



Cruellest
OBLIVION

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MICHELLE HEARD WRITING AS

M.A. HEARD

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Dedication

To my son, Sheldon, who's been there every step of the way, through thick
and thin, with me.

Every heartbeat is for you.

Songlist

Click here - [Spotify](#)

Beyond Today – James Gillespie

Sound Of War – Tommee Profitt, Fleurie

New Blood – Zayde Wolf

Revolution – The Score

Into The Darkness – The Phantoms

Angel – Theory Of A Deadman

Undone – FFH

Not Gonna Die – Skillet

In The End – Black Veil Brides

I Know Where I've Been – Elle King

Synopsis

Over the past four decades, the dome over our ecocity has protected us from the deviants living in the forbidden territory. Since the great war ended, our lives have consisted of virtue and order.

Once a year, seven people are sent out to the forbidden lands to see if there are any deviants worth saving. None have returned, only increasing people's fear of what lies beyond the safe border of the dome.

When I'm chosen as a crusader, the world, as I know it, is ripped from under my feet. In the forbidden territory, I learn things I never dreamed existed – a world I've been totally oblivious to. I meet people who freely show emotion and affection. People who dare make their own choices.

It's frightening and the opposite of everything I've ever known.

Suddenly, I have to fight for my life. I'm thrown into chaos where time is running out to become a skilled fighter who will be an asset for the coming war. But my mind's bombarded with questions – who's right and who's wrong? Which side should I fight on?

I don't belong in this world filled with cruelty and depravity.

Then there's Chance, my reluctant trainer. The man is the definition of deadly and so attractive I struggle to think straight around him. I'm also pretty sure he would love nothing more than to snap my neck. Cruel, impatient, and harsh, he's a brute who seems annoyed by my existence.

Honestly, I'm not sure I will survive living with the deviants, never mind fighting in a war. Unless I find my courage and learn to fight for myself, I fear this new world will crush me.

Cruelest Oblivion

Dystopian Romance

Book #1

Authors Note:

CRUELEST OBLIVION is book #1 and ends on a cliffhanger. SWEETEST AWARENESS will conclude the duet.

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

There is triggering content related to:

Loss of Family.

Abandonment.

Extreme graphic violence & death.

18+ only.

Please read responsibly.

“Your emotions are the slaves to your thoughts, and you are the slave to your emotions.”

~ **Elizabeth Gilbert.**
(Eat Pray Love)

7 VIRTUES

HUMILITY

Always sacrifice yourself for others.

CHARITY

Do not want for more, be greedy or prideful.

CHASTITY

No emotions, affection, or touching are to be shown in public.

No unauthorized relationships between men and women.

DILIGENCE

Obey the emissaries and virtues without question.

TEMPERANCE

Do not overindulge in anything.

PATIENCE

Always give of yourself without expecting anything.

Do not get annoyed or angry.

KINDNESS

Be considerate and mannered.

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.

Chapter 1

Jai

On my way to the haven where the healing center is situated, I stare out the window at the ecocity. It's the only home I've ever known, as I was born and raised inside the dome.

It always looks the same.

Sigh. Nothing ever changes.

There are smaller concrete buildings, the older ones that weren't torn down and replaced with new shiny skyscrapers. The haven is the tallest building, completely made up of solar windows that reflect green and blue. It's where the curers, scientists, enforcers, and emissaries are situated.

Our ecocity was cleaned up after the fifth world war when everything was destroyed. From what I've learned in my history class, it was a brutal war where only a few survived. No one won, and too many died. Mankind was almost driven to the point of extinction. The animals and most of the vegetation, plants, and trees weren't that fortunate – they were all wiped out.

All that remained were DNA samples scientists had managed to keep in a secure location from the deviants. That location is now the laboratories where my father works, at the heart of our ecocity, the haven.

Sometimes I get the feeling everything is just too much. Too perfect. Too controlled. It's a bubble waiting to be popped.

Letting out another sigh, my eyes lock on a billboard, and I automatically read our laws for what must be the millionth time.

Always sacrifice yourself for others.

Do not be greedy or prideful.

No emotions, affection, or touching are to be shown in public.

No unauthorized relationships between men and women.

Obey the emissaries and virtues without question.

Do not overindulge.

Always give of yourself without expecting anything in return.

Do not show annoyance or anger.

Be considerate and mannered.

Together we will prevail.

We will not repeat the errors of our ancestors.

Be blessed.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes because it feels like the virtues are constantly being forced down our throats.

There are seven billboards in total, strategically placed across the metropolis. Not only do they show the virtues, but they also convert the atmospheric humidity into water because the single river we have running through our ecocity isn't nearly enough to provide for all the citizens' needs.

With the disastrous condition the world was left in after the wars, it only rains once a year, a sheet of ice that freezes everything. We can't leave our houses for two weeks, but when the ice melts the water runs into the canals, which feed the reservoir for storage.

I've heard beyond the protective dome of the ecocity there's only devastation. The sun scorches everything to a crisp. I have no idea how the deviants survive.

We're not taught much about the forbidden territory or life before the wars. Our laws were created by the seven emissaries – the founding fathers of the ecocity.

We must live in humility, charity, chastity, diligence, temperance,

patience, and kindness.

There are no wealthy or poor people. Because of the emissaries' generosity, everyone receives what they need to survive. That way, there's no crime and no reason to fight among ourselves.

So far, it has worked, and that's why no one questions the virtuous way. Still, this restrictive way of living is getting to me. I feel claustrophobic whenever I see the laws.

And honestly, I'm curious about the forbidden lands and deviants.

I have so many questions.

'Do not question the virtuous way, Jai. Your emotions are to be controlled at all times. A virtuous citizen doesn't allow their emotions to govern them.' I reprimand myself, but it doesn't ease the pressure in my chest.

Of course, we're allowed to smile and show happiness to a certain degree, but there's zero tolerance toward any negative emotion, and lately, that's all I've been feeling.

Anger, anxiety, fear, resentment, and frustration are the ones that will get you banished without warning, and they've been building and building in my chest, threatening to explode from me.

That will be disastrous, so I do my best to keep them imprisoned deep in my heart.

If you slip up and show extreme emotion, a demerit will be issued against you. Once you receive three, you're banished from the ecocity, so most citizens just don't show any emotion at all.

I don't know how they do it.

Is it just me?

Is there something wrong with me that I question everything?

The emissaries are clever. They never use words like faith and hope.

Mom told me about those words in the privacy of our home, but I'm not allowed to speak of them to anyone else.

I think words like hope and faith might wake people up and make them less zombie-like.

I have a feeling in the pit of my stomach it's the last thing the emissaries want. They won't be able to control the people if everyone starts hoping there's something better out there – if people believe there's more to life than this – just existing.

The bus stops in front of the haven, and I wait for the front rows to empty before standing up and making my way down the aisle.

Today I'm reporting for a medical check-up. It's in preparation for the ceremony that will be held in four weeks. That's where I will learn which part of the ecocity I'll be integrated into. Will I become a wife or a bearer, and what position will I fill?

Passing by the bus driver, I murmur, "Blessed be."

"Blessed be," the man replies monotonously.

I don't look at the enforcers by the entrance of the building. They're the only citizens dressed in brown clothes. Curers and scientists wear white, and the emissaries dark blue. The rest of us wear pale yellow and blue clothing – a simple long-sleeve shirt and pants.

Avoiding the elevators, I take the stairs up to the first floor, and I'm surprised to see two other girls waiting to be served. They must be from different sectors in the ecocity because I haven't seen them before.

Stopping at the reception counter, I wait for the man to look up from his computer screen.

"Blessed be," I murmur. "I'm here for my medical check-up. Jasper Matthias."

"Blessed be." He nods at the waiting area. "Take a seat."

When I sit down, I whisper to the other women, “Blessed be.”

They respond with the same greeting then silence falls in the reception area.

They must be nearing their twentieth birthdays as well. At twenty, we get married if we’re lucky to be chosen as a bride. It’s either that or you’re just another bearer – a woman whose sole purpose it is to give birth.

After the wars, our numbers were dangerously low, so it’s crucial for every woman to build up the population.

Only a handful are lucky and chosen as brides, and only essential contributors to the ecocity are entitled to a woman of their own. The woman is usually beautiful or comes from an influential family.

The rest of the men have to share. Last I heard, there were only three hundred women. It’s far less than the eleven thousand men.

My heart pounds in my chest at the thought because, deep down, I know I won’t be chosen as a bride even though Dad holds an important position in the ecocity.

It’s just a gut feeling I have that, like most other women, I’ll be forced to give birth at least once every two years, and every single man will be entitled to my body during the year I’m not pregnant.

I have nothing against saving the human race from extinction, I just disagree with the way it’s being done. Not that I dare give my opinion. That’s strictly forbidden.

Honestly, I’m terrified of what lies ahead for me. The thought of having sex on demand makes bile churn in my stomach.

The emissaries enforced this law to keep the peace among the men.

But what about the women? Why do we have to be the ones who suffer?

It’s at times like this I hate the virtuous way. Mom won’t be here to help me with whatever path is chosen for me. She was lucky to be chosen as a

bride for Dad. Sadly, Mom only had me and giving birth almost killed her. She couldn't have more children after that, and I think that's why she was chosen as a crusader.

In four weeks, I'll either be married or forced to join all the single women to fulfill my duty to the men of our ecocity.

My stomach spins with nerves at the thought of moving out of my family home and into the bearer sector.

I seriously doubt it, but maybe luck will be on my side, and I'll be chosen as a bride. That way, I'll belong to one man and not all the single men in the ecocity.

Please, don't let me be chosen as a bearer.

I'm pulled out of my thoughts when a man dressed in white says, "Jasper Matthias. Follow me."

I get up and notice the other two girls are no longer in the reception area. They must've already gone for their check-ups.

The air is chilly as I follow the curer down a long corridor and into a sterile room. There's only one chair, a desk with a monitor, and an examination table.

Glancing at the curer, I feel horribly uncomfortable when he shuts the door.

"Take off your shoes and lie down," he instructs, his tone formal.

I quickly do as he says, and climbing onto the examination table, I lay down and rest my hands on my abdomen.

"Arms by your side," he instructs.

I suck in a deep breath of air and watch as the scanner is positioned over my head. When I rest my arms in the grooves by my side, metal bands lock over my wrists and ankles.

I close my eyes and focus on keeping my breaths even as the scanner

makes a soft humming sound when it moves over my body and back up again.

I hear the man type something into the computer, then he mentions, “We’re going to draw blood. You’ll feel a prick.”

I brace myself, my muscles tightening, but still, I flinch when the needle darts into my arm.

“When is your next menstrual cycle?” the curer asks.

“It’s due in three weeks.”

“Twenty-one days?” he checks.

I exhale slowly. “Yes.”

“Make sure to return in eight days for your last physical,” he orders. I nod as I open my eyes, then he adds, “You can put on your shoes back on. Blessed be.”

Relieved the examination is over, I quickly shift off the table and shove my feet into my sneakers. “Blessed be,” I whisper, then I dart out of the room and exit the building as quickly as possible.

Instead of waiting for a bus to go home, I walk down the street, rubbing my hands up and down my arms to get rid of the chill. My eyes flit from one pedestrian to the other, mostly men.

Everyone smiles politely. It all feels fake, though.

I feel like a helpless deer surrounded by a city of wolves, and they’re all waiting for the ceremony so they can rip me to shreds.

I don’t feel safe in the ecocity.

The realization makes my feet come to a halt, and I quickly search for the nearest bus stop. Hurrying to it, I luckily only wait a couple of minutes before one arrives. When I find a seat and the bus pulls away from the curb, I let out a sigh.

This has never happened before – feeling unsafe in the only place that’s

been my home.

I tell myself it's because I'm anxious about the coming ceremony. The day the seven crusaders are chosen is also around the corner.

Control your emotions. This is not virtuous behavior.

Chapter 2

Jai

“It’s time.” Dad offers me a stiff smile. Today is hard on him too.

Honestly, it’s hard on everyone in the ecocity. It’s never easy watching seven citizens leave their families and home to spread the word in the forbidden lands.

I take one last look at myself in the mirror, making sure everything is in place. My light brown hair is clipped back with Mom’s butterfly clips. They’re tiny and pale yellow. Even though they’re old, they’re my most precious possession. It’s my way of honoring Mom, remembering that she stood up to the emissaries to try and stay with us.

I try to banish the negative thoughts before they can spiral out of control and focus on my reflection in the oval mirror.

I have the same green eyes as Mom, and I’m on the shorter side, built petite, just like her. No amount of growth spurts are going to help with my height. I wish I had her dark hair, though. It’s the one thing I didn’t get from her.

When I was little, I used to sit for hours playing with her hair. The memory makes my mouth curve up in a sad smile. There are times I miss her so much my heart physically hurts.

Taking a deep breath, I get up and check to make sure my clothes didn’t wrinkle. My new shirt and ankle-length skirt fit just right, not too tight.

Earlier this year, I got excited when my other shirts got too small. Our neighbor, Mrs. Noah, said I shouldn’t worry, that I would fill out nicely like

the other girls.

Still, my breasts are small and nearing twenty, I'm starting to get worried, though. When you look like a child, people treat you like a child. My body has developed a little, but not nearly enough to be taken seriously as an adult or wanted as a wife.

Eighteen was supposed to be my big passage to adulthood, but it turned out to be just another number. Mom was taken from us two years ago, and my eighteenth birthday came with pitiful glances and awkward smiles.

I tug at the stiff collar shafting my neck. The fabric is still hard from not being worn. I kept the shirt especially for today, the seventh day of the seventh month when the bus comes around to collect seven of us.

It's time for us to wait outside like the rest of our neighbors, to wait and see who will be given the honor of becoming a crusader.

They call it an honor to be chosen, but I'm not so sure about that.

Dad is safe from being chosen, and so am I. Mom was already selected from our family. The law states only one person per family, and it's hardly ever a woman because we're needed for child bearing. Also a man who fills a vital role in the ecocity, like curers, scientists, and enforcers are all save from being chosen.

Taking a last look at my reflection, I leave my bedroom to join Dad outside.

On the way through the living room, my eye catches the photo of Mom sitting on the mantelpiece. It's the only one we have of her in the house. She's smiling at me from where she's seated in a rocking chair, holding me as a baby. On the spur of the moment, I take the photo out of the frame and tuck it in my shirt pocket.

At least this way, she'll be close to me today.

We never changed the living room after Mom was chosen, except for the

glofish Dad brought home from work for my nineteenth birthday.

The genetically modified goldfish swim around aimlessly in their tiny tank. Every night I watch them as darkness sets in, their colors shining brilliantly. When they swim together and their colors blur, I can almost imagine that's what a rainbow would look like. Sometimes I wonder what it's like to live in their confined world.

Then there are nights it feels like I'm on the other side of the tank, and they are watching me – I'm the *one* living in the confined world.

"Everything will be okay, Jai," Dad says from where he's standing by the front door with his back turned to me.

With the late hours he works, we don't get to spend much time together. But I know he loves me. Even though emotions are not allowed to be demonstrated, my parents have shown me affection inside the safety of our house.

"Yes, Dad." I want to say more to make him feel better and less stressed, but I have no words of encouragement to offer. Instead, I break the law of no physical contact and slip my hand into Dad's. He gives me a squeeze before pulling his hand from mine, then I follow him out onto our porch.

I suck in a deep breath of air, nerves spinning in my stomach. I fist my hands at my sides, trying hard not to give in to the urge to fidget.

Now the waiting starts.

Usually, I'd get breakfast ready for us before heading to the seminary for my lessons.

You're safe.

Dad's safe.

In just a few minutes, everything will go back to normal.

Yeah, Jai. There's nothing to worry about.

Still, I can't help but feel sad and anxious because seven families will

lose a loved one today.

I'll go back inside and make us some oats. We'll eat, and I'll go to my classes, Dad will go to work, and everything *will* be fine. It will be another typical, dull day for our family.

Next week I'll complete my last assessment and physical check-up, then the emissaries will decide which part of the ecocity I will be integrated into.

If I study hard and show I'm worthy, I'll be placed in a good position.

Maybe I can even become a curer. I got a good grade for my first aid class.

But someone else's life *will* change today. All because the virtuous feel it's their duty to send seven crusaders each year into the deviants' territory. It's to see if there are still people worth saving.

From the hundreds of crusaders sent out, none have returned.

You'd think after decades of no one coming back, the emissaries would realize it's not working. Surely, all those people can't still be trying to convert the deviants?

Nobody's been banished since Mom. She was found blameworthy of selfishness. It was an act against humility.

Selflessness, '*it's not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less.*' Those were the words they used to pass judgment on her. Words once spoken by a man named *C. S. Lewis*. He lived hundreds of years ago, yet his words condemned my mother.

She was chosen to become a courageous crusader but didn't want to leave us. She got banished anyway – with no hope of ever returning.

I have hope things might change. I don't speak of it to anyone, though.

I hope one day we might make our own choices so that women won't be forced to give birth to so many babies or be forced to pleasure every man. That we'll get to choose what to wear and what colors our clothes are – just

simple things.

I don't always understand what the emissaries mean to achieve by sending out crusaders. If someone like Mom can't be saved, can't be forgiven, then why should we go out to see if there are others? Why give deviants a chance if Mom can't have one?

I glance up at Dad, wondering what he'd do if he could read my thoughts and see into my heart.

I know I shouldn't question the virtuous way – this enhanced and purified society – but I do, a little more every day.

What's the meaning behind everything, behind this dull existence?

Why do all the people follow the emissaries like sheep? Surely I can't be the only one who questions the laws and way of the ecocity?

Or... maybe I am.

Dad sucks in a deep breath before exhaling slowly, then his hand wraps tightly around mine. I squeeze his fingers and swallow hard on the emotions getting to hold his hand stirs in my chest, but too soon, he lets go so our neighbors won't see.

Everything will be fine.

Everything just has to be fine.

Truth is, I'm afraid I'm not virtuous enough, and as I stand here watching the bus stop way down the street, my heart leaps to my throat.

Crap, what if they see the fear in my eyes?

Whatever you do, don't show emotion.

There's a flicker of bravery in my heart. It wants to force me to walk into the street and offer myself up as a crusader, so I can have a chance to look for Mom.

No one has ever offered themselves up to become a crusader. But, the part of me that wants to step forward has hope there's more to life than this controlled and mundane existence.

My life is as colorless as the world around me, my skin pale white just like the walls of our houses, and the blood pulsing listlessly through my veins, a dull blue, like the tiles on the roofs.

My life is droning by, and one day I'll blink, and I'll be old. There has to be more to all of this – a purpose of some kind.

Then there's the other part of me, the side that fears I'll never have enough courage to do such a thing. It wants to stay with Dad, here where it's safe. I have a routine, and even though it's a boring one, it is a secure life.

When I grow frustrated with my life, I tell myself it's only temporary. My studies will come to an end, and maybe I can work in the genetics department with Dad or become a curer in the healing center. Or perhaps I can help grow the vegetables we eat.

I can be an asset to my ecocity, and maybe then, I'll feel more like a virtuous citizen. Then I won't be just a bearer popping out babies but will be entitled to more.

But the odds of that happening are scarce.

I'll either get married soon or give birth to my first child. Should I be chosen for marriage, I'll get to experience my first kiss. I'll experience what it feels like to care for another person – a man. It's a frightening thought.

But an even scarier thought is that of becoming a bearer seeing as I won't belong to one man but all the eligible men in the ecocity. I'll have to kiss many – hundreds, if not thousands.

No.

Take deep breaths and remain calm, Jai.

I almost grab hold of Dad's hand as the bus comes closer. It feels like it's

bringing a tidal wave of tension along with it, and it's going to wipe me right off my feet.

We'll be fine.

The bus slows down two houses from ours, and my heartbeat speeds up until I can hear every loud thump echoing in my ears. When it stops in front of our house, a cold sweat breaks out over my body, even though it's not hot enough outside. It never gets that hot here, never too hot to sweat, because there is no sun to warm our faces. The hermetically sealed dome protects us from the sun's dangerous rays, and all we see of it is a blurred circle that moves across our dome. The dome keeps out all the dangerous natural elements and more, and controls the temperature.

"Daddy!" I don't mean to panic as an enforcer climbs out of the bus, but I'm freaking out.

This isn't happening.

Crap.

No.

They have the wrong house!

"Everything will be okay, Jai. Ethan will find you," Dad's voice rumbles low with urgency, but I don't understand what he's trying to say.

"Look for Chance. Find your mother. You need to get out of the ecocity."

What?

My lips part in a gasp as my gaze darts from the enforcer walking up the cobbled path to find Dad's eyes, which are filled with heartache and worry.

"Wh—" My question is cut off as the enforcer nears us, the yellow of his clothes clashing with his ginger hair.

He swipes over the device in his hand, and without looking at me, he says, "Jasper Matthias."

Me?

What? No.

This can't be happening.

Mom was already taken from our family, and I'm a woman.

He holds a device out to me. It has no keypad, only a screen with three circles at the top. "Press your thumb to the scanner," the enforcer instructs, his tone as bleak as our surroundings.

I remember this from when they came for Mom. She didn't press her thumb on the scanner. She shoved the enforcer and ran. She didn't get far before they caught her. I don't know why she did it if she knew they'd banish her.

I suck in a desperate breath and lift my right hand to the device. As I press my thumb on the scanner, I wish I could stop my trembling so clearly visible to everyone.

Just breathe.

