air was suffocating, and with each step we took deeper into the Zone, the more fearful I felt. Jules and Tallis moved like they were familiar with the intricate underground tunnel system. I tried to keep track of the many twists and

turns but lost count long before we were halfway to our destination.

“Where will we be staying?” Huxley asked. As expected, he was on the verge of an episode. Huxley felt differently about Jacob than about anyone else due to their past. I knew that there was an added layer of guilt to his protective nature where Jacob was concerned. Hyper aware of his surroundings, Hux was prepared to pounce at the first sign of danger. And after seeing the evidence of Jacob’s last five months, the reality of our situation had become abundantly clear. We weren’t safe.

I knew Huxley was blaming himself for what happened. I knew he was on edge, ready to murder someone. Kemper was silent, probably thinking about solutions to Jacob’s new disability, and Patrick was smiling, forcing the guilt and sadness at bay to bear the weight of uplifting the group.

I was eager to learn more about what had happened in these last five months. I yearned to understand Jacob’s struggles. It was obvious that he could no longer articulate his words efficiently. When I thought of Jacob, I thought of the smooth-talking, flirtatious man that said all the right things. The scar across his face and the way his shoulders slumped as he tried to speak broke me.

“Are you okay?” I asked Jacob in a whisper. I wasn’t sure if, by asking, I was upsetting him. He had been staring at the small tunnels with unease. The rigid way he carried himself had me concerned.

“I’m. I’m worried. The walls.” Jacob let out a frustrated huff before digging in his tan pants pocket. Looking over her shoulder ahead of us, Jules then spoke.

“I don’t know why you didn’t just put in your mindspeak to begin with. It took a team of eight of us to steal that, and you never wear it,” she said while rolling her eyes.

I watched as Jacob pulled a shiny device no bigger than a coin from his pocket and placed it in his ear. It was metal and small, looking like a tiny earpiece with a speaker attached.

“I haven’t quite figured out how to censor my thoughts, you unfeeling bitch,” a monotone, robotic voice said. I snapped my attention to Jacob, and he pointed at the device in his ear. “It’s a mindspeak translator,” the voice explained. “Basically, I push my thoughts to the device, and it articulates for me. God, you look so fucking beautiful right now.”

A broad grin broke out on my face at his compliment. If it weren’t so dark, I was sure that I would see him blush. “The only downside is, it seems like all my thoughts get picked up by this goddamn thing. Have your lips always been that perfect? They look like pillows.”

Behind me, Patrick and Kemper burst into fits of laughter. “It’s like you have your own personal lie detector,” Patrick snorted.

The robotic voice then started spewing out a string of vibrant curse words, making even Huxley snap out of his angry mood to gasp at the vulgarity of them. Jacob hurriedly removed the device from his ear, abruptly cutting off the insults shouted by his subconscious.

Once the laughter died down, Jacob took a deep breath while repositioning the earpiece once more. “To answer your original question, since my time in Ethros, small, dark spaces make me anxious. I fell down a drain when I was attacked.”

I suddenly felt bad that he was in the tunnels. Was he okay? I began walking faster. “Then why did you come?”

“Are you kidding me? What the fuck do you think I am? I’ve been going every day hoping Jules was bringing you here. Think I’d stay behind like a coward? Hell no.” Once again, I smiled at how unfiltered his thoughts were. It was eye-opening, to say the least. Although I hated that this happened to Jacob, there was something magical about having access to his inhibited thoughts. I liked knowing what he so freely thought of me.

“But if you want to make me feel a little better, sweetheart, I could take you off to one of the side tunnels and fuck—” Jacob once again ripped the earpiece from his ear. He then placed it in his pocket with a scowl. My heart was racing as I



imagined the things his thoughts described. Around us, everyone laughed, but the heavy streaks of arousal traveling through my system lacked any humor. I stroked his arms with my fingers, leaning closer until I could whisper in his ear as we walked.

“I would like that very much,” I whispered. But not quietly enough, because behind us, Patrick let out a cough.

“So would I...” he said.

I looked behind me, a mischievous grin on my face. “Have you lost your filter too?” I asked playfully. It felt nice to joke with them despite the grim situation.

Patrick returned my grin as we walked under an overhanging light, illuminating his face. “I’ve never pretended to have a filter when it comes to you, Ash.”

## CHAPTER NINE

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**I**t took almost a full hour to get through the intricate tunnel system leading to the Zone. Occasionally, Tallis would hold his hand up and place a finger to his lips. We'd all stare at the ceiling of the caverns, waiting as heavy footsteps passed overhead.

“We need more support beams in here,” he said to Jules, and she nodded.

“I'll let Louis know.”

At the end of the tunnels, we were told to wait outside a green door as Tallis checked the auction post. For five minutes, we stood in silence, waiting for him to return with the okay that the coast was clear. Jules briefly explained that the tunnels poured out to the auction post in the Zone.

“Inside that door,” she said to Huxley while nodding towards the green metal door with rust on the hinges, “leads to the auction post. We checked the auctioneer board, so it should be empty. But if there are people inside, then we'll have to spend the night here.”

“Why does it lead there?” I asked.

“These caves were here long before the empire. The old world used them to filter out waste. When we first discovered them, they were infested with Walkers and decaying bodies. Everyone dumped their loved ones here. A small team of immune Walkers cleared it out about a year ago.”

My brow shot up. This place was enormous. It would take a lot to stomach the clean up of that. Kemper looked around

once more. “It’s smart,” he said with an appreciative smile. “If you’re caught here, they’d just assume—”

“That we’re here to toss the body of a loved one. They have no idea that it leads in and out of Galla. It’s how the Deadlands population has been able to grow so much.”

The hinges of the metal door groaned as Tallis returned. “It’s clear,” he said.

I took a deep breath. The last time I was in the Zone, a Walker attacked me, and Cyler saved my life. I didn’t feel in danger, I mostly just missed Cyler’s presence.

The auction post was strangely familiar, and another memory tickled in the back of my mind. The clean white tile was a stark contrast to our dirty shoes and clothes. The fluorescent lights were turned off, and Tallis held a lantern up to guide us through the dimly lit hallways.

“We have to cut through the stage,” Jules whispered.

I trudged my feet up a couple steps until I was standing on the metal stage. I’d been here before. I could remember it. Phantom fear and sadness burned me as I breathed in the energy of this place.

This was where the Stonewells bought me. I put my hand to my lips to stifle the gasp as I looked out at the empty chairs of the crowd. I could almost hear the auctioneer’s cruel voice.

*“Stop crying. Your tears mean nothing here. Be glad you’re immune. You could have a decent life.”*

*“I miss my Mommy,” my childish voice said, muffled by my faraway memories.*

*“Your Mother and Father are dead. And you will be too if you don’t wipe the stress from your eyes. Today is the day you grow up, little Walker.”*

I felt a hand grip mine, jarring me out of my memory. “Where’d your mind go just now?” Kemper asked. I paused to stare out at the audience once more and sighed.

“This is where I was auctioned.”

Ahead of us, Jules and Tallis were leaving, but my men lingered, staring at Kemper and me. “Let’s go,” I choked out. There were much worse things in the Zone than the auction post. I was lucky. I was procured by a wealthy family. This was where I met Josiah.

*“Just hope Lackley doesn’t get you. He and his favorite little scientist have been experimenting on immunes,” the auctioneer’s voice said in my memory once more.*

Something about that made me pause. It was like I was staring down the barrel of a memory. I knew it would destroy me, but I couldn’t help but look.

I shook away the flashbacks and allowed Kemper to steer me off the stage and through a back door which led to an alley in the Zone.

“Now, we have to make it to Madam B’s brothel without running into any guards. Louis is still working on removing your face from the database. He needs to do a new scan of your face after I’ve done some of my magic.”

“Okay.”

The seven of us spaced out as we walked, hoping to not look suspicious in such a large group. Jacob kept his hood up and stepped in front of me a few paces, leading the way in case we got separated from Jules and Tallis.

Kemper was still holding my hand, standing rigid as he took in the dismal surroundings. He looked unsure and entirely out of place. The uncomfortable way he took in everything would surely draw attention to us.

“You know, I think I lived close to here as a child,” I said to Kemper.

“Oh really?” he asked, looking at me. I squeezed his hand and pleaded with him to relax with my eyes.

“I can’t remember exactly where. But this feels familiar. I’ve often wanted to see my childhood home again,” I replied.

From what I remembered, it was nothing but a two bedroom shack with running water and a stove. We had it a lot

nicer than other Walkers. Dad worked at the garbage station, hauling trash for members of the Elite. Unfortunately, it was how he contracted X.

“My dad worked outside the Zone at the dump. He processed trash. My mom sold bread on the corner. We were one of the few families with a working kitchen, so she made do. Although, if I remember correctly, she would just hand out most of the bread instead of charging for it. She couldn’t stand to see a hungry child.”

“They seem like they were wonderful people,” Kemper said.

“I think they were,” I replied with a shrug. Maybe it wasn’t the right thing to do, but most of the time, I wondered if what little memories of my family I had were real, or if it was something my adolescent brain made up. They could have been bad people. Negligent. My perceptions were limited, and I liked it that way. I’d rather cling to the idea of who my parents were than know the truth.

Even though I was an attendant in the Stonewell home, I still had a good life. I was provided for. I might not have been comfortable, but I was alive.

My parents gave me a future when they died.

I stared at the street where barefoot children stumbled past us, clutching their threadbare clothes to their chest. The colder season was upon us. Within a few weeks, it would be too chilly for them. I’d heard stories of Walkers freezing to death in the streets of the Zone. They became solid as ice.

“I know we had a red door. It was two bedrooms,” I said while squinting and trying to place my childhood home in my mind’s eye. Kemper nodded, and I saw the wheels in his head turning. If anyone could figure out where I once lived, it was him. He was a fixer. A finder of lost things.

The Zone was dirty. Trash littered the streets. Blood stained the concrete, but people kept walking like it was a regular occurrence. Unlike Saberus, Walkers traveled along the streets like it was nothing. I guess in the Zone, people

stopped fearing death a long time ago. The threat of a new regime—and the virus—was still the same as it was yesterday. Their existence was temporary, and they'd accepted that long ago.

“Keep walking, we're almost there,” Jules said while she turned a corner. My eyes locked on Huxley's hard shoulders until we arrived at a small building about two stories tall. Around us were numerous shacks with sheet metal for roofs, but not this. It was a beacon of brick and mortar standing proudly within the filth.

“We're...we are...here,” Jacob said. Jules and Tallis entered the home, but Jacob whirled around to stare at me. He slid back on his mindspeak translator.

“I know this is a brothel, and when you first walk in, things will be jarring. Hell, even I'm shocked by some of the shit I've seen here. But know it's been only you, Ash. It's always been only you. It will always be only you.”

My mouth went soft as I stared at Jacob in wonder. Of everything, he was concerned with making sure I felt comfortable?

“I know,” I said before using the hand that wasn't holding his to stroke his arm. “Thank you, Jacob.”

When we walked inside, the home looked similar to the Stonewell Manor. In fact, it was so similar that I had to suck in a deep breath to catch my bearings.

To the left of the entry was an all white, finely furnished sitting room. A tray of tea and cookies sat on the center table, and a plump woman with blindingly white teeth lay on the lavish couch. She plopped a grape in her mouth before standing and walking towards us.

First, she gave Jules a generous hug. “You had me scared when you didn't show up. I've had to deal with Tallis' insufferable moping. He's been whispering riddles all day. I'll never understand you two,” the woman scolded.

“We had some trouble. I could have called, but with how much Cavil is tapping communications, I didn't want to risk

it,” Jules replied. She sifted through her dress, lifting the hem until the knife strapped to her thigh was visible. “Thanks for this. You were right, it did come in handy.”

The woman held her hands up and said, “Keep it. I’m sure you’ll need it again before this is all said and done.”

The woman had red, curly hair and thin lips. Her breasts were practically pouring out of her tight, white dress. And when she looked at the twins, her eyes went hot with wild hunger. I briefly wondered if that was how I looked when I drank in their appearance.

“Well, aren’t you two a cool drink of water?” she said while pretending to fan herself. “What damned corner of the empire have you been hiding in, and where is my one-way ticket?”

She held her hand out, and naturally, my antisocial twin, Huxley, didn’t accept it. Luckily, Patrick still had the good sense to be polite and grabbed it gingerly.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mistress...”

The woman burst out in laughter. Bending over at the waist, her breasts bounced as she shook with humor. It wasn’t until she broke out into a coughing fit that she stood to wipe her eyes and calm down.

“Oh, you’re a funny one. I’m no Mistress, kid. I’m a madam. Which is just those pompous Elites’ way of saying I’m a whore.”

Patrick turned such a bright shade of red that I couldn’t help but giggle. At the sound, Madam B turned her attention towards me.

“You must be the immune Walker that Jules pretends to hate,” Madam B said with a wink, making Jules scowl behind her. “She won’t admit it, but she missed you. If I had to hear one more word about your chocolate cake, I might have gone mad.”

“You have a nice home,” I said while looking around. I couldn’t get over the fact that it seemed so similar to one of the Elite manors.

“My customers like to pretend they aren’t slumming it in the Zone when they visit here. It took a while, but we like to give them the illusion that they are at home. The show starts when they walk through my door,” Madam B explained with a wild grin.

She walked towards me and placed a painted finger under her chin. “Well, let me get a look at you,” she ordered.

I stood still, forcing my posture straight like Mistress Stonewell had taught me. I kept my eyes ahead, and my arms firmly at my side. I had been trained by the best to be a household Walker, I could do this.

“Oh dear,” Madam B said while circling me. “I see what you mean, Jules.”

“What?” I asked.

“You’re not going to work at all.”

I swore I heard Huxley say, “Thank God,” but I didn’t dwell on that.

“What do you mean I’m not going to work? I’ve been a Walker my whole life, I was trained by the best in etiquette and cooking. I lived in the Governor of Galla’s manor.” I’d never been one to brag about my upbringing, but I felt it pertinent to show her my abilities.

Madam B traveled back until she was facing me. Her eyes gave me one last appraising swoop before she spoke again. “That’s great and all, hon. But we don’t need a Walker. We need a Companion. I bet you’re a virgin.”

I felt the blood rush from my skin as I bit my lips in embarrassment. How could she possibly know that?

“Oh, no, it’s nothing to be embarrassed about. I know many girls that wish they had your predicament. Not many want this life,” she said, “but for this mission, we need someone with a bit more experience. Someone who can blend in and flirt.”

“I can do that!” I resolved. I was determined to fit whatever mold she needed me to. “I can do whatever it takes.”



“Oh really?” Madam B asked. “Louis, come down here please,” she yelled towards the stairs while keeping her eyes on me.

Soon, pounding boots descended the stairs, and a man with reddish hair and black eyes bounded towards us. He looked like Madam B but had more freckles peppered across his skin.

“This is my son, Louis. Seduce him,” she ordered. Beside me, I watched as Huxley, Patrick, Kemper, and Jacob went into fits of disapproval.

“Abso-fucking-lutely not!” Huxley shouted.

“Certainly there is another way,” Kemper then added.

Patrick laughed like the idea was absurd before giving Louis a murderous glare.

Jacob, who was still fumbling to remove his mindspeak translator from his ears was letting loose a list of monotoned threats.

“Enough!” Madam said, holding up her hand. She gave me a sly smile while taking in the angry group of men in her sitting room before speaking again. “All of them? Well well well, maybe I’ve underestimated you after all.”

She took another look at me, and I stopped trying to stand tall. I thought of my guys. Of the heated stares, the sensual way they touched me. I pushed each loving thought I had of them to the forefront of my mind while standing beneath Madam B’s intrusive stare. Finally, she spoke. “You still have a lot to learn, and not enough time to do it. We have a meeting tomorrow, and I’ll let the other girls decide if you’re fit to stay. Until then, Louis will show you all to your rooms. Tonight, Jules will change your appearance so my son can update you in the Walker database.”

Instinctually, I reached up to touch my hair and frowned when I imagined all the things Jules would do to me. And as if reading my mind, Madam B said, “The idea is to make you attractive. Don’t worry. She’s smart enough not to do anything ridiculous.”

“Thank you,” I choked out. Madam B was a strange woman, indeed. But I found her humor and abruptness endearing.

“Stay off the third floor, it’s where my girls work. Not unless you want a lesson in seduction.” She winked at me and turned away, leaving us all in the entryway.

Louis looked at all of us before speaking to me. “I was going to make a joke about seducing me, but I don’t feel like dying today. I was at least hoping to make it to the end of the month. I’m going back to work.” He gave an awkward wave before heading back upstairs.

“Smart man,” Huxley said. “I like him.”

## CHAPTER TEN

---

I spent a good half hour searching for myself in the reflection of a dirty mirror in Jules and Tallis' room. The unfamiliar girl staring back at me had long, straight hair that hit my lower back. The sleekness of it had me baffled. I'd always been at war with my curls, but these unfamiliar new tresses had me missing my wild mane. Jules applied some cream to it, lightening the shiny strands to match my white roots.

A plumping serum took my already cushioned lips and made them even more voluptuous. I found myself making facial expressions in the mirror and staring at the red lipstick Jules so carefully painted on me.

My skin was tanned from being in the sun the last five months, and Louis brought eye drops which temporarily changed the color of my irises to grey. I'd have to add drops every morning, but the overall look was...haunting.

It was me, I knew that much, but the woman in my reflection was cold. Was this what my men saw when they looked at me? The numb, unfeeling woman just scratching the surface of existence?

"Ash?" Kemper's voice called out from behind me. I sucked in a deep breath before turning to face him.

"You might want to get used to calling me Shade," I said with a half-grin. I wasn't sure how I felt about it. The new name Louis assigned me in the database felt foreign on my lips. I'd have to practice introducing myself as such if I

wanted to survive. It felt like each step closer to revenge I got, the less of myself I had.

“Shade? That’s an interesting choice,” Kemper mused while walking forward. He pinched my lightened hair between his fingertips. “I miss your curls,” he whispered.

“As much as I’m happy that you like my curls, I’ll admit that the maintenance of the straight hair will be a relief. Jules said the chemical she used will last for a month! Can you believe this magic serum to tame my hair has been around all this time?” I asked incredulously, joking to hide that I felt like a foreigner in my own skin. Jules was efficient and well-versed in the arts of pampering and appearance. It was jarring almost. She went from cleaning her knife to discussing the proper tint of red for a Companion to wear. She transitioned through her personalities efficiently. I wondered if I’d be able to go from Shade to Ash as quickly.

“I think you could shave your hair off, and I’ll still find you addicting,” Kemper said before leaning forward to kiss my forehead. “Madam B wants you to come down and meet the other Companions.”

“Okay,” I replied nervously. Madam’s words still echoed in my mind. I felt inadequate in this role. Jules could dress me up, but my inexperience was in the way I carried myself.

Kemper must have seen the unease in my expression because he immediately went to fix-it mode. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?” he asked while gripping the bathroom countertop, caging me between his arms.

“I’m not as experienced...”

I could feel Kemper’s eyes boring into me as I stood there; he looked me over, pausing at my chest where the dress Jules picked was draped dangerously low. The see-through material had gained *all* of his attention.

“Everything about you is sexy. I want you to be the first thing I touch in the morning,” Kemper said in a hoarse voice before kissing my neck. “And at night? I want you to be the last thing I taste.”

Kemper kissed my collarbone while teasing my hardened nipples through the thin material of my dress. “I love your heart. I love how honest you are. I love the way you treat others. I love how you dive into your passions and sacrifice yourself. But don’t doubt for one second that I don’t find you completely, fucking, *ridiculously* sexy. I think I’ve been perpetually hard since meeting you,” he said with a chuckle.

“Oh really?” I asked. My voice was low and raspy as he continued to massage my skin.

Kemper grabbed my hand and forced me to drag my touch down his trim chest and stomach, traveling lower until I could feel how hard he was.

“Feel what you do to me, Ash. Own it. You make my cock *ache*.”

I let out a gasp as I stroked him, begging to dip inside his pants to feel him without the barrier of clothes, but before my fingers could travel beneath his waistband, he stopped me.

“We don’t have time, sweetheart. But believe me, if I could—I would. I’ll happily remind you for the rest of your life how desired you are. I might not like this plan, but I definitely don’t want these people to shake your confidence.”

I pulled my hand back, and Kemper crashed his lips to mine, infusing his confidence and attraction into our kiss. My plump lips seemed more sensitive, and when he bit my bottom lip, I gasped at the sharp yet pleasurable sensation.

Kemper wrapped one hand around my neck and the other through my hair. I felt treasured and divine. His kisses were primal. Adoring. He poured his conviction into me with every flick of his tongue and press of his lips. Abruptly, he ended the kiss and pulled away with a small smile. I watched as he slipped back into his usual passive persona, but it took a moment for his fiery eyes to calm.

Knowing I had the power to obliterate his restraint gave me such a thrill. He might be perfect and collected for everyone else, but with me, he embodied a pure, unfiltered, uninhibited chaos.

In the main sitting room, the others were waiting patiently. Jules and Tallis had left to collect supplies from a carrier in the tunnels. I adjusted my dress and hair once more, feeling uncomfortable under the stares of my men.

Huxley rested his eyes on my legs. They were exposed through the high slit in my white dress, and he looked at them like they were taunting him. Then, he traveled his eyes up my body with longing, but when he saw my face, his relaxed lips went hard with disapproval. I wasn't sure how to take that. Did he not like this disguise? "You look beautiful," Patrick said. "But you always have," he quickly added while glaring at Huxley from the corner of his eye, as if daring him to say otherwise.

"What's on your face?" Huxley asked. Jacob elbowed him then began digging in his pockets.

"Makeup?" I replied.

He looked like he didn't know how to respond. Luckily, Jacob intervened. "You don't just ask a girl what's on her face!" the mindspeak blurted out. "Have I taught you nothing? Ash, Jules did a fantastic job disguising your appearance. The makeup is tasteful, but I'm thankful I get to see your beauty underneath. It's like a mask almost. They see your war paint, and we get to see the real you."

I smiled at Jacob's comments then giggled when his mindspeak continued rambling, against his wishes. "See, you idiots? That's how you woo a girl. Take some fucking notes on how to make her feel beautiful for fuck's sake!" Kemper chuckled beside me. I understood that this was an uncomfortable situation. I decided to take a page from Patrick's personality and lighten the mood.

"I'm just thankful Jules didn't follow through with her original plan to shave my eyebrows. I might not be a fashion expert, but her lie about that being a new trend was too transparent."

The guys all laughed, and I took a seat by Jacob. Checking his ears, I noticed that he had removed his mindspeak translator, so I made a mental note not to ask him too many

questions or engage him in conversation. I didn't want him to feel inadequate, embarrassed, or upset. So instead, I didn't use words. I only grabbed his hand and smiled, thankful that I was with him. I hoped that soon we would have time one on one to catch up, but for now, I was determined to fulfill my duties for Madam B.

The kitchen doors opened, and the crass Companion manager walked in, munching on a cupcake. When her eyes landed on me, her chocolate-covered mouth widened into a broad grin.

"I hardly recognized you! Jules does good work." Madam B then shoved the rest of the chocolate cupcake in her mouth before licking the frosting from her fingertips.

Plopping on one of the chairs, she rested her feet up on the coffee table. She was utterly relaxed and in her element. "The girls should be here any moment. They had rounds at Cavil's estate this morning for a diplomacy meeting. Cavil sure does enjoy using them to convince leaders," she joked. "I'm sure they've aided in at least seven trade deals since he arrived here. The other brothels in the Zone are pissed that I've got all the good immune Companions."

At her words, the front door slammed open, and chatter erupted through the hallways. "I'm telling you," a bright voice said, "the man had a stuffed animal! He wanted to watch while I—"

I looked at the entryway as four women stood staring at us.

