

Sweetest
AWARENESS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MICHELLE HEARD WRITING AS

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OceanofPDF.com

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Dedication

To my best friend, Tayla.

My life would be empty without you.

Thank you for putting up with all my crap.

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Songlist

Click here - [Spotify](#)

Runnin' – Adam Lambert

My Demons – STARSET

On My Own – Ashes Remain

Bring Me Back To Life - Ht Bristol, Charlie Bannister,
Vincent Steel, Nine One One

Rise – State of Mine

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Synopsis

With the impending war on our doorstep, I'm training harder than ever to become the woman I was always meant to be.

A warrior.

I'm faced with trials set out to break me, but I keep getting up and walking away stronger than before.

I quickly learn I'm not just fighting for freedom but for a world where women won't be treated as breeders.

I'm fighting for the future of every woman.

I'm fighting to prove I'm not the coward I always thought I was.

I'm a leader.

Mostly, I'm the woman every man on this planet should fear.

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Sweetest Awareness

Dystopian Romance

Book #2

Authors Note:

Sweetest Awareness is book #2 in a duet.

*You need to read **Cruellest Oblivion** to understand the plot.*

This book contains subject matter that may be sensitive for some readers.

There is triggering content related to:

Loss of Family & Friends.

Abandonment.

Death of an animal.

Extreme graphic violence & death.

18+ only.

Please read responsibly.

“Your emotions make you human.”

~ **Sabaa Tahir**

(A Torch Against The Night)

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS:

Ecocity – Isolated city built after the wars ended.

Emissaries – Leaders and founding fathers of the ecocity.

Crusaders – Chosen group of people who are send out to convert the deviants living in the forbidden lands.

Virtuous – Citizens of the ecocity.

Blessed Be – The authorized way of greeting each other.

Curer – Doctor.

Healing Center – Hospital

Haven – Building where the healing center, laboratories, and emissaries are.

Bearer – A woman whose only purpose is to bear children.

Bearer Sector – Where bearers live away from other citizens.

Glofish – Genetically modified goldfish.

Dome – Electric force field over the ecocity.

Trackers – Employed by the emissaries to hunt down crusaders and anyone else they can find. They get paid a bounty for every person they deliver.

Insensate – a person who has been genetically modified not to feel any emotions and obey the emissaries' commands.

Forbidden territory – Any area outside of the ecocity.

Deviants – Anyone who's not in the ecocity and following the seven virtues.

Rebels – Criminals not allowed in the wards.

Wards – Small secured holdings where deviants train for the war.

Main ward – The city where most deviants live.

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Chapter 1

Jai

Entering the main ward, my lips part, and my eyes can't touch on everything fast enough.

Holy crap!

“Stay at my side,” Chance says. “People aren't as welcoming here as at the outer wards.”

“Okay.”

Where everything is clinical and pristine in the ecocity, various colorful stores decorate the street of the main ward. Something called a tattoo parlor, a hairdresser, clothing – everything from sparkling fabrics to the black outfit I'm wearing.

There's so much to choose from.

“It's different. Right?” Chance murmurs, laughter flirting with his voice.

My reaction probably amuses him, but I'm too awestruck to care.

“Yeah,” I breathe, my gaze flitting around like a butterfly that's discovered a field of flowers. “It's incredible.”

As Chance's fingers wrap around mine, a woman shrieks, “Chance, baby!”

He lets go of my hand and spins around, just in time to catch a girl with the longest legs I've ever seen. She wraps her legs around his waist and plants a hard kiss on his mouth.

My eyebrow pops up, and my lips part at the sight of another woman wrapped around the man I've grown close to.

The thought never crossed my mind that I might have to share Chance. Especially because there are so few women, and they are the ones who are usually shared.

Don't jump to conclusions.

"I've missed you!" she beams at him, her pretty face covered with dark makeup.

She's wearing the shortest pants I've ever seen. They hardly cover her rear, and the ripped t-shirt isn't much better. Bangles clink on her wrist, and golden loops hang from her ears.

There's an overwhelming stabbing sensation in my chest when Chance hugs her. It's unlike anything I've felt before, and I don't have a name for it.

I feel many eyes on me, and glancing around, it's to see every man passing by us staring me up and down.

Uneasiness crawls down my spine.

I don't like being out in the open like this, especially with the other woman shrieking with happiness and drawing attention to us.

After too many seconds have passed, Chance sets the girl down on her feet. I watch as they smile at each other, then he says, "Morgan, it's been a while. How are you?"

Morgan. I haven't heard that name before, but somehow it suits her.

She hooks her arm through his, leaning against him in a way that makes my stomach tighten and my heart shrink.

“Great, now that you’re back,” she beams at Chance with an expression that doesn’t sit well with me. “What do you think of my hair?”

Patting the back of her head, she twirls in front of him. The purple-black strands are cut short on one side, and long white hair hangs across her forehead and right ear.

“Ah... It’s different.” Looking a little uncomfortable, he asks, “Have you seen Warrick?”

“Always business and no time to play,” she pouts before smirking. “I wouldn’t mind watching you kick his ass to win a night with me again.”

What does that mean?

I pucker my lips for a split second before I realize I’m imitating her. Not comfortable with the emotions the scene evokes in my chest, I turn my attention away from them and decide to explore the closest store. That way, I can get away from all the men looking at me.

The past week at the smaller ward made me forget I’m a rare commodity because Idris, Kenzo, and the other men treated me like I was one of them, not some breeding machine. Or a hole to stick their dicks in.

After I learned the truth about sex from Chance, it disgusts me that all the women in the ecocity are subjected to the shock of finding out the hard way.

And none of them have spoken up about it.

Not that they can. We're outnumbered.

I shudder at the thought and walk faster toward a store called a tattoo parlor. Through the window, I see a man sitting in a chair while a woman's busy drawing with ink on his face.

Interesting. I wonder if this is where Chance got all his ink from.

When I push the glass door open, a bell jingles, I hurry inside, and before it can ring again, I shut the door.

"Take a seat, honey. I'll be with you in a second," the woman says in a friendly tone.

She has short blonde hair, making me realize I haven't seen a deviant with long hair.

Lifting my hand, I pull my fingers through my light brown strands, wondering whether I should get it cut.

A wall filled with various pictures draws my attention, and I walk closer. There are mythical creatures, death, barbed wire, flowers, and many other images.

The metal pen the woman uses to draw makes a buzzing sound that I find weirdly calming. I glance a little longer at her and the man before I move to a display rack showcasing statues of dragons.

There's so much to look at, but nothing really holds my attention, so I take a seat across from the man and woman to see what she's drawing on him.

With swift movements, she inks black lines around the man's eyes. She finishes with him and places the steel pen on a stand. It's attached to some kind of cable.

"It might sting a bit, but you'll be fine tomorrow," the woman tells her customer. I watch them hug, and as the man walks toward the door, he stares at me like I'm something from outer space.

I find myself holding my breath until the door shuts behind him, then I turn my gaze back to the woman.

"What can I do for you, honey?"

I slip off the stool, not sure how to explain my presence.

"I was curious to see what you were doing," I explain.

"Permanent makeup. Eyeliner, lipliner, eyebrows," she says with a friendly smile. "And, occasionally, tattoos."

"It sounds interesting," I admit. Gesturing at the statues, I add, "I like the dragons."

"Yeah, I have an unhealthy obsession with mythical creatures," she chuckles. "Come on." She nods toward the chair the man occupied a moment ago. "Let me take care of your bushy eyebrows. It will bring out the color of your eyes."

Intrigued, I glance at the chair.

Do things work the same here as in the ecocity, where everything you need is given to you as long as you abide by the rules?

As if she can read my mind, she says, "No payment needed, sweet girl. I haven't seen you around these parts. You're new, aren't you?"

I nod, suddenly feeling caught out even though I did nothing wrong. “Is it that obvious?”

The friendly woman gives me an encouraging smile. “It took me a while to get used to the outside world. Don’t worry. You’ll get the hang of it.”

“You were virtuous?” I ask, relieved by the news.

“Yeah. It’s been twenty years. I was kicked out because I can’t have children.”

There’s a wave of compassion in my chest. “I’m sorry.”

She waves a hand in the air, then nods at the chair again. “It was the best thing that ever happened to me. I got out.”

After I take a seat, she continues, “Here, we take care of each other and trade with each other for what we need. Everyone has a talent or gift. Farmers, soldiers, entertainers, servers. We all have our place in the ward. You’ll find where you belong soon enough.”

“Trade?” I ask, not understanding what she means.

“Yeah.” Her eyes meet mine. “A soldier will trade his ability to protect others for anything he needs.” She waves around the store. “I get paid in protection and food for my services.”

Oh. It’s still a little confusing, but I don’t ask more questions.

My gaze turns to the various metal pens laid out on the counter.

She picks up one, then murmurs, “This might sting a little.”

My eyes squint as I follow the pen's tip when it comes toward the bridge of my nose.

I feel the cold tip and a slight pinch. The pen hums softly as she moves it between my eyes, then over the top of my eyebrow as if she's outlining each one.

"It's looking so much better already. A bit of color would look pretty. Do you want me to color them dark brown?"

Wanting to fit in with all the other people, I nod.

"I'm Dawn, by the way." She reaches over me for another pen.

"It's a pretty name," I say as my eyes flit to her. "I'm Jai."

The pen is cold and wet as it moves over my eyebrows, but after a couple of minutes, she wipes it off with a little square tissue. When I notice the dark liquid, I start doubting whether this was a good idea.

"Come have a look," Dawn says, gesturing at a full-length mirror.

I jump off the chair, and when I stand in front of the mirror, I notice I've lost weight, and my body looks firmer.

Then I see my face and my lips part.

Wow.

"It's like you worked magic," I whisper. "My eyes have never looked so green before."

Dawn lets out a chuckle. "A change is as good as a vacation."

I've never heard that saying, but I give her a grateful smile.
"Thank you."

It's surprising what such a small change can do to my face.

"The red around your eyebrows will fade quickly. Don't worry about it." She pats me on the shoulder. "Once you've settled in, you should come so I can do your eyeliner. We'll only do it with a pencil to see if you like it."

"I'll come visit again," I say as I walk toward the door. "It was nice meeting you, but I have to get going."

"You can pop in any time, honey. Be careful out there," she says, then her eyes turn serious. "Find a group of men who will protect you to keep the masses at bay. A girl looking as beautiful as you will draw attention."

A shiver creeps down my spine as I nod. "I will."

The door rings on my way out, and glancing up and down the street, worry blooms in my heart when there's no sign of Chance.

Shit. Where did he go?

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Chapter 2

Jai

Not able to find Chance or the girl he was with, I consider going back to Dawn.

I glance up and down the street again, my skin already crawling from all the men staring at me.

You should've stayed with Chance, no matter how uncomfortable it was watching him with Morgan.

Where did he go?

There's a stabbing ache in my chest.

He just left me. I was in the store. If he had bothered to look, he would've seen me there.

Still, this is on me. I shouldn't have left his side.

Even though I didn't always feel safe in the ecocity, there were enforcers to keep the men from taking what they wanted.

But there's no sign of any enforcers here in the main ward, and it makes a fear I've never felt before bloom in my heart.

Slowly, I start walking, sticking close to the street in case I have to run for my life. I glance around, hoping to find Chance or Raze, but there's no sign of either of them.

Then again, it's his fault. He practically forgot I existed after that woman threw herself at him.

There's a shop where people are getting their hair cut. I see my reflection in the window and hesitate for a moment before continuing to walk.

At another store where hair is being cut, I stop again and wonder if I should ask them to cut mine.

It's not like I have anything else to do. Right?

Yeah, you do. Look for Chance or Raze.

A man slows down as he walks toward me, and tilting his head, his eyes rove over my body.

Crap.

At first, I almost wrap my arms around my waist to make myself smaller, but then I remember my training. I fist my hands at my sides and lift my chin, then widening my footsteps, I hightail down the street.

"Why are you running, sweetheart?" he calls after me, a mocking chuckle following his words.

I only slow down when I'm sure I'm a safe distance away from the man.

Suddenly, I hear a crowd roar, "No mercy!" It's followed by the familiar sound of fists and painful groans.

I peek down an alley and see stands where people are sitting, pumping their arms in the air as they repeatedly shout, "No mercy."

Is it a training arena?

Curious, I walk down the alley and come up behind a stand. I move to the side of it and see an open space of grass and two men wrestling.

Standing next to the stand, the roar, and chants from the onlookers filling the air. The man on top of the other starts punching him until blood splatters over his face.

Geez. And I thought training with Idris, Kenzo, and Chance was bad.

Only when the poor guy is groaning in pain does the other one let go of him and rise to his feet.

His eyes sweep over the stands, then he says, “That’s how you drop an Insensate when it storms you. Any other takers for a quick demonstration?”

A demonstration?

The one standing helps the bleeding one up and pats his back. “Thanks, buddy.”

He glances over the stands, then jeers, “Come on. If you want to fight in the war, you at least have to have the guts to go up against me.”

Do I?

I was able to get free from Kenzo and Chance during training, but I’m not sure this will be the same.

Suddenly, the man’s eyes lock on my face, and I feel horribly exposed as if a teacher at the seminar asked me a question I don’t know the answer to.

“We have a new face,” he says, the corner of his mouth lifting. Then he gestures with a wave of a hand for me to come closer.

Everyone looks at me, and I resist the urge to inch backward until I can run out.

I take four steps forward, then glance over the spectators, relieved to see other women sitting amongst the men.

“Are you for the cause or an entertainer?” the trainer asks, sounding friendly enough.

I feel self-conscious talking in front of the crowd but answer, “I’m for the cause.”

“You’re from one of the outer wards, right?” he asks.

I nod, not sure if I should just leave.

But I don’t want these people to think I’m a coward, so I take a couple of steps closer.

“What’s your name?” he asks when I’m two arm lengths from him.

“Jai.”

A smile stretches widely across his face, but it feels more like a warning. My muscles tighten, my senses on high alert.

Crap. I should’ve stayed clear of this place.

“Jai?” he asks, sounding amused. “From Idris’ ward?”

When I nod, I wonder how he knows me.

Maybe he talked to Raze or Chance?

He turns his attention to the crowd, one eyebrow raised. “Is she any good?”

I follow his gaze and feel how every drop of blood in my body drains to my feet. Chance must’ve arrived after me because he’s between the stands, a thunderous expression on his face. Unfortunately, Morgan is right next to him.

The sight of them together sends a flare of irrational rage through me.

Chance doesn't even bother looking at me, and it stings.

*Why is he so different now that we're at the main ward?
Does he prefer Morgan over me?*

But he hasn't spoken about her, and I thought things were good between us.

"You'll have to find out for yourself," Chance mutters, not an ounce of emotion in his voice as he walks to the stand and takes a seat.

The guy turns back to me. "Well, Jai from Idris' ward, let's see how well you've been trained."

He takes a step forward, and I match mine by taking one back. He's easily a head shorter than Chance but just as muscled, which means he's much stronger than me.

The man steps to my left side, and I match him again, moving away from him.

I glance at Chance, and instead of finding his eyes on me, he's looking at Morgan as she leans against him, saying something.

Again there's a twisting ache in my chest.

"Oh, baby," the man croons deceptively. "I can dance with you all day long, but the people didn't come for that."

He lunges forward, his arms coming for me from both sides. I don't hesitate and crouch down before darting past him. Just as I think I'm in the clear, he grabs hold of my hair and yanks backward.

The sting from the strands being ripped from my skull has me reaching for my hair to try and free them from his fist.

Now I understand why everyone has short hair.

I stagger back, and too late, I see the fist coming for my face. Knuckles slam into my cheek, the blow hard and brutal, making spots dance in front of my eyes.

I fall to my butt and hardly notice as the guy bounces a step away, a taunting smirk on his stupid face.

For a moment, I'm stunned, my entire being shaken by the punch. It's the last thing I expected today.

Still, I shouldn't be surprised.

"Wow, I expected better, Chance," the idiot jeers. "If this is how you train the newbies, we're all fucked in the coming war."

I force myself to my feet and glare at the man, anger flooding my chest. It chases the shock of the punch away and makes adrenaline rush through my veins.

"Here's the thing," the man says mockingly, his eyes resting on me with a bored expression. "Women aren't meant for war, sweetheart. But if you're going to fight, you need to make sure you don't get hit."

He darts forward, swinging a fist at me, but this time, I lift my left arm and block the blow. It still hurts like hell when my forearm takes the brunt, but it's not as bad as the ache in my cheek.

"Good. You're a fast learner," he praises me, but it doesn't fill my chest with warmth, and instead, annoys me.

I don't want this man's approval.

He moves faster than before, but this time he doesn't go for my face. I gasp when his fist plunges into my side, and I fold into him.

“Time to go down, baby,” he growls.

My vision blurs, and I'm unable to breathe as my feet are swept from under me, and I slam hard into the grass.

Not wanting to be pinned down, I roll over onto my side as fast as possible, but he grabs my shoulders and forces me onto my back.

Shit. He's going to punch the ever-loving crap out of me.

Desperation pours through me, and I almost glance at Chance for help, but the man's knees dig firmly into my sides as he straddles me, forcing all my attention on him.

When the man leans forward, his dark blonde hair falls over his eyes. I twist under him like I did with Kenzo, but then I remember it didn't work.

When I try to slap him, his fingers wrap around my wrist and slams it down next to my head.

“You have pretty eyes. They haven't seen much of the world yet, have they?” My blood runs cold at the tone of his voice. “You're not fighting hard enough, babe. Should we see if I can find a way to bring out the warrior in you?” His voice drops seductively low, and his eyes roam over my face, neck, and chest.

No. He wouldn't. Not in front of all the people.

My attempts to free my wrist from his hold have him chuckling as he leans down until I can see every drop of sweat beading on his face.

“Honestly, I’d rather fuck you than fight.”

Like hell!

I forget about the people around us. I even forget about Chance. My whole focus is on the guy on top of me.

My head snaps to the left when he inches his fingers up my arm and toward my shoulder.

It’s the way he’s touching me. It’s too intimate.

“Stop!” I try to yank away, but he pins both my hands above my head with one of his. His fingers bite into mine, and I squirm, bucking my hips and trying to roll him off me.

“Come on,” someone shouts from the stands. “Finish her already.”

I lift my hips to throw him off. I twist and turn, but he doesn’t move. He lowers his face to within a few inches of mine, and I turn away so I don’t feel his breath on my lips.

“Get off!” I growl, panic skirting around the edges of my anger.

“Do you know what I miss most about the ward?” His free hand drops to my middle, and he bunches my shirt together. My heart rate spikes. “The initiation.” I hear him inhale my scent. “Did you spread your legs for Chance?”

I feel his hand cover my breast, his touch biting and gutwrenching, leaving a stain on my soul.

I react out of pure desperation and slam the side of my head against his forehead as hard as I can, and for a second, I see stars.

He lets go of my wrists, and I don't hesitate to hit every part of him I can find while I manage to roll him off me. I go with the motion until I'm straddling him, my fists pounding down on his face and neck.

I feel the skin over my knuckles split, but I'm too far gone to care and hardly feel the pain. Air explodes over my lips, and tears burn my eyes. I keep hitting him until I see the crimson color of his blood.

The pervert lets out a bark of laughter, and I yank away from him, breathless, anger spilling from me in waves as I climb to my feet. Staring down at the man, I kick his side with every ounce of strength I have.

My emotions spiral out of control as I roar, "I said don't fucking touch me!"

"See, a little motivation is all it took." He lifts himself by his elbow, wiping the blood from his broken lip. "You can fight, after all."

I want to hurt him even more, but my tears threatening to fall has me walking away from the bastard.

I ignore the roar of approval from the crowd and don't even glance at Chance as I rush toward the alley to get away from the impromptu training session from hell.

Chance did nothing. He just sat there with the girl and watched another man feel me up.

Chance said I belonged to him.

He said I wouldn't be shared with others.

He lied.

A sob builds in my chest and strains its way up my throat. I smother it with a trembling hand, refusing to cry where every man will see.

I was so excited about seeing the main ward, but all I want now is to go back to our boundary ward.

My first day here, and a man beats the hell out of me and feels me up.

I suck in deep breaths of air to try and calm down while heading to the main exit of the ward.

What the hell am I training for? Men, who only want me to spread my legs? No. This is not worth going to war for.

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Chapter 3

Jai

With my emotions raging in my chest and my body trembling, I struggle to fight back the tears.

I'm disappointed in Chance, not only because he let another man touch me but because he chose that Morgan woman over me. It hurts.

A lot.

I ignore everyone out on the street, focused on getting the hell out of this place.

“Jai,” Chance shouts behind me.

I ignore him and start to run, just wanting to get away from him and every other man on this damn planet.

“Jai!” He grabs my arm and yanks me back, my body slamming into his.

As I'm spun around, I don't think straight, and the flat of my hand connects with his jaw.

I lose my shit entirely. “You just sat there!”

Tears of anger spill over my cheeks as I lock eyes with him, my body shaking uncontrollably.

“What did you want me to do? Run over and scoop you up in my arms?” he roars, his anger matching mine. He steps closer, his features dark and threatening. “Should I have played the hero and made you look like an idiot in front of every single person we will be going to war with?”

I shake my head as I step backward to put some much-needed space between us.

“What am I fighting for?” I push a trembling hand through the wild mess that’s my stupid long hair. “This?” I gesture at the men on the street. “To be leered at, molested, and maybe one day, raped?”

I shake my head again, my emotions an explosive ball of fire in my chest.

“This is not freedom for my kind,” I hiss. “And I’m sure as hell not risking my life for a man.”

He must see that I’ve lost control because his features soften, and he reaches for me.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” I scream, stepping out of his reach, and far from done, I continue to rage, “Everything you’ve said to me was a lie.”

He glares at me with warning, and as his lips part, I mimic him, “You belong to me, Jai.” I let out a bitter chuckle. “I’ll kill any man who touches you.” Poking my finger at his chest, I hiss, “You left me alone in this place for the first woman who threw herself at you.” My tears stream faster.

Chance takes hold of my hand to stop me from poking at him again and drags me around the corner of a building where it's private. Turning a dark look on me, he yanks me right against his chest.

"Let go," I hiss, my anger turning hysterical.

My breaths burst over my lips, my heart thundering in my chest. My mind is a swirling mess of uncontrollable emotions.

Chance tightens his hold on me, his arms steel bands around me.

I start to gasp for air, my traitorous heart desperate to submit to this man so he can comfort me.

"I didn't leave you alone in this place," he says, his tone calm. "When I wanted to introduce you to Morgan, you were gone. Where did you go? I told you to stay by my side."

"Does it matter?" I spit at him as I manage to press my hand to his chest and push back enough to see his face. Wanting to hurt him as much as he hurt me, I sneer, "After all, I don't belong to you."

"Jesus, woman." He clenches his teeth, the muscle in his cheek jumping. "I said hello to an old friend."

"Next time I see Kenzo, I'll wrap myself around him and kiss him if that's how friends are greeted."

I strike a nerve because Chance shoves me against a wall, his entire body crowding mine. With his face not even an inch from mine, rage makes his eyes dark around the irises.

"Stop," he orders, his voice nothing but thunder. "Calm the fuck down."