Nothing happens, and for a second, I hope this is all just a terrible mistake.

Suddenly, the enforcer grabs my hand tightly and forcefully presses my thumb down on the scanner. Shock vibrates through me from having a man touch me.

A man other than my father.

My mouth instantly grows dry, my heart beating wildly in my chest. My thumb cramps as he rolls it over from left to right to get a good print, then the device beeps, and the first light glows yellow.

No!

The second glows yellow again.

Oh my gosh. This isn't happening.

The third glows bright blue, and a name and face appear on the screen.

CrapCrapCrap.

Shock vibrates through me like a hundred earthquakes shaking the ground beneath my feet.

My name. My face.

“Proceed to the vehicle,” The enforcer instructs as he steps aside and waits for me to walk.

I’m caught in a shocked trance as Dad pulls me into a tight hug. I’m so rattled I don’t even think about Dad breaking the law as he holds me while our neighbors and an enforcer watch.

No. This isn’t happening. Dad will be alone if I leave. Who will make sure he eats? Who will wash his clothes? Who will feed the glofish?

Why are they sending me out of the ecocity instead of letting me marry or bear children?

I don’t understand.

“Ethan,” Dad whispers close to my ear. “Ethan will find you and help you get in touch with Chance so you can search for your mother.”

With it being our last moment together, I try to take in everything about Dad. I smell the familiar trace of sanitizing spray that always clings to him. I take a deep breath and try to imprint his scent into my memory as best I can.

My throat tightens, and my eyes burn.

I’m not courageous at all.

I’m scared and confused.

“Remember what I said. You will make it,” Dad whispers. “You’re strong and deserve so much more than this way of life in the ecocity.”

None of his words penetrate the thick fog of shock around me. Instead, tears well up in my eyes, and I blink them away. I want to be strong for Dad. I want to be virtuous, only I can’t find those traits in my heart.

I’m my mother’s daughter, after all. I want to run like she did. I want to be selfish and stay with Dad.

Dad lets go of me and gently nudges me toward the waiting enforcer.

My heart sinks like a heavy stone, and it feels as if hopelessness makes everything around me even duller than it was before.

The walk to the bus is a daunting one. Every step takes me farther away from my dad and home and closer to the bus. My legs feel heavy, as if my body is nothing more than deadweight. I no longer feel youthful and supple, a woman in the making. I feel as if I've lost something precious this morning, my hope of a future that might've been even though I was unsure of what it held for me.

Anything is better than the forbidden lands.

Boarding the bus, the metal of the door is cold as I take hold of it to steady myself. It looks much the same as the ones used for transport in the metropolis and neighborhoods. Only, this one has the blue and yellow lights mounted on the roof to show it's an official vehicle.

I recognize the guy sitting in the back. He's in my class, and unfortunately, we share the same name. It's because of him everyone calls me Jai, so there's no confusion between the two of us.

Mom named me Jasper because I was born in March, and it's my birthstone.

Shoot, I didn't take the pendant I got for my thirteenth birthday.

When I walk down the aisle, Jasper Thomas looks relieved to see me. I concentrate hard, so I won't show him I'm scared out of my mind.

I take the seat in front of him. I've been taught not to interact with men from a young age. It's to protect my virtue and keep myself pure.

Always obey and remain chaste.

If a woman breaks the most important virtue of all, chastity, she is banished. To be banished and called impure is the worst thing to happen to a woman. You're no longer pure to marry or bear children.

No, there are worse things. This. Being ripped away from Dad and sent out into the forbidden lands. This isn't right!

“Just the two of us so far,” Jasper whispers from behind me.

He never talks to me unless he has to. Hearing how nervous he is, makes my anxiety spike. I wish he would rather keep quiet.

Ignoring him, I scoot closer to the window. Taking the window seat keeps me from sitting between people, but it will only be the seven of us today, so I guess it doesn't matter where I sit.

The bus jerks then pulls away from the curb. I watch as families turn and head back into their houses as we drive past them. They'll have breakfast, then go on with their day as if nothing happened.

I wonder what Dad will do. Will he continue as usual and prepare himself some oats before going to work?

I have to force myself not to glance back to see if he's still standing on the porch.

Will he miss me?

'It's not a virtuous thought,' I reprimand myself. I must have courage, as per the virtue of *humility*. I must sacrifice myself as per *charity*.

I straighten my spine and lift my chin, struggling to calm my emotions.

We stop by a house, and I can't keep from looking at the family stealing a quick goodbye hug.

Everyone is taking risks today.

I watch as two boys say goodbye to their father.

“Mr. Demetrius,” Jasper's voice cracks. “It's Mr. Demetrius.”

After a freak accident in the laboratory, Mr. Demetrius lost his left arm, and since then, he's been our science teacher. I watch his wife hold their sons. It's not right that Mr. Demetrius has been chosen because he has a family to care for.

Climbing onto the bus, he offers us a tight smile as he comes down the aisle. I try to smile, but I think I fail because he quickly squeezes my shoulder, then sits down next to Jasper.

“I’m not ready to die.” Jasper’s words come out in a rush.

Completely failing to hide his emotions, his breaths are so fast it sounds like he’s been running. I suppose he’s not hiding his emotions because he’s leaving the ecocity.

He should be careful. He can still be banished, though.

“We’re not going to die, Jasper. The deviants aren’t barbaric. We have been honored by being chosen,” Mr. Demetrius tries to offer words of comfort.

I haven’t thought about death. I only wondered about finding Mom, should I ever get the opportunity to go into the forbidden territory. I haven’t thought about what lies behind the boundary marker of our ecocity’s dome. I haven’t been brave enough.

“Why have none of the other crusaders returned?” Jasper asks the question I’ve thought of quite often since Mom was banished.

In my heart, I never really thought the day would come when I would be chosen.

I didn’t even feed my glofish this morning.

“Because they’re still out there working to save deviants. It’s a vast land.” I wonder if Mr. Demetrius truly believes what he is saying.

Chapter 3

Jai

The bus stops again, this time outside Ruth Hosea's house.

What? Two women? Why?

I was certain with her beauty, Ruth would be chosen for marriage. She's a year younger than me. I don't know her very well, but sometimes we walk home together. She's always been sweet and timid, a perfect virtuous citizen. Well, except for today because she's crying freely, visibly shaken by being chosen as a crusader.

As she reaches the bus, I quickly avert my eyes, knowing that if I see her cry, I'll lose control of my turbulent emotions.

I hear her move down the aisle, and I inch closer to the window when she takes a seat next to me.

Shoot.

When the bus pulls away, I don't look up to see who the last three people are as we pick them up. I keep my eyes on my hands, doing my best to ignore the growing tension in the air.

After the seventh person is collected, I'm surprised when the bus keeps stopping in front of houses.

What's going on?

My knuckles start to turn white as I clench my hands tightly into fists on my lap. I don't understand why there are more than seven chosen crusaders. I grow more anxious each time the bus stops.

This can't be right. There have always only been seven citizens chosen.

Why is today different?

All the questions bombard my mind, making me feel even more anxious.

Only once a total of twenty-one people are picked up, the bus heads toward the metropolis area of our ecocity that rises high into the sky.

We'll be blessed at the haven before we're sent out into the forbidden lands.

I don't want to be blessed. I want to go home.

The bus stops outside the haven, the impressive glass and steel building from where the emissaries rule the ecocity.

"This way," the enforcer with the ginger hair instructs.

I hear him, but my legs won't move.

Oh, my Almighty, this is really happening.

I'm terrified!

"Come, Jai," a man whispers, then he takes hold of my hand and tugs me up off the seat. My eyes snap to his face, and recognizing Ethan, I remember what Dad said.

Ethan only started working in the genetics lab last year, and Dad has spoken highly of him, saying he had great potential.

I let out a slow breath as I pull my hand free from his before following him down the aisle.

"Don't leave my side," Ethan whispers.

I nod, my mouth too dry to utter a word while more questions whirl in my mind.

As we climb off the bus, Ethan takes hold of my arm, drawing me back so I can't join the group of people. Instantly, my heart beats faster, and a flush creeps up my neck from all the touching.

He better stop before someone sees.

I let out a shaky breath and lower my head so none of the other crusaders

will notice the blush on my cheeks.

“Just stay with me,” Ethan whispers urgently again. “Whatever happens from here on out, don’t leave my side.”

His tone is tense, only increasing my anxiety. I nod quickly, and as we wait for the ginger-haired enforcer to lead the way, my emotions start to spiral out of control.

Why was I chosen?

Did I do something wrong?

Maybe I didn’t hide my emotions as well as I thought, and I’ve been caught out. That would make sense. Someone questioning the virtues is a danger to the controlled life the emissaries have established.

Or maybe I’ve been chosen because Mom was cast out?

Crap, there could’ve been something wrong with my physical check-up yesterday, and I can’t have children?

The only thing I’m sure of is that I’m not brave enough to be a crusader. I’m scared out of my mind.

Calm down. Panicking will only make this more challenging.

The haven looks so daunting today, its shadow looming over us. I shiver and take a step closer to Ethan as we all bundle into the impressive lobby. The floor tiles gleam our reflections back at us, and our footsteps echo as if it’s mocking us with a fake applause for being chosen. The enforcer presses the button for the elevator.

How many people can fit in an elevator?

A fresh wave of panic washes over me. I don’t like confined spaces. I can feel the air already whooshing from my lungs at the thought of being stuck in such a small space, crammed between all these people.

My tongue darts out to nervously wet my parched lips. “Is it okay if I take the stairs?”

“I’ll walk with her, Aaron,” Ethan says.

Aaron? So that’s the name of the enforcer.

“Seventh floor.” Aaron permits us to go.

Ethan’s steps are much wider than mine, and I have to walk fast to keep up with him. We climb the first flight of stairs in silence before he starts to talk. “Aaron is with us, but don’t look at him. He programmed us into the system to be chosen.”

What? So I wasn’t chosen?

My feet freeze on the next step, my mouth dropping open.

Why would someone willingly want to go?

I stare at Ethan in shock as I gasp, “Why would you do that to me?”

“Move, Jai!” He grips hold of my arm, yanking me up the stairs.

My gaze jumps between the stairs and his hand wrapped around my arm.

His eyes flick to me, his irises dark with tension, as he exclaims, “You need to keep calm. You can’t freeze up on me. Your father said you would be able to handle this!”

Rearing back against his hold on me, I ask, “Why? What’s going on? I don’t understand any of this.”

“It’s not safe in the ecocity. Your father asked me to get you out, so just do as I say.”

It’s no longer safe here? That doesn’t explain much.

With the initial shock gone, I remember what Dad told me. The only reason I keep climbing the stairs is because Dad said I can trust Ethan.

Ethan gives me another flick of his eyes, then says, “After the emissaries bless us and we get our packs, just stay by my side. Before the boundary marker, we’re going to split from the group. My brother is waiting for us on the other side.”

Geez, how can he sound so calm?

My heart is beating out of my chest, especially with all the touching. I want to run home and hide in my bed.

I wet my lips again before asking, “Is all the touching necessary?”

Instantly, Ethan lets go of me.

As we continue climbing the stairs, I swallow hard on the lump in my throat, but it bounces back, pushing tears up to my eyes.

Dad arranged for me to leave the ecocity because it isn't safe any longer?

More emotions bubble into my chest.

Dad wouldn't do anything to hurt me. If he and Ethan say it's dangerous in the ecocity, then it must be.

You'll be fine. At least you're not alone. Just follow Ethan's instructions.

But why do we have to split from the group?

“Why won't we stay with the rest of the group?” I ask, a tremble of fear clearly audible in my voice.

“There's no such thing as spreading the word on the other side,” Ethan holds me back, his eyes locking with mine. “There's only death.”

What?

Holy crap!

I'm not sure if my legs are tired from the stairs or numb from the shock, but they struggle to keep me standing.

I stare at Ethan, who lets out a sigh. “I can't explain everything right now, but if you want to make it out alive, you must trust me.”

A cold fear washes over me, and this time I'm grateful when Ethan takes my hand. I need to hold onto something. He's my only chance at survival, and I don't want to die.

“...every year, seven courageous crusaders are chosen to go outside the

boundary marker. They sacrifice their life of comfort to spread the word and ways of the virtuous to the deviants. This year we are tripling our blessing to the deviants in the hopes that the word might be spread faster. Blessed be,” the words drone from Emissary Jacob.

Everyone in the room, except for Ethan and me, repeats the words, “Blessed be.”

I don’t feel very blessed right now as I look at the other nineteen people. Besides the three older men and Mr. Demetrius, there are three other guys from my sector standing with Jasper, five of the chosen are younger boys, and the last six are men in their early thirties.

Then there is Ruth, me, and Ethan. Besides Ruth and me, there are no other women.

After everything Ethan told me, I know why I’m here, but I don’t understand why Ruth was selected. She’s not strong. She’s gorgeous and more petite than me. Her face is covered in red blotches from all the crying.

Maybe she’s not fertile? It’s the only reason I can think of because it’s a general rule that women don’t get chosen if they’re able to bear children.

My gaze shifts back to the broad table where the emissaries are seated.

Each emissary has a flag hanging from the ceiling above their head, with a virtue printed on the pale blue cloth.

“Blessed be your journey. Blessed be you all.” Emissary Jacob closes with the usual greeting. He is the emissary of the virtue chastity.

“Blessed be.” The murmur goes through the room, and before I can bring myself to open my mouth, it’s quiet again.

With the ceremony over, we follow Aaron to another room where there are three tables. One holds silver square packets and water bottles, and another has the blue first aid kits I recognize from class. The last table is covered with bags. To my left, I see clothes in different sizes. They’re all

black, and I can't stop staring at them. It's the first time ever I've seen black clothes.

"Pick your size and get dressed. Move it," Ethan whispers. He hurries toward the larger sizes, and I automatically head to the smaller ones.

"If you haven't figured it out yet, get a set of clothes that will fit you," Aaron instructs. "It will be best if you blend in on the other side."

I grab my size and follow Ethan to the dressing rooms just as everyone rushes for the clothes. I'm relieved to be out of the way.

The clothes are plain; a t-shirt with no collar, a pair of jeans, and a jacket.
Sigh, the deviants must hate color as well.

As quickly as I can, I dress in the new clothes and tuck my mother's photo in the back pocket of my jeans. There's a tight sensation in my chest as I bundle my clothes, and holding them to my chest, I head back to the front.

"Um ... what should I do with these?" I look at Aaron, gripping my clothes tightly. These are the last items I have that are my own, and I hope we get to take them with us.

He looks up from a clipboard and points to a bin with a pen. "Throw them in there."

My heart sinks some more. Walking to the bin, I notice a pile of clothes lying at the bottom.

When I hesitate, Ethan says, "Just throw them in. You won't need them where we're going. Here's your bag. I packed your portion of food, water, and a first aid kit."

He makes it sound like none of this matters to him. How can this be so easy for him?

With a heavy heart, I toss the clothes in the bin and watch the items land at the bottom. I didn't even get to wear them for a full day.

Letting out a sigh, I take the backpack from Ethan and shrug the straps

onto my shoulders.

Suddenly, Ethan reaches for my hair but stops an inch from touching me. I freeze and stare at him.

He looks handsome in the black clothes.

I flush at the direction my thoughts are heading in and lower my eyes to the floor, scared that he might be able to see what I'm thinking.

"You'll have to take those clips out of your hair. They don't have luxuries like hairclips where we're going," he murmurs, compassion lacing his words.

My eyes dart back up as he mentions the hairclips. It's all I have of my mother.

"Oh." It's a lame word, but it's all I can manage.

He must think I'm an idiot.

He draws his hand back and adjusts the straps on his backpack, a serious expression on his face, not allowing any other emotion to show.

I'm sad and terrified to be leaving the only place that's ever been my home. Dread knots in my stomach into a tight, burning ball.

I wish I could be as calm as Ethan.

Gently removing the hairclips, I tuck them in my jacket's pocket, hoping Ethan doesn't tell me to throw them in the bin. I untie and smooth my hair out neatly, then retie the strands again.

"Listen up," Aaron calls out. Everyone is dressed in black with a backpack on their backs.

The color doesn't suit Ruth's small frame, and it makes Mr. Demetrius look older.

"Once you're on the other side of the boundary marker, don't forget why you're there. Be the courageous crusaders you've been chosen to be. Spread the word and recruit people to be virtuous." Not once does Aaron make eye contact with anyone.

Chapter 4

Jai

It's a long way to walk to the boundary marker. I don't think I've *ever* done so much walking in my entire life.

Geez. I might die of exhaustion before we even reach the boundary marker.

Yep, I'd go down in history as the only person who didn't even make it to the forbidden territory.

How embarrassing would that be?

Then again, I wouldn't know because I'll be dead.

What am I thinking?

It's the fear. It's driving me insane.

I shake my head and take a deep breath to try and calm my frail nerves. Ruth hasn't stopped crying, and it's not helping. Her sniffing is wreaking havoc on my emotions.

I look up, trying hard to focus on anything else but the people around me. Their tension makes the air stuffy and hard to inhale.

At this time of the day, when the sun starts to set on the outside, the dome shines clear above us. There are instances you can almost pretend the dome isn't there. Sometimes it sparkles, I don't know what makes the dome sparkle, but it's pretty when it does.

There's one entrance between the ecocity and the forbidden territory. I've heard that both the virtuous and deviants guard it. I'm not sure who is keeping who out.

I glance up the road as it stretches out endlessly before me. I can't see the boundary marker yet, and it's discouraging. Overgrown bushes and wild grass spread out on both sides of the road. For most of the year, it looks dead, just dry wild grass. I know it's invasive and useless, and Dad says it grows faster than our genetically altered crops.

Lowering my eyes to the road again, I watch the concrete beneath my feet.

"Why, if we're going to spread the news of peace, do we have to wear black?" It's Ruth's shaky voice that finally breaks the thick silence.

Yeah, why can't we wear our own clothes? After all, the pale blue and yellow represent peace. The black shirts we're wearing are form-fitting and not loose like our normal ones. They show too much of my curves if you ask my opinion.

"It's so we can blend in with them, Ruth." Mr. Demetrius doesn't sound very convincing. Actually, he sounds sad and scared.

His answer only makes Ruth snifle more.

I feel the anxiety levels spike around me, and it makes me jumpier. I increase my pace, so I don't have to walk too close to the group.

I'm a horrible person.

Instead of consoling Ruth, I'm only thinking of myself. I'm not virtuous. I'm a deviant, and I don't think anyone can convert me. I'm too much of a coward to ever be virtuous.

We've been walking for what feels like endless miles. I know it will be getting dark within the hour. Usually, I sit in front of my glofish, watching their colors become bright as night falls.

Gosh, today is just one endlessly long blur, and I doubt the night will be any different. I haven't checked my backpack to see how much food I have, but it will be time for supper soon.

“I’m hungry.” Jasper gives voice to my thoughts.

“We’ll eat later.” Mr. Demetrius sounds even sadder than before, or maybe he’s just tired.

Ugh, I’m exhausted, and staring at the road doesn’t help anymore. My feet ache, and my legs are numb.

Ethan takes hold of my hand, and as I glance up at him, he nods his head to the right of the road.

I frown, not sure what he’s trying to tell me.

I’m about to open my mouth when he yanks hard at my hand. The jolt vibrates up my arm to my shoulder, and I’m too stunned to even let out a shriek as we set off at a maddening pace into the overgrown bushes and wild grass.

Holy crap!

“Faster, Jai! No one can follow us!” There’s a slight edge of panic in Ethan’s voice, and for the first time since he told me to stay close to him, I feel my stomach bunch together to the point that it aches. The apprehensive pain spreads down into my legs, and I’m afraid I’ll fall, but a miracle happens, and I don’t.

The knee-high grass makes it harder for me to run, and my chest is starting to burn.

“Faster,” Ethan hisses.

If he yanks at my arm one more time, the only speed he’ll get from me is crawling after I go head over heels into the wild grass.

“Faster, Jai.”

He keeps yanking at my arm. Breathless, I gasp, “My legs won’t go faster.”

I don’t think he realizes he’s twice my size.

But somehow, I keep running. My breaths are embarrassingly loud.

“Ethan,” I wheeze. “I can’t.” Another wheeze. Gosh, from panting to wheezing. I’m not going to make the boundary line.

He doesn’t stop but instead yanks me forward again.

“Ethan!” I shriek, almost nose-diving into the wild grass.

“There’s the boundary marker. Just run, Jai.” His voice is filled with an urgency that makes panic explode inside me.

What is waiting for us on the other side of the boundary marker?

The boundary marker is a brilliant blue line that fades up into the dome’s lighter tinge. I’ve always wanted to see it, and now I can’t even appreciate it.

I’m too tired, too frightened.

“We can’t go... through it,” I wheeze the words out. “The dome... will kill us.”

I shouldn’t talk. It’s making my saliva thicker, and my chest burns.

“My brother is meeting us here.”

Ethan starts to slow as we reach the boundary marker. Now that night approached, the boundary marker lights everything up alongside it. I see Aaron as he comes out of the wild grass. The light makes his skin look even paler than earlier.

“Tell me no one saw you,” Ethan demands.

“No one saw me.” Aaron sounds different, younger and scared, and not the official who addressed us back at the haven. “What took you so long?”

“We had to walk with the others. We could only break away now. Where is it?” Panic makes Ethan’s voice dip low. He lets go of my hand and darts forward, searching for something.