The first girl on the right had long blond hair, a pointed nose, and green eyes. She was beautiful, but her features were sharp. She wore an analytical expression as she openly observed our group, lingering a moment longer than I'd like on Kemper before looking at me.

The girl next to her had short black hair and full lips that were a bright red shade without the aid of lipstick. Her dark eyes were framed by thick lashes, and her shorter stature still felt imposing with her unamused posture.

“Is this the girl?” the dark-haired woman asked while nodding towards me.

Madam B rolled her eyes. “Yes, Lowe. This is Ash, or should I say Shade?”

The blond looked to Lowe then back at me before smiling. “Hey, Ash, I’m Blythe.” She immediately walked towards me and held her hand out to shake mine. “Maverick has told me *so* much about you,” she added in a lower voice, peering at me with an assuming look that made me want to squirm away from her. She knew Maverick? Was this the correspondent that was passing notes back and forth with him?

Next to Lowe was an older woman still just as striking as the other two, but there was a weary way in which she carried herself that made me pause. “I’m Kaye,” she said with a bored shrug.

Lastly, a woman with bright blue hair and a mischievous grin to match waved to me while saying, “I’m Jade. I’m the one that’s going to kill Cavil.”

I was shocked by the nonchalant way she had said that. Was she used to killing? “Well, it’s nice to meet you. Not going to lie, I’m a bit envious.”

After nodding in greeting to Kaye and Jade, I brought my attention back to Blythe. “You’ve spoken to Maverick?” I asked.

She smiled. “Every night almost.”

“You wish!” Jade called from the entryway while flipping her blue hair over her shoulder and adjusting her white dress. “You sit on the floor of his bedroom, pining over him while he works.”

Anger flashed in Blythe’s eyes as she turned to Jade. “Well, at least I’m not forced to sit with Master Byron and his foot fungus.” All four of the girls burst out in fits of giggles, and I felt even more out of place. They had history, stories, and experiences which bonded them. How could I possibly fit in?

“So you’re all immune?”



“Yep!” the short woman—Lowe—answered. “Jules found me in a brothel outside of Ethros. One of my regulars was a member of the Resistance. Once I passed the blood test, I was brought here.

The older woman stared at Madam B for a moment before speaking to me. She was haunting in her tone. Each word was like dancing along the cliff of grief. “I’ve been here my whole life. Grew up on the third floor of this house, actually,” she said with a forlorn frown. “Didn’t find out I was immune until Jules performed the blood test on me three weeks ago. Been working my whole life for a cure that not only has become obsolete, but I never even needed.” I felt pity for Kaye. I couldn’t imagine striving so long for something that no longer mattered. But even immunes were locked into the status we were born with.

“Well, now that we’ve all met, we have some plans to discuss. I also would like each of you to work with Ash on her...skills,” Madam B said.

Blythe looked me up and down with a scowl that made me dislike her even more. “She *does* look like she’ll need a lot of work.”

“Nonsense,” Jade said while walking towards me and plunking down on the couch beside Jacob and me. Unlike the others, there was nothing slow and graceful about her movements. She was a dominant presence in their group. “She’s pretty enough. Most of the time, they just want you to sit there and look pretty. Cavil often forgets I’m even there. If she can survive not talking for hours on end, she’ll do fine.”

“Well, of course! Anyone can look pretty. It’s the other part of our job this little Walker looks inexperienced with,” Blythe said while throwing a pointed stare at me. I seriously didn’t like her. From the moment she arrived, she’d been trying to undermine me.

Huxley spoke up. He had been quietly observing everything with interest, and I knew that he was cataloging each woman in his mind, seeking out their threat level and if they were suitable for the mission.

“That won’t be a problem. I’ve been assured that she won’t be going to anyone’s room. Maverick or Cyler will claim her for the night.”

Madam B spoke up, “Yes yes, that’s right. From what I understand, Cavil’s been eager to keep them caged but happy. He doesn’t want people thinking he’s imprisoned the Dormas leaders, but he also won’t let them go. They’re allowed to claim Companions, it’s how Blythe has been able to get notes to Maverick.” Madam B’s tone was bored, and she sipped a drink of something so strong I could smell it from across the room.

Blythe frowned and opened her mouth to speak but, after seeing Huxley’s serious scowl, decided against it.

“Huxley is right. The plan is for Maverick or Cyler to claim Ashleigh for the night should she be called upon. Besides, Cavil will die long before anyone else has a chance to claim her,” Louis said in a matter of fact tone as he descended the stairs. He was absentmindedly typing away on his tablet.

“And how do you plan on doing that?” Kemper asked.

“Jade is going to stab him,” he said nonchalantly as if it were an easy solution.

I looked to the blue-haired woman once more, this time truly assessing her. She didn’t look like someone capable of murdering. “Can you handle that?” I asked.

“Better believe it. I’ve been buttering that man up for weeks. He’ll claim me for the night, no doubt about it. Then I’ll slice his throat. Or puncture his heart, I haven’t quite decided yet.” Something about her statement had me feeling envious again. I’d wondered what had happened to me to make me have so much bloodlust.

“I’m sorry, but that seems like a stupid idea. Guards will be watching. There’s no way you’ll get away with that,” Huxley replied in disbelief. Would guards be in the room with them when...

“Jade and the others have been training with Tallis. They’ll be prepared when the time comes.”

“So why do you need me?”

It was Jules that answered. She casually strolled into the sitting room and sat down, making sure to prop her feet up on the table. “My brothers can’t remove their fetters until the last possible moment. Because they’re in range, the moment they take the death pill—the medicine I gave you—it’ll alert Cavil. Your job is to get them in the transport, give them the medicine, and get them out of Cavil’s estate the moment their fetters pop off. They’ll be unconscious, or they would do it themselves.”

I nodded in understanding while trying to piece together more of their plan. “And why can’t one of the other girls do that?” Huxley asked.

“Because they each have dignitaries of their own to help escape. We’re having to be very strategic. Cavil hasn’t just been keeping your friends in his control. His tower in Galla is full of people forced to follow him.”

“Except me,” Kaye said. I had almost forgotten she was there. She had drifted off into a corner of the room, quietly observing us. “I’ve been tasked with poisoning members of the guard. I’ve got a sister that works in the kitchens.”

“Poison? Will that kill them?” I asked.

“Yes,” Jade replied. “Is that going to be a problem?”

I thought about her question for a moment. Could I handle knowing that I played a part in killing potentially innocent people? Certainly not all members of Cavil’s army were bad. “Don’t look so upset, dear,” Madam B said. She had abandoned her drink and leaned forward. “Every single one of them is a supporter of Cavil. They like his regime. They want him to succeed. We could kill Cavil, but another man would just slide up to take his place. In order to get past this toxic leadership, we have to kill them all. We aren’t like Cavil. We don’t kill needlessly. The idea is to save the human race.”

I felt calmed by Madam B’s words, despite the gnawing sense of dread in my chest. I wanted revenge, but I couldn’t help but feel like the price of doing this would be on my

conscience. “I can handle it,” I finally whispered as Jade gave me a side hug.

Pacified, the guys leaned back as the Companions continued to fire questions at me. One by one, they gave me scenarios they’d experienced, asking what I would do.

“What if your Elite makes a joke at the expense of the emperor? Do you pacify his ego and laugh, or do you keep quiet?” Blythe asked. I opened my mouth but stuttered. I wasn’t sure what the correct answer was.

“If in public, look at the ground and act like you don’t have two brain cells to rub together. If in private, laugh. It’s always better if you laugh at their jokes. Men like to have their big egos stroked.”

“Are you a virgin? Or have you done nothing but stare longingly across the room at a man?” Blythe asked again while lifting her dress. She propped her foot on the edge of the sofa next to Patrick then slowly shimmed the garter around her thigh off right in front of him. He avoided looking at her but his cheeks were pink. She was pretty, and although I felt angry at her blatant disrespect of boundaries, I couldn’t help but feel giddy at Patrick’s politeness.

“I don’t see how this is any of your business,” Huxley growled. I appreciated the support, but I also didn’t want to feel like any more of an outsider than I already was.

“It’s our business because if she can’t pull this off, then we’re all dead. Forgive me for wanting to make sure she’s got her shit together,” Blythe said while rolling her eyes.

“I think it’s time for some rest. We’ve had a long day.” He stood, jerking me up with him and waving at a nearly passed out Madam B.

We all left the Companions and Madam B to rest. I needed a moment to process everything. Upstairs, Kemper, Huxley, and Patrick kissed me goodnight and went to their respective rooms. I wished we could all room together and discuss all the learnings of this place, but when I followed Jacob, he fumbled for his mindspeak.

“As much as I want you to stay with me...stay under me. Fuck this fucking technology. You don't have to. I know it's been awhile. You're probably repulsed by this fucking scar. Goddamn, I want to kiss you. I'm just giving you an out. 'Cause it's okay if you've moved on. Please say you want me as much as I want you.”

Jacob ripped the mindspeak from his ear as if to prevent any more ramblings from pouring out its monotone speaker. I made my way towards him. Part of me wanted to berate him for thinking such ridiculous things. Part of me wanted to shove him against the wall and show him just what I thought of his beautiful face and the scar that represented the sacrifices he was willing to make to be near me.

“If you thought a scar and some time apart was going to change how I feel, then you don't know me at all,” I whispered before softly placing my lips against his. Jacob was only able to choke out one word. One single syllable of lust and longing that had me shaking with need.

“Fuck.”

I grabbed his hand and led him inside his room, pausing only to lock the door behind us. Jacob was panting as he stripped me out of the dress Jules poured me into. The sheer lace became nothing but a pile on the floor, and he traced the white lace of my lingerie with tenderness.

I reached into Jacob's pocket, pulling out the mindspeak. I wanted to hear every unfiltered thought pouring from his mind. “Jacob,” I whispered over his swollen lips, tenderly stroking the scar above his eye with my free hand. “I want to know all the things you think of me. All the things you want to do with me. You make me feel brave. Beautiful.”

I placed the mindspeak in his ear. “Okay, but only for a minute. I don't want to fucking hear ‘yes yes, oh yes’ in this fucking ridiculous monotone voice,” it said, and I immediately burst into a fit of giggles.

Happy tears streamed down my face as I realized how ridiculous that would sound. “Oh my goodness, that's hysterical,” I said through more sputters of laughter.

“Damn, that laugh does things to me I can’t even explain,” the voice said.

Wiping away tears, I turned to look at him with a smile. The intensity of the moment was disappearing, and a new sensation was taking over. Peace. Pure, unadulterated peace.

“Yeah?” I asked.

Jacob lifted his thumb to stroke my bottom lip before his mindspeak responded. “I missed you so much, Ash. So fucking much it hurts. You think I’ll ever stop thinking about you? Damn that was corny. I’m supposed to be smooth. I can say all the right things, wink and smile my life away. But with you, I’m a fumbling idiot.”

I kissed him, and the mindspeak went wild. “Fuck yes, her lips are so soft. Oh God, that thing with your tongue, do it again.” I traced my fingers along his perfect physique, claiming each crease, each crevasse for myself. I wanted to pull away before I lost myself, but his thoughts were still encouraging me. “I love you so much, can you feel it?”

“Yes, Ash,” his mindspeak said. “I love you too.”

I drifted backward, keeping my eyes closed to savor the feel of Jacob on me. “Can I just hold you? I want to hear about everything. I want to know what you’ve been up to.”

I held his hand and guided Jacob to the bed. We shuffled beneath the covers until my cheek was resting on his bare chest, and there was nothing between me and the sound of his heart.

“I trained with a healer,” I whispered before diving into tales about Lilly and Aarav. I told him about fighting with Huxley, pushing Kemper and Patrick away. I told Jacob how I refused to believe that he was hurt or in danger. I told him how I sulked and about Payne.

“I woke up here, you know. Tallis carried me out of Ethros on a transport. I just wanted to call out for you, but I couldn’t. It was like my brain could think the words, but my mouth couldn’t say it.”

I nuzzled closer to Jacob's chest, breathing in his soapy scent. "The mindspeak helps, but I miss having control over my own voice."

If I were being honest, I missed the sound of Jacob's smooth voice too. Although I was thankful for whatever we could get, there was something about his warm tone that made me melt. But I'd rather miss his voice than miss him.

"I'm getting better though. Every day, I can say more."

Jacob took the mindspeak from his ear and sat up taller. With a cough, he moved his lips before saying, "Lo-Love. Love you." Hot tears of joy and sadness rolled down my cheeks.

"I love you too," I whispered. We fell asleep, and although it was comforting to be in his arms, I still felt the weight of all the things still left unsaid.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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**S**taying at the Brothel was a uniquely divine experience. It didn't feel like we were in the poverty-stricken Zone. Lavish gifts and fine foods arrived almost hourly. The Walker Companions had many Elite admirers. I'd always had this image that the Walker Companions had the worst job you could get, but they made it look preferable to my life at Stonewell Manor, but still another form of prison. Where I was confined to the home I worked, they were trapped in the eyes of their clients. Their bodies were their cages.

Each of the women approached their station in life differently. Blythe loved the attention, she reveled in it, squealing whenever the doorbell would ring. Jade would snort and gossip about the men sending her presents. She'd flip her blue hair over her shoulder and spill the secrets of the Elite to anyone that would listen.

Lowe, the pint-sized Companion, fumed with anger over her gifts. She found something to complain about with every wrapped present on her doorstep. And Kaye? The deep frown lines around her chapped lips were more pronounced. It was as if she wanted to seem indifferent to the station she had in life, but couldn't force herself to go numb.

The guys all broke out into different areas after breakfast. Kemper worked with Louis on the database. Huxley and Patrick patrolled the grounds outside, and Jacob was headed to the tunnels to pick up a supply shipment of rejection cures. Tallis had managed to steal a crate for his tribe back in Dormas and snuck them there last month. My guys would be



injected with the last of the stolen vials today. Part of me was glad that we would no longer live in fear that the rejection would one day creep up on them, but another part of me was scared they'd contract X. We had means of preventing infection: sanitation stations and seclusion. But it was still a significant risk.

As I finished breakfast, Madam B dove into explaining the Companion system to me with bouncing pride. "Most girls become Companions when they hit puberty. There are some brothels in lesser known parts that deal young girls, those are un reputable places. The only people that do business with them are sick men and women with fetishes. I have purchased a few girls from them just to save the poor things. I then hire them on as handmaids here in the brothel.

"Parents will bring their teenage daughters to the brothel auction, and madams like myself purchase their vaccine in exchange for ten to fifteen years of service. Some, like Kaye, were born here. They grow up in these halls."

She guided me towards the sitting room, and I tried to imagine what it would be like to live that sort of life. Growing up in a brothel would be a disillusioned and challenging life.

"There are a few brothels here in the Zone, but only the best get used for Elite functions. I'm a regular. My girls know the rules. They're top-notch, you see."

I picked up my tea and took a sip, absorbing this information and trying not to feel disgusted by it. I also couldn't help but feel curious about how things had changed since the cure became obsolete. Before, people were bound to the cure and would sell themselves for it because there was no other way. Unless you were Elite and could afford it, you gave up the only priceless possession you had—yourself.

"How is this system still holding up when there is no cure for the Elite to dangle over your heads?" I asked. For a moment, Madam B's face went dark, but she slipped back into her proper mask. The quick shift in her appearance made me question her alliance. The Elite weren't the only ones

benefiting from this system. The brothel owners made lots of money selling their Companions.

“I’ll admit, it’s put a damper on business. Sometimes I think I’m meant to feel bad about my job,” Madam B said while picking up a muffin and nibbling on it. Her pink lipstick smeared as she chomped down. “But then I think about all the lives I’m saving. Sex always sells, my dear. Doesn’t matter the infrastructure or the motivations. I provide a nice life for my girls. They might have started working here because they wanted the cure, but they stay because it’s their only chance at the parties, the clothes, and gifts. If they left here, they’d have to move into a one-bedroom shack in the Zone. They could marry a poor Walker, and they’d live happily ever after, swimming in their own filth. Or they can give me their bodies, and I’ll give them the world.”

She sounded eerily like Cavil. But unlike him, she didn’t see the world through a prestigious lense of self-indulgent worth. She knew what made the world spin—and used it to her advantage. She didn’t feel sorry about her station in life because she’s honest with herself. There was strength in honesty.

After a while, she dove into the proper etiquette of a Companion. All the rules were overwhelming, I almost couldn’t keep them straight. “When you enter the room, you must wait for your procurer for the night to sit. Always sit on his or her left. Some of the older Elite members will request that you wear lipstick. It’s tacky, but oblige them.”

I briefly thought back to Dominique and frowned at my memory of her in Ethros. “I’m familiar with the red lipstick,” I whispered before taking a sip of tea. “Back in Ethros, Cavil’s Walker Companion, Dominique, forced me to wear it.”

If I squeezed my eyes shut, I could almost feel Dominique’s terse lips on mine, and I shivered in disgust. “Dominique? Strange, Jade hasn’t mentioned a Dominique,” Madam B said while dipping her brow in confusion. “Not once have my girls seen him with anyone.”

“She has been serving him for a few years as his head Walker,” I said, thinking of Payne as anxiety swirled around in my gut. I wondered how he was doing since we’d left. I also couldn’t help but think about the promise I’d made Payne. What if something had happened to Dominique?

“I haven’t heard of a woman named Dominique. Perhaps she didn’t come with him? It’s very possible. Men like Cavil don’t fix their attention on someone for too long.”

I shook my head while trying to wade through what I knew about Dominique. She’d been with him for years.

“Perhaps you’re right,” I mumbled. If what Madam B said were true, then it would be a lot harder to collect Dominique than I originally planned. I just hoped Payne could handle waiting a little longer. There was still an uneasy memory clinging to me. One that had stayed in the back of my mind since dying in the Deadlands. I knew it was close. An answer involving Dominique was just there, close enough for me to reach.

“Well,” a voice said from behind me. I turned around to look at Jade and Blythe. They were wearing all white again. Their hair was pulled up in elegant styles, and red lipstick donned their plush lips.

“We’re off to Cavil’s home,” Blythe said. “I’m looking forward to seeing Maverick again.” I didn’t miss the way her eyes cut to me as she spoke. Jealousy threaded through each of my ribs, tightening my breaths and making me want to claw out of my skin. Why couldn’t I see him yet?

“Be sure to tell him I say hello,” I replied while forcing out a smile.

Blythe rolled her eyes before turning to Madam B, who seemed unamused. “Don’t forget, there’s a meeting tonight,” she reminded the girls.

Jade gave Madam B a salute. “You betcha. Can’t miss the Resistance meeting. We have to go from rich men telling us what to do, just to come home to poor men telling us what to do.” Sarcasm flowed smoothly from her words like poison.

Overall, Madam B had seemed a mildly pleasant person, but at Jade's snarky comment, I saw her eyes turn to fiery slits of anger.

"You should be thankful. Don't abuse the privilege of my kindness, Jade."

"Don't forget that your entire little plan is on *my* shoulders, Madam," she replied with malice.

I sat up taller as the two girls ignored Madam B and sauntered past us to go out the front door. Madam B might think of herself as the girls' savior, but there was still animosity between them. When the door shut, I reached out with shaky hands to take a drink of tea.

"People need to know their place in this world," Madam B grumbled before plopping a soft cookie into her mouth.

I'm not sure why I was feeling so brave, or what moved me to speak up. There was something off about it all, something that had me questioning Madam B, despite my desire to please her.

"Funny," I began before wiping my hands on my dress, a move that made her scowl at the stains on the white fabric. "Cavil said the exact same thing to me."

I stood, desperate to find Huxley, Patrick, Kemper, or Jacob to discuss my feelings. We were in too deep. I might not trust Madam B, but what choice did we have? For now, we'd have to observe and be diligent. I was curious about this Resistance meeting Madam B mentioned. I just hoped it reaffirmed my decision to come here. I couldn't help but wonder if every offer for help came at a price.

Cavil. Lackley. The cure. It all had taken something from me. It seemed every avenue for survival came at a price. That sobering thought left a bitter taste in my mouth. No one ever did anything without wanting something in return.

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I HELPED Jules set up for the meeting to be held in Madam B's basement. Apparently, they had this once a month to keep

everyone updated on the proceedings. The meetings were always random, and they let members of the Resistance know that a meeting would occur by drawing circles on certain buildings around the Zone. Huxley, Patrick, and Tallis had spent most of the day discreetly drawing circles while Kemper worked alongside Louis, learning how to hack into the Walker database. The more who knew how to delete people from the system, the better.

“You should know, these meetings can get...heated,” Jules said while setting up a fold-out chair. She was once again wearing trousers, and her dark hair was braided up in a twist, showing off the sharp lines of her face. Her time in the Zone matured her. There was a time that I never thought Jules would put anything above herself. I liked this side of her.

“How so?”

“People want change, but many are too scared or too stupid to know how to go about it. You put a lot of angry people in one room and tell them it could be better, they all start telling you how to fix things without being willing to fix it. When Lackley died, it encouraged them some.”

I slammed my eyes shut as an onslaught of memories assaulted me. The stage. Lackley’s gleam. The blood. The screams.

Someone shook my shoulder, and I opened my eyes again, staring into Jules’ firm frown. “You have to stop doing that shit. Get it together.”

I squinted at her. “I’m fine. I’ve got it together. Sometimes I just relive that night.”

“What ever happened in Ethros is nothing compared to what will happen in these next couple weeks. You want to know what has helped me get over anything that comes my way?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“I think of the most tragic thing I’ve had to endure, and I remind myself I’m no one. I’m nothing. The world doesn’t care about my trauma, so why should I?”

I stared at Jules, unsure if that was a healthy coping mechanism. “Jules, I care about your trauma. I care about you,” I said. We weren’t conventional friends. We wouldn’t have gotten along had the world not shoved us together. But I loved her all the same.

Jules swallowed and paused to look at me. “I care about you too, you dumb, naive little Walker,” she sniffled and wiped her nose on the back of her hand. “As much as I hate to admit it. You’ve grown on me. But caring gets you killed. Let’s survive for a bit, then we can go on to holding hands and braiding each other’s hair.”

“You forgot to add driving your brothers crazy,” I added with a small smile.

“Oh, that’s just assumed. My mere existence drives them crazy.”

I trusted Jules and resolved to survive this so we could settle into a new routine—together.

“How well do you know Madam B?” I asked her then while adjusting a podium in the center of the large basement. I was surprised by the makeshift headquarters Madam B created in her brothel.

“I know she’s been here for a while. I know she’s determined to overthrow Cavil. When we arrived in the Zone, she was our first point of contact. She’s been helping Scavengers sneak supplies out of the Zone for years.”

I nodded, still feeling unsure. “Something just feels...off?” I mentioned, making sure to keep my voice low as I spoke. I didn’t want to create new enemies too soon.

Jules looked around the room then headed towards me. Grabbing my wrist, she pulled me towards the corner of the room before whispering, “Madam B saved our lives. Saved Jacob. She’s rough around the edges, but she’s good. But... keep your eyes open. Everyone has an agenda. Everyone wants power, money, or both. Survival is relative, and even the people with the best intentions can turn on a dime.”

I stared at Jules, taking in the way her eyes bored into mine. “When did you get so mature?” I asked. “When did you grow up? Don’t get me wrong, I’ve always admired you a bit. Even when you were a brat.” We both laughed. “But this new you? It’s empowering.”