I don't break eye contact, refusing to be the first to look away.

"Calm down," he orders again, his brute strength pushing against my very soul.

A tense minute builds between us until I lose the battle against my stupid heart and submit to the dominance pouring from him.

Chance's eyes lower to my cheek, and slowly, as if he's afraid I'll run, he lifts his hand and brushes his fingers over the bruised skin.

The tender touch soothes me in a way that should terrify me. The man has way too much power over me.

"You kicked his ass," he surprises me with a compliment.

I want to turn my face away from him, but needing the comfort, I lean into his touch. My anger fizzles out until all that's left is an empty feeling.

"I'm proud of you," he whispers, his tone gentle, and it makes tears well in my eyes again.

"It doesn't feel like I won," I admit, lowering my gaze from his.

"Why?"

I shake my head but say, "He touched me in an intimate way."

Sure, Kenzo touched me during training, but this was different. That man was groping my breast.

"Intimate way?" Chance's voice is strained above my head.

“Yeah. Everybody saw how he groped me, and no one did anything.” There’s a fresh wave of anger and hurt in my chest. “At least in the ecocity, the enforcers would’ve stopped him.”

Chance takes hold of my chin and forces me to meet his eyes. “What do you mean he groped you?”

I hate the words I have to force over my lips. “He pushed his hand under my shirt and grabbed my breast. It was right before I slammed my head against his to get him off me.” I pull my chin free from Chance’s grasp. “You were probably too busy paying attention to Morgan to notice.”

“Motherfucker,” Chance growls, and the next second he stalks away from me.

Exhausted from the unpleasant experience, I follow after him until I notice he’s heading back toward the arena.

“Chance?” I call out, but he ignores me.

I jog to catch up, and as we rush through the alley, I try to get his attention again. “Chance, what are you doing?”

I really didn’t want to come back here.

The creep notices Chance and gives him a cocky grin, but it gets wiped right off his face by Chance’s fist.

I freeze, my eyes wide as Chance roars, “You fucking touched my woman, Warrick” Chance gets right in the man’s face. I’ve never seen him so angry before, and it scares me.

Warrick. So this is the man Chance challenged for leadership.

Warrick lets out an amused chuckle. “I was hoping to teach your brother a lesson, but seeing as he’s DNA bait, what better way to get back at you than through your newbie.” He shoves at Chance’s chest but doesn’t manage to make him step back.

“You took my leadership position, and I’m stuck here giving demonstrations.” Warrick lets out a disgusted sound. “Besides, I hardly got in a feel. You need to send out a search party to find a set of breasts on that—”

Chance’s fist slams hard into Warrick before he can finish what he’s saying about me. Warrick staggers back, only a step, then Chance grabs the front of the creep’s shirt, his fist slamming into Warrick’s face with brutal force.

Holy crap.

I can’t find it in my heart to worry about Warrick as Chance makes him bleed before letting the man slump to the grass, knocked out cold.

“Fucker.” Chance spits on the unconscious man, then he turns around and stalks toward me. He grabs hold of my bicep, and I’m forced to jog to keep up with him as we leave the arena, cheers breaking out from the stunned crowd.

I have to admit. That’s the first time violence didn’t bother me. I actually liked seeing the idiot getting his butt kicked by my man.

Chapter 4

Jai

I'm out of breath by the time Chance drags me behind a building and shoves me up against the wall. Before I can catch my bearings, he grabs me by my butt and lifts me against his body, his mouth crushing my lips.

I quickly wrap my legs around his waist, the same way Morgan did, but I don't get to think about her as he yanks my shirt up, and his mouth latches onto my breast.

He doesn't know which breast Warrick groped, so he pays detailed attention to both until he loses control. He drops me to my feet, and in the beat of a heart, he shoves my jeans down my legs. He only unzips his pants and pushes them down enough to free his cock.

I'm spun around and shoved up against the wall again. As I groan from the force he's using on me, his hard length tears into me. I can't keep the cry back as he fills me with a single, painful thrust.

My soul. This is intense.

"Mine," Chance growls, then his mouth rains kisses over the side of my neck. His teeth nip, and his tongue lashes at my skin while he pounds into me like a possessed man.

I don't have it in me to worry about us having sex out in public, because Chance's hand grips my chin, forcing me to look at him. His clear blue eyes burn into mine as he keeps the relentless pace of thrusting mercilessly into me.

"You're fucking mine, Jasper."

"I am," I breathe the words he wants to hear. "Yours." Pleasure snakes around all my muscles, tensing my body.

With an almost painful thrust, Chance forces my pleasure to seize my body with mindblowing convulsions. His palm covers my mouth as I cry out from the intense ecstasy.

When he buries himself to the hilt inside me, finding his own release, he hisses, "Christ, little one. You own me."

Stuck between Chance's hard body and a brick wall, I'm glad for the support because my legs can't keep me standing right now.

We gasp for air, then Chance peels me away from the wall and plasters my back to his chest. He grips my breasts in his hands, his fingers biting into my skin.

His voice is low and deadly. "Next time a man touches what's mine, you don't stop until you've killed him."

I nod, even though I don't think I have that kind of strength.

Chance lets go of me, and as he tucks his cock back into his pants, I quickly pull up my jeans. We straighten our clothes, and I glance around to make sure no one saw us.

Lifting a hand, Chance wraps his fingers around the back of my neck and tugs me against his chest. His other arm wraps tightly around me, then he asks, “Feel better?”

I take a deep breath of his manly scent before nodding. “Yeah. You?”

“I can’t promise I won’t kill the fucker next time I see him,” he grumbles.

He holds me for a moment longer, his palm brushing gently over the back of my head. When he presses a kiss on my hair, my heart fills with warmth.

“You’re the only woman for me, little one,” he whispers, his voice hoarse and filled with an emotion I haven’t heard before. It makes me feel safe, his arms the only place that’s home to me.

“Who’s Morgan?” I ask, needing to know what she means to Chance.

“Just a friend from my past.”

I don’t like the answer and pull back so I can meet his eyes. “What kind of friend?”

He shakes his head. “It’s in my past, Jai. Rehashing it won’t do us any good.”

The bitter feeling curls around my heart. “Have you had sex with her?”

Did you kiss her the way you kiss me? Did you hold her and make promises that she belongs to you?

Even though I need to hear the answer, I don’t want him to say the words.

He lets out a sigh, his fingers wrapping around mine. “Morgan shares her bed with any of the winners in the arena.”

I start to nod, the bitterness coating the back of my tongue.

Chance leans down to catch my eyes. “But she means nothing to me.”

Still, he was inside her. She saw him naked and felt his kisses.

Staring at Chance, I know I shouldn't get upset. He's lived ten years as a deviant and had urges and needs.

I take in his strong jaw, the dark bristles, his firm lips, and the pure blue of his eyes. He's attractive, and of course, he'd be in demand with women.

“Were there others?” I know it sounds insane, but I hope he says yes. I don't want Morgan to be the only one he's slept with in the past decade. That would make her special.

Chance stares at me for so long, I doubt whether he'll answer me. Then he nods. “There are three.”

The corner of my mouth lifts from the relief washing over me.

He frowns at my reaction. “You're not upset?”

I shake my head. “Three means Morgan wasn't special.”

He lets out a relieved breath, then tugs me back into his arms. I feel his mouth by my ear. “You're the only special woman in my life.”

I wrap my arms around his waist, pressing my face against his shirt. “Mine,” I whisper, feeling better now that we've talked about the problems.

“That’s right, little one.”

He pulls back and presses a soft kiss to my lips, then he takes hold of my hand and leads me back to the street.

This time I notice whenever a man looks at me and sees Chance’s fingers weaved tightly through mine, they immediately glance away.

“Do you know a lot of people here?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

I keep noticing how men lose interest in me when they see Chance and say, “I know you can fight, but how good are you?”

He lets out a chuckle. “I can hold my own.” He glances down at me. “Why?”

I gesture around us. “The men are no longer looking at me like I’m a fresh piece of meat. When they see you, they glance away.”

“Because they know I’ll kill them,” Chance grumbles.

I hate that this is the world I live in – where a man has to protect me. I’ll train hard so all the men will give me the same respect they give Chance.

A couple of blocks away from the arena, we walk into one of the larger buildings. It’s square with solar windows all around.

The entrance has two potted plants, a trashcan, and nothing else. We take a set of stairs down to an open space with three passages.

I admit, after the initial awe of seeing the main ward, I feel a little disappointed. So far, the only good thing is Dawn's store. I'll definitely visit her again.

Chance leads me down the passage on the right, and when I don't notice any vertical farms or animals, I ask, "Don't they have animals and vegetables here?"

"They don't farm indoors like the outer wards. The farmlands run along the edge of the dam.

I notice a blue light coming from the wall, and when we get closer, I realize there's a huge window, giving a clear view to the inside of a pool. I can see people swimming past the window and stare because it's not something I've seen before.

"How do you get to the pool?" I ask.

Not that I'll get into the water, because I never learned how to swim. Just the thought of water over my head is enough to make my chest close up. It's the same as being stuck in small spaces.

"It's behind the building. There's a park where people gather to socialize."

My eyes flit to Chance's face. "Did you make the park?"

"No."

Up ahead, there's only one big archway, and inside there are mats lined against the wall. Each mat has a blanket and pillow.

"This is where we sleep," Chance says. "Wherever you find a spot."

"Like the rebels?"

“Yeah, pretty much. Some people sleep outside, though.” His eyes touch on mine. “If they want privacy.”

I nod and follow him down a different passage. A couple of steps farther, there’s another big archway.

“This is the bathroom,” Chance says. “It’s better to use it at dawn or late at night, or else the place is packed with people.”

I nod and follow Chance inside. After relieving my bladder, I use the basin to rinse my face and wash my hands.

The bruise on my cheek is already turning purple, and I let out a disgruntled huff at the sight.

My right hand’s knuckles are worse off, though. Each one is bruised, and the skin between my pointer finger and middle one has split open.

“Let me look at your hand,” Chance suddenly says as he takes a first aid kit from a row of shelves on the other side of the huge bathroom. There are easily fifteen stalls to shower and the same amount of toilets.

As Chance walks to me, three men come into the bathroom. They give Chance a chin lift and only stare at me before they each disappear into a stall.

Chance takes hold of my right hand and dabs some balm onto the split skin. “No pain?”

I shake my head. “Just tender.”

The corner of his mouth lifts in a hot smirk. “I’m glad to see you’re using what I taught you.”

I can’t stop the smile from forming on my face. “I have a good teacher.”

When he's done taking care of my hand, he checks my cheek before kissing the bruise. "I'm sorry you had such a rough first day at the main ward."

I just shrug. "I met a friendly woman. Dawn. At least, there's that."

A mischievous spark flashes in his eyes. "And I made you come on my cock."

My cheeks flush, my eyes darting to the occupied stalls.

Chance doesn't care who hears as he says, "This war better happen quickly because soon my child will be growing inside you."

Yeah, it's inevitable unless I'm unable to bear children. Seeing as we need to rebuild the population, there's no such thing as contraception.

Chance tilts his head and frames my cheeks with his palms. "You have nothing to say on the matter?"

My eyes search his, then I mention one of the worries I have. "Where will we raise the child?"

"*Our* child," he corrects me, "will be raised wherever we choose to settle."

I don't want to live in the wards or the ecocity. I don't want my son to think every woman is only there for one purpose, and I don't want my daughter being only good to breed.

Chance presses a kiss to my lips, then says, "Let's worry about the future when it happens. We have a war to get through first."

I nod, glad we're moving off the topic.

I'm barely used to this new life and all the dangers it holds. I don't have it in me to worry about children, because I'm trying to figure out who I am and where I belong.

"I'm going to shower," Chance says.

I nod and glance at the exit. "Is it okay if I go to the park?"

"Sure." He gives me another kiss. "Don't go too far, though. I don't like to worry."

"I won't." I smile, my heart beating lighter now that everything is good between Chance and me.

"If any of the men give you shit, just tell them you belong to me," he adds.

"Will that be enough to keep them at a distance?"

He nods. "It's worked for Raze."

"And they don't have a problem with you claiming two women?"

One of the men comes out of a stall, chuckling. As he rinses his hands, he mutters, "Unless one of us has a death wish, we let Chance have what he wants." The man looks at me as he shakes the water off his hands. "Everyone knows about what happened to Raze, so we keep an eye out for her."

I'm glad to hear that. I was worried about Raze.

"Raze can hold her own," Chance says, not commenting on what the man said about him.

As the two of them start talking about training season being over, I hug Chance and leave the bathroom to explore the park that's situated behind the building.

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Chapter 5

Jai

The park next to the pool is comprised of a big lawn with trees lining the one side. Fallen tree stumps form a crooked circle around a piece of ground where a fire is burning.

I glance at the people sitting around the fire. A man plays a guitar, and for a moment, I watch him before my attention is pulled away by a sharp shriek from a woman.

Water splashes from the pool onto the grass, and a man roars with laughter as he carries a struggling half-naked woman and throws her into the pool.

Her scream is swallowed by the water, and a moment later, her head pops through the surface, laughter bubbling over her lips.

It feels peaceful and fun out here, and I search for a place to sit.

“You can pack quite a punch for such a little thing,” a woman says behind me. I turn around, and seeing Morgan, my muscles tense.

Her brown eyes sweep over me. “Chance tells me Kenzo trained you at first.”

When I don't say anything, she continues, “Kenzo is a sweetheart. Why did you swap leaders?”

She's beautiful. Her shirt doesn't have any sleeves or straps, the material clinging to her chest as if it has been made to fit her. It's a glimmering, golden fabric that draws your eyes to the curve of her breasts.

I can't wear something like that. Like Warrick said, you need a search party to find my breasts.

I cross my arms over my chest as I reply, "Chance chose me."

It feels good to say it.

"You could've asked Kenzo to keep you. Didn't Chance tell you that?"

What is she up to?

Not wanting another fight on my first day here, I opt for the saver answer. "I'm happy with Chance."

"I'm sure you are. He was good to me too."

I frown, an uneasy feeling settling in my stomach. "What does that mean?"

"He really goes *above and beyond* to teach you the right way."

Oh, woman. I'm not above slapping you.

"What are you trying to say?" I snap. I've passed hate and gone straight to loathing this girl.

She smirks at me. "Enjoy him while you can. Newbie season only lasts so long, then he'll come back to me."

I watch her walk away, hips swaying, and I wish they would sway her right off her damn feet.

I slump down on a nearby log and stare at the dancing flames.

Was Morgan just trying to get under my skin, or is there truth to what she said?

You don't know her. Don't feed into her words.

Chance has proven himself to you. Things are good between you, so don't let another woman ruin it.

Someone sits down next to me, and I glance up to see it's Chance. His eyes drift over my face. "You okay?"

I nod but needing time alone, I stand up. "Everything's fine. I'm going to visit some of the stores. I'll see you later."

"Don't wander too far," he calls after me.

Minutes later, I find myself standing outside Dawn's store. She's the only other person I know here.

Well, Raze is here as well, but she's vanished.

Dawn opens the door, giving me a friendly smile. "Why are you standing outside? Come in." Her smile wavers when she sees the bruise on my cheek. "Rough afternoon?"

"Yeah, you could say that." I grin because there's just something about Dawn that makes me feel better. "You don't know where I can get new clothes? Maybe a haircut and a new personality while I'm at it?"

She lets out a chuckle as she grabs a bag, then wags her eyebrows at me. "I'm always available to help with a makeover. And you, honey," she throws her arm around my shoulders and pushes me toward the door, "are in desperate need of some tender, loving care."

I won't argue with that.

As we walk down the street, she asks, "So what happened?"

I shrug, letting out a tired breath. "An impromptu training session with a man named Warrick."

Dawn pulls a disgusted face. "He's bad news."

"Yeah, I figured as much." A smile curves my lips. "But I won the fight."

Her eyebrow lifts, and she stops to stare at me. "You kicked Warrick's ass?"

I nod, pride filling my chest. I show her my bruised knuckles.

Dawn smiles at me, even looking proud. "That's my girl." She high-fives me. "This calls for a celebration after we're done with your makeover."

We cross the street and enter a store filled with all kinds of clothes. I walk over to the shimmery ones.

"Gerald!" Dawn shouts.

I glance over my shoulder as a short man comes out of the back. He walks funny as if he's trying to imitate a girl, and when he talks, I can't keep my grin back.

"Dawnie, babelicious!" They hug then his eyes lock on me. "Oooh, what do we have here?" He looks me over from head to toe. "Girl, you're hurting my eyes. Mama-Gerald's gonna fix you right on up." He snaps his fingers in the air, from side to side.

Laughter bursts from me. I've never met anyone like Gerald and instantly like him.

Minutes later, Gerald slaps my hand for the fifth time as I reach for another shimmery top.

“Na-a. I said no. There's no way you're leaving my store looking like a disco ball.”

I have no idea what a disco ball is, but I can't stop smiling. My cheeks hurt, my worries from earlier forgotten.

Dawn's sitting on the counter watching us. She points at a row of black clothes, which makes me scowl and shake my head.

“If you're gonna be fighting, then you need something simple, but it must scream, look at me, I'm fucking hot,” Gerald says as he searches through the clothes. “Catch my drift?”

I nod and grin, feeling relaxed.

He takes a black top down and shoves it in my hands. I let out a sigh but head off to the dressing room to try it on.

The top fits so tight it gives me a cleavage I didn't even know I had. The fabric moves when I move, and it's super comfortable. Thin straps cross over my shoulders and then across my back, leaving most of my back exposed.

One thing's for sure, I won't get hot wearing this. My shoulders and back feel too exposed, but I shove the feeling deep down.

Without any warning, Gerald rips the curtain open. His eyes lock on my chest, then he gives me a pleased smile.

“See, it says you’re gonna kick ass before kissing ‘em all better afterward.”

“Uhm...” I scrunch my nose. “I’m not so sure I want it to say that.”

I tug at the top, but he slaps my hand away.

“Stop fidgeting. Now for pants.”

He disappears, only to pop back in a couple of seconds later. He throws a pair of charcoal-colored pants at me. Placing a hand on his hip, he stares at me with a raised eyebrow.

“What?” I ask.

“Come on. I don’t have all day. You have nothing I haven’t seen before, and I don’t swing that way.”

My cheeks warm as I shimmy out of my jeans.

Gerald squeals and covers his eyes.

I freeze.

“Oh, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. You’ll send a man running if he sees those panties. Where on Earth did you get those rags?” Before I can answer him, he slaps the curtain out of his way and rushes back to the front of the store.

I stand holding up my jeans, so they cover my underwear, and seconds later, Gerald returns with a slip of fabric that can’t possibly cover all of my private parts. My cheeks burn bright.

It’s black and see-through, not cream and plain like the ones I’m wearing now.

Gerald shoves the fabric at me, then gives me privacy as he steps out of the cubicle.

With a sigh, I drag the flimsy fabric up my legs. The thing doesn't even cover my butt cheeks. I quickly pull on the pants, then look at my reflection in the mirror.

The pants sit tight, and just like the top, the fabric moves when I move. There are patches torn out on the side of each pant leg, ten holes from my ankles to my hip, to be exact.

Even though I'm showing a lot of skin, the outfit boosts my confidence.

Gerald yanks the curtain back, and I twirl for him, making him grin like a proud mother.

"That's better, but you still need a lot of work." My grin fades.

Out front, Dawn smiles brightly when she sees me. "Hello, hot mamma. You look amazing."

Gerald hands me a pair of socks and boots. I sit down on the floor and put them on. When I stand up, I smile so wide it hurts. The boots are much more comfortable than the sneakers.

And honestly, I feel like a powerful woman in the outfit.

"Come on," Dawn's already walking to the door. "Let's head over to Big Joe so he can do something about your hair."

Gerald kisses me on each cheek. "I'll see y'all at dinner."

"Thank you so much." I resist the urge to hug him before I follow Dawn out of the clothing store.

When we walk into one of the hairdressers, Dawn says, "Honey, I brought you someone. This is Jai."

Big Joe, who's as short as Gerald, stares at my hair. "How fond are you of your hair?"

My stomach bunches into a tight knot because I've never had short hair. "Not too fond."

"Good, 'cause that shit has to go." He points to a chair. "Sit."

I glance at Dawn, who reassures me with a nod.

When I sit down, Big Joe comes to stand behind me. He lifts my hair and inspects it. "You have a pretty little neck you're hiding."

"Thank you," I whisper, feeling a little out of place because I don't know what to make of Big Joe.

The chair tips back, and I pinch my eyes shut as he washes my hair. After he squeezes most of the water out, he picks up a pair of scissors and a comb and starts cutting big chunks of my hair.

Oh crap. I hope I won't look stupid once he's done.

Feeling anxious, I close my eyes and try not to cringe whenever I hear a snip.

After a while, Big Joe chuckles, "You can open your eyes."

The first thing I see is all my hair lying on my lap and scattered over the floor.

Taking a deep breath, I lift my eyes to the mirror, and then my jaw drops.

Holy. Shit.

My hair looks darker, the strands wisping outward in all directions.

It's a beautiful mess.

Kinda like me.

A slow smile spreads over my face. "Gosh. I love it."

"I know you do. No one has ever left here unhappy," he says, smiling at me in the mirror.

Dawn moves closer, a proud smile on her face. "You look beautiful, Jai."

"Thank you," I murmur, feeling a little emotional.

Dawn hugs Big Joe, then says, "There's one more thing missing." She digs in her bag, pulling out a black pencil. "This is eyeliner, sweetie," she explains. "It will come off when you wash your face."

"Okay."

Dawn leans over me and moves the pencil around my eyes in quick strokes.

It doesn't take long before she pulls away. "There you go, all beautified."

My eyes find my reflection in the mirror, and slipping off the chair, I look at my complete transformation.

My eyes look bigger and no longer as innocent as they used to. Every curve of my body is accentuated by the outfit, and my hair feels and looks amazing.

I look like one of them now. A deviant.

Chapter 6

Jai

“It’s almost dinner time,” Dawn says. “Let’s go.”

“Thank you, Big Joe.” I give him a wave and follow Dawn out of the store.

When I step out onto the sidewalk and notice the sun is setting, I realize the time. “Crap.”

Dawn frowns at me. “What?”

“It’s late. Chance told me not to stay away too long.”

“Chance?” she asks, her eyes widening.

“My... trainer.” I don’t know what else to call him because he’s not my husband.

“You’re being trained by Chance?” Dawn looks uneasy. “From Idris’ ward?”

When I nod, she lets out a groan. “Shit. I was only expecting them next week.”

“Idris?” I ask. When she nods, I say, “He’s coming next week. Chance, Raze, and I left the ward early.”

Dawn lets out a relieved sigh, which has me frowning. “Why are you worried about Idris?”

She shakes her head, and taking my hand, she tugs me toward a big building where people gather around the entrance.

“It’s not so much that I’m worried,” she explains. “I have a thing for the asshole.” She rolls her eyes. “Don’t ask me why.”

“A thing?”

Dawn lets out a heavy breath. “I love him.”

“Like you want to marry him?” I ask for clarification.

She nods. “Yeah, but he’s married to his job and only sees me as an entertainer.”