I almost scream, thinking he’s lost his mind and he’s going to walk into the force field when he ducks lower, and I see it. There’s a black hole in the dome, big enough for us to climb through.

“Come on,” Ethan says, turning back to me. “You go first.”

I stare at him, my mouth dropping open. There's no way I'm going near the boundary marker. It will fry me to a crisp.

A frown darkens his brow when I don't move. Then he snaps, "Where are you going to go, Jai? You can't go home, and the others are long gone. You have three seconds to climb through, or we're leaving you here."

I don't want to stay out here alone. I'm afraid of the dark.

My tongue darts out to wet my parched lips, then I suck in a deep breath of air and slowly inch closer to the boundary marker.

Right now, my fear of being alone in the dark is greater than my fear of being fried.

Ethan is right. I can't go home.

Crap.

I peek through the hole, but with the light from the force field blinding me, all I see is darkness on the other side.

Please don't disappear on me and fry me to a crisp.

I fear my legs might shake right from under me as I put my first leg through the hole. The bright blue light stings my eyes, making them water.

It's the brightest light I have ever seen.

When the right half of my body is through the hole, a pair of hands come out of the dark. They grab hold of my waist, and as they lift me through the hole, I let out a terrified shriek.

Almighty! I'm going to die. The deviants are going to kill me.

Just as my lips part to scream again, a hand slaps hard over my mouth, smothering me. An arm yanks me backward until I slam into a solid chest.

My eyes are wide, my heart thundering against my ribs.

Terrified, I watch Aaron and Ethan climb through the hole as if they've done it before. I try to shout a warning to them, but it's muffled by the hand.

"Who the fuck is this?" A deep and edgy male voice snaps above my

head.

It's only then I feel the waves of anger pulsing from the tense body of the man holding me.

"Relax, she's Jasper Matthias, the daughter of the engineer. I told him I'd bring her," Ethan explains, apparently not at all surprised by the man's presence. He doesn't look worried that we're in danger.

What's going on?

"The daughter?" the voice rumbles. "You brought the fucking daughter?"

Dear Almighty, please save me. I promise I'll try harder to be virtuous.

The man lets go of me and shoves me toward Ethan while barking, "You said only one other person, Ethan! Aaron we can use in the war. He's been here before. But she'll hold us back, and if she makes it to the ward, they will break her."

I was mistaken. The voice isn't deep and edgy but cold and heartless.

I keep my eyes down, too scared to look up. My heart is beating in my throat, making it difficult to swallow.

"We're wasting time," Ethan snaps.

There's a moment's silence, then I hear a sizzling sound to my left. Everyone's eyes snap in the direction of the boundary marker, watching as the hole in the dome behind us shrinks until it's gone.

No!

My chance to go back is gone. I'm in the forbidden land with two men I hardly know and another complete stranger who's angry and threatening.

I suck in deep breaths to try and clear my head, knowing I can't afford to panic now.

"I don't need a child to worry about. Dammit, Ethan!"

The man grabs at my shoulder, spinning me around, and in the light of the dome, I see a scar above his right eyebrow. He hasn't shaven in a couple of

days, making him look downright mean. His shirt has holes, and the black jeans look worn from years of wear. The boots on his feet are bulky and look like they can easily squash me.

Oh. Crap.

He's way taller than me, with a muscled body that could easily overpower me. Ink covers his arms and neck, the patterns giving off an aggressive vibe.

Still, he's attractive and more manly than any male I've ever laid eyes on.

I shake my head to rid myself of the insane thoughts. I'm losing it. Only I could notice what someone looks like while my life hangs in the balance.

The man frowns and narrows his eyes at me. "You keep your mouth shut and do as I say, or I swear I'll put a bullet in your head myself."

I swallow hard as his harsh words rain down on me.

"Do you understand?" he barks at me.

I nod because there's just no way I'll manage to say something without squeaking.

His eyes sweep over me once more, then he shakes his head. "Take the food and first aid kits out of the bags and load them into mine." He throws a ragged-looking bag at Ethan. "Take off your jackets and toss them." Again, his eyes travel over the length of my body, and my cheeks flush with heat. "The clothes look too new. Dirty them with sand."

I just nod and scramble to do as he says.

"They're going to see right through the kid," he mutters. "She looks way too innocent."

Ethan glances at me and then at the man. "Jai is worth it, Chance."

Hearing the man's name, my eyes widen.

Dad said to find Chance, that he would help me.

I don't get to react to finding out who the brute is as a fist comes out of nowhere, slamming hard into my face. I stagger back as pain streaks across

my cheek, but before I can fall, hands grab hold of my shoulders, yanking me forward.

When I open my eyes, I'm face to face with Chance's broad chest. My cheek's on fire, and the second he reaches for my face, I flinch, but he takes hold of my chin and forces me to look up at him.

"You didn't have to hit her," he growls, his eyes focused angrily over my head on either Ethan or Aaron.

"The bruise should show by the time we get to the tracks. She won't look so innocent anymore," Aaron replies nonchalantly, then he grabs hold of the back of my shirt and rips a piece of fabric off. "There. That should do it."

Only then does shock vibrate through me. I can't believe Aaron hit me and tore my shirt. No one has ever hit me, and I don't know how to process it.

Emotions fill my chest, everything from raw fear to absolute hopelessness. My chin starts to tremble, my throat tightening with the urge to cry.

I glance up at Chance, and by the impatient expression on his face, it's clear he's waiting for me to burst out in tears.

Don't, Jai. You have to show him you're stronger than you look so he won't kill you.

I bite back the tears and lift my chin while squaring my shoulders.

Chance clenches his jaw, then lets go of me while muttering, "I can't believe I'm doing this. You better do everything I say, or I'm leaving you behind," he snaps at me.

I don't miss the change in his threat. I've been upgraded from being shot to being left behind – that's a good thing. Right?

Chance throws the bag with all our supplies over his shoulder, then shoves at Ethan's back. "It's good having you by my side again, brother."

“I told you we’d make it. Mom sends her love.”

Ethan smiles at Chance, and Aaron falls in next to them.

Loneliness wraps around me, making me feel like an outcast. My only purpose is to stay alive and find Mom.

I walk a few paces behind Aaron, Ethan, and Chance.

Suddenly Chance stops and waves an arm in my direction.

Crap.

“Since when do the emissaries send out teenagers?” he snaps. “The deviants are going to have a field day with her.”

My eyebrow shoots up, and I know I should keep quiet, but I’m tired of being treated like a child. “I’m not a teenager.” I meant to snap, but let’s face it, I don’t have enough courage for that. “I’ll be twenty in a month. I would’ve started working.” I swallow the rest of my rant before I say something that will get me killed.

Where did that come from? Have you lost your mind?

Chance walks closer to me until I shrink back into the darkness. Lifting an arm, he reaches for me, and when his fingers wrap firmly around the back of my neck, my soul all but ups and leaves my body with terror.

He yanks me closer, making me stumble forward until I slam against his chest. Feeling the heat of his breath on my face, I swallow hard on my fear.

Don’t kill me. Please. I can do better.

With a clenched jaw and murder in his eyes, his voice rumbles from his chest, “Shut the fuck up, little girl.” He exhales a harsh breath, the air warming my chilled cheeks. “That’s all you need to fucking do.” Then, looking grimmer than ever, he continues, “They’re expecting Ethan and Aaron, not you. I’ve paid my dues to get in. I’d like to keep my brother from paying the same dues, understand?”

Nodding, I swallow a dusty lump of air down.

“Just do what I say, and you might just make it.”

Might?

My thoughts get stuck on the single word. I don't like the sound of it. I'd like to hear a firm *will*.

Chapter 5

Chance

Jesus fucking Christ.

I can't believe Ethan brought a girl. Women are the rarest thing on this planet. There's probably one to every thousand men.

Christ, the rebels are going to take one look at her, then shred her to fucking pieces. They'll pass her around and fuck her raw until she bleeds to death.

She's not going to make it.

Unable to stop myself, I stare at the girl. Jai Matthias. The daughter of the engineer who's been helping us. He's supplied us with DNA and seeds so we can grow crops and farm animals. He's our inside man.

We only have two women in our ward. Valen, who's more badass than most men and taken by Jarek, and Raze, who almost didn't survive the rebels. When she made it to the ward, most of her teeth were knocked out, and she was on the verge of death from being used by the rebels.

The only reason I chose her to be a part of my team is because she's quicker than a rat, made of steel, and quiet.

Honestly, there are times I forget she's female.

With my gaze on Jai, I have to admit she's the most breathtaking thing I've ever laid eyes on. She looks soft and breakable, her green eyes wide and filled with a world of innocence.

Lifting a hand, I take hold of her ponytail and yank the tie from it. The strands spill over her shoulders, and a startled gasp escapes her as she rubs

the back of her head.

She's too fragile.

Tossing the tie at her, I growl, "Put this away. The rebels don't have these."

"Rebels?" she gulps. "What rebels?" A terrified breath shudders from her.

"They're our first line of defense." I leave out the part that some are cannibals, and most are murderers and rapists who've been banished to the fallen cities.

The only reason they allow us into their city is because we supply them with meat and vegetables.

Turning away from Jai, I head toward the ruins of the dark metropolis in the distance.

There's only the full moon to cast light over the towering buildings that once formed a great city. *New York*. It hasn't gone by that name in decades.

We're crossing an overgrown road no longer in use when gunfire echoes in the distance.

Jai shrieks and darts closer to Ethan and me. "What's that popping sound?"

She keeps glancing over her shoulder, searching in the darkness for whatever made that sound.

There's a burst of protectiveness in my chest that I don't like one bit. It's nature. Men have been programmed to feel protective of women.

I ignore the unwanted emotion with gritted teeth, muttering, "It's a waste of life."

As we continue to walk, I notice Ethan counting on his fingers as more shots echo into the night.

Sixteen shots. That's weird.

"Since when do they send out more than seven people?" I ask.

“Since today,” Aaron replies.

Sixteen people gunned down for the emissaries to do experiments on so they can build their army of emotionless robots. Fuckers.

“What do you mean by a waste of life?” Jai asks, her tone filled with the anxiety and fear coursing through her veins.

“What you just heard was the other *courageous crusaders* being hunted down and shot,” I say, picking up my pace to put as much distance between the trackers and us.

“Wh—,” Jai gasps.

Glancing at her, I notice she looks even paler than when she came through the dome. The bruise from the punch Aaron gave her is forming on her jaw and cheek.

The asshole. I might not give a flying fuck about this woman, but it doesn't mean I'm okay with a man hitting her. It's just not right.

Fuck. What am I going to do with her when we reach the tracks where the rebels are?

Her mouth opens and closes a couple of times before she rasps, “Killed? Why?”

Figuring the woman's had enough shocks for one day, I just shake my head. “We need to move faster.”

Jai stays by my side, her eyes shimmering with the tears she's fighting to hold back.

I have to hand it to her. She's stronger than she looks.

I remember what it was like when I was sent into the forbidden lands. The first two weeks, I had to fight to stay alive, and when I stumbled on the ward, I was almost killed during training.

Here you have to earn your right to live, and you have to contribute to society.

Even though Jai's able to swallow her tears, I doubt she'll last two weeks.
Unless I help her, which I can't do.

Ethan is my only priority.

I've become stronger than most and one of the best soldiers so I can protect my brother. Even though a woman is rare and sought after by every man, I won't let it get in the way of my goal. As soon as I get Ethan safely to the main ward, I'll fight in the war, and after it's ended, Ethan and I will make our own way in the world.

Since I left the ecocity and managed to escape the trackers, it's been my only reason for living in this fucked up world left behind by our ancestors.

I've stayed alive and become strong, so I can protect the only person who matters to me – my brother.

Chapter 6

Jai

This is insane.

It's not happening.

It's a nightmare, and I'll wake up soon.

My thoughts keep racing, and I stick close to Chance. He's a deviant and hasn't killed me, so I figure I'm safest by his side.

Dear Almighty. I could've suffered the same fate as my fellow crusaders. I could be dead right now if it weren't for Ethan and Aaron getting me out of the ecocity.

I immediately feel guilty for thinking of myself first and not the people who just lost their lives. Ruth is lying dead out there, and no one will know.

Did the deviants guarding the border kill them?

But why?

My lips start to tremble, and I try to square my shoulders. I can't cry. I have to prove to Chance I'm just as strong as Ethan and Aaron. Besides, I didn't even know the other crusaders all that well.

Still, I saw some of those people every day. They didn't deserve to die like that.

With a heart that weighs a ton and more fear than I can handle, I keep walking next to Chance until the buildings grow taller as we cross a bridge. I can't see what's below us. There's only a massive gaping hole.

It's weird how Chance doesn't look as scary after hearing those shots and knowing what happened to the others.

Wild grass has pushed its way through the concrete in some places, and as we step off the bridge, I trip over something and fall hard to my knees. I grab hold of the very thing I trip over that seems to be part of an ancient statue.

Crap, Jai. You have to do better!

As I pull myself up, I take in the full view of a woman's concrete face. Spikes dart out around her head, forming a crown. Some have been broken off, though.

Wow. The fallen statue is enormous.

I yank my hand away from the tip of her nose and take a stumbling step backward.

“Before the wars, the statue used to represent freedom,” Chance says, his features grim. Then his eyes flash to mine. “It’s been left here to warn the virtuous that we won’t go down without a war. We’ll always fight for our freedom.”

His words make me swallow hard, and I take a last look at the fallen statue that means so much to Chance and the other deviants before I have to run to catch up to our small group.

Freedom is a word that belongs with faith and hope, words we were never allowed to say in the ecocity.

Chapter 7

Jai

When we reach the metropolis, most of the windows are shattered or completely gone. It must've happened during the wars because there are no shards of glass lying around as we walk past the buildings.

I stumble over a hole in the ground where bricks are missing and quickly catch myself from falling.

Pay attention!

We pass overturned trashcans. Old metal ones, not plastic like the virtuous use for trash.

“We have to go up. We are easy targets down here,” Chance says, but it doesn't make sense.

Up where?

Suddenly, he takes hold of a metal chain and pulls down a warped ladder that's seen better days. The metal rattles and groans, then sways precariously.

I gape at the death trap.

Oh, hell no.

“Every second step is loose, so make sure to avoid it.”

My shoulders slump at this bit of news. Today is just not turning out to be my day.

Chance continues, “Let's do this as quietly as possible. I'd like to get to the tracks without a bullet in my back.”

Remembering there are rebels, I scan our surroundings but see nothing from the dark alley we're standing in.

Chance reaches for a metal step and pulls himself up with ease.

I stare, my mouth dropping open while my stomach bunches and my heart sinks to my feet. Still, I can't help but admire Chance because I've never seen anyone pull themselves up with one arm before.

Gosh, he must be strong.

Chance rests his feet on the third rung, and I swallow hard as my stomach sinks to my feet.

It's too high. There's just no way I'll be able to do it.

"Jai," Chance's voice is a low murmur, and my eyes dart back to him. He holds his right hand out to me.

Really? He's going to help me?

He gives me an impatient look. "Today, little girl."

Annoyance seeps into my chest from the name he calls me, but I hide the emotion from showing on my face. Moving closer, my body is tense as I wipe my hands on the back of my pants to make sure they're dry. I don't want to slip halfway up.

"Take hold of my wrist," Chance orders.

Crap. I get a feeling there's going to be a lot of touching.

My eyes land on his hand, and again I notice the scary, dark ink covering his skin.

Just do it, Jai! Before he changes his mind and leaves you here.

"I'm going to pull you up. Just put your feet next to mine." He sounds different, calmer, and not so upset anymore.

I hesitate for another moment, then brace myself and place my hand in his. My fingers don't even wrap halfway around his wrist, and the heat from his skin instantly sends a rush of tingles up my arm.

His fingers are filled with strength as they clamp around my wrist, making me feel as tiny as a bug. When Chance pulls me up, and the muscles

in his arms strain, heat flushes through me.

Focus, Jai!

I concentrate on putting my feet next to his and grab hold of the ladder. Chance lets go of my hand, and, taking hold of the pole next to my head, he moves in behind me.

Oh crap.

I swallow hard, and with a racing heart, I press closer to the ladder. I stiffen even more when his breath stirs the hairs at the very top of my head.

Just focus on your own breathing, woman!

From Ethan holding my hand to Aaron hitting me to Chance practically pressing his whole body against mine – there’s just too much touching today.

“You’re small,” he murmurs, his tone deep and rough.

There’s a burst of unknown sensations deep in my abdomen, making my skin clammy and my heart skip a beat.

Dear Almighty. I’m going to be impure before this night is over.

“Just climb ahead of me. Count every second step from the bottom. Skip the others,” Chance orders, ripping me from my panicked thoughts.

“Okay,” I breathe, and glancing up, I climb a step.

The metal is cold beneath my hands, and I have to really stretch my body to skip the loose ones.

I don’t know why Chance let me go first. It’s nerve-wracking, to say the least. With the three men behind me, it’s not helping my already fragile nerves, and now I’m self-conscious, as well.

The next step I’m supposed to reach for is missing. *Does that mean I have to reach for the one above it?* I hesitate, not sure what to do. *That would be the loose one, wouldn’t it?*

“Is there a problem?” Chance asks from below, sending a flurry of nervous tension streaking through my body.

I feel the step move beneath my feet as Chance takes hold of it.

Move, Jai!

I test the step with my right hand, and it feels solid enough. Taking hold with both hands, I lift my right foot to the next metal rung.

“Let go. Now!” Chance suddenly snaps, “Let go!” Then his arm circles my waist, his hand presses over my ribs, and his breath hits my ear.

Startled, my fingers jump free from the metal, and I yank my arms back to my chest.

I feel the warmth of his body as he holds me tightly to him. His chest is all hard muscle, and I can feel the rhythmic beat of his heart against my back, unlike my own, that’s racing a mile a minute.

“I said every second one is loose. Listen!” he snaps. My ear heats up as his breath rushes over it.

“It was gone,” I whimper, and I start to tremble, which is not good.

I need to calm down. He’s going to leave me behind.

“Okay.” I hear him take a deep breath. “There’s nowhere for you to put your feet, so I’m going to lift you to the next one. Grab hold and hang tight,” he says, his voice still rumbling like thunder.

My mind freezes the second his fingers fan out over my ribs. I’ve never been held so tightly by another person, a man – not even my father when he hugged me goodbye this morning.

“Jasper!”

I snap out of my thoughts.

“Hands by my hand. Dammit, woman, concentrate!”

A blush heats my cheeks as I grab hold of the rung, then our fingers touch. Chance’s chest presses into my back, and we’re so close I’m scared he’ll feel how fast my heart is racing.

“Concentrate. I’m not doing this alone,” he grumbles.

I have to swallow in order to create some form of moistness in my dry throat.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper and quickly wipe my hands on my shirt when he takes hold of me again.

“It’s easy,” he says.

I’m glad he thinks so.

He exhales, and the wisps of my hair tickle my cheek.

“I’ll lift you to the next one again. It looks as if you can climb farther from there on out.”

I nod as his fingers fan over my side again, then he lifts me. I grab and hold, my feet dangling for a split second before I feel his breath on my ear and his arm around my waist.

That’s it. I’m impure. There’s no way all this touching hasn’t corrupted my innocence.

Shame trickles into my heart, then his voice sounds softer as he murmurs, “We’re almost there. You can do this.”

I glance down but don’t see the street below as my eyes lock on his muscled arm wrapped around my waist and how my t-shirt is bunched up and exposing some of my skin.

No thinking about arms around my waist. No muscles. No nothing. Focus!

I find my footing on the step, then Chance finally lets go of me. We climb in silence the rest of the way, and I try to ignore the mixed emotions I’ve never felt before as they make a mushy mess of my insides.

My arms are burning, and my fingers are numb by the time I reach the rooftop, but it doesn’t stop a smile from spreading across my face. I pull myself over the edge and scramble to get out of the way.

Holy crap, I did it!

I did something hard for the first time in my life, and although Chance helped, I still did it. Then pride fills my chest, the smile drops from my face, and the shame thickens like a dark cloud over my head.

Even though I've been taught being prideful is bad, I tuck this huge accomplishment deep in my heart.

Rubbing the sore muscles in my arms, I watch Chance, Ethan, and Aaron climb onto the rooftop.

When it looks like we're not going to rest but keep going, I quickly say, "Thank you, Chance."

He just nods before walking across the rooftop.

Just because he helped you climb a ladder doesn't mean he's your friend.

"Watch me, Jai," Chance says. "Just do what I do." He walks to the middle of the rooftop and glances at me over his shoulder. "You can do it."

Do what?

When he breaks out into a sprint, my breath sticks in my throat the moment his body goes airborne. Pins and needles spread over my skin as shock shudders through me.

No!

For a moment, he flies, his arms wide at his side, then he pulls his legs in and disappears from my sight.

"Chance!" My heart drops, and I break out into a run. Reaching the edge of the building, I let out a gasp when I see him straightening to his full height on the rooftop of the next building. "My freaking heart," I mutter under my breath.

Then it sinks in that he expects me to jump as well.

Oh, no. There's no way I can do that.

"I'll never make it," the words rush from me.

"You can do it," Ethan encourages me.

I watch Aaron go next and wonder if there's a way for me to go down the ladder I just came up with.

"We'll catch you on the other side," Ethan says, and then he breaks out into a sprint, and I watch him leap into the air.

They're all insane! How can they just jump?

My throat closes up as I slowly walk back to where the men started sprinting from.