Jules fought a smile. I saw it on her full lips, she bit back the preening joy of my compliment and twisted her expression so that it looked unamused. But I saw the pride bubbling beneath the surface. “I grew up the day I died.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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Small groups of men arrived sporadically for the meeting to avoid suspicion. I watched from my seat as Walkers wearing gloves and masks filed in. Louis took extra care to inspect each person, making sure they didn't have the bruise colored boils consistently present with someone infected with X. Each Walker walked through sanitizing mist and sat down. Some chatted, but most waited quietly for the meeting to start. The guys were upstairs receiving the rejection cure. I couldn't watch them get the shot. There was something about knowing they could contract X and disappear from my life that made me nauseous. There was no winning.

It took a full hour for the seats to fill up, and eventually, Tallis and my men filed in.

"You okay?" Hux asked me as Tallis made his way to the podium. Patrick settled into the seat to my left while I stared ahead. The room smelled of sweat and sanitizer spray. Patrick grabbed my hand, and when I looked down at his arm, I took in the band-aid covering the spot where I knew he received the rejection cure. Bile rose in my throat.

"I guess," I replied. The energy of the room was pure, white-hot anger. Everyone was scowling, shifting uncomfortably in their seat. It was like the Walkers were ready to strike, they just needed a reason to. I couldn't help but stare at the various masked faces. Their lips were covered, but I could see the hopelessness in their eyes. This was a group of angry people with nothing to lose.



“Thank you for coming,” Tallis said while nodding towards someone to shut the door. “Let’s get down to business, shall we?”

Tallis looked over at Jules for a moment then back to the crowd. To my left, Lowe, Kaye, Jade, and Blythe entered and shuffled to their seats just before the door shut. I ached to go to Blythe and find out how Maverick was doing, but they each seemed focused on the meeting.

“We plan to strike at the end of the month. Cavil is hosting an event for members of the Elite.”

I half-expected the room to lighten up a bit, but it didn’t. Tallis continued, “We won’t go too much into detail on the execution, the fewer who know, the better. But at midnight of his party, the Resistance will riot.”

Tallis’ words hung over the crowd like an angry fog.

“So what is expected of us, exactly?” a younger man asked while scratching behind his neck. He looked around the room, gaining confidence as people shifted forward in their seats to listen.

“Flood the streets of Galla. Fight Cavil’s guardsmen,” Tallis replied as if it were simple. Jules gave him a sideways glance, opening her mouth to speak then closing it again as if thinking better of it.

Another man, who was burly and wore an unimpressed scowl upon his unmasked face, stood up. “You expect us to fight men with Heat? I’m assuming that you plan to kill Cavil. But killing him won’t stop his armed men.”

Louis then stood, eyeing Kemper with a smile before heading towards the podium. “We might have a way to disable their weapons.”

Almost immediately, the mood of the entire room shifted. Men sat on the edges of their seats.

“I’m working with a member of the Dormas Leadership Council on creating an electric pulse that will disable any of their weapons within a certain radius. I think we should have it running within a week.”

“You *think*?” the burly man asked. “I’m not risking my life unless we have some certainties.”

I glanced at Jules. Her small arms were crossed over her chest as she stared at the Walkers arguing amongst themselves, and I briefly wondered if this was how most of their meetings went. How did anything ever get done?

“There are never any certainties,” I said to mostly to myself while staring ahead at the podium. But the arguing man heard me and responded.

“What did you say?” he spat with malice while twisting to stare at me.

Huxley growled next to me, and I felt Patrick stiffen on my other side. I wasn’t expecting him to hear me, but having his unnecessary fury directed my way had my blood boiling. The angry Walker stared pointedly as if waiting for me to back down, so instead, I stole some false bravado from Jules and continued. “What I mean to say is, if you’re looking for the perfect scenario, you’ll be waiting forever.”

“Who even are you? Are we just letting anyone into these meetings now?”

I wanted to answer, but Madam B intercepted the attention of the room before I could.

“This Walker has been behind enemy lines. She was on stage the night Lackley died. She fought for her life and escaped Ethros with Cavil on her heels.”

A hush filled the space, and shame filled my heart. I didn’t save myself. I wasn’t a hero. I was a girl that got incredibly lucky. My entire life was one big coincidence. A positive happenstance of fate. Immunity. The Stonewells. Dormas. The stars aligned, and I was gifted with what others were not—luck.

“This little Walker was tortured in Cavil’s ivory room. Shocked within an inch of her life,” Madam B’s voice went low and dramatic. “Despite being tortured and abused, she overcame that and joined the Resistance once more. She has

seen the consequences of defying Cavil first hand and yet is gracious enough to help us.”

Madam B got off the podium and headed towards the crowd, her face had a scripted softness about it that made me squirm in discomfort. Bypassing Huxley, she stood in front of me, only a breath away from my face. I shivered at her nearness, and it wasn't until she cupped my cheek that she spoke. “If an innocent Walker, a victim of the society thrust upon her, can overcome her fear and do what is right for her people, then why can't we?”

I swallowed back the bile that rose in my throat at her theatrics. She pulled away and spun around to address everyone once more. With each word, her voice rose in volume and intensity. “At the end of the month, my army of Companions, led by their queen,” she gestured to me, “will end the divide between Walker and Elite. There will be fire in the streets of Galla, and riots in all of Dasos.”

Madam B clenched her fists and punched the air above her. Claps reverberated around the concrete basement, and I watched her rally the troops. Was I the only one that saw her smug smile? Was I the only one that questioned her motives? Jules' words echoed in my mind. “Everyone wants power or money...”

I turned to stare at Jade. She was fuming, and I couldn't blame her. She'd be the one to ultimately do the hardest job, but Madam B was rallying the troops for me.

It was still strange taking in the anger of the Resistance. They were fueled by revenge, an accumulation of the dissatisfaction they felt for this government and their place in this world. Madam B used their anger to her advantage, convincing them to fight an uncertain battle.

I stared at the stage as Louis grabbed the microphone, jolting everyone out of the momentary camaraderie. “Elite coming!” he hissed while scanning his tablet. Madam B moved with precision towards me as Tallis ran to a side door. Opening it, he revealed a small tunnel that I assumed led outside. The small crowd filed out, each man pushing and

shoving at one another to flee as Madam B grabbed my elbow. I winced at her hard grip as she tried pulling me upstairs to the sitting room.

“Where do you think you’re taking her?” Huxley growled out while reaching for my free arm.

“The others are helping remove the evidence of our meeting.” I looked around as the Companions efficiently removed the folding chairs and podium. Shuffling feet stomped loudly along the concrete floor. It was as if they had practiced this many times before. “I need a girl in the sitting room in case they’ve come to call upon a Companion,” Madam B hissed.

Dread swirled in my gut. I wasn’t ready for this, was I?

“Absolutely not,” Huxley replied while yanking me out of her grip and towards his chest. I collided with him, resting my palms on his pecs. For a moment, the room wasn’t in chaos, and I wasn’t on the verge of panic. It was just Huxley and me.

“I won’t let them take her to the third floor, you idiot. I’ll come up with an excuse of why she can’t, but I need at least one of them with me. You can wait in the hallway if you’re so worried.”

Huxley looked around the room for another moment, debating Madam B’s words while stroking my hair contemplatively. Before letting me go, he firmly said, “Fine. But if I think anything strange is happening, we’re out.”

Madam B didn’t waste any time arguing with Huxley, she merely regained her hold on my arm and yanked me up the short flight of stairs leading to the main floor. Taking a moment to smooth my hair with her fingers and adjust my dress at the nape, she then eased her breathing before guiding me towards the entryway where a man was standing.

“Ah, Master,” she said in a sultry, low tone. “How may I be of assistance?”

My eyes locked onto the Heat strapped to his hip and the orange and black uniform draped over his bulky frame. From what I could tell, he was a member of Cavil’s guard.

“I’ve been told this is the best brothel in the Zone, am I correct?” he asked. The guardsman wore his thin hair slicked back. Patches of his white scalp peeked through the thin strands which were greasy and full of product. I breathed in, nearly choking when his too-strong cologne hit the back of my throat. His eyes were hooded as he took me in, and I suddenly felt very exposed in the white dress Madam B made me wear this morning. Although it covered a lot of skin, it still clung tightly to my frame, leaving little to the imagination.

“That would be correct,” Madam B replied with a coy grin, lingering in the handshake a bit longer than I would have. “Are you interested in me preparing one of the rooms upstairs, or...”

“No. Although now that I’ve seen her, I might have to change my mind.” The guardsman looked me up and down, a hunger in his eyes that was equal parts cruel and lustful. I forced myself not to squirm, comforted by the fact that Huxley was only a few feet away, but I was also embarrassed. Although I’d learned a lot about self-defense while I lived in the Deadlands, I still felt an uncontrollable fear where any of Cavil’s guards were concerned. It made me sick to my stomach when I thought of how much their orange and black uniforms affected me. Those colors brought me back to the night Josiah smashed Blan’s skull in. Blood. So much blood.

“Cavil wanted to see if your girls were available for a last minute function he’s having tonight. You have the best Companions in the Zone. I’ll admit, I’m not usually one to partake, but I haven’t seen this one before. Is she available?” He nodded at me.

I looked down at the floor, feigning submissiveness so I wouldn’t have to answer. “Shade is new. A recently acquired immune I got last night. I’ve been reaching out to my contacts across the empire to find immune Walkers needing work. I do what I can to please Emperor Cavil,” Madam B lied effortlessly.

“Well, I’d very much like Shade to join us then. We will send a transport to pick up your immune girls at 8. Please tell them to wear white. Cavil prefers it.”

Madam B nodded eagerly, leaning forward to open her front door and let him out. “In the future, Master, if you’d prefer to save yourself a trip to the Zone, I happily book appointments via tablet. Simply call, and we can work things out.”

The guardsman slowed then lingered in the doorway. “I was informed that a potential Resistance group might be meeting in the area. I wanted to scout the Zone for any suspicious activity.”

Madam B didn’t miss a beat. She clutched her chest like the skilled actress I’d learned she was. “Resistance meetings?!” she gasped. “Well, if I see anything, I’ll be sure to send word. I can’t believe people would be stupid enough to challenge Cavil. It’s a shame there’s no respect for the hierarchy of things anymore.”

The guardsman smiled at her, seemingly satisfied by her shock. “Thank you, Madam. Please let me know if you hear anything.”

Once the door was shut, we didn’t speak for a while, as if too scared that he would return and ask for more. I struggled to digest that I would be going to Cavil’s home for a party tonight.

It wasn’t until I felt a hand on my waist that I turned around and faced the terror of the situation. Huxley had bypassed all build up to his episodes and was already lost to his protective rage. His stormy green eyes were swimming with concern, determination, and anger. I gripped his hand tightly before looking over my shoulder at Madam B, who was pacing the floor and talking to herself.

Finally, she paused and stared at me. “We do what we must, right? Find Jules. She’ll get you ready.”

And with that, she was off, skittering around her home and mumbling to herself as I came to terms with the reality that, within a few hours, I’d be coming face to face with the man of my nightmares.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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The guys hovered as I got ready, vetoing three of the outfits Jules picked out because they revealed too much skin. “I don’t like this at all,” Huxley barked. In the last three hours, he kept repeating the same three phrases:

“No.”

“She’s not wearing that.”

And my personal favorite, “I don’t like this.”

What if Maverick or Cyler weren’t there? What if Cavil recognized me? What if I had to...

“Here, keep this in your pocket,” Jules said while slapping a small blue pill in my palm.

“What is it?” I didn’t want to come across as ungrateful or melodramatic, but last time Jules gave me medicine, I died. I was a bit hesitant to accept anything from her now.

“Just one more way we’re going to insure that Cavil and his men don’t claim you for the night. If Maverick or Cyler can’t get you, take this pill.”

“What does it do?”

Jules laughed, a sadistic grin covering her face that made Huxley growl. Jacob had to take his mindspeak back out of his ear so that she couldn’t hear his insults.

“Let’s just say it’ll make you so sick that no one will find you appealing. They’ll practically beg you to leave,” she

laughed. “You’ll throw up for the next 24 hours, but it’s a small price to pay, in my opinion.”

“Are you sure that’s safe? I think I need to come up with another backup plan,” Kemper said while scrolling through his tablet, looking at the blueprints for Cavil’s tower in Galla. “There aren’t many ways in and out. It’s like he’s built a fortress.”

Jules rolled her eyes and leaned over me, lining my lids with black makeup. “You think we haven’t already exhausted all of our options? The only way in and out is as a guard, Elite, Walker servant, or Companion. They saw her, they want her. The only way we aren’t going to raise any suspicions is if we continue as normal.”

“I don’t like it,” Huxley growled for the fourteenth time. Neither did I, but I didn’t say it. This was what I wanted, right? A chance to avenge Josiah, save Cyler and Maverick?

“You don’t really have a choice. If she decided not to go, they’d snoop around. Pretentious assholes,” Jules lined my lips with red, the bold shade complimenting my tan skin. Despite the destination, I smiled at my reflection. I didn’t feel like myself, but the effect of Jules’ skill almost convinced me that I could handle this. Maybe if I accepted my new persona, pretended to be this Shade person for a night, I could survive. She sprayed me with perfume, making me cough on the citrus scent.

“You look gorgeous,” Jacob’s mindspeak said from behind me. “I agree with Huxley. I don’t want her anywhere near those dicks, I want her home with us.”

Kemper continued to scroll through his tablet. I looked in the mirror, and in the reflection, my eyes connected with Patrick’s. Pale and jaw clenched, he looked wild with worry. I had to convince him that this was nothing more than an evening out. That I’d come home and slip into bed with him like I’ve done so many nights before. I spun around in my chair and stood. Patrick reached his hands out to me, and I nuzzled into him for a hug, burrowing my face against his chest and letting him steal some comfort from our hug.



“Maybe you should just plan on taking that pill the second you walk through the doors? I’ll nurse you back to health.”

I giggled against him. “Will you sing me more nursery rhymes and cradle me?” I asked. He began rocking me slowly as he hummed a quiet song meant just for us. The soothing dance warmed me from within, filling me with peace before the wave of reality crashed back along the shore.

“I’ll do whatever you want me to, Ash,” he murmured into my sleek, straight hair while cupping my neck. He began spinning me around the small bathroom, chuckling some when we bumped into Jacob who let out a curse and clutched his groin.

“Watch where you’re going, for fuck’s sake,” his mindspeak said as he growled through gritted teeth. That earned a laugh from Huxley, and soon we were all enjoying ourselves, even Jules.

Kemper tapped Patrick on the shoulder then held out a box to me. “It’s the fake fetter,” he said with a frown. I stared at the foreboding box, trying to think of another way around it, but ultimately opened the creaky wood and slipped on the brass fetter without a second glance. I wanted the chance to prove myself, I couldn’t back out now over a piece of fake jewelry. Kemper backed away, his hands wrapped around his middle, and Patrick resumed swaying with me.

“Am I terrible for saying I want to see Maverick and Cyler? I’m actually pretty excited about that,” I finally said.

I’d walk through hell to see my men. I’d kiss the devil for a lifetime with them. No cost was too great. Strength came in many forms. Love was messy. I’d once chosen myself. I’d learned how to prioritize self-love over something toxic, it’s what led me to Dormas in the first place. But now? Now, I had to learn how to navigate the all-consuming self-sacrificing kind of love. The love that forced you to step outside of your comfort zone. The love that made danger seem inconsequential compared to a life without them.

And that’s what I felt for all my men.

Huxley burst out in another series of laughter, startling us all. I slowly turned to face him, keeping Patrick close. Huxley was bent over, clutching his stomach as he shook. Was this it? Was *this* how Huxley finally lost his mind? We all stared worriedly as he stood to wipe his juniper eyes.

“Oh man,” he said as a couple more chuckles escaped. “I just realized you’re gonna see Cyler and Maverick. You know what they’re gonna do once they realize you willingly walked into Cavil’s home?”

Suddenly, Jacob’s mindspeak said “oh fuck” while Patrick cursed and Kemper frantically flipped through his tablet once more.

“Cyler’s into spanking, isn’t he?” Patrick asked while wrapping his arms tighter around me.

“I think so. You shouldn’t worry as much about Cavil, and worry more about what Maverick and Cyler are going to do once they see you,” Kemper said with a smirk.

I blushed, realizing they were right. Cyler and Maverick were going to be furious—and I couldn’t wait.

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DURING THE TRANSPORT ride to Cavil’s tower the girls chatted amongst themselves, completely ignoring me. Blythe, at least, seemed less smug now that I was joining them. Her outfit was definitely more risqué than before, too. It was practically lingerie with a sheer, white overlay. She was beautiful. Applying her lipstick, Jade smacked her lips at a compact mirror before looking at me, “You look good, Walker Queen.” I rolled my eyes at the sarcastic nickname. Ever since Madam B called me that at the meeting, all the Companions had taken up addressing me as such.

“Thanks,” I whispered.

I imagined what my reunion with Cyler and Maverick would be like. Would they kiss me? Would they recognize me? With shaky fingers, I pulled out the compact mirror in my

purse and frowned at the grey eyes and light hair. My plumped lips and harsh cheekbones looked foreign on my face.

Kaye looked with sad eyes out the window as Lowe, Jade, and Blythe chatted excitedly about a diamond necklace one of the men gifted earlier today. I leaned forward to whisper, “Got any advice?” to Kaye. She stiffened then turned her gaze towards me, a sadness penetrating my soul with such fierceness that I clutched my chest and had to catch my breath.

“Advice?” she asked. I watched as her hand with red-painted nails dug up the slit in her dress and pulled out a shiny flask. She took a small sip before continuing. “Do you have a survival instinct, little Walker Queen?” she asked. “Do you lean on your instinct?”

“I’m not sure what you’re asking,” I replied. The others had gone quiet and were leaning closer to hear what Kaye had to say. It was rare that she spoke, so they were just as intrigued as I was.

“Of course you don’t understand. My advice is to cling to that innate, primal part of you that screams for you to run when you find yourself in a dark place. Listen to that voice that warns you of danger. Take your adversity, take your differences, your resilience, and use it to your advantage.”

“Well damn, Kaye,” Lowe said with a laugh. “I think the girl just wanted to know what fork to use at the dinner table. We’re not going to war.”

“Every day is war,” Kaye replied in a curt tone before staring out the window once more.

The tower where Cavil lived was quite easily the tallest in Galla. As advertisements for fetters and videos of Cavil kissing babies scrolled along the exterior, I felt my stomach drop. Guards patrolled out front, and the transport didn’t stop outside, it traveled through a revolving garage door, stopping inside a brightly lit lobby.

Sanitizing steam filled the small space, cleaning the transport before the doors opened. I patted my pocket where a tiny compartment holding my puke-pill was. It was sewn into

a seam, ready for if I was claimed for the night. I didn't necessarily want to spend my evening puking the entire contents of my stomach, but it seemed preferable to a night in a stranger's room.

I followed the others into the lobby, stepping outside of the transport with shaky legs and a chin raised high. I willed myself to embody the personality of Shade. She wasn't scared. She knew how to fight. She didn't know grief or sadness. She could handle anything the world threw at her. She didn't go numb to cope, nor did she lash out in anger. She was cool, collected, and a badass.

"A new one, huh?" a guard asked while looking me over and checking his tablet. He scanned my face, nodding once the Walker database came up.

"Grew up in Saberus. Immune. No children or family."

Another guard walked up to me and grabbed my hand, pricking my finger with a needle and putting a drop of my blood on a test strip and grinning when the red stain turned a bright shade of green.

"Well, look at that. You're one of the lucky two percent, Companion. Clear!"

We were guided to an elevator, and as we all rose to the top floor, I stared out the clear glass to the city below. In the distance, I could see the Zone. It stood proud with flickering lights and smog outside of Galla despite the grime and poverty.

The door slid open, revealing an ivory room full of people. "Get ready, Shade. I'm off to find Cavil," Jade said while smiling and entering the room with a flirtatious stroll that made me feel wildly inadequate.

Lowe squeezed my hand before wrapping her arm around me with a fake giggle. "Let's go have some fun, shall we?" She sashayed, adding an extra sway to her hips as she walked, forcing me to swerve and lean into her.

"Just stick with me, honey."

The ivory room triggered a fear deep within me that I couldn't hold back. My mouth was dry and my wrist throbbed as if a phantom pain was rocking through me, reminding me of the destruction that Cavil could cause.

A tall man in a white suit stopped us, grinning at Lowe like she was a prize to be won. "Master Jaquis!" she cooed while detangling herself from me and wrapping her arms around him with a grin. "Oh how I've missed you," she said while nuzzling her nose against his, earning a delighted groan from him. I felt sick to my stomach but kept my face pleasant and neutral. He was a stout man with dimples and red cheeks. He smelled of stale beer and cheese.

"Who is your friend?" the man asked while giving me a slow once over.

Lowe gave me a sideways glance before responding. "That's my new friend, Shade. She's immune, but I'm more fun."

The man chuckled before kissing her neck. Jade flinched, but he didn't notice. "I do love it when you get jealous, dear," he said while wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling her close.

"I know," she replied with a small smile. She played the part well, but I saw past it. I quietly thanked her for steering this man away from me.

My eyes drifted across the room, and I went still when I saw long black hair and a burly frame scowling in the corner. His thick arms were crossed over his chest, and the white suit he wore accentuated his dark eyes.

It felt like someone was punching me in my gut. All air escaped me. *Cyler Black.*

Another Walker Companion walked by and paused when she saw me. She was wearing white too, but I didn't recognize her. I assumed she was a Companion from one of the other brothels in the Zone. "Good luck," she said, her voice husky and sounding older than she looked. "My brothel sends me here almost every night, and not once has he given me or

anyone else a second glance.” She walked away and crashed into an Elite man that was already well too drunk to know what was happening. The Companion easily slipped to his side and maneuvered him to a nearby seat. I slowly made my way towards Cyler in the corner as he stared off to his left at a couple arguing.

Not once did he glance at me. With each step, my pulse increased. Each step closer, I wanted to run and jump into his arms, but I stayed still, slipping into the role required of me.

Once I was near enough, he still didn’t turn my way. Didn’t give me a second of his attention. “Not interested,” he said in a bored tone, still refusing to acknowledge me. I breathed in his cinnamon scent, leaning closer before whispering.

“Cy. First the train, now here? Saving you is becoming a habit.”

I watched as each of his muscles went rigid, the veins in his neck thudding with excitement and anger. Slowly, ever-so-slowly, he turned to look at me, his dark eyes hooded and hungry as he bit his lip and took in my hair, lips, and clothes.

“Babe,” he said in a low voice, reaching out to touch my hip. “You’re in so much fucking trouble.”

I didn’t have a second to think or process what he was doing. Cyler Black didn’t let another moment pass before he was crashing his lips to mine in a passionate move that had my legs going numb. He spun me around, pressed me against the wall, then slid us closer to the shadows. In the dark corner, we were hidden from everyone else.

He kissed me like a starving man, and I melted. I was nothing but a tense bundle of emotions, smearing my red lipstick across his lips as I tasted his tongue, consuming him completely and gripping my dress to hike it up so I could wrap my thighs around him.

I moaned into his mouth, and the sound started a chain reaction of primal need within us. Somehow, my dress had become loose around my chest. He clutched the fabric at my

breasts, keeping it up as we kissed. I opened for him, and Cyler thrust his thigh between my legs, pushing up against my core as he used his free hand to grab my hair, yanking my lips from his so he could lick and suck on my neck.

I was nothing but pleading whimpers. Desire. Hot pain and pleasure demanding more. Five months of longing finally came to an end. I didn't see the ivory room, the Elite, the Walker Companions, or even the figure standing behind him. I just felt Cyler Black and his all consuming love for me.

“What the fuck are you doing?” a familiar voice asked as Cyler was ripped from me. “Really? Does Ash mean nothing to you? How could you do this to her?” Maverick asked while rearing back to punch Cyler before staring at me. I almost let out a scream, begging Maverick to stop, but his shocked whisper stopped me.