I’ve only known Dawn for a couple of hours, and she’s so much more than an entertainer. “Idris is a monster. You deserve so much better than him.”

Dawn nods. “Try telling my heart that.”

Their dining hall is enormous. It’s already half-packed with people, and as I glance over the crowds, I don’t see Chance.

My eyes land on Warrick, though. He smiles at me, but I ignore him, looking away.

I take a seat at an empty bench with Dawn. Gerald soon joins us, a wide smile on his face. “Damn, babelicious. You look drop-dead gorgeous.”

I beam from the praise. “Thank you.”

Two more people join our table, but they don’t introduce themselves.

A minute later, Dawn says, “Come on. Let’s get food before the line gets too long.”

I follow Dawn and Gerald and grab a tray before we join the back of the line.

Gerald keeps smiling at me and touching my hair. “We performed a miracle.”

“We sure did,” Dawn agrees.

“Looking good, Jai,” Warrick says as he falls in line behind me.

I ignore him and keep my attention on Dawn and Gerald.

“Aww, come on,” he taunts. “No hard feelings. A fight is a fight.”

Dawn reaches for my arm, giving it a squeeze.

Warrick moves closer to my back, then I feel his fingers brush over my neck. Swinging around, I shove him away from me. “Don’t touch me, asshole.” I like the new word I learned from Dawn. It fits Warrick.

“Chance is Jai’s trainer,” Dawn says. “It doesn’t look like your face can handle another beating.”

Warrick shrugs. “No pain, no gain.”

“Oh, shit-a-brick,” Gerald whisper-shrieks.

Warrick is shoved so hard he falls on his butt, and a hand clamps around my arm. I’m yanked out of the line, and my eyes fly to Chance’s face. Seeing how angry he is, I quickly drop the tray and let him drag me out of the dining hall.

We're quiet as we head to the park, and only when he's pulled me into the lining of trees does he let go of my arm.

He takes a couple of steps away, then turns to look at me with so much rage I'm actually scared.

His eyes drift over my hair, face, and the outfit, then he shakes his head. "Jesus. Fucking. Christ."

"Chance—" With a thunderous look, he silences me.

"Where the fuck were you?" he snaps.

"Out getting new clothes and a haircut."

"I can fucking see that," he growls. "You're here one day, Jasper." he breathes hard. "One fucking day, and you disappear on me twice."

"I'm sorry. I lost track of time," I try to explain.

Chance steps into my personal space. "Do you fucking understand that you're outnumbered ten thousand to one?"

"Yes." It's been ingrained into me since birth.

"How the fuck am I supposed to protect you if you don't listen to me?"

Realizing that he's not angry but beside himself from worrying over me, I feel like poop.

"I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"Damn right!" He takes a couple of deep breaths, then frames my face with his hands. Staring deep into my eyes, he admits, "I won't survive losing you, Jai. You're all I have. You're everything to me."

My lips part in shock. I knew I was special to him, but not that I was so important.

His features tighten as if he's in pain. "I love you. The only other person I truly care about is Ethan, and God only knows whether he's still alive."

Chance loves me. Those are words I've never even considered hearing.

Lifting my hand, I wrap my fingers around his wrist and turn my head to press a kiss to his palm. "Nothing happened to me. I'm okay."

He nods, then pulls me into his arms, holding me so tightly I struggle to breathe.

"I'm okay," I groan. "But I can't breathe."

He lets out a chuckle and pulls away from me. His eyes lock on my hair. "Why did you cut it all off? Why all the changes?"

"So I can fit in," I answer in a small voice, feeling a little insecure. "Actually, I did it for me," I try to explain. "It felt good."

Chance takes hold of my bare shoulders, and leaning down, he presses his forehead to mine. "You make me so fucking angry when you don't listen."

"I was in safe hands. You'll like Dawn and Gerald."

"You were lucky you met good people like them," he says, his tone calmer. "You can't trust everyone that walks up to you and smiles. Some will try and hurt you just because they can."

I think of Warrick and know Chance is right.

“I’m sorry. I’ll be more careful.”

He pulls back and stares at me again. “Jesus, I’m going to have to kill half the ward to keep them away from you.”

I’m not sure, but I think there’s a compliment in there somewhere. “So... I don’t look bad?”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “You look fucking hot, little one.”

A smile curves my lips.

“A new look, you say,” he murmurs as he stands back to take in all of me. “Fuck, the shirt makes your breasts look incredible.”

I feel a little self-conscious, a blush creeping up my neck.

“Are you happy with it?” he asks.

“Yes.”

Lifting a hand, he gestures for me to twirl.

Slowly, I turn in a circle, hearing Chance groan when he sees my exposed back.

I feel his fingers on my lower back, then they brush over the curve of my butt. “God help me. You’re going to give every man a hard-on.”

When I feel his breath on the back of my neck, I can’t breathe, my abdomen erupting in flutters. My nails dig into my palms, and I let out a moan.

His fingers trail up my spine and wrap around my throat to tip my head back. Goosebumps rush over my whole body when his teeth nip at my nape and shoulder.

“How do you expect me not to fuck you senseless while you look like this?” he groans, his voice hoarse with the same need pulsing in my veins.

He drops his other hand to my hip, then trails his fingers over the torn holes on the side of my pants. His touch is electric, making me tremble with excitement.

“We’re sleeping outside tonight,” he mutters before he takes my hand and starts to walk toward the park.

“What?” I gasp. “I thought you were going to fuck me.”

Chance shakes his head. “This is your punishment for making me worry.”

I pull a disgruntled face and shoot him a playful scowl.

Leaning into him, I say, “I love the boots. They’re comfortable.”

Chance glances down. “And practical.” He lets out a sigh. “I guess I should thank God that you met Dawn and Gerald. They’re good people.”

A grin stretches over my face. “I like them a lot.”

“Don’t get too attached, though,” he warns me.

I think it’s too late for that, but don’t say anything.

Chapter 7

Jai

After showering, I dress in one of my old outfits and head out of the building to look for Chance. He said he'd meet me in the park.

Just as I round the corner, I bump into someone and fall flat on my butt. "Crap. Sorry," I say.

A slender hand with long, red nails fills my vision. I take hold, and she pulls me to my feet. There's strength in her arm. I smile and look at her, then intense shock shudders through me.

"Well, I'll be damned," she chuckles. "I never thought the man would grow a pair and let you out."

Holy. Shit.

Still stunned out of my ever-loving mind, I whisper, "Mom?"

She looks like my mother, but then again, she doesn't. Her black hair is a little longer than mine, cut into a short bob style. Her features are harder, and all the warmth I remember is gone from her eyes.

“Once upon a time, I was a mother.” She shakes her head. “Now I’m Rachel. I see you’ve grown up...” Her eyes rake over me. “A little.” Her cold gaze locks on mine. “Who’s your trainer?”

“Huh?” After two years, that’s what she asks me? “Chance.”

Her eyebrow lifts a little. She must’ve visited Dawn, too, because they’re perfect.

What a stupid thought to have at this moment.

“The Daniels boy. Good.”

I realize I didn’t even know Chance’s last name. Damn, that’s bad and another shock to my system.

“I heard the other one got gunned down. You better get yourself in shape. No daughter of mine will be gunned down for DNA bait. You hear me?”

I nod, then swallow, then nod again, still trying to process the shock of seeing my mother after so long.

She called me her daughter.

The shock finally lifts enough for me to come to my senses. I shake my head at her as confusion and heartache bloom in my chest. “That’s it? After two years, that’s all you have to say to me?”

She shrugs. “It’s a tough world, Jasper. The sooner you learn that, the better.”

“Seriously!” My body starts to tremble, anger quickly replacing the confusion and hurt. “What happened to you?”

“I learned the only way to survive is to fight.” She pushes past me, but I grab her arm to stop her.

“I came here to find you.” My voice is strained.

“Good.” The corner of her mouth lifts a little, but it’s nothing like the smile I remember. “The drill zone is down the middle passage. I’ll see you there.”

When she walks away, I bend over and rest my hands on my knees, trying to breathe through the intense heartache, anger, and disappointment.

I found Mom, and it looked like she couldn’t care less that I’m here.

Jesus fucking Christ, as Chance would bluntly put it.

I gasp through another wave of sharp heartache and shake my head. I lean back against the wall and stare up at the stars, but they blur as the tears come.

What happened to her that all the warmth is gone from her?

I remember how she used to tell me bedtime stories and how she used to braid my hair. Her loving smiles. Her tender touches.

Every memory cuts like a knife, ripping sobs from me.

When I hear voices, I rush off into the shadows, finding a quiet place to process what just happened.

I couldn’t wait to see her again, and she looked at me like I was nothing to her.

Sobs wrack through me, and I cover my mouth as I crouch down.

Too much has happened today, and I don't want to think about it all. It will kill me.

After a couple of minutes, I manage to calm down and straighten up. I wipe the tears from my cheeks, doing my best to shove all the hurt and disappointment into the darkest corner of my heart.

I can't believe this just happened.

Don't think about it.

If she can cut me out of her life so easily, I'll do the same to her.

Another wave of unbearable loss hits, and I groan, quickly shoving it down.

Don't think about her.

Deep breaths.

I clear my throat and suck in deep breaths of air, then square my shoulders and walk toward the park so I can find Chance. More than ever, I need his arms around me.

A group of people are dancing near the pool to music I've never heard. It's loud, the beat fast and vibrating in the air.

She forgot about me.

Dawn squeals behind me, and I brace myself. She throws her arms around my neck in a sloppy hug, and I get a whiff of a sharp smell on her breath.

"My new honey-girl. Come dance with me." She stumbles, and in a daze, I help her walk to the dancing crowd.

“Awesomeness,” Gerald shrieks like a girl, then he shoves a bottle into my hand. “Drink up.”

Dawn forces the bottle to my mouth, and I end up taking a huge gulp. I cough and push her hand away after the second gulp, the bitter liquid burning down my throat.

“How freaking hot was it when Chance dragged you away?” She slurs and uses her hand to fan her face. “What I’d give for Idris to do that to me.”

People bump and grind against us, and I push a man away from me.

“There’s your lover-boy,” Dawn laughs, throwing her arms in the air and jumping up and down as she dances.

I search through the crowd, and when my eyes lock with Chance’s, my barely controlled emotions burst from me. My face crumbles, and I start to sob.

Concern instantly tightens his features until it looks like he could kill someone with his bare hands. He shoves people out of his way to get to where I’m standing next to the pool.

As I take a step toward him, someone bumps so hard into me I stagger to the side. The ground disappears beneath my feet, and a second later, water closes over my head.

The water is like a cold blanket. It swallows me whole and mutes the sounds, snatching the air from my lungs.

My arms flail, and I kick at nothing. The water keeps swallowing me, dragging me down. It presses on my chest, forcing the precious air I have left to leave my lungs.

Everything becomes eerily calm as I watch the bubbles float past my face.

She didn't care.

She forgot me.

Instinct kicks in, forcing me to take a breath. Water burns down my windpipe and fills my lungs until they're scorching infernos.

It's better this way.

I was never meant for this world.

I convulse twice, my eyes drift closed, and darkness closes in around me.

Suddenly, an arm wraps around me, and I'm yanked up. My body keeps jerking upward, but before I can breach the surface, I lose consciousness.

When I come to, I see the stars twinkling high above me.

"Jasper!" Chance shouts, panic lacing his voice. "Don't leave me." His fists slam hard against my chest. "Come on, little one." There's another blow to my ribs. "Don't fucking die."

My head feels heavy.

"Breathe, Jasper!" Chance shouts at me. He shoves hard at my chest again, and a wave of nausea hits.

Suddenly, it feels like I'm drowning again, and I start to cough and vomit uncontrollably.

Chance rolls me onto my side as the water spurts from my nose and mouth.

“Up, so it can all come out,” he says, desperation in his voice as he forces me to sit up while hitting my back so hard, I’m sure he’s about to break my ribs.

Shivers wrack my body.

Chance grabs hold of my face and forces me to look at him. “Breathe.”

I suck in a strangled breath, the air burning down my windpipe, but then I start to cough again, vomiting more water.

I try to clear my throat a few times to get rid of the scratchiness. The shivering is only getting worse, but at least I manage to take a couple of breaths.

“Fuck,” Chance curses, holding me tightly to his chest. It’s only for a moment before he lets go of me and darts to his feet.

I’m still recovering, my mind hazy as I watch him storm Warrick.

“It was a joke,” Warrick tries to explain. He holds his hands up. “Wait. Chance!”

My head clears as Chance tackles Warrick to the grass and starts slamming his fist into his face.

“Don’t interfere,” Dawn says as she wraps her arms around me.

I have zero strength to care.

Warrick manages to get a couple of punches in, but Chance doesn’t seem to feel the blows. He wraps his hands around Warrick’s neck, then growls. “You could’ve fucking killed her!”

“I’m... sor-ry,” Warrick chokes.

“Too late for an apology,” Chance roars, then I hear the sickening sound of Warrick’s neck snapping like it’s nothing more than a twig.

Jesus.

My mind cuts out as I watch Chance kill Warrick, and I lean limply against Dawn.

“He had it coming,” Dawn whispers.

Chance just killed a man for me.

Chance rises to his feet, and the crown scurries out of his way as he stalks back to me. Crouching, he pushes his arms beneath my back and knees, lifting my body to his chest.

He presses his mouth to my forehead, and I feel how badly he’s trembling as he carries me away.

It all hits at once.

Morgan all over Chance.

The horrible fight with Warrick.

My mother.

Almost drowning.

Chance killing Warrick.

My lips part, and a strangled sob forces its way from me.

Chance keeps kissing my forehead as he carries me to the bathroom. He steps into a shower stall and opens the faucets. Once warm water is rushing over us, he sets me down on the tiles and jogs out of the bathroom.

Moments later, he returns with our bag and shuts the door behind him.

I'm still sobbing uncontrollably as he undresses me. Once we're both naked, Chance sits down and pulls me onto his lap, cradling me against his bare chest while the water attempts to chase the chill from our bodies.

"It's okay," he says, his voice still hoarse. "I've got you." He kisses my forehead. "You're alive." A kiss to my trembling lips. "You're here."

He keeps peppering kisses all over my face, his arms steel bands around me.

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Chapter 8

Jai

It's been minutes since I've stopped crying, and neither of us has said a word.

Feeling totally out of it, I murmur, "I found out your last name is Daniels."

"Yeah." Chance reaches up and turns off the faucet.

He pulls me to my feet, and taking a towel from the bag, he starts to dry my body.

"I didn't know your last name until today." My voice is drained of all emotion, my mind sluggish.

"Is that why you were so upset?" he asks as he rubs the wooly fabric over my hair.

"No."

"Honestly, I thought you knew my last name."

I shake my head. "I didn't."

"Had I known, I would've told you sooner." His eyes lock on my chest. It's covered in bruises from when he gave me CPR. Gently, he brushes his fingertips over my skin. "Sorry. I panicked when I pulled you out, and you weren't breathing."

"It's okay," I assure him. "You saved my life. Again."

His eyes lock on mine. “And I’ll keep saving it to keep you with me.” Tilting his head, he asks, “Why did you start crying when you saw me?”

My chin starts to tremble, and I take a moment to breathe the blow of heartache away. “I saw my mom.”

His features tense, and he gives me a worried look. “I’m going to assume it didn’t go well.”

Nodding, I suck in a shuddering breath. “She was cold... like I meant nothing to her.”

Chance leans down and stares hard into my eyes. “You. Mean. Everything. To. Me.”

I nod again, swallowing the lump of heartache down. Face to face with the man who’s saved my life more times than I can count and who’s killed for me, I realize the world can burn down as long as I have him.

“I love you,” I whisper. “You mean everything to me, too.”

His eyes soften, and lifting his hands to frame my cheeks, he looks at me like I’m his reason for living. Slowly, he closes the distance between us and presses a tender kiss to my mouth.

Needing him more than ever, I deepen the kiss until he takes over. Gripping my butt, he lifts me against his muscled body, and I wrap my legs around his waist.

This time his hard length enters me slowly, a groan rumbling from his chest.

“Say it again,” he demands.

“I love you,” I breathe.

I'm pushed against the wall as he strokes his hardness in and out of me, the expression on his face filled with reverence.

"You and me," he says as he keeps filling me slowly, savoring every inch.

"Just us," I agree.

Chance was right. Caring about other people hurts. From now on, I'll focus only on him.



Neither of us is tired after the crazy day we've had.

Chance tugs one of his sweaters over my head, then shrugs our bag over his shoulder. Taking my hand, he pulls me out of the bathroom.

Instead of going to the sleeping quarters, we head out of the building.

Once we pass the lining of trees, I ask, "Where are we going?"

"Some place quiet," he murmurs.

We walk in silence for a couple of minutes, then he says, "I figure we can both do with some alone time."

I squeeze his hand and glance up at the stars that are shining brightly overhead. The sound of insects buzz around us.

"It's peaceful out here," I whisper.

"Yeah."

When we reach a hill, Chance finally stops. He drops the bag and nods at the ground. “You okay sleeping out here tonight?”

“Yes.” Being alone with Chance is something my soul desperately needs.

We sit down, and Chance lies back, using the bag as a pillow. He tugs me down until I’m lying beside him, my head resting on his chest.

“Chance Daniels,” I whisper, loving the sound of his name.

“Jasper Matthias,” he chuckles.

“It’s crazy how much has happened since I left the ecocity.”

“Yeah.” He’s quiet for a moment, then asks, “Do you regret leaving?”

Do I?

I miss Dad, but now that I know what’s really going on in the ecocity, I only have one answer. “No.” I clear my throat. “But I don’t like the wards either.”

“We’re just staying until the war is over.”

I turn my head and prop my chin on my palm so I can see his face in the moonlight. “Where will we go afterward?”

“Away.” Lifting his hand, he brushes his fingers through my short strands. “How do you feel about exploring the world?”

“I’ve always wondered if there’s more out there,” I admit. “It’s hard to believe we’re all that’s left of mankind.”

“Me too.”

My teeth worry my bottom lip. “But what if we find other people, and they’re worse?”

Chance moves his hand to the back of my neck, his thumb caressing the skin beneath my ear.

“I’ve thought about that too.” He takes a deep breath. “Maybe we should just find a place we can make our own. I know there’s a stretch of land north. It’s a four-hour walk from here.”

“Then we can come here for supplies,” I start to dream about our future with him.

He shakes his head. “We’ll plant our own vegetables and breed animals.”

The corner of my mouth lifts. “I’ll get attached to all the animals.”

Chance lets out a chuckle. “Yeah. Never thought I’d become a vegetarian.” His eyes meet mine, concern for me still in his irises. “How are you coping with everything that’s happened.”

The blow hits once again, and I press my face to his chest. “Too much has happened.”

“Look at me.” When I lift my head, he asks, “How do you feel about me killing Warrick?”

My eyes drift over his face, and all I see is the man who will do anything for me. “He had it coming,” I repeat Dawn’s words.

“When I pulled you out of the pool, and you weren’t breathing, I lost my mind.” He closes his eyes, raw pain rippling over his face. “Christ, I thought it hurt when the trackers got Ethan.” Shaking his head, a breath shudders from him. “It was nothing compared to thinking I lost you.”

Chance looks at me again, and there’s so much emotion on his face it makes a lump form in my throat.

“It’s like you were always meant to be mine.”

My lips curve up in a soft smile. “I feel that way, too. The night we met, it was easy to trust you. I knew you wouldn’t let me fall.”

“I never will,” he promises. “Just you and me.”

“And Raze,” I add.

Laughter bursts from him. “Yeah. And Raze.”

“Where is she?” I ask, wondering if she even knows what’s happened today.

“She’s somewhere out here.” His hand starts to move up and down my back. “Raze is a loner. We’ll see her at training.”

“Is it safe for her to be alone?”

“Yeah. I trained her well.”

Nodding, I rest my head on his chest again and stare at the stars.

After a couple of minutes of silence, I whisper, “Thank you, Chance.” I wrap my arm tightly around his waist. “Thank you for dragging me over those rooftops, for taking me off the nest, for training me.”

“You’re welcome.”

I let out a chuckle. “I’m not done yet.”

“My bad,” he laughs.

“Thank you for choosing me and keeping me alive.” I snuggle into his chest. “Thank you for loving me.”

A comfortable silence falls between us, and my mind turns back to everything that happened today.

I fought a man twice my size and won.

I met two good people who made me forget about the depressing stuff happening in this world.

I found my mother.

But most importantly, Chance and I grew much closer to each other. It feels like our bond is unbreakable after today.

I focus on the positives because the negatives are too traumatizing.

Tomorrow will be a new day, and with some luck, it will hopefully be better than today.

Now that it’s just the two of us, I decide to try and get some answers to all the questions I have. “Why do the emissaries send crusaders to the boundary if they plan to capture them? Why not just take the people once they reach the haven?”

Chance lets out a sigh. “It’s to keep up pretenses. When everyone sees the crusaders leave, there’s nothing to question.”

“Can I ask more questions?”

He chuckles. “Sure.”

I sit up and fold my knees beneath me. Resting my elbows on my knees, I look at Chance. “At first, I thought the trackers killed us, but they capture us, right?”

He nods, which has me continuing, “How? What do they shoot us with? Do you know what happens after a person is taken?”

Chance rests a hand on his chest. “They use actual bullets. They only need our DNA, but if a person survives the attack, I’ve heard they experiment on them, trying to remove the part that feels emotions. If the person is killed, they use the DNA to make a clone of them. Our fathers figured out a way to accelerate growth, so they’re able to make thousands, if not millions.”

A shiver shudders down my spine. “I can’t believe my dad’s a part of this. It’s insane.”

This time, Chance doesn’t say anything but just nods.

My heart shrinks, thinking Dad is basically killing people. In a matter of weeks, it feels like my parents failed me... like they’re gone, and I’ll never get them back.

Lowering my head, I try to process the intense loss.

“You have me,” Chance whispers.

I nod, choosing to focus on the strong man I’ve learned to love. I clear my throat, then ask the next question, “What are the people... the insensates like? Do they become emotionless robots? Can they still feel pain?”

Chance sits up and resting his forearms on his knees, he stares at the darkness around us. “The ones I’ve seen were like robots. There was zero emotion. None of them talked.” He shakes his head. “It’s like they were programmed to kill and only kill.” His eyes find mine. “But they die just the same as us. If you aim for the head, your chances of killing one of them are much higher. With a leg or chest wound, they still keep coming.”

“Holy crap,” I breathe. “How are we going to beat an army of robots?”

“We plan on taking down the building where your dad works. We’re hoping if there’s no one to give orders, the insensates will stand down.”

“And if they don’t?”

Chance shrugs. “Then we fight.”

“I need to learn how to shoot.” I dig in the bag and pull out a bottle of water. After taking a sip, I ask, “So we’re sneaking into the haven?”

He shakes his head. “That’s only a front. The real laboratories are situated a couple of blocks away from the haven, but a tunnel connects the two buildings.”

“How do you know all of this?”

“Ethan and your father leaked the information to us.”

Hope spills into my chest. “So my dad wants to stop what’s happening?”

“Yes. After my father was killed and I was sent out, he started reaching out to us.”

“How?”

“He’d sneak out to the rebels and leave messages with them.”