I'm going to die.

My feet feel glued to the rooftop, refusing to move. I can already imagine my body splatting on the road beneath.

Dear, Almighty. Please help me.

Sucking in a deep breath, I try to encourage myself, "Come on, Jai, you can do this. If they can, you can." My voice is trembling as much as my body. "Just do it," I squeal as I break out in a sprint.

Just before the edge, I come to a shuddering stop, my feet refusing to carry me into the air. I cover my face with my hands, icy prickles racing over my body.

I'm going to die!

I'm going to fall, and it will hurt so bad when I hit the ground.

"Jai!" I hear Chance call. Lowering my hands, I glance to the other building.

"Listen to me," he shouts.

I start nodding, my heart thundering against my ribs.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Y-yes," I sputter the word out.

"You're going to be fine. Run as fast as you can and jump. I'll catch you." He sounds pretty sure of himself. "I won't let you fall. You'll be fine."

But It's not him I'm worried about. It's me.

He hasn't seen me jump before. At school, I always went under the poles instead of over them. I suck so bad at sports.

“Go back and run. I'm waiting for you.”

With a heavy weight bearing down on my shoulders, I walk back and desperately suck in deep breaths.

Closing my eyes, I try to imagine a straight road in front of me, and I start to run. I pump my legs fast and hard. The edge comes closer, and my heart pounds loudly in my ears.

Crap!

My heart thunders as I leap into the night. I shriek so loud I'm pretty sure everyone in this city now knows where we are.

A cold wind rushes over my heated skin, and I don't stay suspended in the air as long as the men did.

No!

I drop fast, and panicking, I stretch my body out as far as possible, trying to give myself more length. My arms slam hard into the side of the building, and pain streaks through them and up into my shoulders. When I start to slide back into the dark night, prickles of fear spread over my body. There's nothing to take hold of.

“Chance.” I whimper desperately.

Suddenly, fingers dig into my arms, right above my elbows. The hold is firm as I'm pulled up and onto the rooftop to safety. I grab hold of the first thing I can, a shirt – Chance's shirt. To further my embarrassment, I can't stop myself from plummeting right into him.

His hands move to my shoulders, and it might be my overactive and terrified brain, but they rest there for a heartbeat before he helps me stand on my very unstable feet.

“The next one won't be as bad. Come on.”

I straighten my shirt and watch the men get ready while trying to catch my breath.

Did I really just do that?

“Why do we have to do this? Why can’t we walk on the streets?” I ask the question because my nerves are tattered threads after the jump, and now they expect me to do it again.

My legs feel too numb to move.

“Trackers. They know you come through the gate on the seventh day of the seventh month. They’ll come looking for you. It’s what they’re trained to do. There’s no reward if they don’t deliver.”

“Deliver what?” I ask, but Chance is already running again.

“They need to deliver every single one of the crusaders,” Ethan says.

Shock shudders through me as I begin to realize nothing is like I’ve been told since birth. First rebels and now trackers?

My voice is strained as I ask, “So it wasn’t the deviants who killed the other crusaders?”

“No. The trackers work for the emissaries,” Ethan replies, and for the first time, anger tightens his features.

For the umpteenth time, I’m stunned out of my mind.

What kind of world have I been sent to where a deviant has to keep me from being killed by people who call themselves rebels and trackers?

Is anything I’ve been taught the truth or just a bunch of lies?

Chapter 8

Jai

The second jump goes better, I don't miss the building entirely, but Chance still has to help me up. I also manage not to grab hold of him like the terrified coward I am.

By the fourth jump, I think I'm getting the hang of how I should stretch my body and hold my arms. The landing part, not so much. My hands are chafed, and I'm sure my right knee is bleeding from banging it into the rooftop with the last jump.

Although the men say nothing, and I've been taught it's wrong, I feel proud of myself. It's a vice, but I can't help it. I've managed to do things I never even thought were humanly possible.

"We have to jump into that building," Chance says, pointing downward and slightly to the right.

My pride disappears when I see the hole he's gesturing at. It's big, but even when I turn my head sideways, I can't see a way for me to make the jump.

I'm going to splat against the wall.

Worried, I scan the building for another way.

I could jump to the rooftop and climb down.

"I know I won't make the jump," I say, my voice no longer sounding terrified but determined. "I'm going to jump to the roof and climb down."

Wow. Last night I was staring at my glofish, and now I'm jumping across gaps between buildings. It all feels so surreal.

We go in the same order, Chance, then Aaron. Aaron almost doesn't make it, and I hold my breath as Chance grabs his shirt and yanks him forward. Ethan takes a deep breath and sprints. I hold mine until he lands and rolls into the hole.

This time, there's no one on the roof to catch or help me.

I walk back, farther than the previous times to get a better start. For a second, I close my eyes and inhale deeply before exhaling slowly.

It can't be worse than the first jump. You can do it.

I sprint and launch myself off of the roof. My heart beats the seconds until I slam down hard on the other rooftop, landing on my shoulder. I roll onto my front and push myself up as a wide smile spreads over my face.

Holy crap, I did it!

An exhilarating feeling rushes through my body, setting every nerve-ending alive.

I did it on my own.

Knowing the men are waiting for me, I move to the roof's edge and look down. It's really high, and my sight warps. For a moment, it feels as if the building is swaying, and it makes my insides feel all wobbly.

"Jai," Chance calls me back to my present predicament. "Lower yourself."

The distance is too far for me to hang over the side of the building and swing my body into the hole.

"Jai," he says in a much softer tone.

I see Chance hanging out of the gap in the wall like he did when he was on the ladder, only holding on by his right arm.

What does one have to do to become so courageous and strong?

"Just lower yourself. Trust me. I'll catch you."

Chance has kept me alive this far in our journey.

I lie down on my stomach and maneuver myself, inch by inch, over the edge until I'm holding on by my elbows. My weight is pulling me down, and the bones of my elbows dig into the concrete. My feet desperately search for a foothold, but the building doesn't have any.

My shirt has inched up, and the bricks are cold against the bare skin of my stomach.

Crap.

"Trust me and let go," Chance's voice is kind for the first time since I met him. "I'll catch you."

He helped me up a ladder.

He pulled me up after the jumps.

He won't let me fall now, not after all that trouble.

I glance up and see thousands of lights I didn't notice before. They shimmer and wink at me. The moment is dreamlike.

Wow, I've never seen anything so beautiful.

I let go of the edge, and with my eyes on the twinkling lights in the sky, I fall.

As I drop down the side, the building scrapes against my arms and stomach. Suddenly an arm wraps around my hips, and I feel hot breath spread over my stomach. Then I'm yanked forward, and my forehead slams hard against the top part of the opening as I'm pulled into the building.

My vision blurs, and the lights in the sky disappear.

This time I don't care about embarrassing myself. As Chance starts to lower me to the floor, I throw my arms around his neck and hug him as tight as I can.

This is the first man I've ever hugged. Well, besides Dad.

I'll never forget this moment.

"Thank you for catching me," I whisper, near tears and still breathless

from the fear of plummeting to my death.

I should be straightening out my shirt and not clinging to him, but I can't help myself.

Chance's hand brushes over the exposed skin of my lower back, sending a wave of tingles rushing through my body. To my surprise, he hugs me back, his arms and chest feeling like the safest place on Earth.

"It's nothing," he says, his tone hoarse. "We have to move."

Setting me down on my feet, his hands move to my sides. My heart begins to race as he takes hold of my shirt, tugging it down to cover my exposed skin.

I pull my arms back and look at my feet, so I don't have to make eye contact with him. I'm mortified that I hugged him. I've never done something like that before.

It was an indecent thing to do and not the virtuous way.

"I saw lights," I blurt out to cover up my embarrassment. "In the sky."

"They're called stars. You've never seen them because of the dome. There's a lot you'll learn on this side," Chance explains as he takes the backpack from Ethan.

He walks away as if I didn't just hug him – as if it meant nothing to him. My cheeks flame with humiliation and shame.

Things like hugs and stars mean nothing to the deviants.

"Stars." I test the word on my tongue. It feels foreign, but the name suits them. There are thousands of lights flickering out there, and I never knew about them before tonight.

What else don't I know about?

Will I make it long enough to find out what else has been kept from me?

"Come on," Chance mutters from a doorway. "Let's go."

I only see his shadow as he disappears down a dark flight of stairs.

I can still feel the ghost of his breath on my stomach and pull at the hem of my shirt. My heart skips a beat, and heat creeps up my neck and cheeks. I duck my head and wrap my arms around my waist, not ready to inspect the weird emotion.

Moving down a staircase, I end up between Aaron and Ethan. It's dark, and I can barely see my hand in front of me. I keep close to the wall, feeling each step jolt through my body, all the way to my teeth.

I'm constantly conscious of keeping myself from walking into Ethan, but I don't want to go too slow, scared Aaron will bump into me.

It doesn't help because when Ethan suddenly stops, I slam nose-first into his back. He takes hold of my arm and slides his hand down, feeling for my fingers and pulling me closer. An awkward feeling spreads up my arm at his soft touch.

"We have to wait for Chance to come back," he whispers.

The fact that Ethan feels he needs to whisper sends a chill down my spine. Aaron is close to my left, and I stand crammed between the two men who saved my life today.

"Thank you." I feel a need to show my appreciation in some way while we wait. "For doing what you did back there. You could've left me to—" I let my sentence hang, unable to finish it.

"Don't mention it. Your dad asked us to help break you out, and in return, he'll help us."

"Why did my dad arrange this?" My throat feels even drier now. "Is it really unsafe in the ecocity?"

"Yeah, but don't worry—"

"This way. Quick," Chance barks the orders at us, cutting off from completing his sentence.

Ethan lets go of my hand and darts forward, and I follow close on his

heels. At the entrance of the building, we all duck down and follow Chance out onto a sidewalk, keeping to the dark shadows against the walls.

Reaching an intersection, Chance indicates for us to stop. “See that flickering light over there?” he whispers.

On the opposite side of the street, people are standing around a fire, their shadows cast wide against the walls.

“Trackers,” he whispers.

The hair on my body rises at hearing the word. A weird numbness spreads over my tongue and through my throat. All I can see of them are their menacing shadows.

“There’s no other way?” The panic is back in Ethan’s voice, and this time I feel it in more than just my stomach. My body is tense to the point where my muscles tremble and ache.

“The subway track is two buildings down. Just two. We can sprint.”

I want to tell Chance I’m not fast at all, but my jaws are clenched shut with fear.

I only realize how tightly I’m squeezing my fingers into a ball at my sides when Chance reaches for me and takes hold of my right hand. He pulls me to the front, so I’m next to him, and when he weaves his fingers with mine, my heartbeat speeds up, and my mouth grows dryer.

I glance down at our joined hands and take in the size difference. Chance’s hand practically dwarfs mine, and instead of it making me feel vulnerable, it fills me with a sense of security and strength.

It’s because he’s the strongest man you know and all that stands between you and certain death.

When I look up at his face, I see his features are drawn in a dark frown, his eyes locked on the trackers across the street.

“We have the upper hand. They don’t know we’re here. Let your fear

drive you. If you fall behind, I won't stop for you." His words are clipped, filling me with dread.

I can only swallow hard because I'm too scared to do anything else.

Chance reaches behind him, then my eyes widen, and my eyebrows dart up as he pulls a gun from behind his back.

Holy crap.

I've never seen one up close.

The metal weapon looks threatening in Chance's grip, and I struggle to tear my eyes away from it.

"On the count of three, we run. One," I feel his voice vibrating deep in my chest. "Two." My eyes zoom in on Chance, and I notice that he doesn't let go of my hand. "Three!"

I thrust myself forward as if I'm launching myself off a rooftop.

I manage to keep up with Chance until something blasts into the side of us in the street. It sends shards of concrete up. When I shriek, Chance wraps his fingers tighter around mine and yanks me forward.

I thought I was scared before, but when there's another blast somewhere behind me, terror explodes in my chest, closing it right up and making it next to impossible to take a deep breathe.

In class, they told us to control our breathing. In through the nose and out through the mouth. Whoever thought that one up never had to run for their lives.

I can only manage to gasp, pant, and wheeze.

As we run past the first building, I realize the trackers must've spotted us. With the third blast nearby, the dreadful realization strikes – they're shooting at us.

I know very little about guns, only what I've learned in first aid and what damage they can do to the human body.

Chance lets go of my hand. “Keep running!” Then he points the gun at the trackers and pulls the trigger.

Holy crap!

I hear the crack echo, and there’s another blast slightly to the left of me. Shards of concrete splinter everywhere, and one hits my leg. I shriek and urge my legs to move faster.

Please, don’t let me die.

Chapter 9

Jai

Suddenly, Chance yanks me to the right, and the ground disappears beneath my feet. My whole body goes rigid and cold as I start to fall, but then strong arms scoop me up off my feet.

I grab Chance's broad shoulders and hold on for dear life. From the extremely close proximity of our bodies, embarrassment surges hot through my veins.

I press my face into his shirt to catch my breath and fight the tears of shame. There's also a sharp sense of disappointment that he has to carry me. I'm not supposed to be a liability.

When it counted most, I didn't get to prove myself. Chance has to carry me.

We reach the bottom of the stairs, and Chance sets me down but still keeps one arm around my waist.

"Just follow my lead and don't say a word," he warns right before he bangs a fist twice on a solid metal door.

He pulls me closer to his side until I'm almost squashed against his muscled frame. My whole body goes rigid as I stand in his embrace. He leans down, and his nearness should be intimidating, but it's not.

"Put your arm around me, or we're not going to pull this off."

I don't know what we're trying to pull off, but I turn slightly into him, doing as I'm told.

With all the touching, I can't think straight anymore. I'm way too aware

of him, his body so close to mine and his manly scent intoxicating me.

“Relax, Jai,” he whispers urgently.

That’s easy for him to say. He’s not the one being touched, shot at, and having to jump over buildings all in one day.

The door opens, and as I walk alongside Chance, I feel his body brush against mine.

Suddenly, I feel very hot and find it difficult to control my breathing. I can’t focus on anything around me but this strong man holding me.

Deep down, panic bubbles up, a different kind of panic from what I’ve experienced the whole day. It’s not the kind you have when facing danger. It’s the type when you’re faced with the unknown – when you know there’s something akin to faith, hope, and freedom in this world, but you’re too scared to name it out loud.

We head down many stairs until we reach an open space that’s lit up by the flames coming from a couple of burning metal trashcans.

I glance up at Chance, and for the first time, I can see him clearly.

Oh. My. Soul.

He’s smiling, but it doesn’t make him look any less threatening. He looks like he could be in his late twenties, and he has the brightest blue eyes I’ve ever seen, with dark brown hair that’s cut short.

Then there’s his chiseled, square jaw and full lips that make my stomach spin with a weird sensation I haven’t felt before.

“Chance, my man.” My eyes jump to the big, dark-skinned man turning from the circle of people surrounding one of the burning bins. His eyes lock on me, then he chuckles. “Damn, what’s she on, bro? She looks wacked.”

Holy crap.

I take in the cruel look in his black eyes and how his top lip curls as if he’s about to snarl at me. I try to be inconspicuous as I inch closer to Chance.

“Had a little too much brew to drink,” Chance says, holding me a bit tighter. “We’re just passing through. Going to get some shut-eye and head on up to the ward at the crack of dawn. You need me to give Idris a message?” Chance sounds amazingly calm.

I can’t help but stare up at him, but when his eyes flick to mine, I quickly glance away, and my gaze locks on two men who are hugging. Then my jaw drops.

Are they eating each other's faces?

Crap, they're kissing.

I’ve only ever seen my parents kiss a couple of times, and witnessing the public display of affection fills me with second-hand embarrassment.

The bigger man has the smaller one pressed up against the wall. His one hand is around the other one’s throat, and their crotches are rubbing together.

Stop staring, Jai!

“No message,” the man, who seems to be the rebels' leader, answers. “You better take care of your girl. She’s practically drooling, and one of my men might take it upon themselves to fuck her.”

His words send a wave of fear coursing through my veins. Chance moves his hand to the back of my neck and turns me into his chest. I smell crushed leaves and his manly scent.

“Hands off my woman,” Chance growls, his voice brimming with the promise of violence. “We don’t want any unnecessary killing tonight.”

The other man chuckles. “Wouldn’t dare risk the alliance.”

Then the other man’s words sink in. He thinks I belong to Chance. He thinks I—

My thoughts stop dead, and I can’t think any further.

Well, for a few seconds, then my mind sets off racing. Today was the most I’ve ever been touched by men, and it’s made me impure. The

emissaries would tell me I should've found a way to prevent it, to always keep myself pure.

Still, I don't move away from Chance but remain plastered against his muscled body.

I tell myself it's because I fear the dark-skinned man, but deep down, I know it's not the truth.

Chance makes me feel safe.

"Later, Zane," Chance grumbles, dropping his hand to my lower back and giving me a hard nudge to move.

I walk straight ahead until Chance growls, "Turn left."

A few steps farther, the platform drops away onto train tracks. Ethan jumps off, and I'm about to follow his lead when he turns to me and reaches up. I stiffen when he grabs hold of my waist.

Immoral, that's what I am! I shouldn't let them touch me so freely.

There's a moment of strain on Ethan's face as he lifts me from the platform and onto the tracks. He's not as strong as Chance.

"I'm sorry Aaron hit you. At least we didn't have to shoot you," Ethan says as if it was an option.

A shiver runs down my spine, and this time I can't muster a smile of thanks. Instead, I step away, putting some distance between us.

"When we get to the platform, get some sleep. I'll keep watch." Chance sounds angry, and I can only think it's because I was staring at the kissing couple.

I look up the dark tunnel, but I can't see anything except the tracks disappearing into the darkness.

I follow the men, but it's at a slower pace this time. I keep tripping over the metal pieces of the tracks. I wish there's light so I can actually see where I'm going.

After a while, my toes start to ache from bumping them on the train tracks.

I've been concentrating so hard on where to walk that I flinch when Chance suddenly barks, "Up here."

I can't see anything and squint until my eyes hurt. All I see is black and then a flash of light.

Chance must've been here before to know his way around in the dark. A light flickers on, then spreads dimly through the platform he's standing on.

"Over there is a bathroom. We'll sleep on the platform tonight," he mutters, still sounding angry.

When I place my hands on the edge of the platform so I can climb up, Ethan takes me by my arms and tugs me onto the cold concrete.

Seeing Chance's eyebrows pull together in a dark frown, I wish Ethan hadn't help me.

Chance must think I'm totally useless by now.

I go straight to the bathroom, but I regret it the second I walk in. A pungent smell hangs in the air, and it's so bad I can't breathe through my nose. I don't want to inhale through my mouth, either. The Almighty only knows what I'll be inhaling.

My eyes start to water when I take another breath through my nose. Then, having no other choice but to breathe the awful smell in through my mouth, I cover my lips with my hand.

Ugh. Gross.

Paper sticks to the stained floor, and I don't want to know what the stains are from.

With my pointer finger, I poke at the first stall's door, and it creaks open. I peek into it and immediately back out. I'm sure my face is green by now. The second one is not as bad, and quickly stepping inside, I relieve my full

bladder.

This place is disgusting, and for the first time, I think I can actually convert someone by just telling them how clean our bathrooms are back at the virtuous' ecocity.

I try to flush the toilet, poking at the lever with one finger, but it only clicks, and on my fourth try, I give up. I pull up the zipper of my jeans, then freeze when someone enters the bathroom.

Do men and women share bathrooms here?

The door to my right squeaks. "Fucking hell," Chance mutters.

Without thinking, I place my hand on the filthy door to keep it closed. My eyes grow large when a trickle sounds up from the stall on my other side. Slowly I turn my head to the left, unable to believe what I'm hearing.

Embarrassment and the most awkward feeling I've ever experienced flood me as life returns to my body, and I dart out of the stall.

Rushing to the sinks, I groan when I see they're stained brown.

I really hope they're water stains.

There's no sign of soap or that there ever was any.

Using two fingers, I open the tap, and water comes out in spurts. I want to be gone before Chance comes out, so I try to wash my hands fast under the meager flow of water. There's nothing to dry my hands on, so I wipe them on the back of my jeans while rushing toward the door.

"Hold up."

I cringe, and heat creeps up my neck. I don't turn around as I listen to Chance wash his hands. It feels like I'm intruding on a way too private moment.

"How's your head?" he asks.

I've forgotten about banging it during all the running, shooting, hugging, and kissing episodes. There's a dull throbbing, nothing I can't handle.

“Fine, thank you.”

“I got these from one of the first aid kits. It should help with the headache.” I dare a glance at him from over my shoulder and see he’s holding a small metal tube of painkillers. “That’s if you have one.” He shakes out two into his palm and holds them to me.

Walking closer, I take them with a grateful smile wavering around my lips. “Thank you.” I eye the basin dubiously. I’m not sure if the water is safe to drink.

“Go ahead. It won’t kill you.”

I catch some water in my hand and swallow the tablets down. When I straighten up, Chance reaches for my head. I instantly stiffen, a weird sensation that’s almost like nerves spinning in my stomach.

Chance’s fingers brush over my cheek and jaw, then he murmurs, “Aaron didn’t do too much damage. The bruise should fade quickly. You did a good job at knocking your head, though.”

“Thank you for catching me.” I try to smile but struggle as I address the elephant in the room. “I’m sorry you had to drag me half the way.” I can feel the heat spreading up from my neck to my cheeks.