“A-Ash?” he asked in a deadly low whisper, as if saying my name out loud would break the spell of seeing me. I worried my disguise wasn't enough. What if Cavil recognized me? Behind Maverick, Blythe looked at us with disgust before storming off.

“What are you doing here? Blythe said you wouldn't be here until the end of the month party,” Maverick asked, leaning closer and pushing me even farther into the shadows. Both of them formed a tight wall around me, and I wanted nothing more than to sink my teeth into Maverick's bottom lip. In the distance, I could see that things were heating up in the ivory room. Men and Companions had started to drift off down the many winding hallways. An Elite woman and a Walker Companion were kissing passionately on Cavil's ivory couch, spilling wine everywhere.

“I had no choice,” I whispered. “I was called here.” I couldn't help but feel a slight pang of insecurity at hearing Blythe's name on Maverick's tongue. Was he mad that I disrupted his night with her? Five months was a long time. I knew it was unreasonable, and I hated myself for even thinking it, but I needed reassurance.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Cyler said. He was still close, crushing me against his body. I wrapped my arms around his waist and hugged Cyler tightly before letting go and migrating to Maverick.

He looked the same. If anything, more well-rested. His hair was a bit longer, his skin more pale. I wondered if he was allowed outside. “Mav, aren’t you happy to see me?” I asked before stepping closer.

He looked over his shoulder, staring around at the room, looking at everyone before slipping his eyes to me. “Of course I’m happy to see you, but not here. Not like this.”

I half expected this, but it didn’t mean it hurt any less to hear. I slumped in sadness, feeling rejected even though I knew I had no right to feel this way. Shade was confident, but the Ash that was in love with Maverick and Cyler wanted them to show some sort of excitement. I wanted to slap myself for being so caught up. I knew they loved me. I knew this just wasn’t an ideal situation.

“Ash, sweetheart, don’t look like that,” Maverick whispered. A familiar cadence of trumpets sounded, causing Cyler and Maverick to stiffen and stare at one another.

They made a wordless choice then, communicating only with their stares and leaving me out of the decision making process. Surprise, surprise.

“Cavil,” Cyler whispered while looking around the room.

“I’ll take her to my room,” Maverick said while gripping my wrist. Cyler seemed reluctant to let me go, but he kissed the inside of my wrist, letting me go with a glance that said this wasn’t over.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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Maverick guided me down the hall, avoiding the throngs of people rushing forward to greet Cavil as the processional music played. The soundtrack of people cheering for his arrival echoed against my skull. In the back of my mind, I knew I should have been nervous, but seeing Maverick and Cyler again eased any fear I felt.

“Hurry,” Maverick said. I kept my head low as we passed guards. I kept sneaking looks from the corner of my eyes, but none seemed to pay us any mind. Maverick’s wrist still donned the fetter that I hated so much. I ran my thumb along its ridges, wincing as I remembered the day Maverick clamped it onto his wrist, tethering us together.

My heels clicked on the marble tile in time to the trumpets playing in the formal party room. The tower was a maze of places and people. We hit a staircase leading down to a lower floor, and Maverick pulled me inside a bedroom, slamming the door shut behind him and locking it.

“This is not good,” Maverick said in a shaky voice. He began pacing the floor while running his hands through his hair. “What were you thinking coming here? Was all of this for nothing?” he growled. I felt my blood boil with anger as he spoke.

“I had no choice. They saw me at the brothel and picked me to attend,” I said, strolling up to Maverick with a frown. “I came back for you, Mav.”

Maverick cupped my cheeks and stared into my eyes. He was like a predator debating over if it wants to devour its prey or snack on it. “You have no idea what kind of a risk this is.”

“I don’t care about the risks. I’d do anything to get you back,” I choked out. Maybe it wasn’t what Maverick wanted to hear. He’d been battling his own self-sacrificing habits for as long as I’d known him. He couldn’t believe that I loved him enough—that anyone loved him enough—to do the same.

“You don’t care?!” Maverick yelled, walking towards a bar cart off to the side of the room. I’d let him have his freak out. I’d let him be angry. When I’d learned that they stayed behind, I had time to process my fear. I’d give him the same opportunity. Love was patient, after all.

Scattered papers filled the room, and books were piled high upon an unmade bed. The tall windows overlooked all of Galla, showing off the night sky and giving the illusion of peace. I’d often wondered where Maverick was staying all this time. Many dark nights, I envisioned him in a prison cell, hunched over and working while Cavil and his guards electrocuted him. This was definitely preferable.

“This is a nice place,” I whispered while casually walking to his desk. I thumbed the papers sitting there and smiled when I saw a corner of pen doodles. My name scratched in bold letters sat proudly in the corner.

“Cavil keeps my workspace tolerable,” Maverick groundout. I sensed some discontent in his statement.

“Have you been okay, Maverick? I mean really. Has he... has he hurt you?” I asked, fearing the answer. I needed to know.

“Of course I’ve not been okay. Anytime I don’t have you in my arms, I’m not okay.” I watched as Maverick poured himself a drink then cursed when the liquor cart lit up a shade of red, prohibiting more liquid from being poured. I guess Cavil didn’t want his prized scientist drunk on the job.

“But all of this? It’s now for nothing. All the pain of being apart is for nothing because you’re here.”

“I’m not going to apologize for coming for you,” I said with a whisper. “I’m not going to apologize for fighting for us.”

“I’m surprised Huxley let you do this,” Maverick said before straightening some papers on his desk. It was like he had to keep moving, his fingers were itching to straighten things, put all the little pens and papers on his desk in order because it was the only thing he could control in this situation.

“I don’t need anyone’s permission, Maverick.”

I stared at Maverick, my chest heaving with anger, tension and...arousal. I wanted him. I didn’t care how it happened. Five months of wanting a man I didn’t know was alive became too much. It was all too much. I strolled forward, grabbing his hand and brushing my lips along his knuckles. Maybe I was selfish for pushing, but I needed to feel Maverick’s lips on mine.

“Kiss me, Maverick,” I pleaded. Instead of responding to my demand, he merely looked at the door with defeat. A sad sort of anger filled me. It wasn’t like the all-consuming one I felt when Huxley and I sparred or even the thudding outrage that always seemed below the surface. No, this anger was mellow and dark. It crept up, shocking me with its intensity. It felt hopeless, like it would never let me go.

Was this it? Was Maverick done with me? “Okay,” I said once I realized that he wouldn’t be giving in to my demand. Spinning around, I spotted a wingback chair in the corner and made my way towards it. I planned to sit things out and let the emotionless vacuum of Shade swallow up my feelings. She wouldn’t be bothered if the man she loved refused her. She would move on.

“Ash,” Maverick said, his voice like a sad moan of disapproval. “Don’t be like that. You risked yourself.”

From my perch, I crossed my legs and stared back at Maverick head on. “You risked our family. I understand why you stayed behind, I truly do. But you didn’t include me in that decision. Maybe too much time has passed. Maybe we missed our opportunity if we ever really had one. I’ll leave

here and help you escape, but we don't have to go back to how we were," I replied. All I wanted was some sort of affirmation that he was at least happy to see me, that he wanted me still.

That he hadn't moved on.

"Ash," Maverick began, "stand up this instant." Maverick ran a shaky hand through his red hair and stalked towards me.

"You think I'm not happy to see you? I'm ecstatic. I dreamed of kissing you again. Tasting you. Filling you up. Marrying you. It's all I could think about the last five months."

I still didn't stand, even when he was right in front of me, his pelvis at my eye level. I looked up at him through my thick eyelashes, unshed tears blurring my vision as I took in his angry expression.

"But I didn't want it like this."

"Show me how you wanted it to be, Maverick. Pretend this isn't Cavil's home. Pretend we're back in Dormas. In your lab. Show me how you'd greet me."

My fingers trembled as I reached up to unbutton his pants. I slid the zipper down and swallowed when I saw his hardness ready for me. It was thick and proud. Maverick let out a gasp, and the sound was like a bulldozer to my insecurities, tearing down each doubt as I accepted that his pent-up anger would be a part of our reunion.

Licking my lips, I looked up once more at Maverick, asking permission to continue. Without answering me, Maverick slid off his pants and stripped off his shirt. He yanked me up to a standing position and crashed his lips to mine.

His kisses weren't like Cyler's, it was pure anger coursing through where our lips touched. He wasn't tentative, sweet, or even reverent like before. He moved against me, burning his touch to mine like it was his punishment.

My dress ripped further up the thigh, and I took advantage of the freedom to wrap my legs around him and hike it higher so that I was grinding against him.

Breathing in his heady scent, I let my lungs fill, brushing my breasts against him as his tongue teased mine. I threaded my hands through his hair, grabbing hard on the rusty locks and yanking him away from me so I could speak. “Don’t you ever leave me again,” I said, my voice throaty and hoarse. His wild eyes stared at me as I released his hair and dragged my nails down his back, making him squirm.

“Don’t you ever risk yourself like this again,” he replied.

He threw me on the bed with a thud before ripping apart my sheer ivory dress. He didn’t stop tearing until it was nothing but shreds of white fabric around us, a cloud made up of lies and the part we were expected to play. Standing over me, Maverick dipped down and nibbled my inner thigh before nipping at the lace covering my clit. “Maybe I should want to make this sweet for you. I’m the one expected to make all the sacrifices, right? Save the world. Save the girl.” He dragged his teeth along my sensitive skin, the sharp points taunting me. “I’m tired of being the hero. I’m tired of watching the world burn.”

In one quick movement, my hips were lifting up for his nimble fingers to slide the lingerie off of me. Once it was gone and I was completely naked before him, he let out a little gasp of appreciation that had me melting. “You think I’m worth risking your life for? I’m no one. I’m nothing. I’ll make this all about you because I don’t deserve a bit of your body, Ash. But fuck, I’m going to take it.”

This sadness wasn’t what I ever expected for my first time, and especially not from Maverick. I realized that this wasn’t about me anymore. He might hate that I showed up, but he was still hell-bent on punishing himself.

“This isn’t about me, Maverick. Get on the bed,” I said while sitting up, my newly lightened hair falling around my shoulders, covering my breasts as he stared at me.

“What?” he asked.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him to me, smiling when our bodies became a tangled web of limbs on the soft mattress. I kicked aside the blankets and mess of torn

clothes, pushing him onto his back before straddling his hips. He looked so good beneath me, his flaring nostrils ignited me from within. It was always Maverick. The sweet healer. The tortured scientist. The sacrificial friend. He'd held me while I cried. Saved my life. Cherished me.

"I've been thinking about this moment," I whispered before looking into his eyes. If he wanted me to stop, now was the time. I leaned forward to kiss him, pressing my soft lips to his with a moan. I took my time, trailing my tongue along his jaw, sucking on his collarbone, nipping at his abs.

I placed my lips on his thigh, smiling to myself when his cock, proud and assuming, brushed against my cheek. Slowly, I traveled back up and settled right above him, teasing him as I rubbed our bodies against one another. "I want you, Maverick Black. I want all of you. Forever. No matter the cost, no matter the dangers. I want you." When he didn't move, I lowered, making sure to stare into his deep eyes as I slid down and hissed in pain when he stretched past my barrier of innocence. Maverick grabbed my shoulders, guiding and squeezing as he tried not to buck beneath me. I needed him to be still as I broke apart. It hurt, but it was a good hurt. An earned hurt, amplified by my control and the five months we spent apart. "I'm glad you've finally stopped pretending to have everything together," I gritted out as he stretched me. His head rocked back against the pillow, the first moan escaping his lips. Watching him let go of his burdens was my focal point. I didn't feel pain or anger. I saw each emotion as it crossed his face and stored it in my memory, savoring the look of his joy.

"But you're gonna save me, Maverick. You're gonna save everyone." Once I was sure I could handle it, I began slowly moving up and down, feeling each painful pulse disappear and turn into a throbbing need. I needed Maverick to take control. I needed Maverick and Cyler to succeed. I needed my guys all back together.

Maverick bucked forward, and I fell upon his chest, laying there for a moment and enjoying how he felt inside of me. I pulled off of him and rolled over on my back, urging him with a whimper to take over. "I love you, Maverick," I whispered.

He rolled on top of me and positioned himself at my entrance. I bit my lip as he slowly slid inside once more. Every pretense fell away at that moment. I had no expectations of Maverick, no expectations of what would happen next. He moved with deliberate intention, our skin softly rubbed against one another like silk. My moans were in time with his thrusts, and he kept his steady gaze on me, drinking in my blissful expression.

I wanted to absorb each sensation, each glance, each touch and cling to it, knowing that I'd only have a memory to hold onto once I left here. There were no guarantees. "You're so beautiful. So strong, Ash. I carry the world on my shoulders, and you carry me." His voice was dark, but he tenderly stroked my cheek, pushing my hair behind my ear as he thrust once more. His steady movements pressed against that sweet spot deep within me, and it was so hard to hold back and make this moment last.

It seemed like hours that we moved, slowly rocking to the beat of our hearts. Each loving thrust was slow and intentional. I wrapped my legs around his back, arching up and claiming the intense, electric zap of pleasure each time he moved within me. "I love you so much," he murmured into my hair over and over and over. Each whispered affectionate declaration like a war cry. I whimpered my replies while clenching tightly around him. "I love you, I love you, I love you."

The slow building orgasm tore through us. I let it wash over me in waves and crawl through my veins. I clung to my intoxicating climax, begging it not to end. Begging this moment not to stop. After having Maverick torn from me for five months, I didn't want to lose having him as close as physically possible. He was in my soul just then, settling deep in my heart and branding himself to me in a way that no one else ever had.

"Was this okay?" Maverick asked while settling beside me. I rolled over to cling to him, not worrying about the mess we made of my clothes and my shattered innocence. There was blood between my thighs, but I liked the evidence of it. I loved

knowing that I finally dived into the physical relationships with my men.

“It was more than okay,” I whispered while squeezing my eyes shut and absorbing every last piece of this moment. His smell. The rhythm of his heart. The love on his lips and the passion in his thrusts. “Now I’ve really got to get you out of here. I want a lifetime of that,” I said with a small smile.

Maverick chuckled while stroking my hair. He didn’t say anything for a while, and we lay there, basking in the post-sex bliss. “You remember our first kiss?” Maverick finally asked. I smiled at the memory.

“Of course,” I replied. “We were in Lackley’s lab. It was the first time you told me you wanted forever together.” I snuggled into Maverick’s chest and listened to his steady heart as he spoke.

“We’ve got to stop doing these things right before I know you have to leave.”

I glanced at the clock in the room. As a rule, Companions had to leave by two in the morning. “Do you remember what you said to me?” I asked. “Your kiss tastes like the rest of my life.” I smiled before continuing, “I wouldn’t mind spending the rest of my life with you, Maverick.” There was no fear that I was speaking too soon or assuming things. I didn’t worry that I would scare him away with talk of my feelings. He wasn’t Josiah, there was no status lingering between us. We were pure love. I felt safe diving off this cliff because I knew he would catch me.

“I’m trying to build a world we can spend forever in, Ash,” Maverick said, and our moment started to dissolve into our reality. It was like I could feel each brick of responsibility being piled onto his chest. The cure. Cavil. Escaping. Dormas. The empire. His family.

Me.

“I know, Maverick. I know.”



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

---

**B**ells were ringing, reminding us that our time was up. Madam B warned me that once I heard the sirens, I'd only have thirty minutes to make it to the transport. My heart sank at the harsh reminder that our time was coming to an end. "I don't want to go," I whispered into his chest while breathing in Maverick's scent and committing it to memory. "We still have so much to discuss. What all has happened these last five months?"

Maverick slowly eased us both to a seated position and smoothed out my hair. Grabbing a cloth from nearby, he began cleaning me with gentle movements. I wasn't embarrassed by his care, but I winced when he washed the sensitive parts of me. I prayed that my ache stayed with me long after I'd left this tower. I wanted to walk around the next few days remembering tonight. "Without the cure, Cavil has to cling to the rejection, his fetters, and his weapons to maintain control. He's keeping me here to find the last puzzle piece to the cure."

I'd figured as much. Cavil wouldn't be happy until he had it all. "He's keeping the system in place with fear," I replied mostly to myself. "Louis is working on a way to disable Heat. He and Kemper think that an electromagnetic pulse could disrupt their frequencies."

Maverick went still for a moment, and I watched his eyes flash as he disappeared into that place of his mind where he calculated different odds and outcomes. "It could work," he finally said. "I'll research some and send my findings back with Blythe."

At the mention of her, bile rose in my throat, and I forced myself not to become anxious about their arrangement. I knew that Maverick loved me. I was confident in our connection. Nevertheless, Maverick must have seen something in my gaze because he then said, "It's only you for me, Ash. Always you. Besides, she's a bit annoying." I smiled a little. "Is Jules okay?" Maverick asked. "And the others?"

"They're okay," I replied, unsure if I should tell him about Jacob. "Jacob is struggling, but I think he's finally getting the hang of his mindspeak."

Maverick's face twisted up in confusion and concern, and I immediately regretted saying something. The bells rang once more, reminding us that we only had twenty-five minutes left.

"I promise he's okay, but I don't have time to explain." I stood then stared at my torn dress on the bed and floor. Seemingly satisfied by my words, Maverick joined me and tossed me one of his shirts that hit well past my thighs. Putting it on, I then looked longingly at the bed, wishing I could jump back in and snuggle Maverick some more. Here, I could almost forget that we were in Cavil's domain.

A knock on the door made us both pause. "Mav, open up," Cyler's gruff voice said. We both slumped in relief, and Maverick hurriedly opened the door for Cyler to walk inside.

"Wanted to make sure you didn't miss the bells," Cyler said before looking at me. The way his dark eyes took in my long legs and Maverick's white shirt falling off my shoulders made my breath hitch. "Lucky bastard," Cyler whispered under his breath before moving towards me and crashing his lips to mine once more. Somewhere, the bells were ringing the twenty-minute warning bell, but I didn't care. His kisses were devastating, tearing down my awareness and making it so I could only feel him. "Fuck, you look so good, Babe. You're practically glowing, and I'm going to be hard all month thinking about this." I smiled as he nibbled my ear, my eyes rolling back as I trailed my fingers along his shoulders. There wasn't enough time.

“Guys, you have to go. I’m sorry,” Maverick said, making Cyler growl and spin around to face him.

“Next time, I get her. Understand?”

Maverick simply nodded and moved forward, bypassing his brother to kiss me on the forehead, whispering, “Bye, I love you,” before Cyler picked me up to cradle me in his arms. Without a second glance, he started pounding his feet on the wood floor and out the door. The hallways were a blur as Cyler ran. Drunk guards and men in white suits with lipstick stains on the collar were passed out in the halls.

Cyler bypassed the gathering room and carried me to a hidden Walker elevator, putting me down once the doors closed and wrapping me up in another soul-shattering kiss once more.

Nine floors. On the ninth, his hand was up my shirt, caressing my breast. There was an urgency in his touch that made shooting tingles travel up and down my spine. As we passed the eighth floor, he grasped the cheek of my ass, crushing him to me. It felt like several lifetimes had passed in his hold. I was found and claimed again and again. The seventh floor, he bit my lip and tugged. The sixth, he traced the edge of his fingers between my thighs. He thrilled me, hinting at eternity but filling each last second together with his touch. By the fifth floor, he was stroking me. He kissed me like he’d never see me again as he teased. He inhaled my sighs as I gasped for air at the fourth and third floors, moaning into this mouth as he reawakened my sensitive nub with his fingers.

At the second floor, he slammed his palm on the stop button, rubbing more, bringing me closer to the cliff of oblivion as he kissed me. Claimed me.

“Come for me, Ash. We don’t have time, but I need to feel your release on my palm. So later, when I stroke myself thinking of this moment, I’ll have this memory to keep me going.”

He felt so good. He moved like a man determined to be on my mind until I saw him again, and I knew I’d be thinking of

this trip in the elevator until my dying day.

His words broke me apart, and I let go of the crushing tidal wave of sensations then. Biting down on his shoulder to stop the screams, the embers within me that had been silent from our distance ignited in a blaze of relief. I burned bright in that elevator. He breathed life back into my soul and made the lingering numbness I'd been clinging to completely disappear.

And when Cyler straightened my shirt, kissing me once more as the doors opened, I let out a hiss of air. The pristine lobby was full of Companions loading onto transports, but I wanted to stay in the elevator.

“Fuck, Cy,” I whispered under my breath. My legs were shaky as he guided me to my transport, where the other Companions were grinning mischievously at us.

“Fuck is right,” he groaned while adjusting himself.

We had almost made it. I had nearly sat down in the transport headed for the Zone, forgetting that I was in Cavil's home and that we were in danger. Almost. But a slurred voice stopped us in our tracks.

“Cyler Black, is that you?” Cavil's voice said as he slapped a woman on the ass and stumbled forward. Drool gathered at his lip, and he took another gulp from his flask. Maybe my initial reaction should have been anger or even fear.

But my first thought at seeing Cavil was disgust and wonder. How on earth had this drunk idiot stayed alive? He'd made enough enemies as it was, and in this state, he was incredibly vulnerable. He must have been here escorting Jade to the transport.

“Hello, *Commodore*,” Cyler growled out. I felt Cy's hand on my shoulder, pushing me into the transport and out of view.

“How many times do I have to tell you that it's Emperor, now? Don't let her go too far. I need to see what pretty little Companion caught your eye. I've been throwing girls at you for months!” I stood up, knowing that I had no other option. All I could do now was pray that my disguise was enough.

I looked at Cavil then to the ground. I filtered through what I knew of Companions, and one rule stuck out firmly in my mind: “When all else fails, be submissive.”

“Ah, pretty little thing,” he cooed, lifting my chin with his greasy finger and smiling at me in awe. “I’m so happy to see you’ve moved on, Master Black. You must enjoy life, not spend it pining.”

Cavil rubbed his thumb along my lip where my red lipstick was rubbed off. “It appears as if you enjoyed her company very much.” I breathed in his whiskey scent, coughing when I choked on the strong smell of alcohol and smoke.

“What brothel do you belong to, my dear?” he asked.

Thankfully, it was Jade that answered for me. From within the transport, the Companions were watching, each holding their breath as he gazed at me. “Madam B’s brothel in the Zone, Emperor. She’s with me,” she said. Could he hear how her voice shook?

“Yes, yes. Well, as you can tell, I like my guests to be happy. I’m an honorable man. A good leader. Please tell your madam that I’d like you to attend each event I host until we leave at the end of the week.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Cyler’s mouth drop open in shock. “End of the week? I thought we were staying through the month,” he asked.

Cavil finally retracted his hand from my chin and swayed a little before staring at Cyler. I took advantage of his distractedness and settled into the transport with a shaky exhale.

“Yes, well, that was the original plan. But I find myself feeling homesick.”

Cyler nodded his head and flashed his eyes to me. This meant that we didn’t have a month, we only had a week.

“Who knows, Cyler. If you’re a good little boy, maybe I’ll let you take her back with us,” Cavil cackled while stumbling away.

Cyler wasted no time. “Go, I love you,” he said with a frantic intensity that looked eerily like fear. I’d never known Cyler Black to be afraid of anything, but the fire in his shifty eyes had me worried. He shut the transport door, and we were immediately off, but my heart stayed behind at Cavil’s tower.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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**A**s I stared out the window, watching the glimmering buildings fade into the disastrous Zone, I calmed my racing heart. “Well, ladies, it looks like our naïve little Walker isn’t so innocent anymore. She practically reeks of sex,” Blythe said with a smirk.

The other girls didn’t seem remotely interested in what she had to say. Kaye was drunk and struggling to stay awake, and Lowe was scratching herself, streaks of her rubbed-raw red skin were glaring at us in the dim light of the transport.