My eyes widen because I never thought Dad was so brave. It heals some of the heartache in my chest, and a proud smile curves my lips.

At least I still have Dad.

“Do you know why the emissaries are doing this? Why not just let the people live in peace?”

Chance shrugs again. “Fuck knows. I assume they want complete control over everyone. To create a world, they deem perfect.”

“That’s insane and selfish,” I mutter. I glance over the hill to the lining of trees. “Then again, things aren’t much better here.”

“How so?”

I let out a sigh. “Women are a minority species. In the ecocity, we’re controlled for breeding purposes, and out here, we live in fear of being raped. It’s a man’s world. We’re nothing more than possessions.”

And I don’t like it one bit.

“I’ll keep you safe,” Chance assures me.

Shaking my head, I meet his eyes. “It’s not just about me, Chance. What about the other women? Dawn. Raze. Valen. All the others don’t have someone watching their back twenty-four-seven.”

“It sucks, but there’s not much we can do about it. Not while men outrank women hundreds to one.”

I lift my chin, not willing to accept that. “That’s no reason. Honestly, women should be treated like the rare treasures they are.” I shake my head hard. “We should run the world.”

Chance tilts his head, his gaze searching mine. “For that to happen, all the women will have to stand together.”

I think over his words, then nod. “After the war, I’ll find a way to make that happen.”

“You plan on ruling the world?” he chuckles, but it doesn’t sound condescending.

“Not just me.” The corner of my mouth lifts. “All the women. I just want to make it a better place for us to live in.”

Chance’s eyes warm. “That’s a courageous idea.”

I roll my eyes at him. “I’m not courageous at all.”

Lifting a hand, he wraps his fingers around the back of my neck and tugs me closer. “You are. In some ways, you’re braver than me, little one.”

As his lips find mine, his words settle deep in my heart, giving me the strength I need to get through tomorrow and whatever comes after that.

Chapter 9

Jai

We return to the ward at the crack of dawn, and while Chance goes to talk with someone named Quinlan about Warrick's death, I head to the bathroom to relieve my bladder and wash my face.

Chance assured me he's not in trouble. There's nothing more important than saving a woman's life, so he won't be punished for the life he ended.

It also confirms what I'm thinking. Women are the most important thing next to food, water, and air. We should use it to our advantage and create a world that's safe for all of us. I just need to find a way of making it happen.

After I'm done freshening up, I decide to check out the drill zone. I don't want to slack on my training while we're here.

Spending alone time with Chance last night was amazing, but now it's time to return to reality. I need to work hard, because come hell or high water, I will become strong so people will respect me. I'm done being a punching bag and pushover.

Heading down the middle passage, I find the archway that opens to the drill zone. When I step inside, my lips part, and a gasp escapes me.

Damn, it's massive.

The pathway wrapping around the outside of the arena is broad, enough for a group of people to run at once. Getting to work, I jog slowly to warm my muscles while I take in my surroundings.

The floor in the middle of the arena is covered with obstacles. Lots of bags with balls spilling from them cover the one corner where cabinets line the wall. The weapons are probably in the cabinets.

As soon as Chance returns, I'm asking him to give me shooting lessons.

There are hand bars to swing from and tires to jump through, as well. I look at the wall-to-wall safety net and scowl because the outer ward didn't have that to stop our fall from the scaffolds.

Unfair, but at least I won't slam into the hard ground here.

Their grid is huge, and there's no doubt I'll break my neck if I fall from the top.

I run around the arena until my lungs are burning and my muscles are trembling, then I jog through the entrance at the bottom and stop at the stand.

So many buttons. With a grin, I press them all.

Ropes drop, bouncing in front of the grid. The scaffolds screech as they swing into place.

Holy. Shit.

I gape at the seven scaffolds, all hanging precariously from chains, zigzagging across the dome. Not a single scaffold lines up with the other, and wrecking balls swing hazardously between each scaffold.

Ugh. This is going to be difficult.

Some are lower than others, whereas others are slightly higher.

Just like rooftops.

Then I spot a ladder that reminds me of the one I had to climb with Chance the night I met him. Rungs are missing, and I realize it's the reason Chance knew what to do.

I jog toward the other entrance and up the pathway to get to the top, where I'll jump onto the first scaffold.

My eyes dart over the obstacle ahead. The scaffolds will still knock into each other if the wrecking balls don't get in the way. Either way, momentum is still going to be a problem.

Here goes nothing.

I sprint and leap into the air, stretching my arms wide. I soar for a second or two, and pulling my legs in, I land in a crouching position.

Yes!

This time there's no long hair falling in my face.

The scaffold starts to swing, and I dart forward. I have to jump to the left to reach the next scaffold. I land too close to the edge and scramble to the middle. Moving into a crouching position, my fingers pressing into the metal platform, I take a deep breath of air.

The wrecking ball comes barreling past between the scaffolds.

If that thing hits me, it's going to hurt like hell.

The next scaffold is to my right and lower. It's an easy jump, but there's no time to celebrate, because the next one is positioned higher.

I wait for the wrecking ball to swing past, then launch my body forward. I push off the platform with all my strength.

The few inches higher make a huge difference, and my shins slam into the edge. I manage to grab hold of the chain and pull myself up, dragging my lower body onto the scaffold just as the wrecking ball swings past.

That was too close for comfort. I have to do better.

As I move into a crouching position, a slow clap of hands sounds up from below.

Peeking over the side, I see my mother standing at the bottom. She's dressed in a tight-fitting black shirt and pants, looking like a soldier.

"You have to do better than that," she calls out as she walks up the pathway. "I'll make you a deal." She starts to jog toward the point where she can jump onto the first scaffold. "If I catch you, I can give you the beating I should've given you when you were little."

"What?" I gasp.

I was a good child. She told me so.

"If I don't, and you catch me, I'll let you call me mom."

Anger fills my chest like a destructive force. “You’re assuming I want to call you mother,” I spit the words at her.

Her mouth sets into a hard line, and as she speeds up, I focus my attention on the next scaffold, determined to catch her just so I can prove I’m better than her.

I jump from scaffold to scaffold until I reach the end, where I can use a rope to climb to the bottom. I push my body harder than I ever have as I run to the pathway and dart up it.

Reaching the top, I see her jumping to the fifth scaffold. My eyes dart to the wrecking balls, swinging between the platforms, and not thinking twice, I run for the last wrecking ball.

I don’t care if it’s cheating. I just want to catch her.

I launch myself off the pathway and stretch my body as far as possible. I hear my heart pounding in my ear.

One beat.

Two beats.

With my right hand, I manage to grab hold of the chain. Air rushes over my lips, then the rest of my body slams against the top of the ball.

Jesus.

Don’t let go.

You can do this.

I tighten my grip on the chain and pull myself up to stand on the steel ball.

My mother stops as the ball swings toward the platform she's on, then a grin spreads over her face, and I watch as she braces herself.

I jump, and a second later, my body slams into hers. The momentum takes us over the edge, and we fall to the net below.

Her arms lock around me, and she rolls us off the net, then we're dropping to the ground. My back takes the full brunt of the fall, and I groan from the ache shuddering through my body.

With no time to spare, I lock my right leg around hers and use the last of my strength to flip her over. I straddle her, and my fingers wrap around her throat.

Gasping for air, I glare down at the woman I loved more than life itself.

She lets out a breathless chuckle. "You certainly have my blood in your veins. Got the guts from my side, too."

"I'm nothing like you," I bite the words out through clenched teeth. Letting go of her with a shove, I climb to my feet.

My head spins, and dots explode in front of my eyes, but I blink them away.

Fixing her with a look that says exactly what I think of her, I say, "You're not my mother. You're nothing to me."

She sits up, rubbing her shoulder. "Then why did you work so hard to catch me?"

"Just to prove I'm better than you."

She climbs to her feet, her eyes locking with mine. “What did you expect to find, Jasper?” She opens her arms wide. “A loving mother?” A bitter chuckle ripples over her lips. “In this world? Do you think it was easy for me, being the wife of the man creating the insensates? They judged me because of his actions, and they will do the same to you as soon as they know who you are.” Her eyes soften for a split second, her mouth not pulling down at the sides. “Dig down deep and rip your heart out, my child. You don’t need it here. Feelings only hurt. They make you vulnerable.”

When she turns away from me, I grab hold of her arm.

“Why do you fight then, Rachel?” I refuse to call her mom. She doesn’t deserve that title.

“I didn’t say you can’t take revenge. I’m going back so I can rip their fucking hearts out for what they did to me.”

I stare at her and only then do I see the anger and heartache. The ecocity betrayed her. They ripped her away from us and tried to hunt her down like an animal.

She had to figure out everything on her own. She didn’t have Chance.

“So while you’re looking for your revenge, you’re going to ignore you have a daughter?” I shake my head at her. “We all have to deal with things we don’t like. I’ve been through hell, and not once did I lay the blame at your feet.” I scoff at her. “You’re a disappointment.”

During this training session, something shifted inside of me. The last of my innocence died, and in its place, a warrior was born.

With one last look at her, I turn around and walk away.

I'll change everything, so future generations of women don't have to endure the suffering my mother and I have.

Come hell or high water, I'll be the change I want to see in this world. I'm done sitting on the sidelines.

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Chapter 10

Jai

Clenching my teeth, my hands fisted at my sides, I stalk to the bathroom.

I stop in front of a sink, and opening a faucet, I scoop water in my palm and drink until my throat is no longer dry.

My head spins again, and I close my eyes, taking deep breaths.

“You look like crap,” Morgan suddenly says.

My eyes flick open, and I meet her gaze in the mirror’s reflection.

Today is the day I kill someone.

Another wave of dizziness hits, and I sway.

I’m surprised when concern flashes over Morgan’s face. She darts forward, taking hold of my arm. “Are you okay?”

I pull my arm free and turning around, I lean back against the sink. “I’m fine.”

“Look,” she gives me a tentative smile, “I was a bitch yesterday. I didn’t expect Chance to walk in with you.”

“How’s that my problem?” I mutter.

“It’s not.” She lets out a sigh. “I’m trying to apologize. If I had known Chance loves you, I would’ve acted differently.”

I level her with a glare. “Seriously? Do you make it a habit of treating other women like crap?” I shake my head. “Do better.”

Looking chastised, her features tighten. “Can you blame me? To survive here, you need the strongest men to protect you. There’s no one stronger than Chance.”

I straighten up. “He’s mine.”

“I get that. I’m sorry.”

She looks like she really means it, so I lean back against the sink again, rubbing my palm over my face.

“What happened to you?” she asks again. “Should I get Chance?”

I shake my head. “He’s dealing with important business.” Wanting to give Morgan a warning so she won’t try to mess with my man again, I say, “I beat my mother in the drill zone.”

Her eyes widen with surprise.

“I have no problem throwing down fists.”

She nods. “Warning received.” Lifting a hand, she brushes a finger over the side of my head. The digit comes away with blood on it. “You hurt yourself.”

“I didn’t notice,” I mutter, turning to look in the mirror.

“Let me take care of the wound. It’s the least I can do after being such a bitch to you.”

I watch her, not trusting the sudden friendliness. Morgan gets a first aid kit, then comes to place it on the counter next to the sink.

She takes out a couple of antiseptic wipes and says, “This might sting a little.”

My eyes remain locked on her as she dabs against the side of my head.

“It doesn’t look like a deep cut.”

“That’s good.”

When she pulls back, she smiles at me. “I didn’t get all of the blood—”

“What the fuck happened?” Chance suddenly snaps.

Morgan jumps, turning a worried gaze to him. “She had an altercation with her mother and bumped her head. I’m just helping her clean the wound.”

She actually sounds scared of Chance. I wonder if he said something to her.

“Thanks, Morgan. You can leave,” Chance says in a clipped tone.

She gives me a tentative smile. “I’ll see you around.”

I nod and watch as she quickly walks out of the bathroom.

Chance comes to me, and gripping my chin, he inspects the wound. “You kicked your mother’s ass?” His voice is a low rumble.

“Yeah.”

“Good girl.”

I grin up at him, which makes him smirk.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?”

“Rachel happened,” I grumble.

Chance takes another antiseptic wipe and starts to clean the wound again. “Talk to me, little one.”

“I was training when she came in and challenged me. She said if I caught her, I could call her mom, and if she caught me, she could beat me up.” I glance up at him, but I can’t read his expression. “I tackled her off the scaffold, and we fell. I must’ve knocked my head against the floor.”

“Are you okay, seeing your mom?” His tone is gentle, making the urge to cry rush to the surface.

I try to turn my face away, but he takes hold of my chin, not letting me. I grab his wrist and pull his fingers away from my face.

“It must’ve been hard,” he murmurs. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

Darting forward, I wrap my arms around his neck, sucking in shuddering breaths to fight the tears back.

“I have you. You’re all that matters,” I say, my voice trembling.

His arms form steel bands around me. “That’s right, my little one.”

After a moment, Chance continues to clean the blood from my hair before putting on some of the stinking ointment.

“You knocked your head pretty hard. We’ll take it easy today. Grab some painkillers before we go.”

I quickly swallow two painkillers, then says, “I still want to train.”

He lets out a chuckle and nods toward the exit. "Let's get going then."

As we leave the bathroom, I ask, "How did it go with Quinlan?"

"Not bad. He understood why I killed Warrick."

"I'm glad to hear that." Curious, I ask, "Who exactly is Quinlan?"

"He's the head of the ward. Normally if a crime is committed, he's the one who exiles the criminal to the rebels."

"Oh." I frown up at Chance. "Isn't it dangerous to have one man make all the rules for the ward?"

"Quinlan has a council, but he's fair." We walk into the drill zone, then he adds, "He's Idris' older brother."

My eyes widen. "I didn't know that."

"Now you do." Chance points to where Raze is standing in the shooting range.

There's a burst of relief in my chest when I see she's okay. Walking to her, I give her a sideways hug. "I was worried about you."

She shrugs. "Don't be. I have a couple of people who look out for me." She gives me a playful grin. "And I can kick ass."

Chuckling, I gesture to the paper targets. "I need to learn how to shoot. Desperately."

Chance holds a gun out to me. "Watch what Raze and I do, then we'll work with you. Get used to the feel of the weapon in your hand."

I take it, my fingers wrapping around the handle.

Chance and Raze take up position, and I take note of their stance, the way they hold the weapon, and how they respond to the force of the blast.

My ears are ringing by the time they're done emptying a clip on the paper targets. They both shoot really well, the head of the target completely gone.

If they can do it, so can I.

Widening my stance, I bend my knees slightly, then line up the barrel of the gun with my sight.

“Take a deep breath,” Chance murmurs, and I inhale. “On the exhale, pull the trigger.”

I let the air out slowly, my finger curling around the trigger as I pull. The blast is loud, but I manage to stop myself from stumbling backward.

The bullet slams into the bottom of the target, making me scowl. “Well, that sucks.”

“Come on. Keep shooting. It will get better with practice,” Raze encourages me.

I keep firing at the target, and I'd say every fifth bullet hits the head.

When I grow tired, I straighten my shoulders and lift my chin.

You can do it.

Focusing on the head of the paper target until it feels like I have tunnel vision, I pull the trigger again, firing shot after shot.

When the clip is empty, I lower my arm, sucking in a deep breath of air that smells like gunpowder.

“Jesus. You did it,” Chance murmurs, clearly impressed.

It’s only then I realize I shot the paper targets head to smithereens.

Immense joy bursts in my chest, and turning, I fling myself at Chance with a happy shriek.

“You have a gun!” he laughs, but he still catches me with one arm. My legs are wrapped around his waist, and I look at the gun in my hand, resting on his shoulder.

“I didn’t think.” I drop my legs and slide down his body, but he doesn’t let go of me.

“I like a woman with a gun as much as the next guy,” he jokes, then his mouth brushes over mine. “I’m proud of you, little one.”

Raze gives me a pat on the back. “That was good, but let’s see if you can do it again.”

The stress of the past two days falls from my shoulders as I lift a playful eyebrow at Raze. I give her a daring grin. “Challenge accepted.”

Chapter 11

Jai

After a long day in the drill zone, we went to bed early. When I'm woken by Chance shaking my shoulder, I groan.

It can't possibly be morning already. It feels like I just went to bed.

"Jai, wake up!" he hollers in my ear while yanking me to my feet.

With sleep still floating in my head, I sway. Chance grabs my hand, and we start to run.

"What's going on?" I ask as I try to clear my mind.

When the sound of people screaming registers, the sleepiness up and vanishes. An ominous-sounding alarm blares through the air.

"We're under attack," Chance shouts as he drags me out of the sleeping quarters.

Holy shit.

Adrenaline instantly pours into my veins, and when we make it to the drill zone, there are already people grabbing guns.

I see Mom and Morgan right before Raze shoves two guns at me. I'm glad she's here and not somewhere we can't find her.

I tuck one of the weapons behind me, using the waistband of my pants to keep it pinned to my back. Just like I've seen Chance do.

"Here's another." Raze shoves another one at me.

We grab clips, and I push them into my pockets and even two down the front of my top.

"Good girl," Chance breathes as he loads his own weapons. He glances from me to Raze. "Stay behind me at all times."

The metal of the clips is cold against my chest. The chill spread throughout the rest of my body as the screams increase like it's trying to reach a crescendo.

A loud blast echoes down the tunnel, and I flinch. People scream hysterically around us. Chance runs to the exit with Raze and me right behind him. He takes a quick look into the passageway.

"We're going to move quickly along the left side of the passage. Stay behind me." It's an order.

I nod and run the second he moves, sticking to him like glue.

We slam up against the wall and stay close to it as we keep moving forward. Some people that are trained to fight follow after us. Farther down, I see Morgan with a bunch of women and children. They all look terrified.

I don't see Mom, and for a second, I worry. Pushing the emotion aside, I focus on the passage ahead of us, unsure of what to expect.

"Where are we going," I ask.

"Normally, all the soldiers would meet by the dining hall, but seeing as we're already under attack, we're retaliating while the women and children get to safety," Raze explains.

Shit. What about Dawn and Gerald? They aren't fighters. I hope they get to safety.

I keep searching for them in the crowd of people, but my heart sinks when I can't find them.

"We're fucking sitting ducks in here," Chance growls. "Faster, girls. We need to join the fight and stop the enemy."

We sprint, putting some distance between us and the rest of the people. My freaking heart is about to beat right out of my chest.

Practicing for war and being caught in an actual attack are two very different things.

We reach the end of the passage, and Chance moves forward but quickly ducks right before there's a blast ringing in my ears.

The man falling at our feet has a blank stare in his eyes, blood seeping from a hole in his head. He's dressed in a pale blue shirt and pants.

"Move," Chance hollers. As we run, he shouts. "Anyone wearing those clothes is an insensate. Shoot to kill."

When we rush up the stairs toward the exit of the building, Chance shoots another insensate. I hold my weapon in front of me, my hands trembling from the shock and adrenaline.

“Don’t count,” Raze whispers to me. When I frown at her, she explains, “You’re counting how many we’re taking down. It will drive you insane. They’re insensates, not humans. Remember to aim for their heads to kill them.”

I nod, thankful for the reminder because I might just have to kill one soon.

We make it outside, but it’s absolute chaos. Buildings are on fire, and there are wounded and dead people lying everywhere. Soldiers are already fighting a large group of insensates.

The gunfire is deafening, and where some soldiers have run out of ammunition, they’re caught in hand-to-hand combat with the insensates.

Jesus! I didn’t expect to see so many insensates.

My eyes land on Dawn, who’s kneeling in front of someone, her shoulders shuddering with sobs.

Leaving Chance and Raze, I run to her, but everything around me slows down when I see who she’s holding.

Gerald.

Sweet Gerald.

No.

Blood covers the whole left side of his face, and his eyes are frozen in an empty stare.

“Jasper!” Chance shouts, ripping me out of the shock.

I turn around in time to see insensates running toward Dawn and me. It looks like a wave of blue is coming right at us.

I grab Dawn's arm, and yanking her up, I force her into the nearest store where the windows have been shot out. "Stay here!"

I won't let Dawn die.

I look at Gerald, then run toward the insensates. Lifting both my arms, I start pulling the triggers of my weapons.

I hear my breaths and my pounding heart, and when the first body drops, a piece of me dies with the man.

That was someone's husband or son.

I suck in a strangled breath and pull the trigger again because they keep coming, and I have to protect Dawn at all costs.

I empty the clips, taking down four more insensates. Grabbing the two clips from where they're tucked into my shirt, I reload the weapons as quickly as possible.

"Let's go, Jai." Chance shouts to the right side of me.

I run back and grab hold of Dawn, forcing her to come with me.

More insensates pour into the street, and I shove Dawn in Chance's direction. "Run to Chance! Get to safety."

Lifting my arms, I run toward danger, only sparing a second to make sure Chance has Dawn.

"Jasper!" he shouts as he flings Dawn to Raze, setting after me.

No. Stay back.

I can't lose you.

Focusing all my attention in front of me, I start to shoot. Bullets fly past my body. Somewhere something explodes, and the sky lights up with a ball of fire.

It gets easier to kill them as I get closer, and I notice they don't move as fast.

They're not like the trackers.

I hear a round of blasts sound up behind me, but I don't look. I keep going, and the enemy keeps dropping.

When the guns click in my hands, signaling the clips are empty, I panic. The insensates are too close for me to reload. Dropping one gun, I keep the other so I can use it to hit them as I get ready to fight.

My blood rushes through my ears, and I launch myself at the first one as he tries to fire a shot at me. Using all my weight to take him down, I smash the gun against the side of his head.

His hand closes around my throat, and he clamps my windpipe closed.

I feel something tear through my shoulder, then I hear Chance shout, "You have another fucking weapon. Use it."

Chance kills two insensates while I struggle to reach behind me. My vision goes spotty from the lack of air, but I manage to grab the gun from behind my back, and pressing the barrel right against the insensate's head, I pull the trigger.

The grip around my throat immediately loosens, and I watch as he exhales his last breath, his arm dropping to the ground.

With the immediate threat dealt with, a hand grabs hold of my arm, and I'm yanked into a tight embrace. "You're okay," Rachel breathes, and it's only then I realize she's holding me, breaths bursting over her lips. "You were so fucking good."

I push away from her, and our eyes meet for a moment before I walk toward a pissed-off-looking Chance.

He's breathing hard, his eyes on me filled with anger. "I have zero fucking patience left with you. You fucking stick to my side."

I slam into him and wrap my arms around his waist. "I'm okay."

He doesn't calm down and keeps ragging, "You don't get to come into my life and pull a fucking stunt like that. We look out for each other, which means you are always next to me."

"I couldn't leave Dawn unprotected." I pull back and frame his jaw with my hands. "You need to start trusting me, Chance. What does it help you train me, but you won't let me fight?"

"I'm training you so you'll fucking survive!"

"I know." Standing on my tiptoes, I press a kiss to his lips. "But what is life when I'm the only one to survive?" I lock eyes with him. "I'm okay. We did it."

He shakes his head. "You took a bullet in your shoulder. We need someone to take it out."

“I can,” Dawn says. “I’ve been trained.”

As we walk to the main building to get a first aid kit, Chance says, “This is just the start. We need to be prepared for another attack.”