“Don’t mention it.” He lowers his hand from my face, then a dark frown forms on his forehead, making him look dangerous again.

I notice the scar above his eyebrow again wonder how he got it. His eyes are so striking it feels like they hold the power to place you in a trance.

When I realize I’ve been staring too long, I quickly lower my gaze to his chest.

Needing to say something, I ask, “So you and Ethan are brothers?”

“Yes, and I care a lot about my brother.” I hear a warning lacing the words. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t use him in any way.”

My jaw drops to the sticky floor, and I’m in too much shock to pick it up.

“Huh?”

Chance’s eyes sharpen on my face. “I know this is all new to you. Ethan saved you, and you feel grateful, maybe even some level of infatuation, but we risked everything, and he is all I have. Don’t mess with him.”

What?

“Um...” Are we really having this conversation?

Chance’s eyes sweep over my body. “We both know you’re a rare thing in our world, and it will mess with Ethan’s head. It’s up to you to keep him at a distance. Got it?”

Somehow I manage to nod, then Chance pats me on the shoulder and leaves me in the stinking bathroom.

For some reason, I feel bruised, as if someone just punched me again.

Chance just pointed out that my behavior has been immoral, and he doesn’t want me near Ethan.

Intense shame fills every inch of my being, and I drop my chin to my chest as my lips start to quiver.

Chapter 10

Chance

Leaving Jai in the restroom, I stalk out onto the platform and only spare Ethan and Aaron a glare. “Sleep!”

I’m pissed off because I know if the woman can stir emotions in my chest, she’ll have one hell of a fucking impact on my brother. I see the way he looks at her and every unhappy pull of his mouth whenever I help her.

He’s already possessive of her.

It sure as fuck doesn’t help, that even though Jai is small and seemingly helpless, she’s managed to keep up with us. She was terrified out of her ever-loving mind but still leaped from building to building.

It makes me admire the woman. I shouldn’t, though. She won’t be with us for long. Idris will either break her or send her to the main ward to marry some fucker that’s of use to us.

I watch as Ethan and Aaron lie down on the mats scattered across the filthy floor.

Walking to the platform's edge, I glance up and down the tunnel. Before sunrise, we’ll have to hightail our asses out of here. I plan on stealing Zane’s car. The thing is nothing more than a rusted tin can, but it might have enough power to get us out of the city. Once we’re on the open road, things should go smoother.

My thoughts turn to Jai. She’s dealt well with all the shocks she’s suffered tonight. Finding out the ecocity you grew up in is nothing but a lie is not easy.

Fuck, she's probably never been touched before today, and I had my hands all over her.

I remember the first month after I left the ecocity. Everything was the opposite of what I've been taught. It took a while to wrap my head around the fact that emotions and public displays of affection were totally okay.

Damn, has it already been ten years?

The corner of my mouth lifts in a grin.

I've come fucking far. There's no sign of the *virtuous* man I used to be. In its place is a soldier with a mission to keep his brother alive at all costs.

I notice Jai doesn't come out of the restroom and shake my head.

The woman has a long road ahead of her, but luckily it's not my problem. The second we get back to the ward, I'm packing my shit and taking Ethan to the main ward.

As I turn my attention back to the tunnel, waiting for the rebels to come to sleep, I know we're in for a rough night. At the ward, I have my own bedroom, and I don't have to listen to other people having sex.

Here it will be different, and it's going to be one hell of a shock to Jai.

Every single time I wanted to turn my back on the woman, she stirred a protective feeling in my chest, and I ended up giving in and helping her.

Just until tomorrow, then she'll be Idris' problem.

As the head of the ward, he has first dips on the newbies. Kenzo and I pick from the leftovers.

That's if there's anything left over of the person once Idris is done with them.

Letting out a sigh, I try to clear my mind, but I fail miserably the second Jai steps out of the restroom. My eyes sweep over her body that I know feels a hell of a lot more womanly than it looks.

Her skin is softer than silk, and she smells like berries.

Every time I had to help her, and her body was pressed to mine, I battled the fucking hard-on threatening to tear through my jeans.

Yeah, I'm not going to lie. The attraction is there. It's not surprising, though.

My eyes flick to Ethan, and I watch as he stares at Jai.

I've had time to get used to the urges, but it's still new to him. In the ecocity with its strict laws, it's easier to suppress your needs, but out here, where it's a free for all, things are different.

Basic need takes over until the urge to satisfy the desire to take what you want becomes so fucking overwhelming you either become a rapist or get used to masturbating.

At the main ward, you can fight for the chance to sink your cock into a warm pussy. There's a handful of women who allow the victors to warm their beds.

That's how I lost my virginity, and I'll fight so Ethan can experience a woman as well.

But come hell or high water, that woman won't be Jai.

Chapter 11

Jai

I stare at the worn mats scattered all over the floor.

People actually sleep on them?

I notice Ethan and Aaron are already lying on two, with two more mats placed close to theirs. There are dirty blankets with holes torn in them, which I won't be using.

I glance around the platform, wondering if there's a more private space for me to sleep.

“Lie down, Jai,” Chance orders. “It's only for one night.”

One night too many.

Slowly, I walk to where Ethan and Aaron are lying, and with the threat from Chance to stay away from his brother still fresh in my mind, I leave a mat open, so I'm not next to him.

Anxiety claws its way up my spine as I drop down to my knees without looking at any of the men. I crawl across the hard surface and try to comfort myself with the thought that at least I won't be sleeping on the cold floor or outside. It's not working much.

All I can think of is the three men that will be lying next to me. I lie down and tuck my arm beneath my head.

I can do this. I have to.

Staring at the empty mats, I flinch when I hear Chance's footsteps. He lies down behind me, so he's positioned between Ethan and me.

“Drink some water,” Chance orders.

I sit up and take the bottle from him. When the first drop hits my tongue, I can't control my need and swallow half the water with greedy gulps.

So good.

"When the rebels come to bed, pretend you're asleep," Chance mutters as he takes the bottle from me.

"Thank you," I whisper, and inching away from him, I lie down on the edge of my mat. I tuck my face into the crook of my arm and try to forget where I am.

The sooner you fall asleep, the sooner this will be over.

I watch the light flicker against the wall. It's only then I remember the stars.

"Why can I see the stars on this side but not under the ecocity's dome?" The question is out before I can stop it.

"The hermetic dome is designed to keep you inside and the deviants out."

At first, I don't think Chance is going to tell me anything else, but then I hear the mat squeak beneath his weight. His voice sounds closer when he continues. "There's a lot they keep from you, and most of what you've been taught are lies."

I turn onto my back and look at Chance. He's lying on his side, facing me, and the close proximity feels way more intimate than when we were in the restroom together.

"Like what?" I ask to keep the conversation going. I need to hide how weird I feel around this man.

The corner of his mouth tugs up, and it makes him look very attractive and not as rough around the edges. I can't keep myself from staring at Chance. I've never seen a man like him. In the ecocity, all the men are just as white as I am, with not a hair out of place. None of them are muscled like Chance.

“It rains,” Chance says, drawing my attention back to the conversation. “Not the frozen sheet once a year that freezes everything in sight. It rains often, and you can walk in it.”

Wow.

Like a dry sponge, I absorb everything he’s telling me.

The corner of his mouth lifts a little higher. “The sun doesn’t burn either. It warms your skin.”

“Really? You can go outside?” I say a little too loud.

“Like I said, there’s a lot they hide from you. Everything you’ve been taught is a lie. The virtuous live in a bubble made to keep them imprisoned. The world is different on the outside.” He sighs and rolls over onto his back. “You should sleep.”

A bubble, just like I thought. But why do the emissaries lie to everyone?

I try and imagine rain that doesn’t freeze, and I think of the stars again.

“They’re coming,” Ethan whispers, and it’s only then I hear the footsteps coming up the tracks.

“Sleep. I’ll stay awake,” Chance whispers back.

My head clears of all traces of calm when laughter and slurring voices fill the platform.

Dear Almighty! All the men are sleeping here?

A man crawls onto the mat next to me and almost slaps me in the face. My lips part with a gasp as another man kneels behind him, and they start to undress.

What on Earth?

They kiss, and it sounds wet and sloppy.

As they pull their pants down, I start to blink, and stunned out of my mind, I watch as the one man slams his private part hard against the other man’s backside.

I almost shriek but cover my mouth in time to squash the sound.

I've never witnessed anything so depraved before, and it leaves me frozen in shock while panic floods my body. My breaths start to come faster and faster until they're exploding against my palm.

Hands grip hold of me, and I'm spun around, coming face to face with Chance. His eyes lock on mine, and it makes overwhelming shame fill my chest.

One of the men groans, and it's followed by a hurried pace of skin slapping.

When I cringe, Chance wraps an arm around me and pulls me right against his body. His hand finds my hair, and he presses my face into his shirt. Lowering his head until I feel his breath blow over my ear, he whispers, "You have to become stronger, Jai. This world is not for the weak. I understand it's a shock, but you can't have a panic attack."

I nod quickly, taking deep breaths of Chance's scent.

I can't believe what I just saw. It was downright barbaric!

I keep my voice low so no one else will hear. "I'm trying, but it's hard when two men are doing filthy things to each other right next to me."

"It's nature. There's nothing wrong with two adults appreciating each other's bodies."

Really?

Still, it's not right doing it in public.

My tongue darts out to wet my dry lips, then I dare to ask, "So it's not a sin to show affection?"

"No, it's not. And touching doesn't make you impure, either."

I pull slightly back and tip my head to see Chance's face. "Is that the truth?"

It's hard to believe everything I've ever known is wrong.

The men's moans and groans become louder, and I hear sounds I've never heard before.

Why does it feel wrong?

There's a sickening twist in the pit of my stomach.

"You'll learn to adjust to how things are done here."

I seriously doubt that.

Chance tugs me back to his chest, then covers my right ear with his palm while pressing my left to his shirt.

Hearing his steady heartbeat thumping in my ear, I close my eyes and try to forget where I am, matching my heartbeat to his rhythm. Only then do I become aware of his other arm around my waist, holding me tightly. His fingers brush softly over my lower back, and it soothes me.

Something knocks against my back, and I hear Chance's voice rumble from his chest, "Stay off my fucking mat."

"You could join us, loverboy," the one man breathlessly coos. "We haven't had a girl before."

NoNoNoNoNo!

"No fucking way that's happening, fuck-face," Chance growls, sounding more threatening than ever. "I don't share my woman."

I press closer to the man that's kept me alive, the only one I feel safe with. I don't care whether it's inappropriate and wrap my arm around his waist, grabbing hold of his shirt.

Give me half a second, and I'll crawl under him.

His mouth returns to my ear. "Don't worry. They won't try anything."

I nod quickly, then whisper, "Thank you."

When I press closer to Chance, his hand moves up my back, and his fingers wrap around my neck. The touch sends a wave of tingles rushing over my skin.

I get my wish when he angles his body half over mine, and even with all the depraved things happening around me, I feel protected.

Dear, Almighty, thank you for Chance. I'm sure I would've been dead by now. Or used by all these men.

The prayer shudders through my body.

Chance is all that stands between this cruel world I've been thrown into – one I don't understand – and my survival.

As the hours' crawl by, I lie completely still, every inch of my body pressed to Chance's.

The past day and night replay in my mind. I think how much I've done that I never dreamed was possible. I wonder how Dad's doing.

When my thoughts turn to the other crusaders, I pinch my eyes tighter shut and banish them from my thoughts.

As a chorus of snores fills the air, I lose track of time.

I don't let go of Chance, and I'm grateful he doesn't push me away, either.

In the darkness surrounding us, I give in and let my thoughts turn to the man holding me.

Like I've said before, I've never met anyone like Chance. He's twice my size and so much stronger. He's also the most attractive man I've laid eyes on. It's not just his looks but the vibe he gives off. It's filled with tension, danger, and self-confidence. There's probably nothing on this planet he fears.

It's like he's superhuman.

Chance shifts, and lifting himself with one arm, he hovers over me.

"It's time to leave," he whispers.

I push myself up on my elbow and turn my head toward Chance's. My lips accidentally brush over his cheek, drawing a loud gasp from me.

Oh crap.

My heart sets off at a wild pace, then he yanks away from me, leaving my stomach all knotted up, and I wonder if the fluttering sensation I just felt was a figment of my imagination.

I move to sit up and suppress a groan when every muscle in my body protests. Every inch of me is stiff and aching.

It's dark, with only a shimmer of light coming from the toilets.

"Ethan." Chance shakes his brother's shoulder. When Ethan looks at Chance, he whispers, "Wake up Aaron. Do it quietly." He glances at me. "Don't make a sound. Walk where I walk." He eases himself up in one fluent motion.

I get up as gracefully as my aching body will allow me to, careful not to bump against the sleeping rebels who are still naked.

Chance takes one giant step over a mat, and all I can think is there's no way I can even jump that far. I don't want to look to Ethan for help because Chance will be angry, thinking I'm trying something with his brother.

Like that will ever happen. I don't even know where to start to seduce a guy.

I glance down at the mat again, wondering where to step, when hands take hold of my waist, and I'm lifted into the air.

I grab onto Chance's biceps and feel his muscles bunch together, but there's no sign of strain on his face. I weigh nothing to him.

He sets me down right in front of him, and I catch a whiff of his scent again. I wonder why he smells of crushed leaves. Did he lie in the wild grass while he waited for us? Is that why he smells of the earth? The thought evaporates when he takes hold of my hand and pulls me close behind him.

Ethan is right behind me, and I find myself blocked in by the two brothers. As we start to shuffle our way through the mats and rebels, I grab

hold of Chance's arm to better balance myself. The last thing I want to do is fall on a sleeping man.

Chance stops and lets go of me. He crouches by a mat and slowly pulls something from the rebel leader's pocket. He shoves whatever he took into the back pocket of his jeans and reaches back for me without looking. Once he has my hand firmly gripped in his, we move again, slowly, until we reach the end of the platform.

I watch him jump off. He reaches back for me, and without a word, he lifts me onto the tracks.

With a pounding heart, I think of all the train tracks lying in wait for me in the dark.

I'm going to stumble and make a noise.

The men start to walk, and I wonder how they see where they're going. I can't even see my feet.

I stumble over the first track and reach in front of me to steady myself. A hand grabs my right arm, and I know it's Ethan because Chance is to my left and Aaron's on my right.

I pull back quickly, and not wanting to anger Chance, I whisper, "Don't help me, Ethan."

I manage to take a few steps before I trip and fall to the ground. My knee burns, and I bite on my bottom lip to keep the gasp in. This time it's not my fault because a tie is sticking out of the ground.

I'm not winning with the tracks.

"Walk this side." Chance takes me by my elbow and pulls me to his left side. "There aren't any tracks here."

Now he tells me.

I roll my eyes, hoping he can't see me doing it in the dark. Seriously, he could've told me that sooner.

Up ahead, it isn't so dark anymore, and there's something shining at the end of the tunnel. When we're closer, I can make out that it's a beaten-up, old car.

Wow. I've never seen one this old, not even in the Gallery of Transport.

When Chance takes a set of keys from his pocket, I realize that's what he took from the rebel leader.

Are we stealing the car?

I keep glancing behind us as Chance throws his backpack in the back of the vehicle and gets in behind the wheel. Ethan climbs into the passenger side.

After glancing over my shoulder again to make sure we weren't followed, I watch as Aaron struggles to open the left side door before ducking through the window.

"Are you staying or coming?" Chance asks, annoyance tightening his voice.

I open the door, and it jams halfway, but I manage to squeeze in.

The engine roars to life, the sound louder than the buses in the ecocity, and a puff of black smoke explodes from the back.

"Good girl," Chance purrs, the sound of praise coming from deep in his chest.

My eyes snap to his face, and drinking in the smile of approval curving his lips, his words make heat pool in my abdomen.

Holy crap.

My hands fist on my lap, and I swallow hard on the weird emotion I can only describe as intense craving filling my body.

What would it be like to have him say those words to me?

Chance glances in the rearview mirror, and our eyes lock. Caught red-handed, I quickly turn my gaze to stare out the window while wetting my

lips.

Our exit is a hole in the wall, like the one we jumped into last night. It's like someone took a huge hammer to the side of the building.

It's dark outside, but the sun should rise soon.

I don't know what today will hold for me. I'm not sure I want to know. All I'm sure of is it will be the first time I see the sun and not just a blur moving across the sky.

Chapter 12

Jai

“Wake up.”

I can almost imagine I’m in my bed. I can picture Dad smiling down at me, but my body has never ached this much in my entire life.

My shirt sticks to my back, and the air in the car is stuffy.

Gosh, the heat is unbearable in the car.

I look up and see Chance standing by the window with a black streak smeared across his cheek.

“No!” I dart up from where I’m lying on the back seat. “I missed the sunrise.”

“There will be many more. Come on. We have to walk the rest of the way.”

I lift myself off the sticky leather seat and shove the bag I used as a pillow out of the window. When I try the half-broken handle, the door won’t budge. I turn around and shimmy out of the window, head first. The air is cool on my skin as I climb out, and when I glance up, the light blinds and startles me, making me tumble backward. A ridiculously loud shriek escapes my lips as I hit the hot concrete road.

“Ouch,” I groan, blinking as my eyes sting and start to water from the bright light. For a moment, I can only see black dots before my sight starts to return.

“Don’t look directly at the sun. You’ll damage your eyes,” Chance mentions.

Climbing to my feet, I glance in his direction and catch him watching me. I get the feeling he's weighing me up, wondering if I'll be able to make it through whatever lies ahead.

I'm too scared to ask what it is, but I won't give up. I survived my first night. I will survive today, as well, and do whatever it takes to find Mom.

Taking the tie from my pocket, I start to gather my hair.

"Don't tie your hair. It makes you look too young," he says, looking worried. "Fuck, Idris is going to shit himself when I walk into the ward with you."

Who is Idris, and why would he freak out over me?

"Idris?"

Chance wipes his hands on a dirty rag. "Idris is the head of our ward. Kenzo is your best bet. When we get to the ward—" He stops and shakes his head. "I have to look out for Ethan. Just stay out of Idris' way. Try to win Kenzo over and let Idris take Aaron."

I don't understand what he means.

Glancing around us, I notice we're alone.

"Where are Ethan and Aaron?"

All I see is wild grass as far as the horizon stretches. Heatwaves dance in the distance. It's only us in the middle of the deserted road.

"They'll be back soon." Chance clears his throat, and he glances over the field to our left. "They're out there taking a leak."

A leak?

Looking at the field, I see them in the distance, walking toward us. Then a light goes on, and I flush bright red as I realize there are no restrooms out here.

My stomach growls loudly, and I slap a hand over it. I haven't eaten since I had dinner with Dad the night before I had to leave the ecocity.

“When will we reach the ward you mentioned?” I squint at Chance, my eyes sensitive from the bright sunlight.

Suddenly, a loud crack resounds in the air, making my whole body jerk with fright. Prickles rush over my skin.

I know that sound. It's a gunshot.

I swing around in time to see Ethan drop into the wild grass. Aaron comes running as another loud crack thunders through the air.

No!

Frozen with shock, I only move when Chance yanks me down behind the car. He shrugs the bag onto his shoulders and pulls the gun from behind his back. I'm still shocked out of my mind when he grabs hold of my hand, his grip so tight it hurts.

Ethan. What happened to Ethan?

Aaron slides in behind the car and crawls closer to us. His face is streaked brown with dirt. Sweat forms lines as the drops run down his face. He wipes at it, making a mess.

“Don't move. Wait them out.” It's the first time I hear panic in Chance's voice.

Peeking over the car's trunk to the spot where Ethan fell. I remember the way his body went limp and dropped to the ground, and it sends shivers running down my spine.

“Wait who out?” I ask. “What about Ethan?”

Chance's eyes jump between where Ethan is and the road we're on. My heart drops as his features tighten with a tormented look.

It's not panic in his voice. It's worry. Dread.

“Trackers. We should've kept going. The ward's not far. We should've—” Chance hisses the words out. “Fuck!”

His eyes scan the area again.

Five men come running across the field, and Chance's fingers instantly tighten around mine.

"There they are. We have to run," Aaron shrieks like a girl.

"We can make it to the gate." Chance's voice is clipped. His eyes jump between the five trackers and where Ethan fell. "Ethan!" His shout is loud and filled with desperation.

I flinch next to him. There's still no sign of Ethan, but the trackers have changed direction and are running toward us.

"Ethan!" He shouts again, his breaths coming faster. "Fuck." Chance looks at me, then at the spot where Ethan fell.

Suddenly, he wrenches my arm almost out of its socket as he yanks me up and forward. I hit the ground running, my muscles stiff and sore.

"What about Ethan?" I ask, tears welling in my eyes.

"Fucking run, Jai!" Chance barks, yanking at my arm again.

Aaron shoots past us, making me realize I'm holding Chance back. I try to pry my hand loose.

"Just go! Run," I scream, unable to keep the tears back any longer as they spill over my cheeks.

I can't have Chance risk his life for me. I remember running with Ethan and how quickly I got tired. The last meal I had was dinner at home, more than twenty-four hours ago.

But he doesn't let go, his grip on my hand tightening even more until my fingers hurt.

Is Ethan dead?

Intense heartache floods my heart that's pounding a mile a minute in my chest. I pump my legs harder when Chance yanks at my arm again.

There's only the road ahead of us and the trackers behind us, and it fills me with intense fear.

We're not going to make it.