I didn’t bother denying it; I wasn’t embarrassed. I was too shocked at seeing Cavil. If anything, I felt sorry for Blythe. “You going to say anything?” she asked.

“I don’t feel like I have anything to say.”

Blythe looked around the transport, waiting for someone to speak up, but Jade just coughed and got more comfortable. “It must be nice,” Blythe said. “First you’re immune, you grew up in the Stonewell Manor. Dormas leaders are eating out of the palm of your hand. And while the rest of us worked, you got to enjoy a little rendezvous with your man.”

Once again, I looked out the window, smiling once I saw the brothel in the distance. I was tired, sore, and eager to see Jacob, Patrick, Huxley, and Kemper.

“I’m not going to apologize for having a good life or for things I cannot control,” I said to Blythe. “I don’t know what I’ve done to upset you, or if you’re just too jealous to see past your prejudice of me, but I’m not one to play games. I’m here

to save the men I love, so you can either get on board with that or get out of my way.”

Lowe, with her smeared lipstick and crooked smile, started clapping for me. “Well hot damn,” she began with a whistle. “Ash loses her virginity and, within the hour, becomes a badass. That must’ve been some great cock.”

I laughed as the transport came to a stop, and when the doors opened, I wasn’t surprised to find Huxley standing outside with his arms crossed. The moment my feet hit the ground, he strolled forward and helped me up and out of the transport.

“How did it go?” he asked while placing a hand on my lower back and guiding me up the steps. Behind us, Jade struggled to carry a drunk Kaye inside.

“It went seamlessly,” I lied. No use telling Huxley about Cavil catching us until he had calmed down. The brothel door opened, and we flooded into the lit entryway, but once Huxley took in my appearance, all hell broke loose.

At first, I was confused by his ferocious face and shaking hands. I inched closer, a concerned dip in my brow as I reached for him.

“What happened to your dress?” Huxley asked. The rest of the girls filed in, and once Blythe heard his question, she started laughing hysterically.

“Your innocent little Walker had her cherry popped,” she said while throwing her head back with another laugh.

I immediately realized what Huxley was thinking, and I threw my hands up to capture his face in my hands. Staring in his green eyes, I assured him, “This is Maverick’s shirt. I spent my evening with Maverick.”

Slowly, ever so slowly, the light in Huxley’s eyes returned as he realized that I was indeed okay. I assumed that he imagined the worst. “I’ve been pacing the floors all night,” he said through gritted teeth. “I’m glad you’re okay, but I have to admit that seeing you in Maverick’s shirt has me intrigued.”



A healthy blush covered my cheeks as I looked down at the floor. Although we established back in Ethros that my relationship with all of them was mutual, it was still embarrassing to say out loud with an audience listening in.

Huxley scratched the back of his neck then looked at the Walker Companions still standing in the entryway, staring at us. They were watching our exchange with rapt attention, and I felt even more insecure under their scrutiny.

Huxley wrapped his big hand around my wrist and pulled me upstairs, not giving the others a second glance as we escaped their curious stares. In Dormas, sharing a woman might be typical, but to the rest of the world, it was an unusual arrangement. And although a Companion might understand our dynamic more than others, there was still a judgmental way they viewed my relationship with my guys. I'm sure they thought I was just a glorified version of them, and no matter what I said, they wouldn't believe that there was more to this relationship than what the guys could offer me.

At the top of the stairs, Kemper, Patrick, and Jacob were waiting. But Huxley didn't give me the chance to see them, he yanked me by, grumbling a "she's fine" before dragging me into his room and shutting the door.

I wasn't sure what this was, but I didn't argue. "I promise I'm okay," I said once more.

Huxley wrapped me in a big hug, squeezing me until I coughed. "I know I'm selfish right now. I'm not jealous. Well, I am."

The door opened and in poured Kemper, Patrick, and Jacob. I should've known that they wouldn't allow Huxley to hoard me to himself. My shirt had risen some, revealing my long legs and butt to them all.

"What happened?" Kemper choked out. Huxley let go, and I turned around, adjusting my shirt. He was wearing pajama pants, hung low on his hips, and his light blond hair was wet as if he'd just showered.

“I saw Cyler and Maverick, then spent the evening with Maverick,” I rushed out, hoping they wouldn’t make me explain much further. Cyler once told me that the only way this would work was if we didn’t keep secrets from one another. I knew that by diving into the deep end of my physical relationship with Maverick, I would have to be open to letting the others know.

My eyes flashed to Patrick who was grinning at my disheveled appearance. “Did you and Maverick have a nice little reunion?” he teased. Huxley looked up at the ceiling then glared at his twin. Patrick strolled towards me, and once we were toe to toe, he gripped the collar of Maverick’s shirt and pulled me towards him, launching a kiss upon my lips with a groan.

I melted. I was nothing but loose limbs and racing heartbeats. Patrick was delicious. I savored every touch until he pulled away abruptly. My mouth dropped open in surprise as I stared at Patrick. He bit his bottom lip and leaned in close for one additional peck upon my lips. “Look so good,” he said. “I hope he treasured you.”

It was unlike Patrick to be so intense. But I liked that side of him. I looked behind him at Jacob, Kemper, and a broody Huxley. “I’m now more determined than ever.” My voice wasn’t shaky. There was nothing tentative about my thoughts and my desires to save Cyler and Maverick. Seeing them once again fueled my need to bring them home.

Kemper looked like he was itching to ask me questions, so I wasn’t surprised when he said, “Did Maverick say anything about what Cavil has him doing? I know he’s looking for the cure still. Did he say how close he was?”

I blushed, unsure of how to tell Kemper that there wasn’t much talking that happened between Maverick and me. Our reunion was purely physical. We connected on an emotional level long before we were separated.

“By her expression, I’m guessing they didn’t do much talking,” a monotone mindspeak said for Jacob. He gave me an impish smile before the voice then said, “That lucky

bastard! I get this nasty scar and lose my ability to speak; he gets the girl and the glory.”

Jacob didn't even try to get the mindspeak out of his ear. I was laughing at his thoughts but also felt bad. I squeezed Patrick's hands and walked up to Jacob, feeling brazen. “Don't you know?” I asked. I trailed my nail down Jacob's forearm and watched as goosebumps pebbled up on his skin. “You *all* get the girl.” Standing as tall as I could, I placed a chaste kiss on Jacob's lips, but when I tried to pull away, he cupped my cheek and kept me firmly against him.

“God, she feels so good,” the mindspeak said. The monotone voice should have jarred me out of the sensation of our kiss, but it nearly spurred me forward. I wanted to know what he thought. “If she doesn't stop kissing me, I'm going to have a very embarrassing situation.”

I laughed and took a step back, taking a moment to stare at Jacob's chest as it heaved. Licking my lips, I forced myself to calm down and remember once more that there was something important we'd learned tonight.

“I do have some bad news,” I said with a shaky exhale. “I saw Cavil.” Each of my guys tensed and stared at me with frowns. “He didn't recognize me,” I quickly added, “but I'm expected there the rest of the week. Cavil isn't staying through the end of the month; he's leaving in three days. I guess the party will be the night before he leaves.”

Kemper let out a curse and said, “I'll be right back. I'm going to let Louis know.”

“So we only have three days?” Patrick said. I nodded with a frown.

“Fuck,” Huxley growled out. And as if on cue, he then said, “I don't like this.”

I immediately felt the room grow heavy with concern for what was to come. Tomorrow, we'd have to figure out what we were doing, but tonight? Tonight, I needed peace and comfort. “Stay with me?” I asked.

“Of course,” Kemper said while reentering the room with a half smile. I could sense that he too was worried about the new timeline.

“I want to be held. I want all of you here. I know that as we continue to learn how to navigate our relationships that it’s unreasonable for us to have sleepovers *every* night. But I’m in a new place, and I’m finally starting to feel like myself again. I just...”

“I’m more than happy to hold you, little Walker. But if one of these assholes tries to spoon me, we’re gonna have an issue,” Huxley said.

Jacob must’ve forgotten that he had his mindspeak in because he then thought, “I’m going to spoon Huxley just to fuck with him.”

We all laughed and settled into the tiny bed. Patrick and Huxley opted to sleep on the floor and sofa. We said our good nights, Jacob made sure to kiss me thoroughly, and we fell asleep. As I lay there listening to the steady noise of their breathing, I took inventory of myself. I felt...different.

I’d always thought that losing my virginity would awaken me as a woman. But instead, it merely bridged me back to the girl I was before everything went to hell in Ethros. I felt hope for the first time in months. I felt joy. I felt a little less like Shade, the Companion, and a lot more like Ash, the fearless Dormas woman, hopelessly in love with six men.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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When I woke up the next morning, I wasn't expecting to see Kemper's blue eyes staring back at me. I had such a restful sleep that it felt like I was in Dormas again. It wasn't until I felt Jacob's hand on my hip that I remembered where we were. And although I'd give anything to be back at the Black home, I had to admit that this was a pleasant way to wake up.

"Were you watching me?" I asked Kemper in a teasing tone. His face flushed, and I liked that I had that effect on him. Kemper was such a contradiction. He'd blush one moment then whisper sweet, dirty, little secrets that had me panting the next.

"I can't help myself," he said.

Not caring about my morning breath or how I looked, I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his in a brief yet intoxicating kiss. "I like knowing that you can't help but look at me, Kemp," I said in a low, husky tone while settling deeper under the covers. I wasn't ready to start the day. I would have been happy to stay here for a month, reconnecting with my men and finding myself in their arms. I moved some, surprised and pleased by the ache within me.

"I have a surprise for you later," Kemper whispered over my skin, and I couldn't help but smile.

"What is it?"

Instead of answering, Kemper kissed me softly again, making sure to stroke his tongue against mine. "If I told you,

then it wouldn't be a surprise, would it?"

"Tease," I whispered.

I put the eye-color changing drops back in my eyes and got ready for the day, adjusting the dummy fetter on my wrist before slipping into one of the other dresses Jules picked out for me. It was white, a common theme I found the Companions wore. This one was shorter than I preferred, but I swallowed back my insecurities. It was crazy to think about how I went from the compulsive modesty Linda Stonewell forced upon me when I lived in her home to this. The dress hit mid thigh, and the strappy fabric showed off my slender frame. My stomach was bare, the material covering my hips and chest.

The guys met me downstairs, and I was about to sit at the lavish table laid out for us when a siren blasted through the home, jolting us. Madam B speed-walked through the kitchen doors to the dining room, looking at each of us with a fearful expression. "Quickly, get your things. Men, wear your hoods," she ordered. Still waking up from our late night, the Companions stumbled down the stairs, adjusting their white robes and putting on slippers.

"What's happening?" I asked, too scared to move. Had we been found out? I tried to remember every detail from last night. Did Cavil somehow recognize me?

"The sirens mean there's a meeting in the courtyard. All healthy Zone inhabitants must attend."

I looked to my guys. Shit. I wanted to slap myself for not thinking about their appearance in the Zone. If Cavil saw them, he would suspect something was up. One by one, Louis handed them hooded jackets, and we filtered out of Madam B's brothel.

The sirens grew louder, and it wasn't until a hand at my back pushed me into the street, that I realized I was standing still. I felt so unprepared. The air smelled of smoke and sewage. I swallowed, a lump of emotion swelling in my throat.

“Split up. Meet back at the home after the meeting,” Madam B hissed before slipping into her perfected expression of indifference, matching the other Walkers shuffling towards the Zone beside me.

Jacob settled in line and grabbed my hand. I felt safe having him near, but my heart beat fast when I saw Kemper give me a weak smile before disappearing with Kaye. Huxley wore a scowl as he begrudgingly followed Blythe, and Patrick strolled past with a giggling Jade and Lowe on his arms. He paused to kiss me on the cheek and whisper, “See you soon, Sweets. Can’t wait to kiss those lips.”

Damn Patrick, always making me smile when I wanted to punch something. Even though I wasn’t close with the Companions, I was comforted that the guys were with them. Should anything happen, the girls would be able to direct the guys on the proper protocol, and I knew my men would protect them.

Jacob kept his mindspeak in his pocket, which was probably a good thing. Unfiltered access to Jacob’s thoughts about Cavil and the empire would undoubtedly get us killed. We strolled as the crowd thickened around us. Heart pounding with adrenaline, I tried to keep my breathing even. We followed the flow of people crammed in the narrow streets of the Zone. Barefoot children stumbled past us, but they lacked the usual playfulness of kids their age. Their shoulders slumped as they moved, and cheerful smiles didn’t touch their lips.

“What’s going on?” I asked out loud before silently cursing myself for being so insensitive. Jacob squeezed my hand once more as if telling me it was okay. My skin itched, I wanted to flee. After last night’s run-in with Cavil, I hadn’t expected to see him again so soon.

When we turned the corner, I gasped when I saw a stage set up in what I assumed was the courtyard. It was surrounded by hoards of Walkers staring up at it. I wrapped my arms around my middle as an assault of flashbacks hit me like a punch to the gut. I forced myself not to hunch over as the

physical symptoms of my anxiety wrecked my stomach. I felt like I was going to be sick.

The stage felt foreboding in the distance. It reminded me too much of my time in Ethros. “Be...B-Be strong,” Jacob gritted out through clenched teeth. His voice stuttered, but it still held the steel of a man determined. I reached out to grab his hand once more and leaned into his arm, wrapping around him like a vine and clinging to his bravery and resilience.

“The stage, Jacob,” I whimpered, eyes wide as I nodded in the direction of the large platform. There, on a wooden bench, with stiff postures, sat Maverick and Cyler. “Why are they here?” Dread pooled in my stomach. I scanned the stage further. Studying the platform, I frowned when I saw the hooded official at the end, cradling an electric ax in his arms.

An execution.

“Jacob,” I began. I tried to keep my voice from sounding as shrill and panicked as I felt, but the effort was wasted. I couldn’t help the all-consuming terror. “We have to get them out of here. The executioner’s here.” Jacob turned me to look at him, cupping my cheeks as we stood in the crowd. Walker men and women passed by us in a mindless, obedient haze as I collected myself.

I squeezed my eyes shut as he stared at me more, keeping me in his hands as I breathed in and out. “Hey, get going,” a guard nearby yelled. I took an extra second to exhale and nodded.

Jacob was constant and firm, pressing me forward and comforting me with little touches and care. We filed into the dense crowd, and my breathing went shallow. I looked around for the others, needing to feel secure that they were safe. My eyes spotted Madam B, who was sitting almost directly in front of the stage. She was brave.

When the trumpets started, I felt like puking once more. I kept my eyes on Cyler and Maverick, taking in every little detail like it was my last time to see them. The way Cyler’s mouth quirked up when he observed something. Maverick’s



tall posture. Cyler's leg was bouncing up and down, the only sign that he was anxious.

And, as if they'd trained their whole lives to seek me out in a crowd, their eyes found mine. They bore into my soul with their gazes, and I was comforted by their hard stares. I hated how much stood between us at that moment. I wanted to run to them—to save them. Cavil personified fear, and fear was the only thing standing between me and what I wanted.

Above the stage, orange flags folded and floated in the wind. It wasn't until the music stopped and the place went eerily silent that I completely lost my nerve. How could I possibly keep my composure through this storm?

Maverick and Cyler severed their attention from me, and it felt like someone was ripping my heart from my chest. I clutched myself, and Jacob choked out one more word of affirmation. "Br-breathe." I loved him for fighting to be my rock through this.

When Cavil walked on stage, I half expected the flashbacks to hit me like a crescendo too intense to contain, but instead, it was like a sledgehammer fell on my feelings, cracking through the storm of emotions until all that was left was a cool, calm rage.

There, on that stage, looking like a smug, dark-eyed prey, was the man I was going to kill. Seeing him didn't send me into the tailspin I'd expected. It just pushed forward the resolve I'd locked deep within five months ago: I would kill him if it were the last thing I did.

Jacob let out a gasp, and I looked down at our entwined hands, releasing his once I realized that I had such a death grip on him. "Sorry," I whispered with a shaky breath. Guards behind us yelled over the crowd, ordering us all to be silent and listen. Cavil wrinkled his nose, then made a big production of pulling a mask from his pocket and putting it over his mouth with gloved hands. He wore all black, yet not an inch of skin below the neck was showing.

"Walkers!" his voice boomed over the crowd. Numb dread seemed to fill the courtyard where we stood. It was like

watching a disaster but being helpless to stop it. “A leader is someone willing to risk danger to serve a greater purpose. Not once did Lackley ever step foot in the Zone. The most he traveled was to the auction post, the most sanitary and guarded outpost here.”

I didn't like where this was going. I wished that I had more insight into the Cavil-Lackley feud. It felt like if I knew more, maybe I could decipher Commodore Cavil's intentions.

“You know,” Cavil began again once the mild applause died down. “Lackley and I were friends once. I viewed him as a worthy leader. But Lackley hid his dealings behind closed doors. He wanted to appear benevolent, I think. And this is why I believe that Lackley failed all of you.” Jacob's breath was impossibly shallow, and I locked my eyes on Maverick and Cyler once more. I couldn't believe this was happening. Cavil just wanted a forum to speak highly of himself.

“Lackley had his merits, don't get me wrong. As the population grew, our resources were dwindling. Influenza X saved the human race. Only the worthy survive, you see. We can also thank him for establishing the class system currently in place.”

How could he think any of this was okay?

“But I don't deal my punishments behind closed doors. I lead with an iron fist and a strong stomach. Nothing scares me. Nothing. I am fear. Which is why I am here today, to show you how strong I am, and how I will never fail you as Lackley did in that regard.”

At his last words, a shuffling began on stage that made me grab my stomach. Around me, the sun beat down on our backs, and the trees in the courtyard's leaves were falling. A light breeze picked up my hair, and a baby cried in the distance. A lean man with shaking knees scrambled to the podium, and after bowing to Cavil, he took the microphone with a submissive slump. “Today, our gracious leader will execute a traitor,” his low voice growled over the crowd.

I felt the Walkers around me go stiff with awareness. “The man about to be executed has been employed by Emperor

Cavil as a scientist researching the cure. He was cared for. Provided for. This man was a scientist in Cavil's employment, and his studies flourished under Cavil's careful guidance and tutelage." Oh God. Maverick. Cavil was going to kill Maverick, and I was going to have to watch.

Tears streamed down my cheeks, and I furiously wiped them away. I tried to pay attention to the words coming from the speaker's mouth, but I couldn't help but stare at Maverick. I took in the gentle way his lips pursed while staring at me. His reddish-brown hair. The way his shoulders stood tall and proud, despite knowing that the world was resting upon them. Beside him, Cyler was fuming with anger. Was this my fault? Did they somehow learn that I was with Maverick last night? Did I somehow kill the man I loved?

"This man was gifted with learning from the emperor, and he betrayed our ruler, our people, and our empire."

I made the decision right there to watch. I knew that seeing Maverick executed would be a sight that haunted me for years to come, but if I'd learned anything from the last five months, it's that the only emotion worth clinging to is anger, everything else gets you hurt.

"This scientist abused the privilege of working closely with Cavil and consorted with an enemy," the man said.

I couldn't breathe as the man growled into the mic, making sure to emphasize his fury. "Huxley, do something," I whispered under my breath. I didn't know where he was, but certainly, there was something we could do. Wasn't there anything we could do?

Jacob held my hand, but his grip was tight. I tore my eyes from Maverick for a brief moment to search the crowd for Huxley. Jacob was on full alert, side-eyeing the crowd, looking for a way out.

"Executioner!" the man yelled. The echoes of his voice bounced off the abandoned shacks in the Zone. "Bring forth our traitor!" I couldn't swallow. Couldn't move. I watched the stage as the executioner disappeared behind the tall, black curtains. Pulsing with fear and adrenaline, the rapid beat of my

heart made me dizzy with helplessness and dread. When the curtain was pushed back, I watched as the executioner shoved forward a masked man that stumbled and fell to his knees.

I let out a hiss of hope, then immediately felt guilty. What kind of person had I become? Did it make me like him—like Cavil—to prioritize my own family over that of a stranger? They ripped the burlap hood from the man's head, and I let out a small gasp once I saw who the unlucky man beneath the mask was.

“Allaire?” I whispered in disbelief. I hadn't thought of him since fleeing Ethros. The scientist had helped us once. And now he was about to die—and I was thankful for it.

“The official scientist of Ethros was caught giving rejection cures to members of the Elite without giving them a fether!” the speaker of this deadly rally screamed into his microphone, his words a toxic, garbled mess of syllables and spit. I focused on Maverick and Cyler.

“Allaire, do you accept your punishment?” he asked.

A small moan escaped Allaire's chest as he crawled towards Cavil, kneeling at his feet.

The announcer bent over, then held the microphone to his mouth so we could all hear how he bowed to Cavil's authority. His lips touched Cavil's boots, and I forced myself to separate the man before us from the man that I met in Ethros. Although I didn't know him well, it was still difficult to absorb what would happen next. I wondered who he risked giving the rejection cure to.

“I'm so sorry, Emperor Cavil. I'm unworthy. You control all life. You control the cure. I'm so sorry.” His sniffles and sobs were too much. I shut my eyes for the briefest moments. I tried to imagine myself back in Dormas. Back at the bakery or my bedroom. If I didn't disassociate, I would do something stupid—like scream at Cavil and attack the stage.

“You've failed me. And now that I have a better scientist at my side, I am no longer in need of your services,” Cavil said.

He didn't bother to stand from his seat, but he still addressed us. Crossing his legs, Cavil leaned back in his chair while lazily holding his microphone. "May this be a lesson to all of you. Do not try to sneak around my rules. I will end anyone or anything that gets in my way."

Cavil then shifted to the side as Allaire continued to grovel and beg forgiveness. I watched as the announcer nodded at the executioner who made his way forward, carrying the electric ax I recognized from Lackley's execution in Ethros.

"Do you have any final requests? I'm a good leader, I respect my people," Cavil said in a bored tone.

Allaire went still for a moment before looking up at Cavil in what seemed like the first defiant moment since arriving on stage. "Let Dominique go," he growled out, all groveling and submissiveness gone from his tone.

Cavil paused, seemingly impressed with Allaire's bravery, until he leaned forward and spoke into the mic. "Dominique is my property. The moment I caught you sneaking off with her was the moment she became a prisoner in my home instead of a guest. I should have killed you then, and I'm happy to be killing you now."

My breathing picked up, and the executioner raised his ax, lifting the glowing blade over his head as Allaire looked up at Cavil. Just before the ax slammed down, severing his head from his body, Allaire let one last ominous statement flow from his lips.

"Then everyone is going to die from X."

As the blade came down, connecting at the base of his neck where it attached to his shoulders, I watched as the heated blade completely cauterized the slice, severing his head from his body. The cut was clean and smooth. His facial expressions twitched for about three seconds, eyes glassy yet still somewhat aware until the last of his life flickered from view.

But despite all the death and the terrible scene before me, I couldn't help but focus on what Allaire said. "*Then everyone*

*is going to die from X...*” What could Dominique possibly have to do with that? Not to mention, if Cavil had Dominique locked up in Ethros, getting to her would be harder than I anticipated. Poor Payne. My heart broke for him.

The crowd around me kept quiet. No one cheered or even seemed bothered by the scientist’s death. I expected some reaction, but they just continued to stare on in numbed acceptance. Maverick stood, his face a stoic, stormy blend of anger and regret. Helping the executioner, he put the scientist’s head in a silk sack then exited the stage.

“Let this be a lesson to you all. He who crosses Cavil will die.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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I leaned into Jacob, and he didn't seem as tense as before. It was comforting to know that I wasn't the only one thankful it wasn't Maverick that fell at the end of the executioner's ax.