Glancing over my shoulder, I look at all the destruction and death. Rage starts to burn in my chest at the waste of life.

“Not if I take this war to the ecocity,” I murmur so softly no one hears me.

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Chapter 12

Jai

Chance is helping the others carry the wounded to the park, where tents and cots have been set up to treat them.

“Jai, we need wildgrass,” Dawn says. “We don’t have enough supplies.”

After she removed the bullet that was only skin deep, she got to work on treating the rest of the survivors’ wounds.

“I’ll get some.” Grabbing the first bag I can find, I wait for Chance to place the man he’s carrying on a cot, then ask, “Are you coming with me? They need wild grass for the wounds.”

“Of course. I’m not letting your ass out of my sight.”

We walk along one of the side streets because the main one is blocked with rubble and the dead.

“Listen,” he says but waits for me to glance at him before he continues, “I know tonight was rough, and you acted on instinct. You did good, and I’m proud of you, but you can’t leave my side.”

“Got it.” I turn my attention back to the street, still on high alert for another attack. “But you have to trust me as well. This can’t be a one-sided thing.”

“I trust you,” he mutters.

“Do you?” I shoot him a look. “Because it doesn’t feel that way.”

“It’s everyone else I don’t trust.” A look of frustration tightens his features. “Yes, you’ve gotten good with all the training, but when you’re faced with the enemy’s army like we were tonight, we have to stick together. You can’t take them all out on your own.”

“I know that.” But I’m sure as hell going to try if it means I can save the people I care about. “I’ll be more careful,” I add to set him at ease.

“We’re a team,” he reminds me.

I take hold of his hand, weaving my fingers through his, and we stick to the side of the buildings until we reach the open fields of grass.

Staying as low as we can, we check for any movement as we start to gather batches of wild grass.

The early morning hours is eerily calm after the attack. Not even the insects are buzzing.

“It’s too quiet,” Chance whispers. “Be on guard.”

“Okay.” I keep glancing around us as I use my nails to dig the roots out and shove them into the bag I brought with me.

Suddenly something snaps in the distance, and we fall flat into the grass, pressing our bodies hard into the ground.

“Stay down,” Chance whispers.

We hear another snap, like a twig breaking to our left.

I breathe in the dirt, and my heart pounds into the grass and rocks beneath me.

I scan the field for what made the noise, then see movement in the distance. It's not light enough to make out who the people are, but I can count six of them.

"To our left. Just before the hill," I whisper to Chance.

"See them."

My hand inches slowly to the gun behind my back, careful not to make a sound as I pull it free. I take aim, ready in case they're trackers or insensates.

Suddenly a blast rings through the air. It didn't come from Chance or me, but one of the six drops. The remaining five start to run toward us, and not willing to risk Chance's life, I open fire. The sound of blasts from his gun joins mine until all five have dropped to the grass.

"Who's out there?" a familiar voice shouts.

Tears instantly jump to my eyes. "Kenzo?" I shoot to my feet. "Kenzo!"

"Kid, is that you?"

When I see him stand up from where he was lying, I break out into a run and jump into his arms.

"You're here," I cry from pure relief and happiness. Not thinking, I press a kiss on his cheek and hug him again.

"Get off Kenzo," Chance mutters behind me.

Letting out a burst of laughter, I let go, then smile at Chance. "Now you know how I felt."

"Yeah-yeah," he grumbles, but he doesn't look upset. With a grin, he shakes Kenzo's hand. "Where are the others?"

Kenzo points to where Idris, Valen, Skater, and Ruth are walking toward us.

“We got attacked,” Kenzo explains.

“They hit the main ward as well,” Chance says. “It’s a fucking massacre.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “We’re out here to gather wild grass for the wounded.”

When Idris and the rest of the group reaches us, Idris shakes Chance’s hand, then looks me over. “What? No hug for me?”

“In your dreams,” I sass him, but I’m so damn glad to see them all. “Where are the others?”

“Dead,” Valen answers, her voice bitter and filled with grief. “We barely made it out alive.”

It’s only then I notice the tears on her face. Ruth is pale as a ghost and seems to be in shock.

Aldric, Aaron, Jarek, and Jasper. They’re gone.

“We lost four men from our ward, and the wall is gone,” Idris says. “We came to help and regroup. Nothing’s holding them back from wiping us out.”

“Let’s finish up here and get our asses back to the ward,” Chance says.

We gather more wild grass until the bag is stuffed full, then start the walk back to the main ward.

I fall in beside Valen and whisper, “I’m sorry about Jarek.”

She shakes her head, her chin trembling, and I quickly wrap an arm around her waist to comfort her.

“He died so this waste of space could live,” she mutters while glaring at Ruth.

“We’ll hand her over to someone else,” Idris tells Valen.

“You better,” Valen bites out.

“I have a friend who can maybe help,” I mention. “I’m sure Dawn won’t mind taking care of Ruth.”

“Dawn?” Idris asks. “The beautician?”

“I’m not sure what that word means,” I chuckle.

“Yeah, it’s the same Dawn,” Chance answers.

“The fuck! She won’t take care of the brat. Dawn is coming with us,” Idris growls, picking up his pace. He looks at me again. “So she’s okay?”

“Thanks to Jai,” Chance says. “She kept Dawn alive during the attack.”

Idris raises an eyebrow. “You saved my girl?”

I let out a burst of laughter. “I’m glad you think she’s your girl.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

When the ward is in sight, I start to jog, and it has Idris yelling, “Jai! What did Dawn say?”

“That you have to deserve her,” I shout, hoping Dawn will forgive me for the tiny lie. Maybe if Idris thinks she’s not his, he’ll put in more effort with her.

With the remaining members of my outer ward, we jog to the park, and out of breath, I hand the bag to Dawn.

“Thanks,” she says, elbows deep in blood. Her eyes flick over my head, and she staggers back, a gasp escaping her.

Idris swoops past me and envelops her in a hug, lifting her off her feet. “Christ, I was worried,” he grumbles.

Dawn wraps her arms around his neck, crying so hard I don’t know if it’s from the relief of seeing Idris or the loss and trauma she’s suffered.

My chin starts to quiver, and when I turn around and see Valen’s tears, I let my own fall as I take her hand. I pull her away from everyone else and wrap her up in a comforting hug.

“We’re going to kill them all,” I promise her. “We’ll get our revenge.”

She nods, holding onto me as if I’m a life preserver, and I silently vow to end this madness, so none of my remaining friends have to die.

While Valen cries on my shoulder, my gaze touches on all the destruction, the wounded, the mourning.

It’s all too much.

Why did humanity survive the previous wars if we’re just going to continue killing each other until none of us are left?

I don’t understand it. I never will.

Grief hangs heavy in the air. It feels like it's bearing down on my shoulders.

Every couple of seconds, I hear a woman cry or a man curse.

The ward took a heavy blow, and while everyone's mourning their losses, I'm thankful most of my friends survived.

I don't feel sad about Jasper and Aaron, but there's a pinch in my chest for Jarek, and especially Aldric.

And Gerald.

Jesus, Gerald. He didn't deserve to die like that. He was a unique soul, and I wish I had gotten to him sooner.

I peel the bulb of the wild grass and mash it into a mushy paste. My arm burns after a while, and I don't even know if I'm doing it right.

Chance doesn't correct me, though, so I continue.

"Time to eat," Idris suddenly says. "Come on. Take a break."

I'm surprised he brought us food. He shoves a plate at me and sits down with his own.

I wipe my hands on an old rag and shovel a bite of mac and cheese into my mouth.

We eat in an uncomfortable silence.

"I hear you went crazy and took out half the insensates on your own," Idris mutters.

I glance up and find his sharp gaze locked on me.

“I had to protect Dawn,” I say.

And Chance.

And Raze.

I had to protect everyone.

He puts his fork down, and reaching across the table, he gives my arm a squeeze. “You did our ward proud, Jai.”

I don’t say anything, too stunned that he now sees me as one of them and no longer a newbie.

“We’re meeting with the other leaders in an hour,” Idris informs Chance.

“What will the meeting be about?” I ask before I take a bite of my food.

“We need to check our numbers after the attack and plan an assault on the ecocity,” Chance answers. “I’ll let you know what the leaders decide.”

Changing the subject, I ask, “Where’s Dawn?”

Idris nods in no particular direction. “At Gerald’s store.”

“You left her alone?” I dart up, and not waiting for his answer, I jog around the building and head for the clothing store.

Someone removed Gerald’s body, for which I’m grateful. When I step into the store, it’s dark.

“Dawn?”

“Here,” she whispers, coming from the back. “They’re going to come and clear this place out soon.” She gestures at the clothes. “Take what you need before it’s all gone.”

“I didn’t come here for clothes,” I say as I follow her to a rack. “I came to check on you. How are you holding up?”

She shrugs and starts to take clothes off the hangers, holding the outfits up against me.

I nudge her hands away and wrap my arms around her. “I’m sorry about Gerald. I wish I got here sooner.”

“I’m okay,” she whispers as she pulls back. “Seriously, they’re going to raid the store. Let’s grab what you need and get out of here.”

Dawn grabs two outfits similar to the one Gerald gave me, then says, “Grab a jacket. You need something warm. And another pair of boots.”

I do it to appease her, but it doesn’t feel right.

She shoves everything into a new black backpack and tosses it at me.

I place the jacket and boots inside, then ask, “How did things go with Idris?”

A smile ghosts around her lips. “Good. He had a fright and said he wants me to stay by his side.”

“Is it what you want?”

She nods. “I only stayed here for Gerald. With him dead, I might as well go with Idris wherever he goes.” Her voice is strained with tears.

Wanting to make sure she’ll be okay, I ask, “Do you want to be with Idris?”

She nods again. “Besides you, he’s all I have.” She lets out a strained chuckle. “Hearing he wants me was supposed to be the happiest moment of my life, but with Gerald killed...” she chokes on a sob.

I drop the bag and hug her to me. “I understand. It’s hard to be happy when there’s so much bad happening.” I rub my hand up and down her back. “I’ll do my best to create a world where happiness isn’t always overshadowed by bad things.”

There’s a moment of thick silence between us as we hold onto each other.

“Thank you,” Dawn whispers. “For saving me.”

“I wasn’t going to let my friend die.”

She lets out a sputter. “I’m so glad I met you.”

“Me too.”

“Can you promise me one other thing?”

I pull back to see her face. “What?”

“You’ll come back to me after the war.”

That’s not a promise I can make, but not wanting to upset her more than she already is, I lie, “I’ll come back to you.”

“I mean, I can’t let your eyebrows get out of control again.”

I let out a burst of laughter. “Yeah, we can’t let that happen.”

Leaving the store with Dawn, I look up at the billowing smoke from the last dying embers of the buildings that burned down.

I think about how much everyone has lost and feel I have to do something to prevent further bloodshed. I can't see how there can be any winners in a war.

I could go to the ecocity by myself.

The thought instantly takes root, and I stop walking.

“What?” Dawn asks.

I quickly shake my head. “You go ahead. I'll catch up.”

As I watch her walk toward the park, I weigh my options.

I can stay and fight in a war where there's a strong possibility that I'll lose more friends, or I can go to the ecocity, kill the emissaries, get my dad and hightail it out of there.

If the emissaries are dead and I have my father, there won't be anyone to make insensates.

Shit. It could actually work.

“Hey, kid, why are you standing in the middle of the street?” Kenzo suddenly asks.

I was so deep in thought I didn't see him.

“I was just thinking.”

He throws his arm around my shoulders. “Enough thinking for one day. Did you eat?”

I shake my head.

“Join me for dinner.”

Walking to the dining hall, I say, “I'm glad you're here, Kenzo. About what happened when I left—”

He silences me with a shake of his head. “It’s in the past. All that matters is that we’re together again.”

“I missed you,” I admit.

“Not half as much as I missed your stubborn ass.”

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Chapter 13

Jai

Tonight we have to stay with the others in case there's another attack.

I'm still struggling to wrap my mind around everything that's happened. It's insane and heartbreaking.

Lying down next to Chance, I let out a heavy breath.

He pushes his arm beneath my head and turns me to face him. Pressing a kiss to my forehead, he holds still for a moment.

"How are you holding up?" he whispers.

"I'm still alive." That's the only answer I can give. Wanting to add something positive, I say, "I'm glad our friends are here."

"Hmm..." he mumbles, sounding exhausted.

Lifting my hand to his cheek, I brush my fingers over his jaw. "Sleep."

"Love you," he breathes before dozing off.

"I love you too," I say, watching as his features relax.

The plan that started forming about me going to the ecocity to get Dad and kill the emissaries churns in my head.

I stare at Chance, knowing he'll be upset with me. There's a possibility he won't forgive me.

But if I can save thousands of lives, it will be worth it. Right?

Maybe I'm just being stupid, but if I can make a difference, I have to at least try.

Looking at Chance one last time, I whisper, "Forgive me." I press a soft kiss to his lips, then inch away, careful not to wake him.

With a chorus of snores around me, I quickly leave the sleeping quarters. Sneaking to the drill zone, I take a bag and shove five guns into it with a whole lot of clips.

I take four guns, stuffing them in my bag. I head to the dining hall and search the kitchen for water. Finding a stash of bottles, I take two, shoving them into the bag as well.

The second I'm out of the building, I run as fast as I can down the side streets. I don't slow until I'm a safe distance away from the main ward.

I stop to catch my breath, and crouching down, my eyes dart around me while I take a gun from the bag. I check the clip, and keeping the weapon firmly in my grip, I make my way to the outer ward at a brisk pace.

I keep glancing around me, on high alert for any trackers or insensates.

My heart is thundering in my chest, and my mouth is dry, but I don't stop to drink water. I feel way too vulnerable in the darkness.

I have to reach the ward before dawn. Hopefully, I can get something to eat there and take a five-minute break before running to the broken-down metropolis where the rebels are based. I'll figure out a way into the virtuous eco-city from there.

As the hours tick by, I'm constantly in a state of high alert. I startle at the sound of every twig snapping or sudden noises from the insects.

Calm down. You can't freak out so early in the mission. You still have a long way ahead of you.

Coming through the lining of trees where Chance and I spent the night when Ruth was up in the nest, my foot hits something, and I lose my balance. Sprawling over the grass, the bag with weapons knocks against my head.

I watch as my gun skids just out of reach.

Stalks snap and break to my right, and I quickly grab hold of my gun, making sure the safety is off. When I glance over my shoulder at what tripped me, I almost scream at the sight of Aaron's dead eyes staring at me.

Jesus.

I didn't like him much but seeing him dead and all the dried blood is sickening. No person should die like that and be left without a proper burial.

Suddenly strong fingers clasp around my neck and yank me up from the ground. I kick at the air as I come face to face with an insensate, the man's eyes devoid of emotions.

Not thinking twice, my arm swings up, and I pull the trigger, planting a bullet in his temple. We both drop to the ground.

I guess when they took away the part of the DNA that gives feelings, they took away his common sense too. Idiot.

Climbing to my feet, I keep still, listening for any other movements, just in case the idiot wasn't alone.

Five minutes later, when there's only silence, I continue to make my way to the outer ward's entrance.

I see what Valen meant about the wall being gone. There's a huge gaping hole and no sign of the gate.

Holy crap.

More on guard than ever, I move slowly to the entrance and inch my way down the stairs, straining my ears for any sounds. The main door to the tunnels is gone, smoke still hanging in the air from the battle.

Creeping down the left passage, I reach the first archway and glance inside. The vertical farm has been destroyed, and most of the vegetables burned to ashes.

It's so wrong in a world where food isn't readily available.

Continuing down the passage, I find the ward eerily quiet. I peek into the animal enclosure and pull back. I saw someone lying on the floor. Nothing moved.

A quick glance behind me assures me I'm still alone, and I slip inside the animal enclosure.

The sight that greets me makes bile push up my throat from my churning stomach.

No.

Why are they so cruel?

All the sheep are no longer white and woolly but lifeless and red. The cows and pigs too. My heart breaks at the sight, and when I see Aldric lying face down with a red bloodstain on his back, there's another blow to my heart.

This is wrong. Very wrong. And evil.

I move to the chickens' pen, and seeing all the feathers and blood, a sob escapes me.

"I'll kill the emissaries for this," I growl as I step over the broken fence. "I'll rip their hearts out and make them pay." Suffocating pain squeezes the words through my throat.

I drop to the floor and heave. A perfect race wouldn't hurt something so precious as animals. The insensates are emotionless creatures, much worse than we can ever be.

A weak peep has my head snapping up. Lowering to my knees, I dig through the feathers and lifeless bodies for what made the sound.

Another peep has me zeroing in on its location, then I finally see movement. Tiny feet are kicking to get up from under the dead.

Gently, I scoop the chick into my hands and lift it to my chest. "I've got you, peepster."

The chick looks like it's struggling to breathe, gasping for air. I cradle him close to me and get up, wanting to get him outside. I don't want the chick around all the dead and quickly move out of the ward into the first rays of the rising sun.

Watching the little chick gasp for air makes my heart break in a way it's never been broken before. I see the sun reflects in its black eyes, and sobs ripple through my chest.

All I can think to do is to caress his little head, to show him he isn't alone.

"Do you... feel that?" A sob threatens to close my throat right up. "It's the... sun, nice... and warm." I start to cry harder as the chick's gasps for air slows. My chest aches so much for him. "You go ahead. Sleep, little peepster. I've got you. You're not alone."

His whole body jerks in my hands, and I drop to my knees. "No!"

It hurts so much to watch him die and not be able to help him. I don't understand all the killing, so much senseless killing.

"It's okay," I say with another sob. "I have you. You're not alone."

His body jerks once more before it stills, the chick growing stiff in my hands. My heart shatters into a million pieces as I watch the shine fade from the chick's eyes.

My body shudders with an aching I've never felt before, and I press the little chick to my chest. "I'm so sorry, little peepster," I gasp through the tears streaking down my cheeks. "I'm so sorry."

"Kid," Kenzo whispers behind me.

My whole body jolts with fright, and when I glance over my shoulder, I see Kenzo's eyes are red where he stands a few feet away. "We have to move." He gestures to the broken wall. "It's not safe here."

I don't know how long he stood there, probably keeping watch over me.

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Chapter 14

Jai

Finding a patch of sand, I use my nails to dig a hole. I wish I had something to wrap the chick in, but pressed for time, I lay the tiny body in the ground and cover it up. My tears splat onto the sand.

“You were too precious for this cruel world,” I whisper before standing up and walking toward Kenzo.

I can see anger in his eyes because I left the main ward alone, but he doesn't start scolding me. Instead, he starts to walk toward the broken wall. Shrugging the bag's strap higher over my shoulder, I follow Kenzo across all the rubble.

I'm angry with Kenzo, as well. Yeah, it's nice not to be alone, but I don't want him to come along. I want my friends as far away from the ecocity as possible while I deal with the problem.

I know it's stupid thinking I can solve the world's problems by myself. It's not like I have power to wield over everyone.

But I'm still going to try if it means I can save lives.

Once we reach the open fields that seem to stretch out forever, I mutter, “Why did you come?”

“You think I’m really going to sit back and let you do this by yourself?” he snaps back at me. “I should’ve gotten them all together, but I knew it would take too long. So, if you want to go on this suicide mission of yours, then you’ll just have to be happy with my company.”

Suicide mission. That’s one way of putting it.

“You should’ve stayed at the main ward,” I grumble. “I have a plan.”

“I’m sure you do.” His eyes fix me with a scolding glare. “What’s the plan? Take on the entire ecocity by yourself? Be real!”

Anger wraps around my heart. “It will be easy for me to sneak in. I’m a woman, which means they won’t just kill me. You, on the other hand, are a liability.”

“I’ll probably be the only thing standing between you and certain death,” he growls.

“I’m not as weak as I look.”

We both huff, picking up our pace. “I know you’re strong and stupidly brave, but that won’t save you from hundreds of insensates or the rebels,” he shoots me another dark glare, “or the trackers.” A cynical smirk lifts the corner of his mouth. “And let’s not forget the enforcers and emissaries as well.”

“I’ll figure it out,” I answer stupidly.

“You seriously planned on walking in there and hoping no one notices?” he says mockingly, as if he can’t believe I’d do something that dumb.

“It’s better than watching hundreds of people die,” I mumble. Picking up my pace, I start to jog. “If you’re coming along, you better keep up.” I glare at him, although I’m not sure my glares have any effect on him.

Kenzo lets out a burst of amused laughter. “Lead the way, kid. At the very least, this is going to be entertaining until we get captured or killed, of course.”

Kenzo falls in next to me, and we keep a steady pace as we put some distance between ourselves and the outer ward.

Because I was asleep when we left the broken-down metropolis where the rebels are based, I keep to the road Chance used when I first came to the ward in sight so I don’t get horribly lost.

I’m just about to start getting worried when we finally pass the rebel’s car we stole when I met Chance.

My heart beats a little faster as my gaze searches the field on the other side of the road where Ethan got shot down.

I’m sure Chance would’ve checked, and Ethan isn’t still lying out there.

I quickly banish the thought and focus on checking for any signs of trackers or insensates.

We run well into the afternoon, only stopping twice to drink some water.

“It’s not too late to turn around, kid,” Kenzo says, not even sounding breathless.

I’m exhausted but keep pushing forward. “I’m not turning around.”

He lets out a sigh. “Fucking stubborn.”

When we finally reach the outskirts of the broken-down metropolis, the sun is already setting. I honestly didn’t know it was this far from the wards. Then again, I was asleep when we drove through this stretch.

I’m tired, but there is no way I’m stopping, not with Chance, Dawn, and everyone else’s life hanging in the balance.

Also, I know Chance is bound to come after me, so I’m pressed for time.

“Do you know your way around this place?” I ask Kenzo. Chance seemed to know where to go, and I’m hoping Kenzo does too.

“Like the back of my hand. We used to live here when I was a child. The emissaries forced us farther back to the main ward.”

Kenzo takes over, leading the way as we creep past dilapidated houses.

I see movement in one of the windows and ask, “Rebels or trackers?”

“Yesterday, I would’ve said Rebels. Today, I’m not so sure,” he whispers, ducking low as we run past a fence that has patches of white paint. “Keep low.”

We move fast, sticking to a path that offers as much cover as possible.

The neighborhoods soon fall behind us, and we're left with an open space of crisscrossing roads to get over. Some are overpasses, and others have gaping holes in them.

"These are old highways. It leads into the heart of the metropolis if we take it, but we'll be open targets." Kenzo locks eyes with me. "It will save a lot of time if we take this road, but it's dangerous. If we're spotted, it's game over for us." His teeth tug at his bottom lip. "I'd like to keep the element of surprise on our side."

"We don't have time to waste. We can use the cars as cover and run from one to the other," I say, my heart thumping hard against my ribs.

Kenzo takes hold of my fingers, and lifting it to his face, he presses a kiss to the back of my hand. "You've come a long way, kid. It's good to know I've got you to cover my back." He swallows hard, clearly nervous about the road ahead.

It's a suicide mission, after all.

"Don't get all mushy on me now, Kenzo," I tease. I nudge my shoulder against his side and give his hand a firm squeeze. "Let's do this."

He lets out a chuckle. "Yeah, before Chance catches up to us and kills me. He'll probably spank your ass ten shades of blue for going on this insane mission."