I hear a crack in the distance, but luckily it doesn't hit any of us. We all keep running.

Is Ethan still alive?

A sob builds up in my chest, making my lungs burn even more than my legs.

We run over the incline in the road, and only then do I see the ward. The gate is enormous, but it's still a distance away.

At least it's something to run toward.

My side starts to cramp, my breaths wheezing over my parched lips.

If I survive this, I promise I'll run often. Every day.

I just have to make it through today.

There's another blast, and something smacks into the road next to me. Some rocks shoot up.

"Faster, Jasper!" Chance yanks at my arm again, and I push myself to my limit.

I'm winded, and no matter how fast I breathe, my lungs aren't getting enough air. They're on fire, just a ball of flames like the sun beating down on my head.

There's another loud crack, and not even a second later, my arm stings. I don't scream or shriek. Tears keep flowing down my cheeks.

I tell myself I'm okay because the bullet smacks into the road in front of me.

I know I'm still alive because my legs are aching, and my lungs are still on fire.

The gate is right in front of us, and I can see it's being opened enough for us to get in.

Come on! You're almost there.

Aaron reaches the ward and hurries inside.

Ethan was so close!

My tears blur my sight as Chance flings me toward the gate. Another crack resounds in the air, and my cheek burns as I slam into the gate. Chance shoves me hard into the ward, then the gate slams shut with a loud thud behind us.

Drained of all my strength, I drop to the ground. I gasp for air, my cheeks wet from crying.

Chance lifts his arms, gripping the back of his neck with both his hands, his features torn with sorrow as he stares at the shut gate. He sucks in deep breaths of air, then horror darkens his eyes. “Jesus,” he groans, the tone of his voice absolutely heartbreaking. “Ethan.”

“I’m ... sorry,” I sob.

Chance shakes his head, and all emotion drains from his face. He blinks slowly before turning his gaze to me. He stares at me for a moment, then turns around and walks away.

I can’t get up to follow him, my legs too numb from the running. Lowering my head, another sob escapes my burning chest.

I can’t believe we lost Ethan. Seeing him die shocked me to my core.

Chance lost his brother.

My heart hurts so much for him.

Chapter 13

Chance

It didn't happen.

No.

This is just a nightmare. It's not real.

Slamming the door shut behind me, excruciating pain rips through my soul. I suck in desperate breaths of air, knowing the full shock hasn't hit me yet. It's going to knock me on my ass when it does.

I didn't leave my brother out in that field.

As if I'm being hunted by the stark reality I'm refusing to accept, I begin to pace up and down the bedroom, my heart pounding in my chest.

My mind is inundated with images of Ethan's body slumping in the grass.

Christ.

I grip my shirt over my heart as a blow of crippling sorrow hits.

"Fuck." I inhale. I exhale. "Fuck!"

Swinging around, I rip the door open, only to come face to face with Idris.

He shakes his head at me, concern clouding his eyes. "Forget it, Chance. You're not going out there again."

"Ethan's out there," I grit through my teeth. I have the urge to go after Ethan, even though I know I won't find him. They're long gone by now.

Still.

Idris tilts his head. "I know."

The man's the same height as me and just as strong. We've spent years

training together and formed an unlikely friendship, which is saying a lot, seeing as Idris doesn't make friends easily.

Idris steps into the room, shutting the door behind him. "But we both know there's nothing you can do." He levels me with a compassionate look. "I'm not going to lose you to the trackers."

I shake my head because, rationally, I know there's nothing I can do, but the intense heartache demands I try. "They're going to drag him back to the laboratories and experiment on him."

Jesus Christ. They're going to turn my brother into an insensate – an emotionless robot. The very thing we're fighting against.

I left my brother in a field, all to save a woman.

The final blow hits, and unable to hold myself up, I sink down on the side of the bed. I cover my face as my heartache morphs into a living, breathing thing. It's violent and destructive, ripping everything I am to shreds.

I sacrificed Ethan for Jai.

What kind of brother does that?

Ethan was the only thing I lived for, and in a heartbeat, I betrayed him.

Why?

As if he can read my thoughts, Idris says, "You did the right thing saving the woman."

I let out a burst of air and glare at Idris. "Did I? I fucking sacrificed my own flesh and blood..." I wave a hand angrily in the air. "For fucking what? The couple of babies she'll bring into this fucked up world?" Enraged laughter erupts from me. "I don't care whether mankind goes extinct! I care about my fucking brother who's about to become a lab rat."

Idris places his hand on my shoulder. "I know it's hard to hear, but there's nothing you can do. You know those fuckers travel in packs, and they've got transport. We'll never catch up to them in time."

I know.

The blow slams the breath from my lungs.

Jesus, I lost Ethan.

I cover my face as my breathing speeds up, grief flaying my soul to shreds.

I've lost the only person I loved.

I remember when he was a toddler, and he followed me around.

The way he used to look at me as if I was his entire world.

His smile.

I'll never see his smile again.

Idris sits down beside me. “Channel all your rage and sorrow into training for the war. We’ve all lost someone to the fucking emissaries. We’ll get our revenge.”

Revenge won't give me my brother back.

Idris rests an arm around my shoulder and leans forward to catch my eyes. “Ethan will be taken straight to the girl’s father. Matthias knows Ethan is your brother, and you have his daughter. There’s a strong chance he’ll save Ethan, so he doesn’t endanger his daughter’s life. Until we’re face to face with Ethan and see for ourselves he’s been turned into an insensate, there’s hope.”

Idris’ words manage to calm me down. He’s right. Matthias is the scientist who has to alter the DNA, and he won’t do it to Ethan, knowing I have Jai.

Christ.

I suck in a deep breath of air.

Nodding, I say, “You’re right. There’s hope.”

Idris lets out a chuckle. “I’m always right.” He pats me on the back, then gives me a pointed look. “You know what this means, right?” The corner of

his mouth lifts in a smirk. “The girl is your problem. Try not to kill her until you’re sure of your brother’s fate.”

Fuck.

Chapter 14

Jai

I can't believe we lost Ethan. Chance must hurt so badly.

Minutes pass in which I'm stuck in a shocked trance from everything that's happened. The past twenty-four hours have been downright insane. It's hard to process everything.

Ethan.

A shadow falls over me, and when I lift my head, my heart sinks even further. A girl, who seems to be twice my size, glares down at me. At least, that's what she looks like from where I'm sitting in the dirt.

She doesn't seem friendly at all.

With white and black hair and thick black eyeshadow, her brown eyes almost look gold. She's wearing a tiny shirt, which only covers half of her torso, leaving her waist exposed for all to see. Her jeans are torn, and she's wearing men's boots. She looks like she can squash me with one step.

She looks like a rebel.

"Where is Ethan?" Her voice is soft, a total contrast to what I expected.

"Trackers," I breathe the word out while climbing to my trembling legs.

The girl doesn't say anything. She stares at me for a moment. "Well, that's one hell of a pity." Letting out a sigh, she nods in the direction of the entrance. "Follow me."

Standing, I notice she's easily two heads taller than me. I follow her toward an entrance that looks like the start of a tunnel, but then it forks into two corridors.

“Your name, newbie?” she asks.

“Jai.” I clear my throat and use the back of my hand to wipe the tears from my cheeks. “My name is Jai.”

“I’m Valen.”

There are two doors, and we head toward the one on the right.

She lets out another heavy sigh. “I suppose it’s up to me to show you around.”

Still shocked from losing Ethan, I don’t actually process her words, and it hasn’t sunk in I’m at the deviants’ ward.

Chance just lost his brother.

I watch as Valen presses a sequence of numbers on a keypad. The door clicks open, and she motions for me to enter first.

“We, just like the other wards, are self-sustaining. Our lights and heat are generated by solar panels. We grow our own crops, but unlike the virtuous, ours receive actual rain, and not that manufactured shit the ecocity gets once a year.”

The way she says it makes it sound like she’s given this tour countless times before, and honestly, I can’t find it to care right now.

“Only the corn is grown outside, the rest is inside.”

I’m tired and want to find Chance so I can check on him. I’m also hungry and thirsty. Surely this tour can wait?

But I keep my mouth shut and walk down the corridor. The walls are curved with rings of light every couple of yards. An archway opens up to my right, and I see what looks like stairs, only it’s terraced row upon row of greenery.

Holy crap, this place is huge.

“Veggies and herbs,” Valen mumbles.

Feeling out of place, I whisper, “There’s so much.”

“Like I said, each ward is self-sustaining. Our vertical farms produce crops all year round, much like the ecocity, just on a smaller scale.” She sounds smug about it.

To my left, the tunnel opens up to three consecutive archways.

“Wow.” It’s the only word that comes to mind.

It’s an oval-shaped room. The white ceiling looks like someone has chiseled patterns into it. It flows into perfect oval shape holes, almost like the pictures of beehives I’ve seen. Rays of sunshine spill through it, giving light to a patch of green grass. There are two benches in the back of the room and a small one situated more to the front. Other than that, there are three big trees and calm pools of water.

It looks peaceful.

“It’s Chance’s version of a park. It’s a work in progress,” Valen informs me. “He has another park in the other corridor. Different theme, though.”

I think it’s a beautiful place to come and sit and think. In a world devastated by war, there isn’t much beauty left.

To think Chance created something so peaceful.

I love how green everything is. It makes the environment feel alive and not stale like the ecocity.

At the second archway to my right, I stop. There are several enclosures, each holding different animals. I’ve never seen real-life animals, only the ones in my history book.

Oh wow.

I know my dad works with animals, the ones he clones for food purposes, but the public isn’t allowed to come in contact with them. It’s for hygienic reasons.

Sheep, cows, pigs, and chickens. Those are the ones I can see from where I’m standing. Never in a million years did I think I’d see live animals. I’d

love to see them up close so I can find out if a sheep is as soft as it looks.

“It was weird for me as well. You’ll get used to it, the smell not so much.” Valen gestures with her head to keep going.

“Where did you get them?”

“The original ones were courtesy of your dad. We’ve been breeding our own the past ten years.”

Shocked, I gasp, “You can breed them?”

“Not us. The animals breed by themselves. You know, they do the deed and out pops the little ones,” she answers with an amused smirk.

I just blink at her.

They procreate on their own? Wow.

Dad always said it’s unsafe for both animals and humans, and that’s why we have to be inseminated at the laboratories to ensure the baby is a healthy specimen. It’s also to make sure the best genes get passed along and there are no genetic deficiencies. After all, the virtuous population has to be pure.

“Come on,” Valen urges me along.

The tunnel slants left, and a third archway opens up to our right. It’s another tunnel, and as I peek into it, I see another door to my left. A blue one. I follow Valen down the tunnel away from it.

“Where does the blue door go?”

“Back out. The corridor holds three bedrooms that belong to Idris, Chance, and Kenzo.” I want to ask more, but then she points to another archway to our right. “The dining hall where we eat.”

We walk past the hall, and I get a glimpse of benches and a kitchen. There are more oval-shaped holes in the ceiling where light spills into the room.

“Bathroom, self-explanatory.”

I turn my attention to the doorway on my left, then ask, “Do the men and

women share?”

Valen gives a sharp burst of laughter. “Oh, you’re in for a thing.” She glances down at me with a flash of pity on her face. “I keep forgetting the virtuous live a confined life.” She takes a step closer to me, and patting my shoulder, she continues, “Well, honey, if you want any advice, you better forget everything you’ve been taught real fast, or there are some pretty tough days ahead of you.” Her eyes skim over me again. “The sooner you get used to our way of living, the better for you, but yeah, we share everything. Bathrooms. Bedrooms.” There’s a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Men.”

Nerves make my stomach ache.

There’s one more archway to our left and a big one up ahead. “Sleeping quarters. Again, self-explanatory.” Then she smiles as we stop in front of the big archway. “And this is…” We walk inside, and I see the area opens up into a huge room, “The drill zone.”

“Drill zone?” I squeeze the words out.

That doesn’t sound good.

A long pathway curves down both sides of the room to an open space of concrete below. It then slants back up again, forming what looks like a track around the entire room where a person can run.

“What do you do here?” I’m not sure I want to know.

“We prepare for war.” She turns around and heads out again. I stare at her back, totally flabbergasted. It takes me a moment to recover what senses I have left.

“What war?” I jog to catch up and follow her into the sleeping quarters.

“Against the virtuous. You don’t think we’ll just sit and let them take over the world?”

“What?” I wish someone would give me some real answers.

“What do we have here?” I swing around and stumble backward when I

see a man leaning with his shoulder against the archway.

I'd guess him to be in his late twenties, but I'm no expert in guessing someone's age. His hair is wet, and he's only wearing jeans and a gray t-shirt, no shoes. His eyes drift over me, making me feel very uncomfortable.

"Jai, she's a newbie who came in with Chance. Did you leave warm water for the rest of us?"

He walks into the sleeping quarters, and I quickly move out of his way, leaving a clear path for him to Valen.

When he stops mere inches from her, I swallow hard. She smiles up at him, and the way they look at each other tells me I should leave.

"I missed you."

I turn my head away, looking anywhere but at them. There are ten mats on each side of the wall, inches apart from each other. Each mat has a pillow and blanket.

At least the place is much cleaner than the tracks where the rebels live.

"Where are the others?" Valen's voice sounds hoarse.

"Kenzo and Wayan are still checking the wall and making sure none of those fuckers break through. Raze and Aldric are in the kitchen. Idris is in the bathroom with Chance and that newbie that keeps popping up."

Are they referring to Aaron?

I want to go to Chance and tell him how sorry I am about Ethan. I also want to go to the bathroom for other reasons. I glance at Valen and the man, and when he pulls her into his arms, I take the opportunity and slip out of the sleeping quarters.

If memory serves me right, the bathroom is the first archway on my right. I slip inside, and instantly my eyes widen, and my heart starts pounding as I watch Chance slam his fist into Aaron's face.

I stumble away from the violence, pressing my back to the wall.

Is it because Aaron didn't try to help Ethan?

Probably.

Aaron falls, and a dark-skinned man plants his foot against Aaron's neck. "I'll deal with you later, fucker. Get to work and earn your keep."

The man turns his head, and his dark eyes lock on me. A tremor rakes through my body, and I can't bring myself to move.

Oh crap. He must be Idris.

Aaron shoots to his feet and rushes out of the bathroom.

Slowly, Idris' eyes sweep over my body, then he shakes his head. "Pathetic."

The word slams into my heart that thumps harder against my ribs when he walks past me to leave the bathroom.

Geez, that doesn't hurt at all.

Not able to look at Chance, I glance around the room and see a row of sinks lining the opposite wall.

Water!

I rush to the sink, and turning open the faucet, I scoop water into my hand and drink until I've quenched my thirst. I hear a door to my left open, and my head snaps toward the sound.

A man steps out of a shower, and my mouth dries again. He only has a towel around his waist.

Blood rushes to my cheeks, and I look away as fast as possible without straining my neck.

"Someone lost their newbie," he shouts out for all the world to hear, and it's only then I realize Chance left.

The man chuckles at my visible embarrassment, then leaves. Letting out a relieved sigh, I glance at the mirrors above the sinks.

Holy crap.

I look awful. My cheek's bruised, and the bullet grazed my skin, leaving a tender red streak. I'm too pale, making the black, blue, and red bruises more visible. My hair is all over the place, looking like something exploded in it.

When I try to pat some of the strands down, I notice a tremble in my hands.

I need food.

My eyes travel down and stop on my arm. The sting I felt was another bullet that grazed my arm right above my elbow.

I was lucky. Ethan wasn't.

I want to cry for him but know now is not the time or place.

Chance comes back in, dressed in a plain black shirt and blue jeans.

So, they do wear color.

He holds a pile out to me. "A towel and clothes. The shirt and pants are Raze's. They should fit. Shower, then we'll look at your arm and face." He doesn't say anything else and leaves again.

Grateful I'm allowed to clean myself, I walk to the showers, hoping afterward I can get something to eat.

Chapter 15

Jai

Knowing at any moment, one of the men living here can walk into the bathroom, I hurry to clean myself and can't enjoy the warm water washing away some of the stress. I do feel more human, though, as I get dressed.

The shirt fits like a second skin, and for the first time, I feel conscious about it showing the curves of my breasts. They might not be as big as other women's, but no matter how I pull at the shirt, it still goes right back to clinging to me.

The pants aren't much better, but they also clings to my body. It's not that the clothes are uncomfortable, quite the opposite, they're more comfortable than any I've ever worn. They just feels revealing.

I glance down and let out a self-conscious sigh when I see my cleavage peeking out from the top's low neckline.

Hell, now there's something I never expected to see. Under different circumstances, I'd be happy to look womanly. But with so many men in the ward, I worry.

I leave my damp hair untied, remembering Idris will freak out if I look too innocent.

I bundle my dirty clothes together and step out of the shower stall.

"Finished?" I jump with fright. Chance is leaning against the wall in the corner, his eyes closed.

"Yes, thank you."

Letting out a sigh, he opens his eyes. "Dirty clothes go over there." He

gestures to a woven basket. “We take turns working in the kitchen, doing laundry, and tending to the animals and vegetables.”

I hurry, not wanting to waste his time. I throw my clothes into the laundry basket, thinking at least I get to keep them.

When I turn around, it’s to see Chance staring at me. His eyes drift over me, and my whole body flushes hot, not just my face.

He clears his throat. “How’s your arm?”

I glance down at the raw wound. “It’s just grazed. Nothing serious,” I answer. I try to smile but stop when it feels awkward.

Chance doesn’t say anything and pushes himself away from the wall. He walks to me, and I avoid his eyes.

I feel guilty about what happened to Ethan and don’t want to see the accusation in his eyes.

His fingers brush over my skin right above the wound, making me glance down.

It really doesn’t look that bad.

He lets go of my arm, and my heart sets off at a maddening pace when he brings his hand to my face. He takes hold of my chin and nudges until I’m forced to look at him.

For a couple of intensely awkward seconds, I don’t know where to look, and my eyes jump from his chin to his mouth to his eyes. My insides quiver and tighten, and it’s not because I’m scared.

I’ve never experienced such strong emotions before. Everything from guilt to compassion to wonder. Chance is an incredible human being, and he affects me deeply.

“You’re right,” he murmurs, “it’s not too bad.”

He doesn’t step away or let go of my chin. The quivering inside of me spreads through my body, and I clench my hands into fists.

Suddenly, he says, “It’s not going to get any easier. You’ve made it this far. Very few do.” His eyes lock with mine, making my heart skip a beat. “Stay away from Idris. He’ll hurt you. Kenzo is safe.”

He pulls away and turns to leave.

“And you?” The words rush from me before I can stop them.

I wish I could take them back when Chance closes the distance between us in two steps. He’s standing so close, it’s suddenly hard to breathe.

His eyes bore deep into mine, and unable to stand still, I begin to fidget with the hem of my shirt.

“In the forbidden lands, there’s no good and bad, Jai. There are only those who are strong and those who are weak. The strong survive, and the weak die. It’s as simple as that. Idris will break you, and Kenzo will make you strong. But if you’re wise, you’ll stay away from me because I get a feeling I’ll make you weak.”

His words send shockwaves through me and make a frown form on my forehead

“That’s not true,” I argue. “I jumped across rooftops because of you. I’ve never run so fast in my life.” I give him a pleading look. “I’m alive because of you.”

He looks exhausted as he asks, “Remember I told you there will be a lot you have to learn on this side?”

“Yes.”

I’m hoping he’d be the one to teach me.

Suddenly, Chance grabs hold of my shoulders and yanks me against his chest until I feel every one of his muscles press against my body. He lowers his head, and I stop breathing completely. His warm breaths fan over my face, and I realize I’m still not scared. There’s only the nervous anticipation bubbling in my chest.

His face darkens with anger. “Feelings make you weak, little girl,” he growls.

I flinch at the tone of his voice, and before I know what’s happening, his mouth crushes against mine.

Zero. Brain. Activity.

A dizzying wave of pleasure pools in my head, and I gasp for air. The instant his tongue slips into my mouth, something primal takes over.

My left hand finds the back of his neck, and the other grips his shirt. Somehow I manage to kiss him back even though I’ve never done it before.

Overwhelming feelings, I can’t begin to describe, explode in my chest.

Holy crap.

Suddenly, he pulls away, and the dark expression on his face as he glares down at me clears my mind instantly. It feels as if I’m spiraling down a black hole when I realize I didn’t stop him from taking my first kiss.

“Lesson one,” he hisses. “Just because I saved your life doesn’t mean I won’t kill you.” He shoves me backward. “Lesson two. Nothing will stop a man from taking what he wants, and you, little girl, are a rare commodity any man would love to own. Never leave yourself vulnerable like this again.”

The blow to my heart is pure devastation, and I can only watch as Chance stalks out of the bathroom.

I’m bombarded with shame, disappointment, and a sense of betrayal. My trembling legs can’t hold my weight, and I sink to the floor, horrified by what just happened.

Chance just kissed me, and it meant nothing to him. It was his way of showing me how gullible I am.

It hurts so much.

When we were jumping over the buildings, he told me to trust him. Now he’s telling me the opposite.

I don't understand.

Maybe he did it because he wanted me to hurt as much as he does?

I cling to my last thought because it's the easiest reason to accept. I can't deal with the fact that Chance might be like most of the other men who won't hesitate to use my body for their own pleasure and force me to have babies.

No. Chance isn't like that.

He protected me in more ways than one during our journey from the ecocity to the ward. He helped me. He kept me safe. He even comforted me on the platform.