Before Cavil exited the stage, he looked over the crowd with beady eyes, and I let out a gasp when his eyes landed on me. Maybe it was my fear and paranoia, but despite the thousands of Walkers around us, I felt his knowing gaze singling me out. I held my breath and kept my chin held high until Cavil exited the stage. "He saw me," I whispered to Jacob.

The walk back to Madam B's manor was long. Eager to see Patrick, Kemper, and Huxley, I took large strides, ignoring the slow-moving Walkers looking about in a haze. At the door of the manor, Louis stood outside with a sanitizing wand. "Strip down and stand behind the curtain to spray yourself," he ordered in a bored tone as we walked up. "Even you, Ash—I mean Shade. You could have the virus on you even though you're immune." Sanitizing spray was only forty percent effective, but the Walkers that could afford it still used it. It was especially necessary for Walkers after being in a crowd. You never knew who was infected. You could never be too careful. In the distance, smoke clouds filled the sky. Most Walkers would be burning their clothes tonight. Cavil's required meeting exposed us all, and I couldn't help but wonder if that was intentional on his part.

Jacob rolled his eyes then reached up behind his shoulders and removed his shirt before grabbing the wand and moving

behind the screen to spray off.

Huxley and Blythe walked up, and Louis gave them the same spiel. Blythe started stripping out in the open, giving Huxley and Louis an unobstructed view of her body. “Hurry up, Bly. Or I’ll tell my Mom you’re giving away peep shows for free,” Louis said with a playful grin. Their eyes zinged back and forth, a playful passion passing between them like fire. I quirked my brow, momentarily curious about their relationship.

Instead of responding with one of her usual retorts, Blythe scurried past, disappearing behind the curtain where Jacob was currently getting sanitized. She squealed when she saw Jacob, and he ran out from behind the curtain, clutching a towel around his waist and swatting the air behind him.

As the others arrived, I waited until all my men were accounted for. Once it was Patrick’s turn to sanitize, I joined him behind the curtain. I helped him out of his shirt then casually turned around, allowing him to undress me.

His hands slid the fabric off my shoulders, and he groaned when he saw that I wasn’t wearing a bra beneath my dress. “I know now isn’t the time, but if Louis weren’t right there listening to us, I would take full advantage of this situation.”

I bit my bottom lip, almost feeling guilty that I was out here contemplating letting Patrick distract me with his touch after what we’d just witnessed. I turned around, hoping to remove the temptation, but he merely groaned once more when he saw my ass.

“No funny business, I’m in a hurry,” Louis called to us, making me almost smile.

We both took a moment to sanitize ourselves, and I finally asked, “Are you okay?”

Patrick took a moment to respond. “Not really.” His voice lacked all of its usual playfulness and the easygoing lull I’d come to expect from him. I could usually gauge the seriousness of a situation based upon Patrick’s ability to push past the gloom and lighten the burden of everyone else.



“Am I wrong for feeling happy that it was Allaire and not Maverick? I know he was a friend...once...but I’m glad.” I breathed a sigh of relief, finally letting go of the question about ethics that had been haunting me. I shut my eyes, trying to block the image of Allaire’s head falling away from his body.

With gentle hands, Patrick spun me around and started spraying the hazy sanitizing mist over my chest; the cool spray was refreshing. Finally, Patrick replied. “I’m glad it was him. If that makes me a terrible person, so be it.”

Once we were done, Patrick wrapped me up in a towel and returned the wand to Louis, who went inside. Hidden here, Patrick took his time enjoying my naked frame, and his cock hardened beneath my stare. He was beautiful...so damn beautiful that it hurt.

“Patrick,” I began while shuffling closer. I leaned up to kiss his lips then wrinkled my nose when I tasted the sanitizing serum. He laughed, and the sound was like pure music, invigorating me and pushing past the pain of the day.

I stroked his hair while scraping my nails along his scalp. “You’re so beautiful,” I murmured.

“I’m beautiful, huh? Not manly, sexy, or intoxicatingly addictive?” he joked, and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to hold back my laugh. Patrick was beautiful, in every sense of the word. It wasn’t just his tall, muscular frame, blue eyes, and bright smile. It was the way he put everyone above him. It was in the way he calmed me in times of crises—and today was a significant time of crisis.

“You’re all of that, but mostly, you’re beautiful, Patrick,” I said again. He cupped my face but paused before leaning in to kiss me, laughing when he remembered that we were both still covered in the gross-tasting sanitizing spray meant to prevent the spread of influenza X.

“Are you okay?” Patrick finally asked.

“No, but I will be,” when I have all my men back. “This is a dangerous game we’re playing, Patrick.”

“I know, Ash. I know.”

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I WAS BRUSHING my hair when Kemper found me. Wearing white after the execution felt wrong today. I didn't want to be Shade for a few hours; I wanted to be Ash. So I slipped into one of the casual outfits Jules wore. Tight pants, form-fitted through the ankle, the material clung to my legs. An off the shoulder grey top was loose on my thin frame, but still comfortable. “You ready for that surprise?” he asked, shuffling his feet and looking down at the ground. “I was going to take you tonight, but it looks like you're going back to Cavil's tower.”

“Yeah,” I said with a small half smile. I had spent the last hour worrying about going to Cavil's estate, so an afternoon with Kemper before going back into the lion's den was just what I needed.

He held his hand out for me to grab before saying, “Let's go,” with a small smile. Guiding me outside and down the hall, he paused at the door to put a hat on my head. “Stick close to me, okay? We have a bit of a walk ahead of us,” he said. I squeezed his hand, answering him with a peaceful resolution to not let go.

The air was light and smelled of smoke, and a light breeze lifted the sleek strands of my hair as we walked. The Zone was quiet. All the Walkers seemed to be hiding in their shacks after this morning's execution. Not that the Zone was ever buzzing with excitement, but today there seemed to be an added layer of fear.

Kemper guided me down the street and around the corner, towards the auction house. I kept my eyes ahead, taking in my surroundings and once again trying to imagine what my life would have been like had I grown up here. “How are you holding up?” Kemper asked.

I took a moment to consider my answer. “I don't even know anymore. I'm stuck between wanting to be this strong, ruthless woman with a vendetta, and being the scared little

victim. I'm getting emotional whiplash from it all. I want everyone back and healthy. I want to go back to Dormas where our biggest obstacle was our feelings for one another."

I looked ahead and covered my mouth. In the street, a man with boils along his skin was passed out in the road. With blood oozing from his arms, he gasped and rolled over. It was obvious that he was in the last stage of the disease. The poor man would undoubtedly die soon, alone and abandoned in the street.

Kemper gently pulled me away from him and continued speaking. Strange how desensitized we'd become to X and death. "I think it's okay not to have one singular reaction to things, Ash. You're allowed to be both strong and scared. There's no right or wrong way to feel, no checklist of emotions you're supposed to work through. You're doing the best you can, and I admire you for it."

I nodded my head. I knew this, didn't I? I knew that I was capable of many emotions and reactions. I knew that part of growing meant riding each wave of the human experience. Kemper's words hit me harder than most. He was gradually learning that perfection wasn't real. By accepting me, he was accepting the beauty in the mess.

"Where are we going?" I asked, changing the subject of the conversation. Kemper was always good at providing me with a semblance of normalcy during the chaos.

"What, you can't handle a surprise?" he asked with a chuckle. There was a certain bounce to his step, despite the grim day and setting. We kept walking, and between two buildings was an alley. He gripped my wrist and pulled me towards the shadows, planting a kiss on my lips and pushing me against the wall.

"I'm sorry," he whispered over my lips like a cool secret meant only for me, and I shivered at the sound of his husky voice. "I promise to bring you to the surprise, but first I have to do this."

Kemper's kisses had a healing quality about them that I craved. He took great care of my lips, my tongue, and my soul.

He kissed me like he was thankful I came into his life, and as we devoured one another, I was completely, utterly lost. He could have taken me right here, against the wall in this alley.

He pulled me off the wall and wrapped his arms around my back, snaking his fingers up beneath my shirt and gliding across my hot skin. I wondered if it would always feel like this. I'd become so starved for affection in the Stonewell Manor that I burned for more. The last five months I'd turned off my need for physical contact, but once I opened the gates to my heart once more, the craving was so intense that each little kiss, each touch, each caress was like a drug. He peppered kisses along my jaw, traveling to my neck, and I looked up at the sky as clouds passed overhead. He continued to drift lower, licking and sucking on my skin right above my plush right breast. I sighed. "Is this, uh, the surprise?" I asked. My voice sounded throaty and laced with lust.

"I didn't plan on it, but now I can't seem to stop," he said with a groan. I leaned back a little more, and Kemper placed his ear against my chest, listening to the thudding of my heart and tapping against my wrist with his hand in time to my pulse.

"I love you, Ash," he whispered.

My vision went blurry from unshed tears. "I love you too, Kemp. We keep doing this, you know? You always seem to find shadowed alleys for us to kiss in," I said with a laugh. Kissing Kemper on the streets of Ethros was one of the few good memories I had of our time there.

Kemper closed his eyes, squinting them shut in embarrassment. I knew he was mentally chastising himself. "Not that I'm complaining," I quickly added, hoping to stop whatever spiral of self-deprecation he was in.

Kemper looked at me like he wanted to toss me over his shoulder and carry me back to the manor—or back to Dormas—but once again, he made even the dirty streets of the Zone feel like paradise. "I swear to you," he began. "The next time we kiss like this, it'll be in my bed, and I won't stop. Not until

you come apart while I'm inside of you. And then we'll do it again, and again, and again," he growled out.

We continued down the street, our breathing heavy from the brisk walk and our kisses. We didn't stop until we arrived at a shack on the outskirts of the Zone. "Ash," Kemper began with a nervous whistle. "Maybe I shouldn't have...fuck..."

Kemper looked down at the ground then back at me. I took in our surroundings, taking special notice of the shack in front of us, with its chipped blue door and rusted metal roof. "Where are we, Kemper?" I asked.

He let out a shaky breath. "When I learned the database from Louis, I found out where your childhood home was. They burned it down when your parents died..." he said, and I frowned. "But there was still something here...in the concrete," he quickly added.

Kemper leaned forward, pulling me down with him to stare at the concrete sidewalk. There, imprinted in the street, were three sets of handprints with names traced above them:

Claire

Daniel

Ashleigh.

I gasped, tracing over the indent of my mother's hand and letting the love of the parents I never got the chance to know, fill me up. Grief was fickle. I went years without thinking of the parents I could barely remember. All I knew of my childhood was Josiah and Stonewell Manor. It was rare that I remembered anything from before the auction. My life in the Zone was nothing more than a fuzzy, distant memory. I sometimes doubted that it was even real. But this, this permanent and concrete marking proved that my childhood was real.

My parents were real.

"Kemper," I said while clutching my chest. "How did you...this is so..." My tears covered the pavement, and I closed my eyes, trying to remember when we did this. I now had names for my parents. This was a gift I'd cherish forever.

What little memories I had were fleeting, and in the height of this moment I found myself feeling unsure of what they were like. I pictured a tall man as my father. Big eyes and callused hands. He would have been thin from malnutrition but toned from his job at the junkyard. He was hard working. Maybe a playful smile covered his face when he came home to us.

I imagined my mother, a woman that looked like me, with curly hair and fierce but kind eyes. I imagined us huddled together over the wet concrete, feeling mischievous. Maybe they whispered to themselves while carrying fear in their hearts. They didn't know if they'd survive X, but they knew that this would be a permanent memory, a permanent fixture in this world. Something that could prove that we all were once together and that we were *happy*.

“Thank you, Kemper,” I choked out while turning to hug him, it was like I couldn't squeeze him hard enough. Being here was the greatest gift anyone had ever given me. “This is amazing. Thank you.”

Kemper stroked my back, rubbing little circles as I held him tightly against me. “I'd do anything for you, Ash. Anything.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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I didn't want to go back to Cavil's tower again. Tonight's event was expected to be a dinner party, so I couldn't hide away with Maverick or Cyler like before. I wore a long, elegant white dress with jewels covering the torso. It dipped low, revealing my cleavage in a tasteful but seductive way. Jules did my hair up in an elegant twist that pulled the strands of my hair so tight against my scalp that I winced with every pin she placed. Something told me that she enjoyed torturing me, going so far as to say, "Beauty is pain, little Walker Queen." She, too, added a condescending tone to the nickname that Madam B gave me at the Resistance meeting.

Since having to up the timeline of our attack, the brothel owner was frantically making plans. Kaye came up to me with a frown. "I need you to deliver a note to my sister in the kitchens," she told me as Jacob led me to the transport taking us to Cavil's tower. "I haven't heard from her in two days, which is uncommon for her. I need to make sure she's still prepared to poison the drinks." Kaye placed a note in my palm, and I slipped the tiny scrap of paper into the hidden seam in my dress, which also contained the pill that would make me puke should another member of the Elite try to claim me for the night.

I still wasn't sure about her plan. It felt wrong killing every member of the guard. I knew that she and her people would make sure the good ones didn't attend, but I didn't like the sort of power she had over deciding who was worthy of being saved and who wasn't. "Okay," I told her. "How will I know who she is?"

“Her name is Lilac. She’s young, but crazy smart. I’d go see her, but I don’t want to raise suspicions. Your men can sneak you in and out.”

“Okay,” I said with an exhale. “I’ll get this to her.”

Huxley grunted beside me, and I left to load into the transport. Just as I was about to dip into the seat of the transport, Huxley leaned over to whisper in my ear. I shuddered when his breath feathered over my exposed neck. “Don’t deliver that note if it puts you in danger,” his gruff voice said.

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, Hux.” Once more, I was about to move to sit beside Lowe when he gripped my arm and whispered once more.

“Be safe and come back to me. I’ll reward you.” Huxley wasn’t one to say much, but that little promise already had me growing warm. He kept his hand on my arm and pulled me up to him, grabbing my ass with his free hand and kissing me so hard our teeth clashed.

“You better come home,” he growled into my mouth before nipping my bottom lip and slowly easing me into the transport. When the door shut, the entire transport let out a sigh.

“Damn girl, he had *me* panting. That was hot,” Lowe said while fanning herself.

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CAVIL’S TOWER seemed to have more people this time, and the moment the elevator doors opened, Cyler was nearby, inconspicuously waiting to snatch me up the moment my shoe hit the lobby. I worried that Cavil would think he was too eager and would investigate further, but I also couldn’t help but think that, in the drunken state he was in, he wouldn’t remember much of the night. Besides, he was nowhere to be found, and other Elite men snatched up Jade, Lowe, Kaye, and Blythe the moment the doors opened too.



“Hey, Babe,” he growled into my ear while hugging me tightly. “I’ve been so fucking worried. Are you okay?”

I nodded as his lips tickled my earlobe and neck. Each of my nerves were firing off at how close he was. Looking around the beautiful gathering room, I wondered if Cyler and I could sneak off. “Dinner will be starting within the hour. We need to stay here. We can go over and find a seat if you’d like?”

I patted the seam of my dress, remembering my promise to Kaye. “Could you take me to the kitchens? I need to get a glass of water. The drive left me parched.”

Cyler cocked his eyebrow and tilted his head to the side, not quite catching on. I wasn’t sure how much I could say or who was listening. I leaned in, nuzzling against his neck. “I have a message to deliver,” I whispered.

Cyler went rigid and began pulling me towards the opposite side of the room to a less crowded area. “What’s going on?” he asked once sure no one could hear us. I looked around, wondering where Maverick was.

“Kaye gave me a note to give her sister in the kitchens,” I replied.

Cyler dragged his eyes over me with that fiery intensity I loved before saying, “Okay, it’s risky, but if we hurry, we can go before dinner.”

I nodded and followed him down the maze of hallways. “Where is Maverick?” I asked, making sure to keep my voice low.

“We decided to keep him away. He can’t keep his eyes and hands off of you, and it would look highly suspicious if both of us suddenly became smitten with the same Companion. It might make Cavil pay more attention to you.” Cyler went quiet and nodded at an Elite man and Companion passing us. He was already a bit buzzed, grabbing the Companion’s hip as they made their way towards the gathering room.

Once they were out of earshot, Cyler continued. “I didn’t really mean for him to see us together, to begin with. I never

meant to put another target on your back, Babe. He's been paying close attention to everything I do. And every time I turn down his offer to give me a Companion for the night, it becomes almost like a challenge for him."

Winding down the hallway, I tried to feel concerned or fearful about what Cyler said, but all I could feel was happiness. I was glad that despite not knowing if we'd ever see each other again, Cyler and Maverick stayed true to me. "How much farther?" I asked.

Cyler took me down three more steps, bypassing a room that was all white with screens filling each wall. "We're here."

A swinging door with Walkers entering and exiting drew my attention, and Cyler scanned the hallways, as if ready for someone to turn the corner and attack us. "I'll wait outside and keep watch. Go in and out as quickly as possible."

I nodded, suddenly feeling nervous. This was my first small, yet official, duty for the Resistance. This was the sort of thing I'd been yearning to do, I'd wanted to feel useful and add to the cause. So why did my heart race with uncertainty, like I was headed towards danger?

I gave Cyler a quick peck on the cheek then went inside, immediately regretting not coming up with a reason for being here when I came face to face with a kitchen full of bustling cooks, Walkers, and curious stares.

"Can we help you?" a rude chef with dim black hair and a scowl the size of Cavil's tower asked. She stirred her pot and jettied out her hip as she took in my revealing attire.

"I'm here looking for Lilac?" I said, not sounding nearly confident enough.

"Why? Who are you? Aren't you supposed to be in the gathering room?" I shut my eyes, momentarily gathering myself and trying to think of a way to respond that would garner some sort of cooperation from this woman. Walkers were bustling by, taking extra care to avoid her which meant that she was the person in charge here.

“I work with her sister...” I began, trying to search my brain. And when the answer came to me, I almost felt ashamed for my excuse. Grief was the only thing that tied all Walkers together and would hopefully be what allowed me to find Lilac. “She contracted X. I wanted to let her know...” The chef’s eyes softened for a brief moment, and I knew that she was remembering someone that she had lost to the virus. We’d all lost someone, hadn’t we?

“I-I,” she stuttered, coughing back whatever emotion was rising in her throat before continuing. I wondered if her loss were recent. “I’m sorry to hear that. Lilac is washing dishes. You have three minutes. Don’t keep long, or I’ll find the Companion Coordinator and make sure she lets Cavil know you weren’t in the gathering area.”

I muttered a quick “thank you” with a bow before scurrying in the direction of the sinks. I didn’t want to waste any time. There, a girl not much older than I was scrubbing the dishes and humming to herself. She, too, had blond hair like Kaye. However, the curls were long and luscious, hitting at the middle of her back. She swayed as she washed, and there was an innocent way she moved, a nice lift about her that I found intriguing to watch.

Over her shoulder, I saw the chef eyeing us, so I quickly introduced myself. “My name is shade, are you Lilac?” She turned to face me and dipped her brow in confusion.

“Do I know you?” Her voice was soft and high pitched. Her eyes took in my outfit, and she nodded once before continuing. “Ah, you must know my sister. Did she send you here to find out why I’m not responding to her?”

For being so soft-spoken and gentle, she certainly had a fire in her words. “Ye-yes,” I mumbled, somehow feeling almost chastised.

“Well, you can tell her that I’m out. Cavil’s been executing people left and right,” she hissed while looking around. “She may be willing to die to get out of that brothel, but I’m not.”

I gaped at this girl, and even though my mouth was dropped open in surprise, she didn’t seem bothered or amused

by my shock.

“But-But you have to,” I replied with a stutter.

“No. I don’t. I want to live. Tell her I’m done doing her dirty work. Bye now,” she said while waving. I stood there for a moment more, wondering if this was all a cruel joke. It wasn’t until she rolled her eyes and resumed washing dishes that I shuffled away.

When I made my way out of the kitchen and back into the hallway, my mind was in a fog. Everything about this mission had been a failure. We were out of time and would soon miss out on ending Cavil. If no one drugged the guardsmen, it would mean we’d have more stacked against us. I just hoped Kaye could still pull it off without her sister’s help.

We had no other options. We’d have to just make it work, because Cyler and Maverick going back to Ethros simply wasn’t an option.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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I was so lost in thought that when I opened the door at first, I didn't notice Cyler talking to someone. My eyes went wide with fear when I realized he was speaking with Cavil himself. "I'm surprised to find you outside my kitchens, Master Black. Did you find the appetizers not to your liking?"

Cavil looked suspicious as he stared at Cyler. "I hope there's not a nefarious reason for you being here. My kindness and generosity have been stretched extremely thin where you and your brother are concerned."

I would've gone back inside the kitchens and risked the anger of the chef, but Cavil caught my gaze. His smile went from full of scrutiny to mischievousness. I immediately looked down at the ground and shuffled toward Cyler and the Commodore. He didn't seem nearly as drunk as the night before, which meant his memory and his ability to observe me wouldn't be hindered by the alcohol.

"Ah, I almost forgot. Your little Companion is here." Once I was standing next to Cyler, Cavil traced a knuckle down my bare arm, and it felt like someone was slicing my skin. It would've been rude to swat his hand away, so I focused on Cyler beside me and hoped that he wouldn't continue to touch me.

"My, you sure are pretty. I can see why you like her." My heart raced under his perusal, the only comfort I had was that Cyler was near. When I was in Ethros, Cavil saw a less submissive side of me. I was defiant, and I hoped that by

keeping quiet and acting shy, he wouldn't make the connection.

"But what were you doing in my kitchen?" he asked. We should've waited until Cavil had more to drink. I looked down at Cyler's wrist, where his fetter was clamped around it. I was worried that the Commodore would punish him, but Cyler threw him an easy smile. "I sent her looking for some whipped cream. I was feeling adventurous," Cyler said. The lie rolled smoothly off his lips, and as a result, my cheeks burned bright red with embarrassment.

Commodore Cavil went silent for a breath before clapping his hands together with a laugh. "Oh-oh! Maybe you'll come to play in my ivory room." Cyler frowned, as if the thought of anyone seeing him and me together intimately was upsetting.

"I think I'm okay with keeping her to myself for now," Cyler responded while pulling me tighter against him. I was worried that the possessive tone in his voice would tip Cavil off, but it didn't seem to.

"Very well," Cavil began. I couldn't see his face because I was keeping my gaze firmly on the floor, but I heard the pridefulness in his voice. "I'll just have to hire her for myself."

Cavil lightly traced my collarbone with the tip of his finger, and I shivered with disgust. A breathy voice called from down the hall, bringing him out of his intrusive touch. "Emperor? Would you like for me to get you a drink?" Jade asked. She sauntered closer, flipping her hair over her shoulder and biting her lip. The flirtatious body language looked practiced.

"Well, hello there. Yes. I think a drink would be very nice," he replied before leaving us to go to Jade's side. They left without saying anything else to us, and the moment Jade's white dress disappeared around the corner, Cyler wrapped me in a big hug, squeezing tightly before grabbing my wrist and pulling me in the opposite direction.

"That was close," I whispered the further away from the kitchens we got. I was shaken by the news from Kaye's sister as well as from seeing Cavil. But I was also proud of myself. I

didn't crumble under pressure, nor did I have that aching feeling in my chest. I did, however, feel a little out of control. We didn't have a plan at the end of this week, Cavil would return to Ethros, and our window of opportunity would diminish. If I wanted to save Maverick and Cyler, it would have to be here in Galla. We had no way to get them out of Ethros. It was like one giant, heavily-guarded island.

"Did you get the message delivered?" Cyler asked in a low voice while scanning the crowds. More Companions had arrived, and people were starting to drink in the corner. I saw Maverick leaning against the wall with Blythe standing beside him. I wanted to run to him, give him a grateful hug and whisper in his ear how much I loved him and how thankful I was that he didn't die this morning, but I kept my feet firmly planted, knowing that it was smarter for me to stay here.