I let out a nervous chuckle. "He has to catch me first."

We jump over the railing onto the road and start sprinting toward the first broken-down car.

Buildings rise dark and gloomy into the early evening, making me worry whether this is really such an insane plan.

I shove the doubt deep down and square my shoulders.

I have to try.

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Chapter 15

Jai

I watch Kenzo scale up a concrete pillar separating the two highways. We're on a lower street, trying to climb to the overpass above us. The highway we're currently on has a huge gaping hole, stopping us from going farther. A river winds long and broad beneath us, the sound of rushing water scary as hell.

"Is that the same river that runs past the main ward and through the ecocity?" I ask.

"Yeah, it's one way of getting into the ecocity."

I glance at the dark water rushing beneath us. "Yeah, I'll pass. I can't swim."

"Then we're doing this the long way." Kenzo strains as he carefully maneuvers from one concrete pillar to another. "Come on, kid. You can do this."

Sucking in a deep breath, I exhale slowly while I wipe my sweaty palms on my pants.

If Kenzo can do it, so can I.

I stand on the railing with my heart in my throat. If I fall, I'll probably die of a heart attack before I even reach the river below.

"Come on, kid," Kenzo says again.

He's higher up than me, holding onto a piece of metal on the side of the pillar.

There are thin grooves etched into the concrete that I can use to climb. Much like the grid I've practiced on. Only there's no rope keeping me from falling this time.

I inch away from the railing and reach for the pillar. Grabbing onto it, my body slams into it, and I hold on for dear life.

My heart beats hard against the cold slab. I glance down, and time warps along with my vision.

Shit. It's high.

I slip, and I start to slide down. Panicking, I struggle to find a groove I can hold onto, but it feels like they're all gone.

"Kenzo!" I gasp, my chest tightening with fear.

The bag of weapons on my back suddenly weighs a ton, dragging me farther down.

"I can't hold on!"

I look wildly at Kenzo, and he tries to reach down to me.

"I can't swim," I breathe to remind him just as I lose the last of my hold.

It's not like before when I got pushed into the pool. This time I hit the water so hard, it knocks the air from my lungs.

The river roars and yanks at my body before it swallows me whole. With the bag of guns dragging me under, I sink faster this time. I try to kick at the water, my arms paddling wildly.

Something black comes at me, and I only know it's Kenzo when his arm wraps around me. I grab onto his shoulders, and kick my legs, trying to help so we can reach the surface.

It takes too long before the water breaks over our heads. I gasp lungfuls of air just before a wave of water hits my face.

"Get onto my back and hold on tight," Kenzo orders, his voice strained.

Using my legs, I wrap one around him and maneuver my body behind his. I place my arms around his neck and cling for dear life, my face pressed against the side of his.

"Thank you," I sputter, my teeth clattering.

"No problem," he breathes. "You could've just told me..." he pauses to take a breath, and I can feel his body straining as he swims, "...you wanted to take the river." Water splashes all around us, and for a moment, we focus on trying to get air into our lungs. Once we reach a calmer part of the river, Kenzo says, "We didn't have to jump off the bridge."

"Ha-ha." I press my lips to his cheek and kiss him. Twice.

We swim for a minute. Well, Kenzo swims while I cling to him for dear life.

He's breathless as he says, "I'm dating your mother."

As the shock of his words hit, water splashes in my face. I cough from swallowing some. "You're what?"

"Your mother and I are in a relationship," he says, his words strained from the effort it's taking to keep us above water.

"Now's not the time to tell me this," I snap.

“You can’t run and have to listen. It’s the perfect time.”

“I can strangle you,” I warn.

“I go down, you go down with me,” he jokes.

At least, I hope he’s joking.

I try to gather my thoughts. I like Kenzo. He’s a good friend. But never in a million years did I picture him with my mother. Not only because she’s married to my dad but because she’s become such a cold person.

“What about my dad?” I ask the obvious question.

“It’s not like they’re still married, kid. It’s been two years of no contact between them. I just wanted you to know.”

I think for a moment, then ask, “Are you looking for my blessing, Kenzo?”

He doesn’t answer me immediately. He swims us to the side of the river where it’s shallower, and the current isn’t as strong. I can feel his feet touching and slipping on the muddy banks below.

“No,” he says, then he takes a deep breath. “Yeah... I don’t know. I guess I am.” He clears his throat. “Things are different on this side. Rachel practically fell through those gates into our ward. She surprised us. All the newbies normally show up within two or three days, not nine days later. And she was shot in the arm. She’s a tough one.”

I smile. I can hear his love for her shimmering through in his words. Maybe it's because of everything I've been through, and I'm done judging people, but I can't find it in my heart to be angry with him. My mother is a whole different story, though. Right now, I couldn't care less about her.

"It was between Idris, me, and Warrick. I knew what a bastard Warrick was, and Idris wasn't a better choice. I took her to protect her. She hated me for it." He laughs. "She said those exact words to me you did, 'I hate you, Kenzo,' he mimics my mother and me. "I said the same thing to her that I told you; I never told her to love me, and that's when I realized I wanted her. I wanted her to love me." He sighs, and it sounds miserable.

"She's changed a lot," I whisper against his cheek.

"She has." Our conversation stops as we approach the gleaming blue boundary marker of the ecocity.

"Take a deep breath, kid. We're going under."

Before I can ask him whether the force field will fry us to a crisp, I have to inhale deeply, and then we go under.

Nothing can beat the suffocating feeling of the water trying to claw my lungs from my chest. When we come up on the other side of the boundary line, my lungs are on fire, and I gasp for air.

"Your nails," Kenzo gasps. "You're digging my heart out, kid. Let up some."

I ease up on the grip I have around his neck and chest.

We float a few more yards down the river before Kenzo takes us back to the riverbank. It's muddy and slippery, and I keep slipping until Kenzo grabs my arm and yanks me forward and onto dry land.

"Christ, that was no party," he grumbles.

"Thanks for doing all the hard work. At least we made it past the dome without being fried." I glance around us at the trees and fields of wild grass. At least, what I can see in the dark. The ecocity is in the distance. "We need to get dry. The guns are wet. Do you think they'll still work?"

"Yeah. I'll have to check them, though." He gestures to my backpack. "How many do you have?"

"I think four. I just shoved in as many clips as I could."

Kenzo's teeth reflect white under the light of the dome. It's lighter on this side. The virtuous have never really seen the darkness of the night.

"And here I was hoping you gained a few pounds," he chuckles. "In the meantime, my girl is packing some guns." He ruffles my hair and droplets of water fall on my face. "The guns will work, wet or dry, but I see you won't." He looks around.

In the distance, the first lights of the virtuous dwellings dot in a straight line.

"We could go to my dad's house," I offer.

"Yeah, right." He shakes his head. "Just imagine how that would go down."

“He won’t be home. He works most of the time,” I reassure him. “We need to get dry.”

We stare at each other for a minute, and I will him to say yes. I’d love to see my childhood home again, and I’ll be able to get clothes there so I can blend in.

“Minutes, kid, we don’t stay longer than a few minutes,” he warns me.

We start jogging slowly, and it helps a little to chase the chill from my body.

“Wipe the grin off your face. If you’re hoping to see him, you better get rid of the hope now. He’s the one creating the very enemy we’re fighting.”

My grin fades. “Not if I can convince my father to come with us. Without him, they can’t make more insensates.”

“Sometimes people don’t want to be saved. Just prepare yourself for it.”

I nod, knowing I might not like what I find. I’m actually afraid Dad won’t want to come and that he’s really the enemy.

Reaching the first line of houses, we stick to the shadows as we creep in the direction of my family home. My teeth keep chattering from the wet clothes, but I keep pushing forward.

There’s no turning back now. I’m already here and just have to hope my plan will work.

We reach Dad’s house and slip inside. We have to move in the dark, so Mrs. Noah, our neighbor, doesn’t notice any of the lights on.

Our clothes aren't dripping anymore, but I'm still freezing, and so is Kenzo.

"You can shower first while I put the clothes in the dryer." I nudge Kenzo toward the bathroom.

"Kid, seriously, you have nothing I haven't seen before, and your lips are fucking blue. Get your ass in here."

I'm yanked into the tiny bathroom and watch as Kenzo turns on the faucets. I stand frozen as he tugs the bag off my back.

"I don't wanna be here a second longer than I have to," He says. "Strip out of the wet clothes and get under the spray."

My cheeks flush, and I blink at the man who's clearly lost his mind.

When he notices, he shakes his head. "I see you as nothing more than a little sister. A frozen one, at that. As much as I love you, there's none of that crazy crap happening, so get out of the clothes and get your butt in the shower."

I nod and slip my sneakers off. I don't look at Kenzo, hearing his wet clothes hit the tiles.

I peel mine off, but I keep my underwear on. I don't care what he says, there's no way I'm getting naked in the shower with him.

My eyes have a mind of their own. One that doesn't have common sense because the second Kenzo moves in under the water, I look at him.

When I see he's also wearing his underwear, relief washes over me, along with the warm water. I think I would've gone blind from shock if he was naked.

Kenzo grabs my shoulder and pulls me against his bare chest. He wraps his arms around me, rubbing warmth into my back, then we stand for a while under the water, just soaking up the heat.

Standing in my underwear, I ask, "Did you undress me the night of the initiation?"

He pauses for a moment, then answers, "Yes."

"Why did you do that, Kenzo?" I whisper. "I trusted you."

I press my cheek against his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat, just wanting to know why he was the one to undress me.

"Oh, kid." he sighs above my head. "You know, I waited for you by the chickens, hoping you'd get over it and come. You're more stubborn than Rachel, though." He chuckles, and his chest moves against my cheek. "Chance took you off the nest before I could. If it makes it any better, I did it because I didn't want someone else touching you. I did it to protect you. I did it for Rachel."

"I think if I had known about you and my mother, it would've made things easier," I admit.

"I didn't tell you because I wanted you to get stronger."

I understand that now.

"Come on, kid. Make me some coffee while we wait for the clothes to dry."

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Chapter 16

Jai

Kenzo inspects the guns in the light of my glofish tank. I bring our coffee, and while we drink the warm beverages, I help him check the clips. In total, we have six guns and enough ammunition to make a dent in the enforcers if we have to fight our way into the building where the laboratories are.

“You did good, kid,” Kenzo says, a pleased smile on his face. “We’ll need every bit of firepower we can get our hands on.” He shoves the backpack over to me. “Put it in the dryer.”

I do as he says while making sure the towel remains secure around my body.

When we’re done drinking the coffee, I say, “I’m going to put on virtuous clothes. I’ll be able to blend in with them.”

“Yeah.” He walks to a window and glances outside. “I’ll wait down here.”

Rushing up the stairs, I walk into my old bedroom, and I’m hit with a pang of nostalgia. I glance at the pristine room, not a thing out of place.

Opening the closet door, I take out one of my outfits and get dressed in the dry clothes. The shirt and pants feel stuffy and restrictive. It’s nothing like the casual clothes I’ve gotten used to wearing since I left the ecocity.

Suddenly I hear voices murmuring below, and I rush out of my bedroom. Reaching the top of the stairs, I crouch down to make sure it's safe. It won't help if I run into the enemy's arms, and I won't be able to help Kenzo if I'm caught as well.

"She's my daughter!" I hear my mother hiss.

Holy crap. How did she get here this fast?

"Did you expect me to let her come by herself?" Kenzo snaps at her.

"I expected you to stop her, Kenzo. She shouldn't be here. If we could find you so easily, they will too!" she whispershouts at him.

I move down the stairs and see Mom grabbing the front of Kenzo's shirt. She looks livid, and for a moment, I worry that she's going to hit him.

Kenzo takes hold of her wrist and yanks her closer while saying, "She's an adult and has free will, Rachel. That's something you have too. I will never stop someone from doing what they want to."

There is something like physical pain on her face, but I can see Kenzo isn't holding her that tight. Then my eyes widen as Mom lifts herself to him and presses her mouth against his.

Oh crap.

I only realize I said the words out loud when they pull apart and look in my direction.

Ugh. Busted.

Walking down the stairs, I feel super uncomfortable. I see Idris standing by the window where he's keeping watch.

“How did you get here so fast?” I ask.

“We have legs, too,” Idris growls at me. When his gaze flicks to me, his features are tense with anger. “Do you know how fucking unpleasant it is to run with Rachel and Chance, listening to all the different ways they want to kill your stupid ass?” He takes a threatening step toward me. “I should do it now and save them the trouble.”

My lips part to say something when Idris’ eyes flick to somewhere behind me.

Oh shit. Chance.

When I turn around, it’s to find my mom glaring at me.

“If you have a death wish, just tell me,” she hisses. Her face is so close to mine I can see the tiny lines next to her eyes. They weren’t there before. “Tell me so I can kill you and put you out of your goddamn misery myself!”

I shove her hard, and she stumbles back. “This is what I didn’t want.” I’m too loud, so I take a deep breath to calm down. “I’m doing all of this for you.”

I glance at Kenzo and Idris. “Every one of you.” I lock eyes with Idris. “I don’t want to see any of you dead. You weren’t supposed to come. You were supposed to stay at the ward and let me do this.”

“We work as a team,” Idris snaps at me. “We die as a team.”

I have nothing to say to that, and my mouth goes even dryer when Chance comes out of the kitchen, his eyes burning with rage.

He grabs hold of my arm and yanks me up the stairs.

“Which fucking room?”

I point to my bedroom door. “On the left.”

Once we step inside, I move closer to the window while Chance leans back against the door. The expression on his face is nothing but grim.

It’s quiet for a while, and with every passing second, my stomach tightens more. I cross my arms over my chest, sucking in a fortifying breath of air.

Chance rubs a hand over his face, then walks to the middle of the room. He still doesn’t look at me. He glances at my dressing table and bed.

“I’ve always wanted someone who would match me,” he says, his tone deceptively soft. “I thought the person would have to be just as strong as me to keep up with me.”

He looks out the window, and my heart sinks. This is where he tells me I’m not good enough. I’m too weak for him.

“She wouldn’t know any fear.” He clears his throat.

I swallow, but it doesn’t help because the lump pushes past my throat and into my eyes, but I blink the tears away, refusing to cry.

“But, with you doing this, just taking off and trying to save all of us, I realized differently. I want someone who will depend on me as much as I depend on her. I want someone to watch out for me like I’ll watch out for her.” His eyes flick to mine. “I want someone who loves me, Jasper.”

He steps closer to me, shaking his head. “I’m not fighting this war just to stay alive. I’m fighting it so I can be with you, and I’d like to believe that’s how you feel too.”

Every word from his mouth is a blow to my heart. I can’t sacrifice hundreds, if not thousands, of people for the love I feel for him.

“What do you want me to say?” I whisper.

“I can’t tell you what to say or feel.” He sounds sad, and it tugs at my insides.

My gaze jumps to his, and the hurt in his eyes reminds me of when he lost Ethan.

“I can only tell you how I feel. I can only show you how I feel.” He looks out the window again. “Honestly, I’m fucking terrified I’ll wake up tomorrow, and you won’t be there. I’m scared I won’t get to touch you again. I’m scared I won’t get to taste you again.”

He takes a step closer, and his chest brushes against mine. His breath warms my cheek, then he whispers, “I’m hoping you’re just as scared as I am, and you want the same as me.”

I feel his lips brush over the sensitive skin beneath my ear and groan, “I do. I want it all.”

He slips his arm around my waist and pulls me against his chest. “Then, no running off without me.”

The anger is back in his gaze. “Because, so help me, God, I will fucking spank this stubborn streak out of you.”

I almost say I’d like to see him try but decide not to poke the bear.

“I just wanted to keep you all safe,” I explain.

“I know, but that’s not for you to decide. We’re stronger together, Jasper.”

“I just don’t want to lose you,” I admit to him. “Seeing all those dead people and our friends we lost scared the ever-loving hell out of me.”

“You won’t lose me. You’re all I have, little one.” His eyes soften. “But you can’t do this on your own.”

He hugs me tightly, and I melt into the warmth of his arms and chest.

If it’s wrong to love, to allow all these emotions to war and rage inside of me, then I’d gladly be an outcast. For him, I’d sacrifice everything. Even my life, and I fear that’s something he won’t understand.

Turns out I’m a coward after all. I don’t want to lose Chance, even if it means I have to die trying to stop the madness of war. Not once did I think how much it would hurt him. I only cared about sparing myself the heartache.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

I’m sorry I didn’t run faster.

I’m sorry I didn’t execute my plan before you got here.

I’m sorry, but I’m probably going to disobey you again.

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Chapter 17

Jai

Letting go of Chance, I sit down on my bed and ask, “Why are you so calm? I expected you to bite my head off.”

He lets out a sigh and shrugs. “Will it help if I yelled at you?” His eyes meet mine. “Once you set your mind on something, there’s no changing it. I just want you to include me in your crazy plans in the future.”

I stand up again, my eyes widening. “So you’re here to help and not to stop me?”

He nods. “But we don’t move forward without a decent plan in place. We can’t go running crazy through the ecocity. That will only get us killed.”

Intense relief washes through me, and I dart forward, throwing my arms around his neck. “Thank you!” I press a kiss to his mouth, and although it was supposed to be quick, the instant our lips touch, it explodes into a wild frenzy of lips, tongues, and teeth.

For a moment, Chance pulls back, giving me such a predatory look it makes my heart beat out of control in my chest.

Moving at the same time, our bodies crash together, and our mouths latch on to each other again. Chance's hands grip the hem of my shirt and pull the fabric over my head. Then he takes hold of my hips and pushes me back until I bump into the bed.

The heat in his eyes makes my abdomen clench with need, then his mouth burns a hot path down my neck.

When he reaches my breast, his teeth clamp down on my sensitive nipple, almost ripping a cry from me.

Geez, this man. He's intense as hell.

Chance pushes me down, and my butt hits the mattress.

For a moment, I think about my mother and our friends downstairs, but then he kneels in front of me and pulls my underwear and pants down my legs.

Yep, no thinking about them right now.

When I'm butt naked in front of Chance, his hand moves up my thighs, forcing them wide open for him. I feel self-conscious when his eyes rest between my legs.

"Hold onto something." It's the only warning he gives me before he starts lapping at my slit.

Holy crap.

My lips part on a silent O as I grab fistfuls of his hair.

He lifts my legs over his shoulders, and I fall back onto the bed, my fingers instantly gripping the covers.

Using his lips, teeth, and tongue, he attacks my clit in a way that makes me see stars. I quickly cover my mouth with my hands to stop the moans and whimpers from escaping.

Chance works me into a frenzy, pleasure erupts through me like a volcano, my back arching and every muscle in my body tensing.

Before I can recover, his burning, blue eyes meet mine. “Now I’m going to fuck that stubborn streak right out of you,” he growls as he stands up and unbuttons his pants.

I watch as he undresses, my eyes feasting on his ink and hard muscles.

Damn, my man is a work of art. How did I get this lucky in a world where no luck seems to be found?

I move higher up on the bed as Chance crawls over me. His mouth latches onto my nipple, his teeth biting and his tongue soothing the sting. I feel it all the way to my abdomen.

He takes hold of my jaw, and holding me in place, he kisses the ever-loving crap out of me. It’s so wild, it feels like I’m having an out-of-body experience.

When I feel his hard length press against my opening, I moan into his mouth, the anticipation of having him inside me overwhelming.

Keeping himself braced on his right forearm, he grips my hip with his other hand, then slams into me. His hardness forces its way into me, stretching my inner walls until it borders on painful. He doesn’t give me any time to adjust to his size but starts to pound into me like a possessed man.

The sound of our skin slapping mixes with the unstoppable moans spilling from me. Chance covers my mouth with his hand, his eyes keeping mine captive while he takes me harder than he ever has before.

All his anger. His worry. His frustration.

He gives it to me with every hard thrust.

“Do you want to orgasm?” Chance asks in a low growl.

Stupid question.

“Of course,” I reply breathlessly.

“Then you’ll fucking listen to me in the future,” he orders.

As long as he keeps pounding into me like this, I’m pretty sure I’ll do anything so he doesn’t stop.

“Say it,” he demands on a hard thrust that shifts my body up a couple of inches.

“I’ll listen...,” I gasp and moan, “to you.”

“Come, little one,” he growls as he hammers into me, giving me permission.

The friction between our bodies drives me wild, my body strains against his, then sweet release spreads through me as I start to convulse. The ecstasy is so intense I stop breathing, my vision goes spotty, and a sound I’ve never made before escapes me.

Chasing the pleasure, I grind my hips against Chance’s pelvis for all the friction I can get while he finds his own release. His teeth sink into my shoulder to smother his groan as he fills me with short thrusts, his muscles as tense as I’ve ever seen them.

I’ve never felt so satisfied, and as he lifts his head, I frame his jaw with my hands and kiss him.

When I free his mouth, our eyes lock. There's so much love between us it makes me realize I was stupid to think I could take on the world all by myself.

I'll always need this man by my side because he's my strength. He's my everything.

"You and me," I whisper.

"Always."

Chance gives me one last tender kiss, then pulls out of me. We clean up and get dressed before he asks, "So, what's your plan?"

"I kind of want to kidnap my dad. They can't make insensates without him."

Chance nods.

"And I want to kill the emissaries so people can be free from their control."

An eyebrow lifts on his forehead. "How did you think you'd get close enough to kill them?"

I shrug. "I'm a woman. If I go to the haven and demand to see them, I'm sure they'd let me in."

Chance stares at me, and with every second that passes by, the expression on his face grows darker. "Seriously? That was your big plan?"

I shrug, knowing how stupid it sounds. "I didn't have time to think of something better."

"Jesus, woman," he mutters. "You'll be the death of me."

“Don’t say that,” I whisper, not liking the word death in any way associated with him. “I just want all the killing to stop. Too many people are dying.”

Chance steps forward, and wrapping his fingers around the back of my neck, he presses his forehead to mine. “I know, but from now on, we work together.”

I nod quickly.

He gives me a last tender kiss, then lets go. “The others are waiting.”

“And probably wondering whether you spanked me,” I joke.

Chance grins at me as he opens the door. “I thought about it a great deal on the way here.” To make a point, he smacks my butt on the way out of the bedroom.

Coming down the stairs, Kenzo and Mom are whispering near the glofish, and Idris is standing with Raze, Skater, Valen, and Dawn. I didn’t even know our other friends were here. I’m surprised to see Dawn, but I figure Idris didn’t want to leave her behind at the main ward.

“You all came,” I voice my thoughts.

“Of course,” Raze mutters, looking a little upset with me.

“I’m sorry I left you all behind. I just didn’t want you near any danger,” I try to explain.

Raze just nods while Dawn comes to give me a hug. “You scared the bejesus out of me. Don’t ever do that again,” she whispers.

“I won’t,” I promise.

“Okay,” Idris says as his gaze drifts over all of us. “What’s the plan?”

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Chapter 18

Jai

We're all standing around the kitchen when Kenzo asks, "Are you sure your father won't suddenly come home?"

"Pretty sure," I mutter. "It would make things easier if he did, though. That way, we won't have to break into the labs."

Idris shakes his head. "We'll still have to go to the laboratories to destroy everything."