He's just hurting because he lost Ethan. It's understandable.

Knowing I can't sit on the floor forever, I force myself to my feet and walk to the sink. I open the faucet and splash some water over my face while I shove the heartache and confusion deep into the corner of my heart.

After patting my skin dry, I let out a sigh and leave the bathroom while doing everything in my power not to think about the kiss and how amazing it felt.

Lesson learned, Chance. Don't ever trust anyone.

After placing my towel in the sleeping quarters, where I choose the mat in the farthest corner, I head to the dining hall to see if I can find something to eat.

Hearing voices, my hope soars when I smell food. Stepping into the hall, I see people already seated on the benches.

Valen is sitting with the guy from the showers, Jarek. Aaron and another guy are also seated at their table.

"So this is the newbie," a girl, who's just as short as me, says. She's standing behind a table with a huge pot and bowls on it. A row of broken teeth is visible when she smiles. "I see the clothes fit." I try not to stare at the scars on her face and neck. "I'm Raze, and that is our master chef, Aldric."

I manage a nervous smile. "It's nice to meet you."

A guy with streaks of powder on his clothes waves from behind a stove, then Raze hands me a bowl. As I take it from her, she smacks dollops of thick stew into the bowl.

"Thank you for the clothes," I think to say, then quickly add, "And the food."

She grins at me. "Eat up. You look like you can use it. There's bread on the table." She's by far the friendliest person I've met in the ward.

I smile at her and walk over to an open bench against the wall. I don't feel like company right now. I plan on eating the food, then getting some much-needed sleep.

The moment I take a bite, two men come into the dining hall. I recognize the one from the showers, and the other is Idris.

Their eyes lock on me, but I quickly look at my bowl and shove another bite of stew into my mouth.

I hear their footsteps come closer and suppress a groan when they take a seat across from me. The atmosphere becomes so thick I don't think I can manage another bite without standing the risk of choking.

Suddenly, Chance sits down beside me and reaches for a piece of fresh bread.

Oh great. Just when I thought this couldn't get any more awkward.

The silence becomes unbearable while Chance breaks his chunk of bread in half and dips it into the stew. He starts to eat, clearly not bothered at all.

As hungry as I am, I can't eat with the two men staring me down.

Ugh. I'm going to starve long before anything else manages to kill me.

Having had enough of the unbearable tension, I lift my chin and meet Idris' eyes. His bulkier than Chance, and gives off one hell of a dangerous vibe.

The entire dining hall is quiet, as if they're all waiting to see what Idris will do next, and it makes me even more nervous.

"Aren't you going to introduce us, Chance?" My whole body tenses.

Did Idris forget our interaction in the bathroom when he called me pathetic?

I'm not used to this kind of tension. It's making my stomach burn something fierce. I glance at Chance, but he doesn't look up and takes another bite. My eyes dart back to Idris, wondering if I should introduce myself.

Just as my lips part, Chance mutters, "Jasper Matthias. Daughter of the scientist. He asked Ethan and Aaron to bring her along in exchange for his help."

I glance at Idris again and watch as his eyebrows lift slightly.

"How old is she?" Idris asks.

Chance lets out a huff as if it annoys him to answer the questions about me. "Twenty."

Idris taps his fingers on the wooden table, his gaze still locked on me. "She'll have to do then."

Chance nods stiffly, and without another word, he gets up to leave.

"Before you go," Idris says to stop him. "You know the rules around here, Chance. Dues have to be paid."

Chance stares for another moment, then walks away, his half-eaten food still on the table.

Idris turns his attention to me. "You better eat, Jasper Matthias. You're going to need your strength."

I can't make myself nod and instead shove a spoonful of stew into my mouth. I'm hungry, but it's still hard to swallow with them watching me.

"I'm Idris and head of this ward," he finally decides to introduce himself

to me. “Here, my word is the law. You *will* work to earn your keep and learn to fight for the cause. If you think you can’t do that, then it’s best you leave now.”

Leave and go where? It’s not like I have any other options waiting in the wings.

I almost let out a relieved sigh when he rises to his feet, but then he pauses and grumbles, “Jasper.”

My eyes dart up, and I’m met with a threatening look. He stares long and hard at me.

It’s a test. Don’t look away, or he’ll think you’re a coward.

Finally, he continues, “I’d hate to think Ethan gave his life for nothing.”

Instantly, my stomach churns, and my heart aches.

After Idris leaves with the other man right behind him, I can’t force another bite into my mouth.

I was raised not to waste food, so I sit staring at the bowl, hoping my appetite will return. I hear the other people get up and leave. I hear them talking but not what they’re saying.

“You have to clear out your bowl and wash up when you’re done eating.” It’s Aldric. He stands with one arm crossed over his chest, rubbing his shoulder. “Throw the leftovers back in the pot. We’ll heat it tomorrow for lunch.”

“Huh?”

The deviants don’t believe in germs, it seems.

Aldric cracks a smile. “Waste not, want not, newbie.”

When he walks out of the dining hall, and it’s just me, I get up and gather my bowl, as well as Chance’s leftovers. I pour the stew back into a pot that’s bigger than the ones we have at home.

I finish washing the bowls and dry my hands on the back of my jeans. I

know it's early still, but I'm tired, and sleeping is all I can think about.

Maybe tomorrow will be better.

Chapter 16

Jai

Walking out of the dining hall, I startle when Valen says, “You sure took your time in there. I thought you’d never get done.”

“Geez, give me a heart attack next time,” I mutter, but Valen doesn’t seem fazed by my comment.

She walks in the direction of the drill zone, asking, “So, what do you think of Idris?”

“He’s... ah... intimidating.” I meant to say downright scary, but keep that to myself.

“Yeah, at first, he does intimidate a person, but once you get to know him, he’s not all that bad. He just wants us to be the best, that’s all.”

I take my chance as we walk into the drill zone and ask, “You mentioned a war you were preparing for?” I shove my hands behind my back, trying to come across as casual as possible. “Why?”

Valen lets out a sigh. “Life. It’s always about life and the quality thereof.” She lifts her eyebrow at me. “Don’t you agree?”

“That you should go to war about the quality of your life?” I’m not sure I’m following what she’s trying to say.

“Yeah. I’m going to fight for what’s mine. My life. My basic right to be a human with free will. Things come and go, but there can be only one of you and one of me. I refuse to become an emotionless robot. I refuse to give up my freedom.” Her eyes meet mine. “But it’s your choice whether you join the war or not.”

“Of course, I’ll fight for my life.” I start to consider what Valen just said. “But, why go to war against the Virtuous?”

“Because they want to replace us all, newbie. Make you a better version, according to them. Genetically altered humans, the perfect human race for the perfect society. All they need is to alter our DNA, and we’re their puppets for life.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. I shake my head slowly, but then, some of the puzzle pieces start to fall into place.

Is this why Mom fought against going out on the seventh day? Was she trying to avoid the trackers and buy some time to plan a better escape?

Chance said the trackers deliver us to the emissaries, and everything in the ecocity is a lie.

But he also told me not to trust him, so how do I know if what he told me is the truth or a lie?

Ugh. I have so many new questions my head is spinning.

“Come on. Tomorrow you’ll start training. Let me show you some of the equipment.”

I follow Valen from the top of the drill zone, down the pathway that runs around an open concrete area that looks like an arena. There are two entrances to get into the arena.

“The pathway is for jogging,” Valen explains.

My body is still aching from all the exercise I got the past two days, but I promised to start running every day and intend to keep it.

The drill zone looks different from the bottom. The first thing I notice is the wall. I didn’t see it because I was standing on top of it. It’s pretty high up once you reach the bottom and filled with holes, grooves, and bulges.

“That’s my favorite. The grid.” Valen has the biggest grin on her face. “You’ll learn to climb it.”

I look at the wall with new eyes. The grooves are holes where you can place your hands and feet, and I suppose the bulges are just for extra support.

“Why?”

“Because your daddy’s building looks similar.”

I frown at Valen. “No, the solar panels look nothing like this wall.”

She shakes her head at me. “Not the haven, Jai. I’m talking about the real building where he works. Security is too tight to break in through the front door, so we have to climb so we can enter via the windows.”

What does she mean by the real building where Dad works?

“Aldric is looking for you.” Chance snaps from the pathway right above us.

“Later, newbie.” Valen shrugs and then jogs up the pathway.

Feeling curious, I walk closer to the wall to inspect it. The texture is rough and cold beneath my fingers. I grasp hold of the first small hole and look for a place to put my foot. I find a bulge not too high from the ground and test it with the tip of my shoe. Once I’m satisfied with the grip I have on the wall, I pull myself up.

I find another hole that can only qualify for a crack and manage to pull myself higher up. It seems easy enough. I reach for another bulge, already searching for the next hole. My heartbeat starts to speed up with exhilaration because I can actually do this.

“What are you doing?” Chance barks beneath me.

I almost lose my grip but manage to hold my position against the wall.

Shoot, I thought I was alone.

“I’m climbing.” My voice dips, and the words come out sounding like a question.

“I can see that. Unless you plan on breaking your neck, get your ass down. We usually use ropes, so we don’t fall.

“Ropes?” I didn’t see any ropes.

I look down at Chance and see he’s upset, standing with his arms crossed over his chest. He lifts one finger and points up.

I glance up and see a contraption hanging from the roof with ropes tied to it.

Oops.

I ease myself down and jump off the last bulge. “I didn’t see that,” I mutter.

Ugh, interacting with him is super hard and awkward after the incident in the bathroom.

Trying to make a run for it, I dart past Chance, but his hand grips my arm, holding me back. My stomach sinks to the ground, and I wish I could join it down there.

“I don’t doubt one day you’ll be able to climb the grid without a rope, but that day is not today.” His eyes skim over me from head to toe, and my whole body flushes with heat. I quickly look away so he can’t see the effect he has on me.

The last thing I need is another lesson.

He lets go of my arm and walks over to a granite stand situated to the left of us. “You’ll have to build some muscle if you plan on climbing the grid.”

I follow Chance and see a bunch of buttons with words beneath them on the stand. Grid, scaffolds, ropes, wrecking ball, and other words that don’t quite make sense.

Chance presses one button after the other, and a deafening roar fills the air. I cringe closer to him without meaning to.

Ropes for the grid come down with a loud bang, bouncing a couple of inches from the ground. A screeching noise fills the room, and I cover my ears. It sounds like wheels that haven’t been oiled in a long time.

Platforms drop down from the ceiling with a bang. Five, all in different sizes, hang and sway precariously above my head.

Holy crap.

A massive ball swings through the air, the metal chain shuddering. More ropes spiral down at the far end of the room. Bars that look like horizontal ladders extend from one of the walls.

“This is where you’ll practice your climbing and jumping skills, Jai,” Chance informs me. “Until you can do it blindfolded.”

The room has converted into a full-blown training arena.

Now I understand why they call it the drill zone.

I glance up at the swaying scaffolds. The rooftops didn’t sway, but it explains how Chance jumped into the hole so effortlessly. He can do this blindfolded.

I’m going to start practicing tomorrow until I’m as good as Chance. Then I’ll look for Mom and find out what’s really going on in the ecocity and what Dad has to do with everything.

Mostly, I’ll do it for myself to prove I’m not as weak as I thought I was.

“You should get some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be rough.”

When Chance starts to turn away from me, I blurt, “I’m sorry about Ethan.”

He pauses for a moment, then continues to walk.

My heart cracks a little. “Do you blame me?”

Again he stops, but this time he glances at me. “No. It’s my fault.”

My lips part in a gasp, a frown forming on my forehead. “It’s not.”

Chance shakes his head at me. “It was either him or you, and unfortunately, my brother can’t give birth.” His eyes narrow on me. “That’s the only reason I saved you.”

Even though I know birthing children is my sole purpose in life, for some

reason, it hurts hearing it from Chance.

Whether it's from emotional and physical exhaustion or just that I'm tired of keeping quiet, I say, "I'm not a breeding machine."

For a moment, the corner of his mouth lifts, and he almost smiles. "Prove it to me and train your ass off."

"I will," I say with so much bravado, I shock myself.

I'll train hard and fight in the war to earn my freedom so no one can force me to do anything I don't want to .

Chapter 17

Jai

Lying in bed in the clothes I got from Raze, I stare at the wall, trying to process the past two days.

I'm tired, but I can't fall asleep.

When I close my eyes, I see Ethan's body go limp and drop to the ground. I see the pain in Chance's eyes.

I can't stop thinking about how it felt when he kissed me.

I'm scared of this new life, not understanding any of it. I feel alone with only questions to keep me company.

I don't understand how it was so easy for Chance to kiss me and how it meant nothing to him. It changed my world, and instead of being a wonderful moment, it's a sad one.

Turns out the deviants aren't that different from the virtuous. Emotions still need to be controlled.

And I can't. Mine are all over the place.

After tossing and turning until the blanket is wrapped around my legs, I kick it away and give up on sleeping. I listen to the even breaths and snores from the others.

Deciding to explore the ward on my own while everyone's asleep, I get up and tip-toe out of the sleeping quarters.

The lights are dim as I walk down the corridor and make my way to the animals' enclosures. Slowly, I inch closer, curiosity bubbling in my chest.

The first pen holds sheep, and I smile when I see they're all huddled

together, a cloud of white fluff. I watch them for a while before I move to the next pen. The cows aren't fluffy, and they're huge in comparison to the sheep. I don't look as long at them.

When I see the pigs, I let out a chuckle. They look naked. A fat one lies to the side. It has floppy ears that curl at the edges.

The next enclosure seems empty, and I almost pass by it when I see the chickens in the corner. There are tiny ones pushing their way beneath the bigger ones.

My heart turns to a puddle of goo when I hear the peeping sound they make.

"Oh, my soul," I whisper. "So cute." I crouch down and clutch the fence, wishing I could hold one.

"They're cute until they start crowing," a male voice says from behind me.

I quickly straighten up and glance over my shoulder, recognizing the man from the shower. I don't know how long he's been here, seeing a side of me I'm not sure I want him to see.

"I'm Kenzo."

Chance said something about Kenzo being my best bet, or something along those lines.

Kenzo holds his hand out to me, and for a moment, I hesitate before I shake it, like I've seen men do. His grip is firm around my fingers, then he lets go.

Kenzo is a little shorter than Chance, more Ethan's height. His black hair draws attention to his gray eyes. The longer you look at Kenzo, the more you realize just how attractive he is, and I only notice now that the man is actually wearing clothes.

I can't guess his age, late twenties, early thirties.

He moves past me and opens the gate, letting himself into the chicken enclosure.

“Shouldn’t they sleep?” I ask, worried he’ll disturb them.

“It’s all they do.” He picks up a little one. It looks even smaller in his hand. “Eat, shit, and sleep.”

When he comes back to the fence, a smile spreads across my face.

“Come in,” Kenzo says in a hushed tone. “They don’t bite.”

Not waiting for a second invitation, I quickly let myself into the enclosure and make sure the gate latches behind me. With a smile I can’t contain, I look at the yellow ball of fluff in his hand.

“Go on. Touch it.”

“Really?” I ask, my chest filling with a warm sensation.

The corner of Kenzo’s mouth lifts in a grin, and it’s all the encouragement I need. I try to keep my hand steady as I lift it to his, moving slowly, so I don’t scare the little chick.

When I brush the tip of my finger over its feathers, it lets out a soft peep.

“Oh, gosh!” I coo.

“Here.” Kenzo takes my hand, forming it into a cup, and eases the little chick into my palm.

“I’m going to drop him,” I say, my heart fluttering at the thought of him falling so far. Crouching down, I cradle the chick against my chest. Unable to resist, I stroke its tiny head, earning myself another peep.

Kenzo crouches down on one knee and looks at me with a smile. “You’re a natural, kid. Just don’t let Aldric catch you playing with the food.”

“What?” He doesn’t have to repeat what he said. I heard him loud and clear. I bring the little chick closer to my chest to shelter it as if Aldric is lurking around the corner with a butcher knife.

Little peeps of protest sound up, and the chick squeezes its head through

two of my fingers.

“Don’t worry, peepster, I won’t let Aldric make dinner of you.”

Kenzo lets out a burst of laughter. “If you’re going to try and save every chick, we’re never going to eat chicken again, and there will be chickens running all over this place. It’s the way it is, the natural order of life.”

I shake my head, and it has him adding. “It is nature’s paradox, kid. Somewhere something has to die so something else can live.”

He reaches out to me and slowly pulls my hand away from my chest, cupping his hand beneath mine. “Wait until tomorrow morning. You’re going to want to slaughter them all once they start crowing and you’re trying to sleep.”

“Never,” I say adamantly.

“Let’s put him back.” I slide the chick into Kenzo’s palm. “Peepster, you say?”

My cheeks flush with heat. “It was a spur-of-the-moment thing.”

I let myself out of the enclosure while Kenzo places the chick back with the others.

“Thank you for letting me hold him.”

Kenzo shuts the gate behind him, then narrows his eyes at me. “I’m trying to decide whether it will be a good idea for you to work with the animals.”

“Why?” I ask as we walk toward the dining hall. I think it will be nice looking after the animals.

“You’d grow too attached to them, especially the little ones. You’ll probably give them all names.” He chuckles, smiling at me. “And you’ll cry every time we have to slaughter one.”

Looking at Kenzo, I understand why Chance said I should let him train me. He’s been really nice to me. I like Kenzo.

In the kitchen, Kenzo makes two cups of coffee. Eager for some caffeine,

I take a cup from him and swallow a couple of sips while following Kenzo to one of the benches.

After taking a seat, I admit, “I expected it to look different on this side of the boundary.”

“What did you expect?” Kenzo watches me from over the rim of his cup.

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “Not rebels and trackers.”

“The rebels are our front runners. We have an understanding with them.”

I watch his throat work as he swallows some coffee. “We supply them with food, and they supply us with shelter and safety on runs.”

“So they aren’t a part of this group?” I look down at my cup as I remember the night before and the way they behaved.

“No, they aren’t.” Kenzo stares at me pretty much the same way Chance and Idris have been staring at me. Like I’m too weak for this world. Then he surprises me by saying, “You’ll be okay, kid.”

“You think so?” I ask.

“Yeah. We all find a way to survive when push comes to shove.”

He’s right. I’ve already survived jumping across rooftops and the trackers shooting at us. I’ll survive everything else as well.

Getting up, we rinse our cups, but before we leave the dining hall, Kenzo says, “I was nice to you tonight.” He gives my arm a squeeze. “But it doesn’t mean I’m going to be nice to you tomorrow.” He inhales deeply. “Word of advice, kid. You have to figure out how you want others to see you and be that person. Everyone loves the nice, innocent girl thing, but you won’t make it that way. You have to make them forget where you come from and see the survivor you are.”

I absorb his words like a sponge and nod. “I will.” Meeting his eyes, I add, “Thank you for being nice to me.”

I really needed it.

“I’ll start training you tomorrow until you’re chosen. Go get some sleep, kid.” He winks at me as he walks toward the exit. “I’m gonna break you tomorrow.”

With a smile on my face, I feel almost giddy as I head back to bed. I feel like I’ve made a friend in Kenzo, and it makes everything not seem so dark.

Chapter 18

Jai

“Rise and shine, kid!” Kenzo growls in my ear as he yanks the blanket away from me. I hear crowing echoing down the tunnel while I try to blink the sleep away.

Geez, the chickens are loud.

“Don’t kill the newbie,” Valen mutters as she shoves her pillow over her head. Then I hear more mumbling. “I’m hoping she can help me catch that chicken later. Its crowing days are coming to an end.”

“There won’t be anything left of her when I’m done,” Kenzo says.

I rub the sleep out of my eyes and sit up in bed.

“I said move it!” he snaps.

I almost trip over the blanket in my hurry to get up. I slip on my sneakers and throw the blanket over the mat, hoping there aren’t any bed inspections.

I have to run to catch up with Kenzo.

Still trying to wake up, I ask, “Can I brush my teeth, at least?”

“You have thirty seconds.” He keeps walking toward the drill zone. “Anything after that you’re paying for in sweat and blood.”

Turning around, I run to the bathroom. I don’t have a toothbrush and place some paste on my finger.

It’ll have to do for today.

As quickly as possible, I brush my teeth with my finger, then rinse and spit. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror, and seeing the multi-colored

bruises, I cringe.

Not having time to waste, I dart out of the bathroom and run to the drill zone.

Honestly, I'm glad Kenzo is the one training me. The thought makes me smile, but as soon as I run into the arena, Kenzo barks, "Wipe the grin off your face and start running, kid." He's already running around the track. "We're not stopping until you catch up with me."

At the seminary, we used to warm up before exercises. Guess that's not how they do things here.

I start running after Kenzo, my eyes jumping from the concrete in front of me to him on the opposite side of the dome.

It's different running in circles as opposed to running for your life. I don't even last two laps before I start breathing too fast.

I suppose when you run for your life, you don't think about anything but surviving whatever's chasing you.

Now I have time to think about the pinching ache in my side and the distance that's not getting any less. Kenzo is fast.

Crap, I'm going to run forever.

"I can do this the whole day, kid," he taunts me.

I believe him, but I can't do this the whole day, so I try and pick up my pace. The muscles in my shins are pulling, and I've skipped panting and gone straight to wheezing.

After the fourth lap, I feel queasy, and I only manage to run a couple of yards before my vision blurs.

"Kenzo," I groan as I stop, placing my hands on my knees and taking big gulps of air. My tongue goes numb, and an eerie sensation washes over my body.