I thought of what to say to Cyler. We had been clinging to a hopeless plan, and now we had nothing. But I didn't want to ruin what could possibly be one of my last nights with him for a while, so I decided to wait to tell him. "Yes," I replied.

Cyler nodded his head and continued to look around the room more. In the corner, musicians set up and began playing softly for the Elite guests. A couple of Elite men and women pulled Companions aside to dance. Cyler looked at me mischievously before grabbing my own hand and leading me towards the music.

He spun me around one time before pulling me close. I placed my hands on his chest and peered up at the man that started this entire journey. Cyler Black saw me like no one else ever had before. Maybe it wasn't love at first sight. Maybe when he brought me to Dormas, he wanted to test Josiah, but I'd always felt an electric connection with my fearless leader. Nevertheless, I was still hurt by his letter. I had questions and grievances to iron out with him.

"What are you thinking about?" he murmured into my ear while swaying softly. The music had a steady beat, and the guitars strummed dark chords. Others danced around us, but in my mind, it was only Cyler and me.

“We haven’t had time to discuss that letter, Cy,” I said. There was a sense of sadness in my tone that seemed unexpected. I was still hurt by his ability to let go, to leave, knowing there was a chance he’d never see me again and not let me know. Maybe it was foolish to focus on this tonight. But I needed to know it was as hard for him as it was for me.

“I was hoping you’d let me kiss you enough that you’d forget,” Cyler replied with a half chuckle. If we weren’t in Cavil’s tower, maybe I’d let him kiss me, love me until I couldn’t remember the betrayal, but we weren’t. And if I weren’t going to see him again for a while, then I’d need some closure to hold me over until I saw him again—*if* I ever saw him again.

“Did you miss me?” I asked in a small voice. “Is it wrong that I want to know if you were as devastated as I was? Is it wrong that I wanted you to suffer as I did? I didn’t handle being away from you well, Cy. You’re a part of me.”

I felt lips on my temple, and I shivered at how reverent it felt. “I should have never removed your choice, Babe. I was torn up about Jules. I was frantically trying to save the best thing in my life.” His hand drifted lower on my back. We weren’t really dancing anymore, we were swaying and pressing as tightly against one another as we could. “As for if I suffered? Fuck yes, I suffered. Every second away from you was agony. Fucking agony, Babe. Knowing you didn’t handle it well guts me. What happened?”

The song stopped, and we both just held each other for another moment until another song picked up. I used the loud strumming of the guitar to conceal my words from others nearby. “I was sad in the beginning. You were the first person to see me and then truly value my choices and freedom. You ripped that freedom from me. I was angry for a while, then I just kind of went into survival mode. But you know what I hate most, Cy?”

Cyler didn’t respond, he just held me tighter. He kissed my temple once more as if that was all he could do. “You taught me to fight for myself. You showed me I was worthy of love, that I didn’t have to be so passive in my life. You made me



realize that I could claim my soul for myself...then you left. The worst part was you made me fall in love with you, then you gently placed me back in the pretty little cage where I was helpless against my situation.” I choked out each word as I let go of everything I’d been feeling these last five months. “Josiah said he stayed away because he loved me, too, you know. I thought we were better than that.”

Cyler let out a shaky sigh and whispered in my ear once more. “I did wrong by you, Ash. If I could change everything about that night, I would. But can you blame me? I love you enough to be without you if that’s what it takes. I just hope I can make it up to you. I swear I’m nothing like Josiah. I’d let nothing get between us.”

I looked around us and, after not seeing Cavil’s prying dark eyes, leaned up to kiss Cyler on the lips. With my touch, I showed him how much he’d changed my life. The depth of my love and appreciation for Cyler Black was infinite. He truly saved me from myself and from a lifetime in a toxic relationship. He collected each little broken piece of me and put it back together, making a life for me more beautiful than I ever could have imagined. He didn’t just make me feel complete, Cyler Black completed me.

Being without him would inevitably break me.

The space between us exploded, and my hands struggled to bring him closer. “You’re my everything, Babe. I want this for the long haul. I’m so sorry,” he whispered between kisses. The music stopped, and I looked up into his dark eyes, committing the fiery way he looked back at me to memory. I wanted to remember this moment forever. If this was our goodbye, then I wanted it to be a good one.

“We might not be able to get you,” I said, making sure to keep my voice low. “Our...arrangements...they’re falling apart. You could have to go back,” I choked.

Cyler rubbed his hands up and down my arms while looking around the room. The music stopped, and people were disappearing to the many dinner tables. He didn’t answer me until we found a small table in the dining room in the back,

secluded from the others. Maverick sat at the table across from ours and kept eye contact with me as we ate. "I'm going to do everything in my power to get out of here, Babe. I'm not leaving you again," he said in a voice that made me almost believe him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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**K**aye was quiet during the ride home. Although she didn't seem surprised by her sister's refusal to help, she was still disappointed. We all were. Now, Kaye would have to sneak into the kitchens to poison the guards' wine stash on her own. I made sure to warn her about the angry chef and the lie I told her. But still, nothing seemed to be coming together. Was Jade genuinely prepared to kill Cavil? I didn't know her well, and although she appeared fearless, it was still a risk. Either way, I was determined to get my men on the transport and out of there. Regardless if Cavil were alive or not, *I* wouldn't be failing my mission.

The girls went to the third floor to debrief Madam B on their evening, and I was surprised to see that none of my guys were there to greet me when we got back to the brothel. Slowly, I made my way upstairs and to my room, gasping when I opened the door.

Flowers. Dozens of flowers covered the floor. Candles were lit and scattered around every available ledge, and the bed was made with crisp satin sheets. "Hello?" I called. From what I could see, there was no one here.

"Hey," Huxley's gruff voice said to my left. He was wearing nothing but boxers, and his hair was wet. Moisture clung to his skin as he shut the steamy bathroom door. "I was taking a shower. Didn't expect you back so early."

I was stunned speechless. I'd never been one to get the twins confused. To me, their smiles held all the secrets to their differences. Huxley was hardened by his life and always

seemed unhappy. Differentiating him from Patrick had never been an issue. However, tonight? He looked happy. There was an anxious glow pouring from his lips as they quirked at the ends. His shoulders didn't seem to crack under the weight of his burdens. Huxley didn't look angry or even sad. He looked like a man on the edge of something beautiful, and I couldn't help but wonder if that something beautiful was me.

“What’s all of this?” I asked while motioning through the room. Huxley rubbed the back of his neck, looking bashful and sexy as hell as he noticed what I was talking about. “I...I wanted to do something special for this...I know it’s not ideal, but with everything...”

Was Huxley...nervous? He made his way closer to the bed then whirled around as if he'd forgotten something. In the process, Hux knocked over a candle and flames erupted around us. “Shit, son of a bitch!” he yelled before barreling towards the bathroom and emerging with a sopping wet towel to throw over the fire.

The door slammed open, and a stream of curses flew. “What the fuck is going on?” Turning around, Patrick, Kemper, and Jacob fought to get through the door and make sure we were alright.

“It’s these fucking candles!” Huxley roared. “I told you I don’t do that sort of shit. One fell over, and it started a fire.”

Patrick let out a laugh, and I merely stood there speechless. “When you said things were ‘heating up’ tonight, you weren’t kidding,” he snorted. Huxley spun to look at his brother and raised his fist. It wasn’t until then that I realized I should probably speak up.

“Stop!”

Jacob’s mindspeak started going crazy. “I knew I should have gone next. This is a disaster.”

Huxley huffed, the sound more like a growl than an exhale, but I couldn't help but smile. “Okay, that’s it. Out. All of you.”

Kemper, Patrick, and Jacob begrudgingly left, but I kept my eyes on Huxley. I soaked in how nervous and embarrassed he was. This was so unlike the man I'd come to know that I wanted to take a moment to appreciate his flustered and unsure movements. He began blowing out candles, and a heavy cloud of smoke filled the room, but I didn't care. One by one, each flame went out, and I was left with nothing but a dark room and Huxley's firm body. I was almost happy to be stripped of the ambiance. It was like that with Huxley and me. I preferred his gritty realism.

"You okay?" I finally asked once he was sure every candle was taken care of.

He took a moment to respond, wiping his hand on the back of his neck before saying, "Not really. This isn't me. Kemper's the one that does the candles and flowers shit. I wanted to do something special for our first...well, for you. But now I'm questioning everything."

"What would you have done, Hux?" I asked while walking closer. I trailed a finger down his torso and smiled when he shivered at my touch. "Show me how *you'd* make sure this was special. Not your brother, or Kemper, or anyone else that has ideas about what's special. What's your version of it?"

My voice was low and sultry, the smoke in the room gave everything a hazy feel that had me aching to be closer. Huxley licked his bottom lip in a slow movement, and I wondered what he tasted like. Spinning me around, Huxley wrapped his arm around my middle then pulled my head to the side, exposing my neck.

"I would have come up behind you as you got ready for bed," he whispered. "I'd kiss your neck and enjoy watching your creamy skin pebble up with goosebumps." At that, he trailed his tongue along my skin and then blew cold air on me. I shivered, and an overwhelming heat flourished within me.

He trailed his fingers across my shoulders and my back, making sure to brush my hair aside so he could unzip the white dress I was wearing. "You look beautiful, but I'd rather see you with nothing on if that's okay?" he asked.

The way he asked was tentative but heated. I was too turned on to say anything other than yes. When my dress fell to the floor, I couldn't help but let out a little gasp as the cold air hit my back. I felt lips on my neck. My shoulders. Trailing lower and lower, he kissed my hip, until finally, I felt him on my ass. A light nibble on my cheek had me almost bending over as sensations flooded each of my muscles. Huxley was on his knees.

“Spin around, little Walker,” he said. His voice was hoarse and full of desire. I obeyed him with a smile, knowing that I'd do anything to feel his lips on my skin. He licked my stomach, scraping his teeth along me before placing a soft kiss lower. My legs went weak, and I let out a curse. Huxley already had me on edge with just a few kisses. “Sit on the bed, Ash.”

I did as he asked, moving backward until the back of my calves hit the mattress. I sat down in a hurry, eager to see what would come next while enjoying the view of Huxley on his knees. His eyes were feral and hungry. Pulling my thighs apart, he let out a groan of approval.

“When I pushed you away, you stayed strong,” he murmured while kissing my knee. “And when I was an ass, you didn't give up on me.” He bit at my inner thigh, letting out an exhale. The subtle but hot breath brushed across the junction between my legs, reminding me that I was completely bare to him. “I'm going to reward you tonight for being my good little Walker. For staying with me, even when I didn't deserve it.”

“I'll always stay with you, Hux,” I said.

“You promise?”

I wanted to answer him, but only a gasp escaped my lips, cutting off whatever spoken promise I'd intended to make. His tongue reached my bare mound, and he moved circles around it. Each groan from his mouth had his lips vibrating against me. It felt so damn good.

My need increased, and I shifted on the mattress, my hips moving back and forth while I grinded against his mouth. “Oh yes,” I whispered. Bringing my hand up to my mouth, I bit my

knuckle so hard I was sure it would bleed. The sensations were too vibrant, I couldn't hold back.

“Lay down, Ash,” Huxley ordered while pulling back. He stood up and slipped off his boxers before kissing my stomach. Bracing each leg beside me at my stomach, I felt caged between his thighs while staring at his glorious hardness. Licking my lips, I wanted to taste him, and when I looked up at him, he smirked. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” he asked while shifting closer and knowing what I was thinking. “You want to suck me off, little Walker?”

I nodded yes, already leaning forward to wrap my lips around his head. “Well, too bad,” he replied while slinking back, farther away from me. “Tonight is all about *you*.”

Huxley flipped me over and pulled my arms over my head. With one hand, he held me still, and with the other, he picked up a bottle of warm oil on the side table and poured a generous amount on my back. His strong hands kneaded my flesh, working through, with delicious delicacy, each knot in my muscles. Slower and lower, he massaged me until he was rubbing my globes. His hands dipped between my slick folds, rubbing until he slipped his finger inside of me.

“You like that, little Walker?” he asked, his voice sounded gravelly, making me clench with desire. Sliding in and out of me, he chuckled when I bucked up.

My response was a whimper. “Yes, Hux.”

“Is this what you’d prefer? Or do you want flowers and candles?” I sensed some insecurities within Hux as he spoke. He pressed further, and I arched my back up some more to take his finger deeper.

“I want you,” I replied with another moan. “I want the best version of you, Hux.”

Huxley froze, and I felt his fingers fall away before a kiss touched my shoulder blade. “That, I can do. I’m going to give you all of me.” Peppering kisses along my spine, I couldn’t think of a time my body felt so worshipped. He didn’t leave an inch of skin untouched. He took my hair out of its bun, letting

my tresses cascade along my back. He then threaded his fingers through my hair, scratching my scalp before twisting my hair in his fist and guiding me to roll over and face him.

“I want to look in your eyes, Ash. I want to see every expression on your face.”

He was gentle in the way he slid inside of me, pausing when I winced. I was still sore from Maverick. He pulsed and pulled, stretching me as I grew to accept how big he was. He leaned down to kiss me, and I bit his lip, tugging on it before saying, “This is perfect, Hux.”

He pumped into me again, increasing his pace as he absorbed every single response. It was a divine experience. Huxley saved this side of himself for only those he loved, and although he’d never muttered the words, I knew he loved me. I felt it in his gaze poised perfectly on me.

“You know I love you, right?” My voice was breathy. Hux shifted so he could rub along my sensitive nerves as he thrust deeper. The combination of having him inside of me as he circled my clit had me close to thrashing, but I kept still and focused on the adoration in his eyes and the movements of his fingers. I was calling out to that pleasure deep within me and using him as my focal point.

I didn’t expect Huxley to say anything in return. I’d come to love and accept his shortened speech and quiet, steadfast resolve. We’d always spoken better with our bodies, moving in perfect sync. Our connection had intensified over time, but there had always been a deep, unmistakable tethering between our souls. My words just solidified what our bodies already knew.

Huxley seemed to be lost in thought as he continued to move. My orgasm tore through me in an unexpected way. I cried out in bliss as he moved, matching me in pleasure after a few thrusts. Our breath mixed together, and I basked in my love for this man. He tucked my hair behind my ear and leaned forward to kiss my forehead. He lingered for a moment, brushing his lashes against my skin while sucking in deep breaths.



“I love you, my little Walker. I’ve loved you since the moment you opened those train doors. I loved you when you saved baby Hope from me and the Walker woman in Dormas. I loved you when I kissed you back in my bedroom. I loved you in Ethros when you proved how strong you were. I loved you in the Deadlands when you fought your grief. I love that damn determined smile you have. I love your confidence. I love how you say all the right things. I love you enough to light fucking candles and spread rose petals on the bed. I love you enough to say all the things I’ve always been too scared to say.”

I wasn’t expecting to cry at his admission, but slow and happy tears rolled down my cheeks, mixing with my sweat and making my chest swell with more love for this man. I didn’t respond. I knew that it was a lot for him to say all of this. I imagined him practicing this speech in the mirror, and it made me smile. Instead of responding, I lifted up and kissed him on the lips, slow and steady. His determined face softened into happiness then. And as I lay there beneath him, basking in the joy of his love for me, I realized that it was a look I wanted to see for the rest of my life.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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The next day, I woke up feeling equal parts sated and worried. Today was the day; Cavil sent the invitation to his grand party last night, letting everyone in Galla know that he would be traveling back to Ethros soon and expected everyone to be at his going away party.

I was shocked by his insistent need for praise and recognition. What about Cavil's life had made him crave the attention and adoration of the empire?

"Morning," Huxley murmured into my hair. We slept wrapped up in a tangle of limbs and exhaustion. He held me all night, and I enjoyed watching his peaceful face as he slept.

We reluctantly headed downstairs for breakfast after getting dressed. The other Companions sat with us, eating in silence. Kaye had disappeared for a walk sometime this morning. None of us bothered her as she still seemed upset by her sister's abandonment. Madam B and Louis made quick work of briefing us at breakfast. "Louis and Kemper were unable to finish the Heat disabler in time," she said before chomping down on a muffin.

Tallis frowned but seemed resigned to the fact that it wouldn't work. Everyone already knew about Kaye's sister giving up, so this seemed to just dampen the already dark mood. "I'll alert the Resistance," Jules said with a sigh.

"No," Madam B immediately replied. It was the first I'd seen her not act calm. "We still need the riots. Once Cavil is dead, it'll give us the momentum we need to really spark

change. If they know we've failed to disable Heat, they won't stand up. We really need what few members of the Resistance we have."

"They'll be killed," I replied before pursing my lips. "You can't just send them to their deaths."

"Some may die, yes. But they're smart. Resilient. I'm sure more would survive than you think."

Tallis stood and scowled at Madam B. "No. That's not how I lead." He slammed a fist on the table, causing drinks to spill and food to splatter everywhere. Opposite him, Madam B seemed unphased by his outburst.

"You forget where you are," she murmured. "I've planned this all. You used *my* connections to get behind enemy lines. *My* Companions got you access to Mr. Black. I think you should tread *very* carefully."

I watched their ping ponged aggression and tried to piece together their motives. Why would Madam B risk so many? "Who does Cavil have that is important to you?" I asked while cocking my head to the side. I wanted to get to the bottom of her motivations and was determined to find out who exactly Madam B was doing this for.

"What do you mean?" she scoffed, but I saw the fear in her eyes. I was on to something, I just knew it.

"I want to know why you're doing this. Why do you want Cavil dead?"

She stood up and took a step back, as if being backed into a corner. "I want him dead for the same reasons you do. Cavil is evil."

"Enough," Jules said, eyeing me with annoyance but accepting why I needed to know. We were too close to the end of this. Madam B may be willing to risk the members of the Resistance, but I wasn't. I needed to know that she wouldn't betray us. This empire was too full of power-hungry people willing to step on anyone to get what they wanted.

She looked around the room, seemingly accepting that there was nothing she could do to stop the questions. "I have a

relationship with a dignitary from Saberus. He has a fetter and is now a forced advisor to Cavil. Lowe is responsible for getting him out of there.”

I snapped my attention to Lowe, and she shrugged. “I’m just following orders.”

“I’ve known him for a long time. I’ve...loved him for a long time. I just want him out of there and safe. That’s my motive.” I took in the way her eyes went soft with affection. Her bottom lip dropped, as if she was remembering something with fondness. I knew then that she was just a woman in love, desperate to get him back. Like me, almost.

Jules tilted her head to the side. “This dignitary, you don’t have any ideas about him being the new emperor, do you? Because that’s not going to happen.”

“I don’t care about any of that. We need the riots to distract the guards so we can sneak out in the tunnels. They’ve been patrolling the auction post more lately. And if Cavil is killed, they’re going to be out in full force, making sure that no one leaves Galla. Kaye is only going to be able to poison the men in Cavil’s tower. The Zone is still flooded with hundreds of guards.”

I slumped back in my seat and puffed out some air. She was right, we couldn’t leave unless the guards were distracted. I flashed my eyes to Kemper, and I knew that he was trying to piece together a plan that didn’t involve using the Resistance as sacrificial lambs.

“What about all the other Walkers? The ones that’ll be left here,” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

I bit my bottom lip. Madam B wasn’t a mastermind. She wasn’t equipped to lead a resistance or make grand plans for taking down an empire. She was a woman in love and looking out for herself.

“We need a distraction, Kemp,” Jules said while standing. I always appreciated her ability to thread together a plan. I found myself leaning on the edge of my seat, clinging to her

every word. “We need something on the complete opposite side of the Zone to draw the attention of the guards. Then the members of the Resistance need to help get Walkers through the tunnels and out of Galla.”

“How many people live in the Zone?” I asked Louis, feeding off her feeble plan.

“A few hundred? Our numbers are dismal.”

“So reach out to the Resistance. Let them know—”

“What is it with people jumping in and stealing my thunder!” Jules exclaimed with a joking smile. Everyone around us laughed. “Anyways. Tallis, reach out to the Resistance. Tell them the new plan. Each member will be assigned a street. Their job will be to get as many Walkers as they can out of here. Things will be utter chaos for a while.”

“Where will they go?” Lowe asked.

“The Deadlands,” I whispered.

Everyone sat back in their seats while taking in the plan for tonight. Jade would kill Cavil. Kaye would poison the tower guards. I would get Cy and Mav out, and members of the Resistance would help Walkers in the Zone escape.

“We just need a distraction,” Kemper said with a smile while looking at Louis. “Think we can handle that?”

“Oh. Absolutely,” Louis replied with a sadistic grin that both terrified and comforted me. We had a plan. A real plan. I just hoped it worked.

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JULES GOT me ready before leaving to go with Tallis. Her place in all of this was to help guide people through the underground tunnels. “You ready, Walker Queen?” she asked me with a fond smirk.

I looked down at the dress I wore with a smile and tried not to feel giddy. I needed to keep a level head and be flexible tonight. This was it, I’d finally have all my men back. “I think so!” I replied. The dress was sleek and, again, white. Unlike

my other dresses, though, it had black leggings covered by thick tulle, a design that Jules proudly came up with. That way, when the time came, I could ditch the dress and run.

“You should design clothes,” I told her. My time with Jules here was pleasant. She seemed happier when near Tallis, and having a purpose had brought her to this new state of awareness about herself. She was confident and didn’t seem as dependent upon the approval or acceptance of others. Just then, Tallis walked into the small bathroom. He leaned against the door frame and stared at Jules.

“*Agapimenos*, you almost ready?” he asked.

“Almost,” she replied while pulling a knife from a holster on her thigh. “I was thinking you should have this, just in case.”

I looked down at the silver knife while cocking my eyebrow. It was beautiful and silver plated. Almost decorative. “Madam B gave it to me on my first mission. Figured it was good luck, and I could pass it along to you.”

“There is no way I’m sneaking that inside,” I replied while clutching my chest. They’d catch me for sure.

Jules didn’t respond, she simply rolled her eyes and spun me around. I felt her hands in my hair as she rolled the knife up and twisted. “It’s now in your hair. I hear these things are big drunk fests. With any luck, the guards will be too busy looking at your breasts to pay attention to the shiny thing in your hair.”

We both exchanged small giggles before Tallis cleared his throat. “Come on, *Agapimenos*. Time to go.” Jules stood after squeezing my shoulder.

“Be strong,” she said. Tallis wrapped his arms around her middle and pulled her out of the doorway, but I could still see their shadows. I blushed when I heard her moan, and he kissed her down the hall. I was happy for them, Jules deserved a man like Tallis. She deserved love. Didn’t we all?

Downstairs, Huxley was pacing the floor while Kemper and Louis wired something that looked like a bunch of

household appliances woven together. “What’s that?” I asked.

It was Jacob’s mindspeak that answered. “They say it’s a bomb, but I think they’re just tossing shit together like fucking evil scientists.”

Kemper tossed a rogue wire at him, and I covered my mouth to laugh. “Damn, Ash. You look good,” Patrick said. He strolled up and gave me a giant hug. “You ready to save Cy and Mav?” he asked.

“I’m ready to go home,” I replied. I’d been granted the opportunity to see the world, meet new people, and travel to exotic places. But at the cusp of it all, I just wanted to be back in Dormas with its simple cabins and simple people.

“Me too,” Kemper said while clipping a wire into place.

“I wanted to tell you all something before I go,” I said while waiting for each of them to stop what they were doing to look at me. “Under no circumstance is anyone allowed to stay behind nor do something stupid. At the end of the night, I expect all my men to be in the same place at the same time. Is that understood?” I asked.

Huxley smirked at me before strolling over and placing a long kiss upon my lips. “You got it, little Walker.”