"Right." I let out a sigh. "So we're attacking the laboratories first."

Chance nods. "We'll split into two groups. In case one group is stopped, the other can still get in. Hopefully."

"We're eight people." I glance at everyone. "Who's coming with Chance, Raze, and me?"

"I will," Mom answers quickly. She locks eyes with me. "I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"You're with me, Kenzo," Idris says.

Kenzo doesn't look happy about being split from my mom, but he nods.

"And me?" Dawn asks.

All eyes turn to her. Idris stares long and hard at the woman he seems to love, then he says, "You have no training."

“I can fire a gun.” She lifts her chin. “You’re not leaving me in this house. You wanted me to come along, and I kept up with you all the way here.”

“True,” he murmurs. “Stay by my side.”

A smile spreads over Dawn’s face.

“Okay,” Chance says to get everyone’s attention. “My group will scale the building and enter from the fire escape on the roof.”

“Fucker,” Idris mumbles. “That leaves us with the sewage drains.”

“Gross,” Dawn whispers. “On second thought, I’ll go with Chance and Jai.”

Idris lets out an amused chuckle, “Not happening, baby.”

“Shoot.” She smiles widely, and I can only assume it’s because he called her baby.

“First thing first,” I say. “Everyone needs to change into virtuous clothing, so we don’t stand out.” I look at Kenzo, Idris, and Chance. Skater will fit into my dad’s clothes, but I’m not so sure about the other three men.

“There’s no fucking way I’m wearing that shit,” Idris mutters.

“I second that,” Kenzo backs him.

I look at Chance, and he shakes his head, then says, “The women can change into the clothes. We’ll stick with our combat gear.”

“I’ll check outside to make sure it’s safe to leave,” Idris mentions as I take the women upstairs to give them some of my old clothes.

When we’re all dressed and ready for the mission, we gather by the backdoor.

“We’re leaving in groups of two,” Chance says. “Jai and me, then Raze and Rachel, then Idris and Dawn, followed by Kenzo and Skater. Keep a couple of yards between us, so we don’t attract attention as a group.”

“It’s the middle of the night, so there won’t be many people outside,” I mention. “Mostly enforcers. Keep in mind they’re probably only following orders like the rest of the citizens.” I lock eyes with Idris. “Not everyone’s the enemy here.”

“Yeah-yeah,” he mutters. “But if someone pulls a weapon on me, they’re dead.”

“Let’s do this,” Chance orders.

I follow him out of the house, and we stick to the shadows as much as possible as we sneak down the street.

“It’s going to be an hour’s walk,” I whisper.

“Then we better start running.”

I glance over my shoulder to see if the others are behind us and only manage to make out a shadow here and there. Increasing my pace, I start to jog, staying behind Chance as we move through the streets.

When we reach the highway that stretches between the neighborhood and the heart of the ecocity, we leave the main road for the fields on either side of it, so we're not out in the open.

I'm out of breath when we finally reach the first side street of the ecocity.

We wait for Raze and my mom to catch up with us, then Chance says, "Careful of the surveillance cameras."

Cautiously, we sneak through the streets. Most of the buildings have lights on.

"Can't we jump from rooftop to rooftop?" I ask.

"No. Some are too far apart," Chance answers. "Besides the sewage drain, the only other way into the laboratories is from the roof. Unless we walk through the front door, and that's not happening."

"Right." I take a deep breath, constantly glancing around me.

We hear a vehicle's engine and quickly find a place to hide behind one of the many big plastic bins used for trash collection.

"I hope Idris' team is doing okay," I whisper.

With a view of the street from the alley we're in, we watch as an official vehicle drives by.

As soon as it's safe to move out of our hiding spot, Chance orders, "Let's go."

We finally make it to the building, and I'm surprised at how plain it looks compared to the haven. Honestly, I never even noticed it before.

But maybe that's the idea. If it doesn't stand out, people won't notice it.

We stop at a safe distance and survey the building. There are two guards loitering out back, neither looking fully awake.

"Are we taking them out?" I ask.

"Not if we can help it," Chance answers. "If one of the guards from inside checks in on them and they don't report, then it will give away our element of surprise."

I point to the side of the building. "So we have to scale that wall without them seeing us?"

I'm no expert, but there's no way that's happening.

"Let me think," Chance murmurs.

We watch the guards for a couple of minutes, Raze keeps an eye on our surroundings.

One of the guards' radios makes a crackling sound, and we hear a bored voice saying, "Check in, Izak."

We see how the guard presses a button. "Everything's quiet."

Chance leans closer to us, whispering. "Let's disable them and take the radio. I can answer if they check in with the guards."

"Okay."

“Wait here with Rachel while Raze and I take care of the men.”

I frown at Chance, not liking the order at all. I’m on high alert as I watch Chance and Raze sneak closer.

When they’re within attacking distance, Chance shoots forward and wraps an arm around the guard’s neck, dragging him into the shadows.

Raze climbs the other guard like a tree and wraps her legs around his neck. With a twist of her body, she breaks his neck.

Oh wow. I seriously need to learn how to do that.

Mom and I rush forward to help Raze drag the guard behind one of the trash bins.

We take his radio, and meeting Chance by the wall we’re going to climb, I hand him the device. He tucks both radios behind his back, the waistband of his pants keeping them in place.

“You all ready to climb?” he asks.

I nod, even though I’m nervous as hell. I’ve never climbed the grid without the support of the harness and ropes.

Whatever you do, don’t fall.

I stare up at the brick wall. The grooves are clearly visible, so I don’t have to search for them. It’s also evenly spread out and seems to be much easier to climb. Or, at least, I hope so.

It’s the height that will be the problem.

Just don’t look down.

If they can do it, so can you.

And honestly, it's better than crawling through the sewage tunnel. That shit will make you claustrophobic. Never mind the smell.

“Ready?” Chance asks as he finds grooves to hoist his body up the wall.

As ready as I'll ever be. Here goes nothing.

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Chapter 19

Jai

Holy shit.

Don't look down.

For the love of all that's good, do not look down.

I try to keep my grunts as soft as possible as I stretch and cling at a snail's pace, working my way up the wall.

This is so not the same as the grid.

I try to keep my breathing under control while my heart beats a mile a minute.

Chance reaches the roof first, followed by Raze and then my mother.

I still have a quarter of the way to go. I slip a little and stop thinking about the others, focusing on not falling.

One inch at a time. You've got this.

With all my attention on climbing, I startle when Chance grabs hold of my hand. I'm yanked up and onto the roof before it even registers that he's helping me.

I don't get time to thank him, because he's already jogging to a door that's situated in the middle of the roof. I wipe my hands on my pants to get rid of the sweat and follow after him.

I watch as Chance does something to the lock with two pins, and when the door clicks open, I frown. “It looked way too easy to open the door. Shouldn’t there be more locks?”

Chance’s eyes meet mine. “They’re arrogant and don’t expect an attack.”

True. In all my years living in the ecocity, there were never any break-ins to buildings and houses. At least, none that I know of.

Pulling his gun from behind his back, Chance steps inside first. I do the same, getting my weapon ready in my hand.

Just as the door shuts behind us, one of the radios crackles. “Check in, Izak.”

Chance takes hold of the radio, clears his throat, and says, “Everything’s quiet.”

When he puts the radio back, I ask, “How will we know if it worked?”

“We won’t hear any alarms go off,” Mom answers.

Slowly, we make our way down the stairs, on high alert for any movement. When we reach a hallway that seems to go on forever, Chance says, “Try not to fire your weapons. If you can disable a person with hand-to-hand combat, then do so.”

Quickly, we rush down the hallway, sticking close to the wall. We reach a doorway, and Chance opens it. “Come!”

We all bundle inside what looks like a janitor’s closet.

“Perfect.” Chance picks up a pair of overalls and puts them on. He grabs a mop and bucket, then looks at us, “Let me go ahead. If the coast is clear, I’ll come back for you.”

“And if you don’t come back?” I ask, not liking this idea at all. We should stick together.

“Then complete the mission.”

Before I can argue, Chance is out the door, pretending to mop the floor as he surveys the rest of the hallway. I keep the door open an inch so I can see him.

When two scientists come out of a room up ahead, I hold my breath, my eyes locked on Chance. They don’t seem to pay him any attention, and the instant they walk by him, he signals something to me.

“There are two scientists coming toward us,” I whisper to Mom and Raze. “I think Chance wants us to knock them out and take their clothes.”

Mom comes to take a peek. “It will be easy.”

We wait until the man and woman walk past us, then I yank the door open. Mom grabs the man and pulls him into the closet while I go for the woman, who turns to see what’s happening. Her features go slack with shock, and I don’t have to use much force to take hold of her and drag her into the closet.

I instantly realize there’s nothing to restrain them with, and I start to worry.

“Give us the lab coats,” Mom orders them. The man and woman shrug out of the coats and hand them to us. “And your key cards.”

I take one of the coats and put it on. The moment Mom has the keycards, she grabs a bottle of tile cleaner, pours it out into a sink, and fills it with water.

“What are you doing?” I ask. “We don’t have time for this.”

Mom turns around and, holding the gun behind the bottle, now filled with water, she pulls the trigger twice in quick succession.

My hands fly up to cover my mouth as horror ripples through me from the two bodies hitting the floor.

“Come on!” Chance suddenly snaps from the doorway. He only spares the bodies a glance. “We have to move.”

Mom shrugs on the other coat and hands one of the keycards to Chance.

Raze pushes me out of the closet, saying, “I’ll just pretend to be an insensate. Say you’re taking me for testing or some shit.”

“Why did you kill them?” I finally manage to ask. “They were normal citizens.”

“People who can scream and alert the whole damn city that we’re here,” Mom mutters. “It had to be done.”

It makes sense, but it doesn’t make it right.

When we finally get into a laboratory, my mouth drops open. There’s a wide variety of equipment everywhere, none of which I know the names of.

Four counters are situated in the middle of the room, and on the far side are empty cages big enough to hold a human.

The room is otherwise empty, and not finding anything of value, we creep through the room toward another door.

The place smells so clean you could probably eat off the floor. Not that I would. It's just a random observation.

The antiseptic smell also reminds me of Dad, and it causes my heart to squeeze.

Honestly, I'm not sure how Dad will react when he sees us or hears about our plan. I hope he agrees and joins us willingly.

Just as we reach the door, it makes a buzzing sound, then opens. I freeze, and so do Mom and Raze.

Chance, on the other hand, darts forward, and as a man steps through the doorway, coming into the room we're in, Chance grabs him and drags him farther inside, letting the door slam shut.

The man struggles against the hold Chance has around his neck, and for the second time, I watch as the man I love snaps the man's neck.

Raze helps Chance strip the body of the lab coat and keycard, then she quickly puts on the coat.

Not that I think it will help. None of us look like virtuous citizens.

Chance drags the body away from the door, then the radio crackles again, "Check in, Izak."

"I guess it worked," Raze chuckles.

Chance takes a deep breath, and with a calm tone, says, “Everything’s quiet.” He puts the radio away, then nods in the direction of the door. “Once we breach, there might not be any time for hand-to-hand combat. Shit might go down. Brace yourselves.”

My fingers tighten around the handle of my gun as I nod.

Chance scans the keycard, and the door opens with a buzzing sound. We all rush into the next room only to come to a sudden stop.

Jesus.

I gasp at the sight of Ethan. I’m not sure it’s Ethan, though. There are ten men, all identical to Ethan, which means they harvested his DNA and made clones.

I can’t believe my dad did that to Ethan.

My eyes snap to Chance’s face, and I see the moment the sight of his brother’s clones shatters his heart.

Suddenly there’s movement by another door, and all our arms are raised in the air, our guns trained on whoever comes through it.

I’m hit with a wave of anger and worry when I see it’s Dad. He doesn’t notice us immediately, too focused on the tablet in his hand.

He goes to stand in front of the clones, and presses a button, then says, “Crouch.”

The ten clones crouch.

“Jump,” he gives another order.

Like puppets, they jump.

He's programming them. Holy shit. Do they control the insensates from here?

Chance moves forward, his weapon trained on my father. "What the fuck have you done to my brother?" It's a snarl filled with the promise of death.

I watch as the man I love more than life itself is a second away from killing my dad.

Dad's eyes widen when he sees Chance, then he notices me, and finally, his stunned gaze rests on Mom.

For a moment, it looks like he can't comprehend what he's seeing, then he gasps, "Why are you here?" Panic tightens his features. "You shouldn't have come back, Jasper!"

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Chapter 20

Jai

“What the fuck did you do to my brother?” Chance roars.

Dad flinches, his face tightening with fear. Chance presses the gun against my father’s temple, then growls, “I will not hesitate to kill you.”

“Tell him, Dad,” I cry, and when I try to dart forward, Mom grabs hold of my arm, holding me back.

Dad closes his eyes, and holding up his hands, he whimpers, “Ethan is alive.”

“Where is he?” Chance demands.

Thankfully, he lowers the gun, and I can breathe again.

“I have him in a safe room.” Dad looks at Chance. “I’ve been hiding him from the emissaries, but I had to make the clones, so they believed it when I told them Ethan died.”

“My brother is alive,” Chance says, his voice strained with all the emotions that must be wreaking havoc inside him.

I yank my arm free from Mom’s hold on me and rush forward. “You have to destroy everything and come with us, Dad.”

A confused expression washes over his features, then he mutters with disbelief, “Destroy everything?”

“Yes.” I take hold of his arm. “Tonight, everything ends. We’re stopping this war.”

“Either you’re with us, or you’re against us,” Mom snaps as she comes toward us, her fingers flexing around the handle of her weapon.

“I can’t leave here,” he says, still sounding confounded.

Mom raises her arm, pointing the gun at him. “Then you’re against us.”

“Tell me where Ethan is before she puts a bullet in your head,” Chance demands.

“Wait,” I cry. “What the hell? Can we all just calm down for a minute?”

Just then, Raze smashes a chair into a computer monitor. “While you’re all talking shit, we’re running out of time.”

As she continues to destroy everything, I lock eyes with my father. “Just disable the insensates and come with us. This reign of terror is ending.” When he still hesitates, I ask, “Are you prepared to make clones of me? Of Mom? Are you willing to alter our DNA and make us insensates?”

“N-no,” he stutters, looking terrified.

“Then destroy everything and come with us. That’s the only other option.”

Dad nods, and looking frazzled, he starts to type on the device in his hand. Within seconds, the clones of Ethan drop to the floor, lifeless.

“Holy shit,” Raze gasps. “It’s that easy?”

The realization hits like a ton of bricks. Slowly my eyes leave the bodies to find my father. “You control them? You had them attack the main ward?”

Dad quickly shakes his head. “As soon as they’re processed and ready to go, the emissaries take over control of them.”

“How many insensates do they have access to?” Chance asks.

“Thousands,” Dad whispers. “There’s another group marching toward the main ward as we speak.”

Jesus. There’s no way to warn the ward.

“We have to stop them,” Chance snaps.

“Let’s get to work,” Mom says and grabbing one of the other chairs, she helps Raze smash the equipment.

“Is there any way to shut down the program?” Chance asks.

Dad nods. “On the first floor. But it’s heavily guarded.”

“Can you get in there?” I ask.

Dad nods again. “But it will take me an hour.”

“I’ll go with him,” I say, not trusting Dad to shut it all down. It’s an awful thought, but I can’t help it. My gut tells me to watch him.

“Where’s Ethan?” Chance asks again.

“One floor down. Room nineteen,” Dad answers. He flinches at the noise of everything being destroyed.

The radio crackles. “There’s a disturbance on the second floor, Izak. You’re closest. Check it out.”

Chance gestures for Mom and Raze to stop, then he takes out the radio. “Copy.”

He’s just about to tuck the radio behind his back when it crackles again. “Copy? Who’s this? What’s going on out there?”

Chance discards the radio. “Let’s move. We’re getting Ethan, then disabling the program.” He gestures with his gun for Dad to move. “Show us the easiest way. If you try to screw us over, I’ll kill you.”

“Do you think the disturbance on the second floor is Idris?” I ask as we move toward a door.

“Probably,” Chance answers.

Chance leaves the lab first, with Mom and Dad behind him and Raze and me bringing up the tail end.

“This way. The elevators are the quickest,” Dad says.

Chance lets out a huff. “And every single one of them has cameras.”

“They already know we’re here,” Raze reminds him.

“True.”

We all pile into an elevator, and I tighten my grip on my gun, closing my eyes and sucking in deep breaths of air.

“You okay?” Chance asks.

“She’s claustrophobic,” Mom answers. “Just imagine you’re running through an open field.”

She always told me to do that. My eyes pop open, and I stare at my mother.

It's hard to think we were a happy family once.

“Get ready,” Raze says.

I brace myself for a group of enforcers waiting to apprehend us, but when the doors open, the hallway is empty.

“Maybe everyone went down to the second floor?” I ask as we rush to the door marked nineteen. Dad scans his keycard and opens the door, then he's shoved out of the way by Chance.

There's only a bed in the room. Honestly, it looks like the old prison cells I saw in my history books.

Ethan stands up from the bed, complete shock on his face as Chance grabs him, yanking him into a hug.

“Thank God,” Chance breathes. “I thought you were dead.”

There's pure relief on both Chance and Ethan's faces, the moment emotionally charged.

Watching the brothers reunite, especially knowing how much Chance loves Ethan, a lump forms in my throat, but I swallow it down.

“We have to move,” Mom snaps.

Just then, the elevator door pings open again, and eight enforcers step out.

Both Mom and I raise our arms and point our guns at the enforcers as if we're moving as one. Honestly, it's unnerving that even though we've been through so much, we're still in sync.

It's also a blow to my heart because I really want my loving mother back.

But I can't think of that right now.

As the guards start to raise their own weapons, I pull the trigger of my gun.

Raze joins us, and Dad ducks into the room for safety. Soon Chance comes out and opens fire on the enemy. One after the other enforcer starts to fall.

A bullet flies by my head, and I'm shoved to the side by Mom.

"Jasper," Dad cries.

It's good to know he still cares about me.

Chance and Raze take out most of the enforcers, and when there's only the buzzing of the aftermath in the air, I try to gather myself and slow my thundering heartbeat.

Mom bumps into me, then stumbles and braces herself against the wall.

It's only then I see the blood seeping through her shirt by her lower abdomen.

No.

I tuck my gun in the back of my waistband, and darting forward, I press my hand to the wound. "We need a curer."

“There’s no time,” Raze says.

Dad comes out of the room, and his features tighten at the sight of Mom’s blood. “This way,” he mutters, already moving toward the other door.

He leads us to another room, and I’m horrified to see bodies lining the one wall, all with some kind of defect. Missing arms. Missing legs. Some have no eyes.

Jesus. Failed experiments.

Then I turn my head, and the breath is knocked from my lungs. The room goes on for what seems forever, bags hanging from the ceiling with people in all stages of development in them.

Insensates. This is a breeding room.

“Get on the table,” Dad instructs Mom.

“What are you going to do?” I ask, not trusting the man responsible for this level of depravity, even if he is my father.

“I’m going to remove the bullet and close the wound,” Dad informs us with a neutral tone.

I guess it’s easy for him to cut into people.

When Mom lies down on the table, I take up position next to her and give Dad a look of warning. “Try anything weird, and I’ll kill you myself.”

His eyes lock with mine, and I see sadness flash in his irises, but then he nods and gets to work.

Mom’s hand finds mine, her fingers clinging to me. I look at her and only see pride on her face. “In case something goes wrong. I’m so fucking proud of you, Jasper.”

A lump shoots to my throat, but I force it down.

“You’re going to be fine,” I say, my voice tense with worry.

Chance stands with his arm wrapped around Ethan like he’s afraid his brother will vanish if he lets go of him.

Raze keeps watch, her alert gaze checking the two exits while Dad gets everything ready to remove the bullet from Mom’s side.

I squeeze Mom’s hand. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

I hope.

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Chapter 21

Jai

Dad gives Mom something to manage the pain before he starts digging the bullet out of her.

Honestly, I'm squeamish and unable to watch, I turn my attention to Chance and Ethan. The brothers are whispering, and I'm guessing Chance is catching Ethan up on everything he's missed since the trackers caught him.

I'm so glad he survived and Chance has his brother back. It's a ray of light in all the darkness we're facing.

Luckily, it only takes fifteen minutes, and even though Mom should rest and heal, we know there's no time for that.

Once this night is over, Dawn can nurse Mom back to health. But right now, we have to move. There's still a lot to do.

Dad uses some type of glue to bond the torn skin together, and as he pulls his surgical gloves off, Mom struggles into a sitting position.

When I move closer to help her, she says, "I'm fine. We've wasted enough time. Let's go."

"I'll check the hallway," Raze says.

My eyes lock with Chance's. "You good?" he asks.

I nod, even though it's the furthest thing from the truth. I just want this mission over and done with.

"I need backup," Raze shouts.

I run to her, and looking into the hallway, I see insensates coming from the stairway. Ten, maybe twenty.

"Insensates," I shout so the others will know. "A lot."

We all dart out of the room and open fire. I have to reload my clip and start to worry that we'll run out of ammunition before we make it to the haven to kill the emissaries.

When my clip is empty again, I fall back and pull the bag from Raze's shoulders while she continues to shoot. Setting the bag on the floor, I open it quickly and grab a clip.

Darting up, I open fire, and Mom falls back to reload her gun. It feels like forever before the last insensate falls, then Chance storms to my dad, grabs him by the front of his shirt, and shoves him against a wall. "Why the fuck did you create these things?"

"To survive," Dad shouts. "Just like everyone else, I had to survive."

"At the cost of everyone else," I mutter as I close the bag and shrug the strap over my shoulder. "Let's go."

We file into the elevator, and I press the button for the first floor.

"We'll be walking into an army on that level," Mom says. "Wouldn't it be safer to get out on the third floor?"

"This is the quickest way," I snap. "We'll be faced with an army no matter where we go. It's time to end this."

Chance takes hold of my arm and presses his forehead against my hair as we descend. “Stay by my side.”

I nod.

“Love you, little one.”

I turn my head, and locking eyes with him, I say, “I love you.”

The doors ping, and we immediately take a ready stance. When the elevator opens, we pause, and then a massive smile forms on my face at the sight of Idris, Kenzo, Dawn, and Skater.

“About fucking time,” Idris says, the corners of his mouth lifting. Then he sees Ethan, and Idris smiles broadly for the first time since I met him. “Damn, it’s good to see they didn’t turn you into DNA bait, Ethan.”

“Lucky me,” Ethan chuckles. “What took you so long to come and get me?”

“We’re here now.” Idris nods in the direction of the front doors. “They’ve blocked off the entrance to the haven.”

We all move into the lobby. Across the road, we can see enforcers and insensates in the lobby of the haven.

Kenzo sees the blood on Mom’s shirt and darts to her side. “What the fuck happened?”

“I’m fine,” Mom reassures him.

Wrapping an arm around her neck, he pulls her into a hug as he presses a kiss to her forehead.

My eyes dart to Dad, who only spares them a glance. He doesn’t seem to be bothered.

Who are these people?

I shake my head, thinking I never knew my parents.

“What do we do?” I ask to get everyone’s attention back on the mission.

It seems like an impossible task to get into the haven. I don’t think we have enough firepower.

Idris gestures up at the ceiling. “We have labs above us. There has to be something we can use to make bombs.”

Everyone turns to look at Dad. “Oh...a...okay.”

“We’ll stand guard here,” Kenzo says. “Skater and Raze, you’re with us.”

I hand the bag with ammunition to Raze as Idris nods, then jog to catch up with Chance, Dad, and Idris as they step into the elevator.

We get out on the third floor and follow Dad to one of the laboratories. He gathers bottles of chemicals and says, “If we put a piece of cloth in the mouth of each of the bottles and set it on fire, it will work well as a bomb.”

“How many bottles do you have?” Idris asks.

“It’s rubbing alcohol. There are a couple of bottles in every laboratory.”

Idris takes the bottle from Dad and shows it to Chance and me. “Search the floor and bring back all the rubbing alcohol you can find.”

Chance and I jog out of the lab and start moving from room to room. I find a bag we can load the bottles into and also grab all the towels and rags I see.

There's a lighter lying on the table, and Chance grabs it, shoving it into his back pocket.

"Next lab," he says and pauses at the door to make sure the hallway is empty.

Once we've cleared out the entire floor, we head back to the laboratory Idris is waiting in.

"We got a lot," Chance says as we hurry into the room.

Idris is already shoving pieces of torn cloth into the mouths of the bottles.

When we take everything out of the bag and place it on the table, Idris says, "Matthias, you can cut the towels into strips. Jai, push them deep into the bottles and make sure the cloth is soaked on both ends. Chance, find a box we can load the bottles into."

We get to work, everyone doing their part. Chance finds two boxes and starts loading the bombs into them.

"There's a group of insensates on their way to the main ward," Chance informs Idris.

Idris' eyes lock with Chance's. "My brother and the soldiers will protect the ward, but let's move. It will save lives if we can stop the insensates on our end."

"Matthias can destroy the program. It's held in the haven, so we're not just going there to kill the emissaries. We need to get him to the main computer room so he can shut this shit down."

Idris nods. "After that's taken care of, we'll kill the emissaries."

Chance and Idris each take a box. I keep an eye on my dad as we hurry to the elevator and make our way to the first floor.

When we step out of the elevator, Mom is sitting on a chair by the reception counter, and Raze and Kenzo are standing in front of the closed exit doors, keeping an eye out for any enemies.

“We have bombs,” Idris informs them.

“I’ll light the fuses. You and Kenzo throw them,” Chance says as he sets his box down on the gleaming tiles.

I walk to Raze and gesture at the bag on her back. “I want three clips, so I don’t have to worry during the action.”

She shrugs the bag off, and I quickly help myself. Glancing at Mom, I ask, “Do you want extra ammunition?”

“Yeah, hand me two clips.”

We distribute all the remaining ammunition between everyone and shove the clips into our pockets. Chance hands Ethan one of his guns, so he can at least protect himself.

“Ready?” Idris asks. When everyone nods, he starts giving orders, “We stay in groups of two. Cover your partner’s back at all times. Dawn, you’re with me. Skater, you’re with Raze. Kenzo, you’re with Rachel, and Chance is with Jai and Ethan.”

“What about me?” Dad asks.

“You’re somewhere in the middle where we can all keep an eye on you.” Idris checks the clip in his gun, then continues, “First things first, we’re getting Matthias to the main computer room,” he locks eyes with Dad, “which is where?”

“The entire fourth floor,” Dad answers. “I just need to get to the motherboard. I’ll be able to shut it down from there.”

Idris gives my father an impatient look. “Again, which is where?”

“Oh, on the fourth floor. It’s hard to explain. Just get me there, and I’ll do the rest.”

Idris doesn’t like the answer, but he continues with the mission, “After the program is shut down, we’re finding the fucking emissaries and killing them.”

“And then?” Dawn asks. “Once we’ve done all of this, what happens?”

“We’ll make an announcement to the people, informing them that all the shit they’ve been fed for decades is nothing but lies,” Chance says.

“Quinlan can handle the politics,” Idris mutters.

“I want to be a part of the politics,” I tell Idris. “Make sure your brother knows that. The women need a voice to speak for them.”

“Two voices,” Dawn adds.

“Make that three,” Mom chuckles.

“God help me,” Idris mutters. “You can all take the matter up with my brother. It’s above my pay grade.”

“You don’t get paid,” Chance chuckles, slapping Idris on the shoulder. “Let’s get this night over and done with.”

Chapter 22

Jai

When we open the exit doors and step out onto the pavement, I notice how the insensates form a line behind the windows of the haven's building across the road. The enforcers have pulled back to where the elevators are.

Without wasting more time, Chance lights the first fuse and hands the bomb to Idris, who throws it. The bomb explodes seconds before reaching the window, but the blast is enough to shatter the glass and knock some of the insensates off their feet.

The rest of us open fire on the enemy while Chance, Idris, and Kenzo keep throwing bombs.

For minutes, it's pure madness and chaos, but finally, we start to push forward, careful of the burning debris. I stick to Chance's side with Ethan right behind me.

Raze and Skater fall in behind us. Dad is somewhere in the middle, with Idris and Dawn. Kenzo and Mom bring up the rear.

Just as we move into the lobby of the haven, the enforcers open fire on us. I hear Skater grunt a second before a burning sensation rips through my left thigh. Keeping my right arm raised, I pull the trigger in quick succession while my left hand drops to my thigh to put pressure on the wound.

It's fine. Keep going.

Chance ducks in my direction, and I'm bumped to the side, finding myself behind a pillar. His breathing is as hard as mine, his hand brushing over the wound on my leg.

Our eyes meet for a precious second. "You still good to go?"

I nod. "Yes."

"Ethan, are you still with us?" he asks his brother.

"Yeah," Ethan mutters from behind Chance.

Chance glances around the pillar, his body pressing against mine. I soak in the strength coming from him as he opens fire on the enforcers. Only when it's clear does he grip my arm and yank me from our hiding place. We run for the stairs, too many bodies blocking the elevators.

As we make our way up the stairs, I leave drops of blood on the steps. Glancing behind me, I see Skater. He took a bullet to his shoulder but seems to be okay. One by one, my friends come up the stairs, and when I'm sure no one else was shot, I feel relieved.

Dad looks rattled, though. He's probably never seen this level of violence, and it must be a shock to his system. Still, he keeps up with us, making me proud of him.

When we reach the fourth floor, I'm surprised it's not guarded.

"Are all the guards on the emissaries' floor?" I ask.

“Maybe they don’t think we’ll shut down the program?” Chance replies. “Keep in mind, they’re used to being in control. I don’t think they considered that we’d attack them.”

“That’s just arrogant and stupid,” I mutter, noticing I only have one clip left. “I’m really low on ammunition.”

“Me too,” Raze says.

Everyone checks how many clips they have, and it’s disheartening to see we probably won’t have enough to get to the emissaries. Not if they have half an army guarding them.

Gathering at the door that leads to the fourth floor, I can see the worry on everyone’s faces. We’ve come too far to turn back.

“We have to come up with another plan,” Chance says. “We don’t know what kind of firepower we’ll face on the seventh floor.”

“Are there any laboratories in this building?” I ask. “Maybe we can make more bombs?”

Dad shakes his head. “Unless there are flammable cleaning supplies we can use, there’s nothing I can think of to make a bomb.”

“Shoot,” I mutter.

“The surveillance cameras,” Mom mentions. “Can we access them to see what’s happening on the seventh floor? For all we know, the emissaries aren’t even in the building.”

“True,” Idris agrees.

Everyone looks at Dad, who starts nodding. “I can access the cameras from the mainframe.”

“We need to hurry,” Kenzo says. “If the emissaries are on the seventh floor, they’re expecting us any second. If we don’t show, they might realize what we’re up to and send enforcers and insensates to stop us.”

Bracing ourselves for an attack, Chance shoves the door open and moves into the hallway, his gun held firmly in his grip, ready to fire.

We all rush into the hallway, and finding no armed forces protecting the computers, we let out a collective sigh of relief.

That’s one win, at least.

“Where to?” Idris asks.

“This way.” Dad takes the lead, and we follow into a maze of computers. The air is freezing, making the gunshot wound to my leg pulse with pain.

I start limping, and it draws Chance’s attention. He wraps his arm around my lower back, taking some of my weight off my leg.

“I’ll check the wound as soon as we get to the mainframe.”

The deeper we move into the room, the colder it gets. I can’t keep my body from shivering, but I don’t mention the room temperature, seeing as the others aren’t complaining.

We reach a big black box that’s half the size of a container. Dad scans his keycard, and doors slide open, revealing flickering lights, wires, a monitor, and a keyboard.

Dad enters a password, accessing the system.

“Let me check your wound,” Chance says.

Taking hold of my hips, he helps me to sit on top of a counter. The fabric of my pants is soaked with blood.

Chance glances at Dad. “Joseph, give me your lab coat.”

Dad quickly shrugs out of the coat and throws it toward Chance before continuing with whatever he’s doing.

Chance uses a utility knife to cut a long strip of fabric off the coat, and when he wraps it around my leg, tying a tight knot, I clench my teeth and focus on what Dad’s doing.

“I’m in,” Dad says. On the monitor, there are hundreds of tiny blocks, all showing different footage.

Dad types some more on the keyboard, then only four blocks are singled out, giving us a clearer view of the seventh floor.

There are twenty insensates stationed in the hallway, watching the elevators and staircase. Inside the office space are seven enforcers, one for every emissary.

“It’s much less than I expected,” Idris mutters. “Clearly, they weren’t prepared for the war to come to them. Stupid fuckers.”

Emissary Jacob seems to be shouting, his features torn in anger.

“So much for controlling your emotions,” I mutter. “Is there any way we can hear what they’re saying?”

Dad shakes his head.

“Disable the insensates,” Idris orders. “We’ll only have the enforcers to deal with.”

Kenzo grins at the bit of good news. “We have enough ammunition to take down the fuckers.”

“Oh, no,” Dad gasps. “Look.” He points at a different security camera, showing the staircase.

There’s a group of insensates coming toward us.

“Get to work,” Idris roars. “Everyone guard the door and keep the fuckers out as long as possible.”

Dad starts typing fast, and even though it’s freezing in here, sweat beads on his forehead.

Chance helps me off the counter, then says, “Stay here. If the insensates get past us, help Idris and Dawn to protect your father until he shuts down the program.”

I grab hold of Chance’s shirt, tugging him down, and our lips crush together for a breathless moment before he pulls away and runs toward the door.

I move closer to Idris and my father, my fingers flexing around the handle of my gun. My eyes lock on the monitor, showing the insensates march up the stairs.

“Quicker, Dad,” I say, urgency lacing my words.

“I’m trying,” he breathes.

Gunfire erupts, the blasts echoing through the icy air. I glance at Idris and Dawn, then shake my head. “I have to help them.”

Before Idris can stop me, I limp as fast as I can toward the action. My friends have taken cover behind computer systems, and as the insensates march into the room, they’re taking them down.

It works for a couple of minutes, but then the insensates practically pour into the room. There are too many to pick them off one at a time.

“Joseph!” Chance shouts. “Any time now would be good.”

I aim and fire, not blindly shooting, seeing as I’m on my last clip.

Kenzo runs out of bullets first, and dropping his weapon, he storms the nearest insensate, slamming his fist repeatedly into the face of the insensate.

Chaos erupts, and it’s everyone for themselves as we fight to keep the insensates out of the room.

When my gun is empty, I dive for a dead insensate, and slamming into the body, I grab his weapon and pray it works the same as a regular gun. As I turn onto my back, I open fire.

Within seconds, my friends arm themselves with the fallen insensates guns, and we’re back in action.

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Chapter 23

Jai

All at once, the remaining insensates drop to the floor.

There's a moment in which you can only hear our harsh breaths and the buzzing from the computers, then Kenzo lets out a loud victorious holler, pumping his fist in the air.

We did it.

Shocked that we actually managed to shut down the insensate program, I'm frozen in place until Chance's arms wrap around me, lifting me off my feet. He hugs the ever-loving crap out of me, laughter bursting over his lips.

We did it.

Victory hits me so hard, I let out a sob as I wrap my arms around his neck. "We did it," I whisper, the relief I'm feeling more intense than any emotion I've ever experienced.

From over Chance's shoulder, I see Raze and Skater hugging and jumping with joy. Kenzo is swinging Mom in a circle.

When I see Ethan drop to his knees, I push at Chance to set me down. "Ethan."

Chance swings around and darts to his brother, who looks stunned with relief. I was worried there for a second that Ethan got hurt, but when Chance pulls him up and hugs him, I get back to celebrating our huge win.

With the pain in my leg forgotten, I run to Idris, Dawn, and Dad. I fling my body at my father. “You did it!”

Dad lets out a chuckle, a world of relief in the sound.

“I’m so proud of you,” I say before I let go of him. Our eyes lock, and there’s so much emotion between us. “Thank you.”

Dad seems overcome with emotion. He just nods and lets out a sigh.

“Now for the emissaries,” Idris shouts.

With adrenaline and happiness flooding our veins, we take the insensates weapons and rush up the stairs. The victory has given us all a fresh burst of energy, and as we storm into the hallway, Idris shoots at the door.

It shudders open, and after all the fighting we’ve done, we take down the enforcers without much effort.

Emissary Jacob is the first to drop to his knees, begging, “Don’t kill me. Please.”

“Everyone on their knees,” Idris shouts. “Follow your leader’s example.”

The other four men kneel beside Emissary Jacob.

I stare at the five men that have ruled the ecocity with an iron fist.

“Why did you do it?” I ask. “Why all the lies, the control, the cruelty, and violence?”

Emissary Jacob lifts his eyes to me. “It was to stop the annihilation of the human race.”

Mom lets out a bitter chuckle. “By killing hundreds?”

“It was for the greater good,” Emissary Jacob argues.

“No,” I snap as I limp forward. “This is for the greater good.” I pull the trigger of my weapon, killing the leader of the emissaries.

When Emissary Jacob drops dead to the floor, the remaining four emissaries start to beg for their lives.

“Shut up!” Idris roars, silencing the four terrified men. “There will be a vote. Do we execute the emissaries?”

Idris looks at Raze.

“Yes.”

His eyes move to Kenzo.

“That’s a stupid question, brother.”

When it’s clear there’s a unanimous yes, Idris doesn’t waste any more time, and one after the other, he executes the emissaries.

When the last man drops dead to the floor, the weight off my shoulders is so intense my legs go numb.

With the war officially over, I’m overcome with emotion.

The real hard work is only starting now. We have to get rid of the seven virtues. We must address the citizens and create a new leadership that will be fair to all.

We have to rebuild a new system that will benefit women and not only men.

Jesus, there's so much to do.

Chance takes hold of my shoulders and pulls me to my feet, then asks, "Can you walk?"

I nod, taking a deep breath of air.

Months ago, I walked out of this building a terrified girl. Today I'll walk out of here with my chin held high. With steel in my veins. With determination for a better future for all.

Today I walk out of the haven a warrior who won the war against injustice and cruelty.

Hours after the war ended, Quinlan, Idris' brother, arrived with the soldiers from the main ward.

Word is spreading fast through the ecocity that the emissaries have been killed. There are various rumors making the rounds, and we need to stop them before the citizens start panicking.

With Quinlan being more experienced in politics, we vote that he'll continue to act as the leader of the free people.

"I'll address the citizens and assure them of their safety. Do we inform them of all the crimes the emissaries committed?"

“They deserve to know the truth,” I say. “They also need to know about rain and the sun. The stars. What it’s really like outside the dome. We can’t just destroy the force field. It will cause widespread panic.”

Quinlan nods, taking down notes of everything.

You can see he’s Idris’ brother. They have the same features, and honestly, they could’ve been twins. But where Idris has the hardened look of a soldier, Quinlan has serious eyes. I can see his mind working to create a society from which all can benefit.

They’re both leaders in their own way.

Quinlan glances around the table we’re all sitting at. We cleared out an office space on the second floor of the haven, which is headquarters for the time being.

Besides Quinlan and his council of five men, there’s me, Chance, Idris, Kenzo, Dawn, Mom, and Raze.

We’re four women to nine men. In a world where women’s numbers are so few, I think it’s great that we have three votes.

He starts ticking items off a list. “We’ll need to establish new laws. The basics. No murder, no rioting, no looting.”

“No raping women,” I say, my voice firm. “I want the death sentence for any man who rapes a woman. It should not be tolerated at all.”

Quinlan locks eyes with me. “How do you expect me to control thousands of men?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, Quinlan, without women, the human race is pretty much fucked. We only need your sperm to create life, which we can find in the laboratories. Unless you want to restart the program, we just fought our asses off to shut down, you need our wombs to carry babies.” I suck in a deep breath. “We’re not just there for your breeding purposes. Women have feelings too. We have rights, and I demand you be as fair to us as you would to a man. “I gesture to Idris. “Give your brother an army to enforce the law. Now that there’s no war to train for, use our soldiers to protect the people.”

“I’d like to be a part of the army,” Mom says.

Quinlan lets out a heavy breath. “Okay, no raping of women.”

“Also, no forcing us to breed,” I add, giving him a pointed look to add it to his list.

After he’s written it down, he raises an eyebrow at me. “Anything else?”

“I’ll let you know when I think of something,” I grin, happy that I got my way.

Quinlan turns his attention to Chance. “You’ll have to head back to the main ward. I know you don’t want to be in the city. Take over my position as leader, and help people rebuild everything that was destroyed. I want to see if the fields between the city and ward are fertile enough to farm.”

Chance smiles at the news.

“And me?” I ask, not liking the idea of staying here in the ecocity while chance is at the ward.

“You’re coming with me. So is Ethan,” Chance answers. “There’s no way I’m leaving you here.”

A grin spreads over my face.

“Once a month, everyone will meet in the city so we can discuss problems and make sure everything is running smoothly.”

“What about the rebels,” Kenzo asks. “Are we just going to leave them to live in the metropolis area or clear them out?”

Quinlan shakes his head. “I’ll talk to Zane. I want to send men out to explore. We need to know if it’s just us who survived the wars or whether there are other groups of people out there.”

“Explorers,” I whisper. I read about them once in history class.

“Yes,” Quinlan agrees. “Explorers.” He looks at everyone again. “We have a lot of work. Some people might take longer than others to adapt to the new way, so use patience with them.”

“And those who refuse? What if a new faction emerges to challenge us?” Idris asks.

“We’ll deal with it when it happens,” Quinlan murmurs. “Clearing his throat, he continues, “I’ll address the people today.” He looks at me. “Your father will take down the seven virtues, and I’ll be able to address the people via the billboards?”

I nod. “Yes, my dad’s working on it right now.”

When Quinlan rises to his feet, we all do the same. He takes a moment to look at each of us again. “Let’s build a great city where the people can prosper and live in peace and harmony. It will take months, if not years, but together we can do this.”

We all agree.

I know it will take a lot of hard work, but we’ve already taken giant steps in the right direction.

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Chapter 24

Jai

Quinlan's address to the people was received with shock and confusion.

It's understandable, though. Everything they ever knew was thrown out of the window. Their lives changed irrevocably in a matter of a day. They all need time to adjust. Especially after learning that most of the crusaders sent out over the past decades have been killed or turned into insensates by the emissaries.

Where possible, we've reunited the crusaders, who survived and reached the wards, with their families, so there were something to celebrate.

Still, grief hangs thick in the air and most are fearful now that the *deviants* are living among them.

Idris is talking to the enforcers or what's left of them after the battle, asking them to join him in creating an army for the people.

Mom is coming to the ward with me to set up an army base for training. Of course, Kenzo's right behind her. Dawn will be staying in the city with Idris. Even though she's just been through some pretty traumatic stuff, she seems happy.

Honestly, I think Idris has the most challenging job of us all. He needs to create an army that will be able to keep the people from spiraling out of control while protecting them.

Dad will continue to be a scientist, but this time it will be for good. He'll help build the farmlands so that they can sustain the entire population.

Me? I'm on my way to the ward with Chance, Ethan, and Raze.

We're still on the lookout for trackers who might not have gotten the message that they're no longer employed. But we're armed and ready for any surprise attacks, so we stick to the streets of the broken-down metropolis and don't have to jump across rooftops.

Yeah, there won't be an instant change, no matter how badly I want it for the people. Like Quinlan said, it might take years, but at least we're moving in the right direction. We're building a new future.

The thought makes me smile, and it catches Chance's attention. "What's the smile for?"

I shrug. "I'm just happy."

"Yeah," he grins as he throws his arm around my shoulders. "You really didn't want to stay in the city and help Quinlan run things?"

I shake my head. "I've done my part." My eyes scan the endless grass fields stretching on either side of the road. "Now it's my turn to live."

I glance up at Chance, finding a soft expression on his face, as he asks, “Do you want to farm a piece of land with me? We can build a house of our own.”

My lips curve up at the idea of sharing a home with Chance. “I’d love that.” Scrunching my nose, I admit, “I have no idea how to build a house, though.”

He lets out a burst of laughter. “Leave that to Ethan and me.”

“What about me?” Raze asks.

I grab her hand and tug her closer. “You and I can figure out how to make furniture. I had a woodwork class once. It didn’t go well, though.”

She shakes her head at me but agrees, “Together, we can figure it out.”

Chance, me, Ethan, and Raze. Together we’ll build a future... a home.

If it’s one thing I’ve learned, nothing in this life is easy, but building a home with them will be worth every drop of sweat.

I’m happy that the man who’s my pillar of strength is by my side and that I can focus on just loving him the way he deserves to be loved.

I smile up at Chance, glad that we’re finally getting the opportunity to live a life of our choosing.

Our choices. Our freedom. Our love.

And a future that holds endless possibilities.

Watching Chance chop wood is the hottest thing I've ever seen. I'm supposed to be planting crops and feeding my chickens, but instead, I'm staring at my man.

In the past six months, we've helped to rebuild the ward. As a reward for our part in the war, Quinlan allowed us to claim one of the outer wards as our own.

We chose our old ward. It took a long time to clean it, but at least we didn't have to build a house from scratch.

We gave the dead a proper burial.

The animals are no longer inside the ward but outside in pens that Chance and Ethan made for them.

We still use the drill zone to keep fit, just in case we're forced to defend what's ours.

The dining hall has been changed into a living room and dining room. It's more homely. The old sleeping quarters is where Ethan lives, and Raze took Kenzo's old room.

The old animal enclosure and vertical farms have been cleaned out. We now use the space for storage.

Everything is working out perfectly.

Glancing at Raze, I say, "I'm taking a break."

She just smirks at me when she sees me walking in Chance's direction.

He slams an ax down on a piece of wood, and I let out a chuckle. “I could watch you chop wood all day long, but right now, I need you to come with me.”

Worry fills his eyes until he sees the desire on my face. The corner of his mouth lifts. “Yeah, I figure we have enough wood to start making the crates to store the vegetables in.”

“It can definitely wait until later.”

I hold my hand out to him, and when his fingers wrap around mine, I tug him toward our house because there’s only one thing missing. A baby.

With a bit of luck and a lot of hot steamy sex, we’ll hopefully celebrate the new year with us expecting our first child.

I have many dreams for our future, and slowly they’re all coming true.

The End.

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