Jacob’s mindspeak went frazzled. “Why does her bossy voice turn me on so much? God, keep it under control, Jacob!” He didn’t even look embarrassed when I gave him a look. I’d grown used to his mindspeak. I missed his honey tone but loved knowing each of his thoughts. I almost now couldn’t imagine him without it.

“Of course,” Patrick and Kemper said at the same time, each looking at each other and laughing before going back to what they were doing.

I looked at them all once more before the rest of the Companions came downstairs. I knew that tonight would change everything. I just hoped I was ready.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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The ride to Cavil's tower had an excited yet ominous feel. Each of us kept quiet, thinking about all that we would be required to do. Of all of us, Jade seemed the most calm despite having a gruesome job ahead of her. "Are you nervous?" I asked her while patting Cy's and Mav's pills in the hem of my corset.

"I should be, right?" Jade looked around the transport while snuggling closer to Lowe. "I mean, I'm a bit nervous, but mostly I'm just excited. He killed my..." Jade swallowed then, the first true sign of emotion since we left. A glossy shine came over her eyes, and she blinked away the emotion with a frown. "My sister was a Walker in Ethros. She mostly kept to herself. Never bothered anyone. She worked in his home, and one day, he set his eyes on her. She was barely a teen. Barely knew the world was cruel. She killed herself the same night he invited her to his ivory room."

I gasped at her story and tried not to ask too many questions. She spoke with a numbness I hadn't expected. "She was my only family left, and he broke her. So I'm okay with murder. In fact, I'm going to enjoy it."

When we arrived at the tower, the guards didn't give us a second glance. They had grown relaxed with their rosy cheeks and wide grins. There was an excitement in the air; apparently Cavil wasn't the only one who was homesick, his guards were, too. Too bad they'd never see their home again.

The gathering room was more crowded than any other time before. Cavil had invited every dignitary within a hundred



mile radius. It took me a moment to find Cyler's black hair and flirty smile in the crowd. But once I did see him, I was instantly taken aback by the pure fury in his gaze as he stormed closer to me.

"Something isn't right. You need to leave now."

I looked around the room for Maverick, unsure what was going on but feeling scared nevertheless. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"Oh Cyler!" Cavil's voice said over the crowd. Trumpets started frantically playing as Cavil strolled through the room, trying to catch up with his processional. "I've been looking for you *everywhere*, Master Black."

"You obviously haven't been looking very hard," Cy began. "It's not like I can go anywhere."

When Cavil's beady eyes connected with mine, I just knew that something was up. It was the same calculating stare that I saw when I first met him in that abandoned home outside of the city. Cavil had something planned.

"Well, hello there, *Shade*," he said. I didn't remember telling him my name, which meant that he had looked me up in the database. "So happy to see you here again. I was thinking tonight that I would switch things up and claim you for the night. I think I'd very much like to see what all the fuss is to have *the* Cyler Black all out of sorts." My mouth dropped open in shock as I took in what that would mean for me.

"Is that going to be a problem?" he asked in a sinister way that made my breathing go shallow with fear.

"No, sir. I mean, Commodore," I replied with a stutter, it felt like my heart was going to jump out of my chest.

"That's emperor, Shade. I'm an emperor now."

*Not my emperor.*

"Yes, of course, Emperor Cavil. My apologies, sir."

Cavil wrapped his arm around my lower back, and his hand lingered dangerously low. His fingers brushed right between my white corset top and the tulle pant skirt I was

wearing. My skin prickled with discomfort at his touch, and I wanted nothing more than to run away.

Cyler's face was a bright red, and I wondered if this was it. If this was the moment that he broke. "Oh Cyler. I was thinking, since you don't much enjoy these sorts of things, you could just spend the evening with your brother. He's working very hard on a new finding."

At that suggestion, Cyler curled over and clutched his arm. I could hear the zap of electricity and smell his burning skin. Someone had turned on Cyler's fetter, leaving him no choice. "Yes, emperor," Cyler said through clenched teeth. A guard clasped his hand on Cyler's shoulder and guided him away, Cyler making sure to drag his feet along the marble as they went.

I wanted to stab Cavil right there and run to Cyler to end his suffering, but I knew it wasn't that easy. Something was up, and Cavil seemed to know about our plans. It was odd that he'd requested me today. Was this some sort of power trip over Cyler?

Jade walked up to us, looking beautiful but nervous as she threw Cavil a coy smile. "Emperor, if I might be so bold as to say, I was truly looking forward to enjoying one last evening with you." She sounded desperate, stroking his arm with a manicured fingernail.

"Don't you worry. I have plans for you, Jade," he said with a snarl before snapping his fingers. Three guards strolled up and grabbed Jade by the arms. One drifted a hand up her thigh, and she flinched when they pulled a knife from a holster attached to her leg.

"Send her to a holding cell to wait until tomorrow. We can have one last little execution before I leave," he said with a smile as Jade struggled against their hold. I knew it was useless, but nevertheless she fought. Our plan was falling apart before we even got a chance to try.

Once she was out of sight, everyone went back to their hushed conversations, and the band began playing once more. Cavil stared at the hallway Jade and the guards disappeared

down before turning his attention to me. “Ready for tonight, Ash? I think we’re going to have lots of fun.”

At the sound of my real name, all hope fled me. It was over. Cavil had won.

Cavil lifted a hand up and, with a flick of his wrist, unraveled my hair, making sure to pocket the knife Jules hid there earlier. “We can play with your knife a little later, Ash. I should send you with Jade, but I prefer to have a bit of fun first.”

I shivered when his hand wrapped around my throat. He leaned forward like he was going to kiss me, and bile filled my mouth, threatening to spill past my teeth. I wanted to flee. But instead of touching his lips to mine, he inhaled my scent. “Smell that, little Walker? I smelled it on you when I first met you outside of Galla.” How did he know it was me? When did he figure it out? “You smell like fear. Practically overflowing with it. It smells delicious.”

“How’d you know?” I whispered.

Cavil let out a low cackle so threatening and dark that I felt it in my bones. Kaye broke through the crowd with her sister from the kitchen on her heels, and I knew then where she had disappeared to this morning. She didn’t even pretend to be apologetic as she looked down her nose at me. She wasn’t wearing white anymore. “I reward those loyal to me, Ash,” Cavil said with venom.

“Why?” I whispered to her. I should have known this all along, right? She didn’t seek out a position in the Resistance. She grew up at Madam B’s brothel and was forced into this role. I thought back to the advice she gave me my first night here.

*“Cling to that innate part of you that wants to survive.”*

When Kaye’s sister backed out, her survival instincts kicked in, and she was more than willing to sacrifice all of us to save herself. “I survive, Ash,” she said. “I *always* survive.”

Cavil placed his hand at my lower back and guided me away from Kaye, smiling at onlookers and acting like ruining

assassination attempts was a normal occurrence for him. I wondered if he wanted the public display to show that he was invincible, and at that moment, it seemed like he very well was.

“I was going to wait until after dinner, but I don’t think I can stomach sitting next to you for the next hour and not slitting your throat,” he growled. The hallway lights seemed to flicker as he dragged me. Each step felt like trudging through wet cement. I didn’t want to go with him, but what choice did I have?

I didn’t want to die like this, once again being pulled to my fate without any way out of it. The lights ahead flickered once more, and for a moment, I felt like I was back in the dark streets of Ethros. He was pulling me back into the darkest night of my life. Commodore—sorry, *Emperor*—Cavil was evil.

I looked in the corner and let out a shocked whimper when I saw Cyler and Maverick on their knees on the floor. “Ash!” Cyler yelled while struggling to move. He lifted his leg to stand up and a nearby guard pressed a button on his tablet, activating his fetter.

Harsh screams echoed off the walls, and I choked back a sob. I wanted to beg Cavil to stop hurting him, but he would just get more pleasure from my groveling. That’s what he wanted, wasn’t it? He wanted to feel powerful. “Do you like my new ivory room? I had it installed when we moved here,” Cavil said while waltzing over to Cyler and patting him on the head like he was a pet.

I closed my eyes, knowing that this was it. Cyler, Maverick, and I would most likely die here in this room. I knew that the white walls and furniture would be coated with our blood and that there was nothing to stop him. The only consolation I had was that Kemper, Jacob, Patrick, and Huxley would survive.

No. That just wasn’t good enough.

I took in the four poster bed in the middle of the room. Tall posts at each corner of the bed with white bedding and a

canopy over top drew my attention. The bedding was pulled tight, and white pillows rested against the headboard. “It looks tacky. I’ve never really been one for showy rooms,” I replied with a smile.

I should have been submissive or at least pretended to be. But if I was going to die in this room, I’d die with dignity. I wouldn’t roll over on my back and accept whatever the fates dealt me. I’d die a strong Dormas woman, through and through.

I was expecting retaliation, but the backhanded slap still caught me off guard. I fell to the ground, and Maverick let out a curse. “Fuck you, Cavil,” he groaned as the guard pressed the button once more, activating his fetter.

“I don’t *need* you anymore, Maverick,” Cavil spat. “Your brain and talent can’t protect you. I found out the clue to saving the empire. It’ll be ME that saves everyone.”

“What does that even mean? How could someone like *you* save everyone?” I asked. I was baiting him and trying to buy us some time. There had to be something that could get us out of here.

“I found out some interesting news this week. Something that made me eager to go back home and explore a bit more,” Cavil replied cryptically while moving closer to me. Slowly, he wrapped his hand around my wrist, pulled me towards the bed, and sat me down on the hard mattress. Once more, I eyed the four posts on the bed frame.

“You might remember my Companion in Ethros, Dominique. She’s been keeping some dirty secrets,” Cavil snarled as he spoke, unbuttoning his dress shirt and keeping his eyes locked on me.

I thought back to Allaire and his ominous statement before dying at the hands of the executioner. “I think it’s hardly world-altering that she was seeing Allaire behind your back.” I made sure to keep my voice even as I spoke. My plan was to keep him talking; as long as he was talking, I could figure something out.

“She wasn’t *dating* Allaire. She was showing him her findings. Dominique wasn’t Lackley’s Companion like I thought. She was his *scientist*. And she came to Ethros with me as a Companion to hide once he realized that her cure wasn’t working. The woman I’ve been fucking created the damn virus in the first place.”

All at once, a clear understanding flooded through me like an icy shock to the system. My dream, my understanding of Dominique, it all made sense now. That woman was tortured and disturbed, nearly teetering on the edge of insanity. I realized, then, that she wasn’t suffering from all that the world had done to her, but instead from the guilt of all the things she’d done to the world.

“How did you even find her?” I asked. I wasn’t sure how far to push, how much Cavil would be willing to say. If I acted like I was hanging on the edge of his words, worshipping each syllable pouring from his lips, maybe I could distract him and...

“She cornered me in Lackley’s home. She said she was Lackley’s most prized Companion, but she wanted to go with me. I saw the opportunity to claim one of Lackley’s possessions and didn’t think anything of it. I wish I’d known then what I know now, though. I had the answers for the cure under my nose this whole time and didn’t even know it,” he chuckled to himself.

I closed my eyes, once again reliving the glimmer of a memory I was gifted with when Jules gave me the death pill. Maybe it was a message from Josiah. Maybe he wanted to give me one last nudge in the right direction. Leave it to Josiah to find a way to help me from the dead.

I swallowed deeply as Cavil slowly removed his shirt, revealing yet another crisp, white undershirt beneath. “We went through Allaire’s office to find out who else he was working with. I never imagined I’d find his correspondence with Dominique. Just before you escaped, she and Allaire unlocked the cure. She injected it in her son, Payne, then sent him away with the hopes of keeping him far from me. Once I

find him, I'll have it all. And there's nothing anyone can do to stop me."

Oh no. Payne. He couldn't do anything to Payne.

"It's a shame Dominique died. I would have liked to have seen her expression when I bled her son dry in front of her," Cavil added while unbuckling his belt. Some dark part of my brain knew what would happen next. I knew where this would lead. Cavil wanted to exercise his power over me in front of Maverick and Cyler.

"The day Allaire died, she hung herself in her jail cell. Pity, huh? I bet she knew I'd find his research. Allaire seemed to think I'd never find her son, but I have my ways. It'll take no time at all to bring him back to Ethros."

I grabbed my chest and held it tightly, taking in the pain of her death. Conflict over the woman that died rocked through me. She was Payne's mother. The woman that helped us escape. But if what Cavil was saying were true, she was also the woman responsible for killing a majority of the population.

I looked over my shoulder at Maverick and Cyler then bit my lip. I knew they were stuck between feeling hopeful about this new information and defeated about Cavil. "You'll never find him," I whispered. I would still fight. I'd fight for my guys. I'd fight for Payne. For the empire.

"Is that so? You know where he is, Walker?" Cavil stopped undressing to look at me. He was trying to assess what I knew. I kept my face soft as the pretentious bastard looked me over. "You do, don't you?" I bit my lip, praying that the idea I was slowly formulating would work. I didn't think I had the strength, but I had to try. Looking around, there weren't many other options. "Wouldn't you like to know?" I replied with a smirk.

Cavil snapped his head to the guardsman. "Go! Get me a fetter. I bet she's wearing a dud. Tonight's fun just kicked up a notch." Cavil then turned to face me. He clasped my chin between his index finger and thumb then growled, "I'm going to figure out where he is. And you're going to tell me."

The guard left the ivory room to get what Cavil required. I saw in the fake emperor's eyes the eagerness he was feeling. He was too confident in his position, and it was time to strike. I took the time for a single breath, resolving to use everything Huxley taught me for one blinding moment of bravery. This was what I'd wanted. "I wouldn't be so sure about that," I said before lifting my leg up and kicking Cavil in the balls.

As expected, he crumpled over with a curse as I stood. "Fuck you," he snarled while pulling his tablet from his pant pocket and pressing down on the button that electrocuted Maverick and Cyler. Their harsh screams made me wonder if he turned the setting up to the highest mode. I wanted to look back at them, but I knew if I did, I wouldn't be able to do what I had to.

I wrapped my arms around the top half of the bedpost, and using my body weight, I pulled as hard as I could until the wood cracked, breaking the post free. I stumbled a bit with a curse. It was heavier than I'd expected, and a large, splintered crack dug into my palm as I steadied myself.

Cavil tried to move to stand, and I knew this was it. I didn't have time to think or cry. I had to end him now and think about my morals later. Sometimes while we're stuck thinking about the consequences, we lose sight of the rewards.

I swung back and hit Cavil in the head, and I wasn't sure if it was his skull cracking or the splintered wood. Rearing back, I hit him again.

And again.

And again.

And I hit him as blood covered the ivory room.

I hit him as Maverick and Cyler screamed in agony.

I hit him until his skull was so broken that I was sure he could never hurt me or my men again.

"Ash, stop," a pained voice cried out, the sound the only thing able to break me from the rage that flowed freely through me. I realized then that my guys were being electrocuted within an inch of their life. Quickly, I picked up



Cavil's tablet then cursed when it wouldn't accept my fingerprint. Their screams grew quieter, and I knew that we didn't have time to spare. I picked up Cavil's hand and placed his index finger on the screen.

Once it was unlocked, I turned off their fetters, and not a moment too soon. I dropped the tablet and crawled towards them with tears in my eyes. "Maverick, Cyler," I cried out, touching their faces as their chests heaved. I smeared red blood along their cheeks. "Are you okay?" I asked.

It took what felt like ages for them to answer, but it was finally Cyler that responded in a hoarse voice. "Let's get out of here." I checked the tablet, praying I could disable their fetters from here, but a red alert flashed on the screen before it locked once again. Cavil must have had a failsafe on his tablet directly tied to his life.

I quickly went back to Cavil's body and took a moment to look at it with clear eyes while they stood and made their way to the door. We had to leave before the guard got back with a fetter intended for me. I knew I needed to leave, but I had to take a moment to see what rage could do to a person. It was important that I truly absorb what I was capable of.

His head was a mangled mess. I'd expected this to feel... more. But his blood was just like mine. He wasn't invincible. *He died.*

"Ash, we have to go," Maverick said while hunching over and clutching his stomach.

"Okay." Tearing my eyes from Cavil, I paused, dipping down to grab the Heat strapped to his thigh. My fingers trembled from the adrenaline as I held the weapon in my hand. Pressing the button while aiming at Cavil, his body turned to dust in a matter of seconds, as if he was never really there. Hopefully it bought us some time.

"You had to do it, stay strong," Maverick said in a soft voice while placing his hand on my lower back. Was he worried about my soul? Was he worried that the Ash he knew was gone forever?

Or was that just me?

“I know.”

## EPILOGUE

Maverick

**T**he sirens started when the Walker elevator doors opened. We made it to the lobby where the transport was located with relative ease, thank goodness. But it was only a matter of time until someone found Cavil's dusty remains. Ash was covered in blood, moving in a haze as screams filled Cavil's tower. The siren was loud, but not as loud as the pulse in my ears. Seeing her kill Cavil was likely a sight I'd never forget.

Blythe and another Companion I'd often seen her with were pacing in front of a transport. Once they saw Ash's red-stained hands, they jumped to action. "What the fuck happened?" Blythe asked while looking at me.

"Cavil's dead. We have to go," Ash replied. Her voice was monotone, and I knew she was in shock. Looking down at her hands, I noted that they were shaking. A layer of sweat covered her forehead.

"What about Jade?" the other girl asked. She ran her fingers through her short, black hair and bit her lip in distress.

"Cavil took her. We can't go back for her. If you want to live, then get the fuck in the transport, Lowe," Ash replied. She didn't sound like herself at all. The girl I knew would crumble at the thought of leaving someone behind.

Had I finally destroyed her? I destroyed every good thing in my life.

Blythe and Lowe exchanged weary expressions before nodding.

Every single bone in my body ached. It felt like there was no cartilage in my joints. “Here,” Ash said before digging in her corset top and handing Cyler and me both pills. She wouldn’t meet my gaze, and that broke me. I couldn’t help but wonder if she was ashamed. “It’s the death pill.”

We got into the transport in silence. Lowe made quick work of pressing buttons on the dash, and as the garage slowly opened, I let out a curse when I saw guards loitering outside. The small group snapped their attention to us and began walking over, but just before they could intercept us, a loud explosion of fire and destruction went off in the distance. Clouds of flames filled the sky almost immediately.

“What the fuck?” Cyler asked while placing his hand on the window and peering outside. The guards were temporarily distracted, and Lowe took the opportunity to input the coordinates.

“Take it now. I’m not sure where the barrier is. You’ll want it off before we leave here,” Ash said quickly.

Staring down at the pill in my palm, I weighed the pro’s and cons. I was only about eighty percent sure that we’d wake up. Our bodies had just experienced some traumatic damage, and I couldn’t be for certain that this pill wouldn’t push what little life we were clinging to over the edge. But we didn’t have much of a choice, and I refused to tell Ash. She’d insist we stay, otherwise.

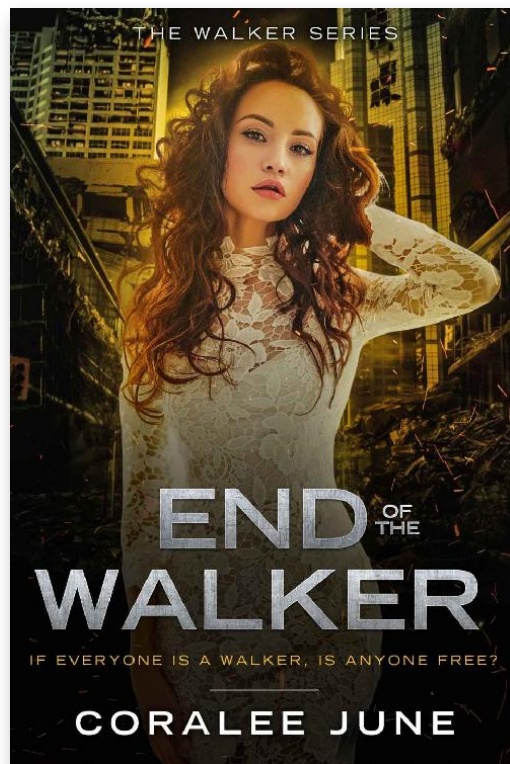
Once again I found myself making one of the hardest decisions of my life: Risk her, or risk myself. In the end, I’d always pick her happiness and survival over mine.

Blythe handed us water, and the guards ahead started running around like mad men, as if unsure where to go. Glancing at Cy, I placed the pill on my tongue and gulped it down. After we wordlessly exchanged a look of solidarity, he quickly followed suit.

The darkness started to claim me, and I made sure to stare at Ash. I wanted her to be the last thing I saw, just in case. The transport jolted forward and flames engulfed the sky outside, giving her a red silhouette of fire. She looked beautiful.

“Wow,” Lowe began, as my vision went black. “You really are Queen of the Walkers.”

COMING SOON



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Everything I do is for you. Everything.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I've always been passionate about storytelling and impressed by the influence it has on people. I love engaging with the projects I work on, diving headfirst into developing real, raw, and relatable characters.

I like flawed and beautiful things.

I'm an English Major from Texas State University and my wild affair with literature began at a young age. I love angst. I love to crack open a book and borrow the character's emotions for a bit. It's how I approach writing, too.

I live in Dallas, Tx with my husband and two beautiful, headstrong daughters. I enjoy long walks through the ice cream aisle at my local grocery store and listening to gangster rap in my minivan.

For more information about me, and my upcoming releases, please visit my website at:

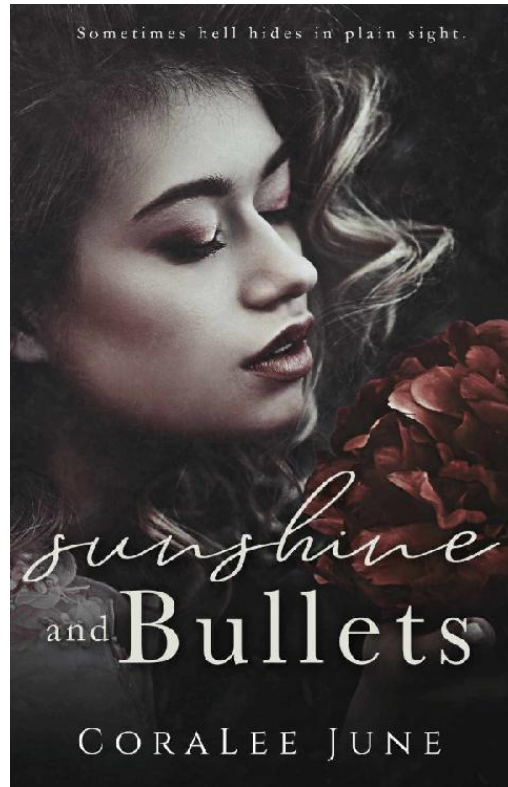
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ALSO BY CORALEE JUNE

[Sunshine and Bullets](#)



Sunshine.

It's a nickname I haven't heard since I lived on Woodbury Lane, where the houses were pretty but the secrets? Deadly. It was a pet name known only to the Bullets.

Rough, violent, and ruthless, they laid claim to the town — and my heart.

I wasn't supposed to fall for a boy from the wrong side of the tracks—especially not four of them. But they were the only ones who understood that sometimes hell hides in plain sight.

I was the girl with all the conveniences a privileged upbringing could provide. The world only saw two loving parents and a pristine home life, but I knew the truth. And it was going to get me killed. So, I disappeared, from everyone and everything

I'd ever known. I changed my name and my appearance, but the scars I carry, they're still the same.

The Bullets are all grown up now, too — a crime boss, a pro fighter, a bounty hunter, and a federal agent. Life took them in different directions, but they once shared the bonds of a brotherhood forged under the harshest conditions. Together they were fearless. Brutal. Unstoppable.

I'm praying they can find that unity again. If I'm going to survive this, it'll take everything they have. Because that's the thing about running from the past.

Eventually, it catches up to you.