"Did I say stop?" Kenzo shouts.

I try to take another step, but pins and needles spread over my skin, a cold sweat following on its heels.

“Jai!”

I hear my name, but I can't see Kenzo. Disorientated, I can't see anything as a cloud of darkness falls over me. The world tips on its head, and for minutes, it feels as if I'm drifting on water.

I feel hands on my face, and when I finally manage to pry my eyes open, it's to see three fingers in my line of sight.

“How many am I holding up?”

I stare at Kenzo's hand for a second longer, then mumble, “Three.”

“Get up,” he snaps at me. Grabbing hold of my arm, he yanks me to my feet. My head spins again as Kenzo says, “When Idris says eat, you eat. People don't fucking pass out on me.” He bends forward, so he's eye to eye with me, and there's no sight of the friend I made last night. “Here, there are no second chances. Failure means death. Go eat, and when you come back, you better be ready.”

Anger bubbles in my chest, and I yank my arm from his hold. “It's not my fault I didn't eat,” I mutter, turning around and walking to the archway. “I've been too freaking busy running for my life!”

I still feel light-headed when I walk into the dining hall. Raze gives me a sympathetic smile. “Raw deal this morning? Give me a sec, will you, Aldric?” she calls behind her.

“Sure,” Aldric mumbles, too busy frying bacon to look up from the pan.

“Let's get you into clean clothes,” Raze says as she takes hold of my elbow.

We walk to the bathroom, where there's a row of cabinets against the farthest wall. Opening the first door, she takes out two pairs of jeans, two shirts, and even underwear.

Grateful, I smile at her. “You’re the best. I appreciate the clothes.”

“Of course,” she grins at me. “You can’t wear the same outfit every day. This way, you’ll have one in the wash, one on hand, and one to wear.”

Biting my bottom lip, I glance at the other cabinets. “You don’t have an extra toothbrush, do you?”

“Sure.” She opens another door. “We keep all the toiletries here. Just help yourself.”

Curious, I ask, “Where do you get all your supplies?”

“The main ward. It’s where most of the population is. The outer wards are just training camps for soldiers. You’ll see the main ward soon. After we complete training season, we always head up there.”

If I survive the training.

“I’m heading back to the kitchen,” Raze says.

I give her another thankful smile, then help myself to a bar of soap, a toothbrush, a comb, and a towel. Not caring that I’ll upset Kenzo after the way he treated me, I take a couple of minutes to shower, then place my clothing and toiletries next to my mat.

Walking to the dining hall, I help myself to four strips of bacon and two slices of toast. Eyeing the eggs, I give them a pass.

Sitting at an empty bench, I place the bacon between the two slices of toast and take a huge bite.

So good.

“Seriously, kid?” Kenzo takes a seat opposite me with Idris.

I stare at my bacon sandwich, not holding back the groan this time. I was really looking forward to eating my breakfast without an audience.

“You have to get those proteins in.” Kenzo teases me. “Where are your eggs?”

I glance at him, and not seeing any trace of the friendly man I met the

night before, I square my shoulders, level him with an annoyed look, and take another bite of my sandwich.

After I've swallowed, I mutter, "I don't feel like having eggs today."

Not after holding the chick.

Turning my attention to Idris, I swallow hard, then ask, "Is there anything specific you'd like me to do around here?"

He's just another rooftop I have to jump across.

"I'm not into babysitting." He forks his bacon. "Figure it out yourself."

Breakfast is hard to sit through, but somehow I manage. I don't see Chance, though, and I wonder where he is.

Aaron enters the dining hall and doesn't even bother to look in my direction. He loads a plate with food and picks the bench farthest from us to sit.

I catch Idris glaring at Aaron and realize Idris hasn't looked at me like that. Yes, he growls a lot at me, but it looks like he wants to kill Aaron.

Maybe things aren't as bad for me as I thought.

When Idris' eyes snap to me, and he catches me staring, a flush creeps up my face. I gather the little courage I have and say, "Thank you for letting me stay at your ward."

He watches me for a couple of unnerving seconds, then mutters, "Don't make me regret it."

I won't. I'm going to do my best to fit in with the deviants and learn their ways, so I can prove to Chance it was worth saving me.

Chapter 19

Jai

“Newbie, take this up to the nest.” Aldric shoves a plate stacked with food into my hand.

Frowning, I ask, “The nest?”

“Down the tunnel, turn right, out the blue door,” he says. “You can’t miss it once you’re outside. Oh, the code for all the doors is Idris.”

I’m confused, more than ever, but I take the plate and walk out of the dining hall. When I reach the blue door, I see the keypad has both numbers and letters on them. I punch in Idris’ name, and the door clicks open.

Now I can at least get out whenever I need fresh air.

The tunnel is brightly lit, just like the other one, and there aren’t any archways to my right but three doors. To my left, two archways open into an oval room. The other park Valen mentioned.

It doesn’t look at all like the other one, except for the ceiling with the oval-shaped holes for sunlight. This one has more trees and sand laid out in patterns with smooth rocks. There’s also a water feature in the corner surrounded by a patch of grass.

I almost forget about the food in my hands as I stare at the beautiful space.

The second door opens, and Kenzo steps out into the corridor. “Do you need to take that somewhere?”

“Aldric asked me to take it to the nest?” I’m hoping he’ll show me where it is.

“Yeah, the man can’t stay up there the whole day and not eat.” He walks toward the exit, and I quickly follow him. “Give Chance his food and get your butt back to the drill zone. I’m not done with you yet.” His mouth curves at the sides.

“You’re giving me whiplash. First, you’re friendly, then you’re mean. Why?”

He gives me the same friendly smile from the night before. “It’s a matter of survival while we’re training.”

When I step outside, I shield my eyes with my hand against the bright sunlight. It’s going to take some time to get used to the glare.

“There you go.” Kenzo points to a metal structure. “Give him the food. Don’t keep me waiting.”

I watch Kenzo leave with a smile, feeling better after the conversation.

When I turn back to the structure, I realize I have no idea how to get to the top. I don’t see any stairs I can use.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I mumble as I walk closer, searching for some way up. It has ridges every few feet, but there’s no way I can climb up there while holding a plate of food.

“Chance!” I call out, hoping he’ll hear me. “I’ve brought food.”

The structure shudders as it starts to lower, each ridge from the top folding into the one beneath it until it’s only the bottom two and the fence part remaining.

Chance opens a gate and jumps out.

“Aldric sends food.” I hold the plate out to him.

“Thanks.” It’s all he says as he takes the plate and heads back to the nest.

Wanting to spend more than a second with him, I ask, “What do you do up there?”

“Keep watch.” He doesn’t bother looking at me or saying anything else.

He places the plate on the top of the platform and uses the ridges as steps.
“I like your parks,” I blurt out.

“They’re there for everybody.” He closes the gate and stares at me. “I hear Kenzo’s training you today.”

“He is.” This feels really awkward, this back-and-forth thing we’re doing.
“He’s nice.”

“Good,” he mutters. He presses a button on a remote hanging from his belt, and it makes the structure rise into the sky. “You better not let Kenzo wait,” he shouts, moving out of my line of sight.

I really, really dislike Kenzo right now.

I don’t know what the time is. The training started taking on a torturous pattern. I run around the arena once, then jump from one piece of scaffold to the next, which are basically metal sheets held up by chains. I end the course by jumping and grabbing hold of a rope.

For now, I have to hang and hold on. Kenzo says I’ll start climbing the rope when I’m stronger.

I don’t think it will happen any time soon.

“How’s it hanging, kid?” Kenzo taunts me.

My hands burn from the friction, and I start to slip. Letting go, so the rope doesn’t tear at my skin, I fall with a hard thud. My shoulder and hip take most of the impact, and I let out a groan.

Sitting up, I say. “I need a break.” My palms are red from the rope.

“A break,” Kenzo chuckles darkly while glaring down at me. “A break is something you get when you fall from a rooftop, kid. Get your ass up and run.”

I drag my aching body off the floor. It feels as if something explodes

behind my eyes. I clench my teeth together and start to run up the pathway again, pushing myself as hard as I can.

I complete the lap and focus on the first scaffold. It's the easiest one out of the five.

Once I jump onto it, it starts swaying, slamming into the next one. It gets really hard after that, as they all keep banging against each other. Holding my balance is almost impossible.

Sucking in a deep breath, I jump the over the short open space between the pathway and the metal scaffold, landing in a crouching position.

Exhilaration pumps through my veins, and I propel my body forward with the momentum of the swaying scaffold. Landing, I spread my fingers on the floor to keep my balance. I can hear my heart pounding in my ears.

I've only managed to get to the rope four out of the thirteen times I've tried.

My throat feels thick, and I swallow and gasp for air.

You can do this. Focus.

I get ready to make the jump between the second and third scaffold, then launch myself forward.

Crap!

I miscalculated my timing, and I slip right over the third one. As I fall off the side, the fourth one slams into my side, knocking the wind from me.

The fall is much harder than when I fell off the rope, and I hit the floor with a dead thump. A white-hot pain streaks through the entire left side of my chest, and tears well in my eyes, but I grind down on my teeth to keep them from falling.

Crap, it hurts.

Not wanting to come across as weak, I force myself to climb to my feet. I wince at the dull pain in my left side and shoulder.

Ignore it.

“You better get going, kid,” Kenzo says, his tone tense.

He’s standing near the grid, only a few feet from me. The scaffolds still swing above my head, making an unnerving screeching sound.

Just as I start to walk toward the pathway to start running, I hear Chance say, “Kenzo, take over in the nest.”

My eyes dart up and lock on Chance, relief washing over me.

I fight the urge to cry from the pain in my ribs and keep my eyes locked on Chance, drawing the same strength from him as I did while I had to jump across the rooftops.

I don’t know what it is about him that makes me feel stronger than I am, and I’m not about to inspect it now.

“Remember to eat, kid,” Kenzo says as he takes the remote for the nest from Chance. “Tomorrow’s going to be harder.”

The second Kenzo walks out of the arena, I turn my back to the entrance and Chance, clenching my jaw and fighting the tears.

You have to do better than this, Jai!

Don’t show any weakness.

I suck in deep breaths of air and close my eyes, focusing on calming the chaotic emotions in my chest.

To survive in this world, you have to become hard and strong like a deviant.

You can do this.

Chapter 20

Jai

“Jai,” Chance says, his tone tense.

I swallow the tears back and feeling miserable, I shake my head. “I almost made it.” Letting out a sigh, I turn around to face whatever scolding he’s about to give me for not being strong enough.

His eyes drift over my face, then he surprises me by saying, “You did well for your first day of training.”

I don’t understand why he’s being nice to me all of a sudden. He shouldn’t, though, because it makes my eyes burn, and even though the arena is huge, the air feels tight.

Lifting an arm, he takes hold of my bicep and tugs me toward the exit. “Let’s fix you up.”

Don’t you dare cry in front of him.

“How was your first day?” I ask as we walk up the pathway. “I mean, when you started your training.”

He doesn’t answer me, making me feel even more miserable. When we reach the blue door, he opens it and waits for me to go first.

“Wait in the park,” he instructs, then walks to the first door, which I assume is his bedroom.

I head to the park and use the cobblestones to get to a bench, so I don’t disturb the sand. While I’m alone, I lift my shirt and check my side. It’s red and inflamed.

Chance comes out of his room, and I quickly cover myself. I watch as he

skips the cobblestones and walks in the sand, leaving a clear trail of footprints.

He sits down next to me, and it makes me feel weirdly nervous. My stomach flutters as if a kaleidoscope of butterflies has taken flight.

Chance lifts his hand to my face and nudges my chin up. His eyes touch on the bruises, then he murmurs, “Your cheek is healing nicely.”

With his hand so close to my mouth, it’s unsettling, and I exhale slowly.

He lets go of my chin and picks up the tube, unscrewing the cap. “I’m going to check your side.”

When he takes hold of the hem of my shirt, my eyes dart around the park, and my heart thunders in my chest. As he lifts the fabric, I inch up, and it has him stopping.

My face grows hot under his stare.

“Valen shows more skin on a daily basis,” he says.

I feel embarrassed, and when he lifts my shirt, exposing my ribs and stomach, I wish the ground would open beneath my feet and swallow me whole. He presses lightly against my side, and before I can stop myself, I shoot forward, grabbing hold of his hand.

I’m unsure if my reaction is because of the pain or because he touched me. “It hurts,” I blurt out.

Chance tilts his head, and I can feel his eyes on my face. “But I realize you’re nothing like Valen or the other women, and this is all new to you.” My gaze darts to his. “It’s going to take a while before you realize touching is not a bad thing, and showing skin won’t send you straight to hell.”

I lower my eyes to the ink peeking from under his collar. “Why isn’t it a bad thing here?”

He lets out a heavy breath, then asks, “When I was helping you up the ladder, and when I pulled you into the hole, how did it make you feel?”

I turn my gaze to the patterns in the sand, thinking back to the day I left the ecocity.

Gosh, it feels like a lifetime has passed, even though it's only been three days.

Not used to talking about my emotions, heat flushes my neck and face. "It felt... safe."

"And?"

"Wrong."

He leans forward to catch my eyes. "Why?"

I search my heart and answer honestly, "Because I've been taught it's wrong." Then I think to add. "Even you said I must guard my feelings and not leave myself vulnerable."

He clears his throat, then explains, "I was angry when I said that."

My heart clenches for the loss he suffered. "Because of Ethan?"

"Yes." Chance rests his elbows on his thighs. "But also because you're so damn innocent. It would be the easiest thing in the world for anyone to take advantage of you." His eyes find mine again, and this time it's hard not to look away. "You should only care about someone once they've proven you can trust them."

"But..." I wet my lips, "I can trust you. Right?"

Whether it's right or wrong, I need to hear the words from Chance. Out of everyone here, he's the only person I want to trust.

His eyes lock with mine, and he stares for a moment, then he murmurs, "Yeah, you can trust me."

A smile curves my lips, but then he gives me a look of warning. "I'm still going to be hard on you, though."

"So I'll survive?"

He lets out a heavy breath and nods. "I don't need your death on my

conscience.”

I’m overcome with the urge to hug him. I wonder if he even knows how much I needed to hear that – to have one person I can count on in a world that’s so unforgiving.

“Come on,” he says, nudging me back until I’m leaning against the bench. “Put some of the ointment on your fingers and rub it over your injury.”

He opens the tube, and a strong peppery smell makes my eyes water.

I watch as he squirts a clear gel onto the tip of my pointer finger. I lift my shirt with my other hand and smear the gel over the bruise that’s turning purple in places. It hurts too much, though, and I flinch.

“You have to rub it in, or it won’t work.”

Shaking my head, I take hold of his hand and wipe the gel on his finger. “I can’t, it hurts too much. You just do it.” My eyes lift to his. “Please.”

He tilts his head again, the blue ring around his irises darkening. “Are you okay with me touching you?”

He said it’s not a bad thing, and it doesn’t feel wrong. I nod and give my permission. “Yes.”

Chance moves closer to me. “Place your left hand on my shoulder.” The corner of his mouth lifts and it makes my heart skip a beat. “It’s okay if you dig your nails into me.”

I let out a burst of awkward laughter but do as he says. When he lifts the fabric of my shirt again, I stare at where I’m touching him, focusing on how solid he feels.

The moment he starts rubbing the ointment into my side, the pain is so sharp I can’t breathe. Tears brim in my eyes, and I clench my jaw to keep from groaning.

“Almost done,” he whispers.

I gasp through the pain, nodding while my fingers grip hold of his shoulder.

Chance drops the tube of ointment on the seat, pulls my shirt down, and yanks me against his chest. When his arms lock around me like solid steel bands, I let out a sob and try to smother the sound against his shirt.

“Christ, you’re so fucking fragile,” he growls, his hand settling behind my head.

“I’m sorry,” I sputter through the tears. “I’ll try harder to do better.”

I feel his breath on the side of my head, then he presses his mouth to my hair, his arms making me feel safe.

We hear a door open, and when I pull back, Chance lets go of me and stands up. “Let’s go for a walk.”

When I get up, I flinch and wrap my arm around my middle. I follow Chance out of the building, and only when we’re walking through the long grass toward a row of trees does Chance break the silence.

“I got the scar above my eye on my first day. I slammed my head against the last scaffold. Idris drilled the hell out of me. I thought I was going to die.”

I glance at the high wall around the ward, then take in all the greenery. “How did you make it?”

I’m grateful he’s talking to me, and I don’t want to do anything that will ruin it.

“Ethan,” he replies. “I kept telling myself I had to make it for him.”

There’s a hollow ache in my chest.

He sighs, then continues, “When I was chosen as a crusader, I was lucky. I got away from the trackers and ran for my life.”

When we reach the trees, there’s an open field filled with the prettiest flowers I’ve ever seen.

Wow.

Chance picks one and starts to rip the petals out. “There was no one waiting for me on the other side of the border. By the time I stumbled upon the ward, I was dying of hunger and terrified out of my mind.”

I glance up at Chance, unable to imagine him being scared of anything.

“How old were you when you got chosen?”

His eyes flick to mine, and he places the flower's stem between his teeth. “Eighteen.”

Gosh, that's young.

“But I survived, and ten years later, it's hard to believe I was that scrawny kid who didn't know a fucking thing about the world.”

So he's twenty-eight?

“Our fathers used to work together in the laboratories,” he says.

My eyes widen, and I stop walking.

Chance turns and locks eyes with me. “One night, my father died, and soon after, I was chosen as a crusader.”

“I'm sorry,” I whisper. Wanting to connect with him, I admit, “My mom was banished from the ecocity when I was eighteen.”

He nods. “I know.”

“You do?” My eyebrows pop up. “Have you seen her?”

“A while back. Last I heard, she was at the main ward.”

A wide smile stretches across my face. Before I can ask, Chance says, “We'll head to the main ward in a week, or so, then you can look for her.”

It's such good news, I don't think and dart forward, wrapping my arms around his waist. For a moment, he keeps still, but then his arms wrap around me.

An intense warmth floods me, and for the life of me, I can't believe this is wrong when it feels so good.

Chance takes hold of my shoulders and pushes me back, and it pops my

happy bubble.

“Sorry,” I mumble, and the shame I’ve been conditioned to feel creeps into my heart.

“It’s okay,” he says, tilting his head to catch my eyes. “Just don’t hug every man you meet. Most will take it the wrong way.”

I nod and explain, “The news just made me happy, and I didn’t think.”

It’s only then I realize he hasn’t snapped at me once since he took me from the drill zone. Frowning, I ask, “Why are you being nice to me?”

He picks another flower and holds it between us. For a moment, I wonder whether he’s giving it to me, but then he says, “You’re like this flower, Jai. Beautiful but fragile.” He plucks the petals out. “This will be you if I leave you to survive on your own.”

There’s a stab of disappointment in my heart. “You don’t think I can make it on my own?”

He shakes his head. “Against a ward full of sex-deprived men, you don’t stand a chance.”

That’s true.

My shoulders sag, because deep down, I know it doesn’t matter how hard I train, one thing will remain the same – I’m a woman. Not able to meet his eyes, I ask, “Why don’t you take what you want?”

Chance lets out a chuckle. “Just because I haven’t doesn’t mean I won’t.”

His words surprise me, and still, I don’t feel unsafe around him.

We stare at each other for a minute, and all I can think is that out of all the men I know and all the strangers out there if I had to belong to someone, I’d pick Chance.

Without another word, Chance starts to walk back to the ward. I follow after him wondering if he’d take me as his if I were to ask him.

Not that I would. I don’t have enough courage to be so blunt.

Later that night, I sneak into the animal enclosure only to find Kenzo waiting by the chickens.

Without saying anything, he opens the gate and steps inside. I follow, closing it behind me so none of the chickens will get out. I watch as he picks out a little chick, and the corner of my mouth lifts when he comes to stand in front of me.

I'm careful as I take the chick from him, cuddling it close to my chest.

"How do you feel?" he asks.

"It's bearable." I brush the tip of my finger over the chick's feathers. "Hey, little peepster."

"You should thank me for not being hard on you. If it were Idris or Chance, you'd be bleeding. I'm the nice one out of the three."

I shake my head. "Chance wouldn't hurt me."

Kenzo lets out a bark of laughter, startling the animals. "He put Skater in bed for six days. The guy couldn't move."

I can't imagine Chance hurting someone. I shake my head but can't find words to argue with Kenzo.

"Just because Chance is nice to you doesn't mean he won't break you if he has to." His eyes narrow on me. "Just like I will."

Break me? The words sound horrible.

He reaches out and strokes the chick's head. "But it will make you stronger, and at the end of the day, it's all that matters."

He takes a deep breath then says, "Don't freak out."

"Huh?" My frown deepens.

"I know your mom. Rachel."

Hearing my mom's name, I almost drop the chick, but luckily Kenzo

moves fast and takes the baby from me.

“Chance said he’s seen her. How do you know her?” I ask, desperate for more information.

“She asked me to be on the lookout for you.”

My mouth drops open, and tears jump to my eyes.

Mom’s been waiting for me. She didn’t forget about me.

Kenzo places his hand on my shoulder, then admits, “When she reached this ward, I trained her. You have her spirit, kid. Just get through training, and once we reach the main ward, I’ll find her for you.”

“Did you and Chance talk about me?” I ask because I doubt this is a coincidence. “You both mentioned my mom today.”

“Yeah, we talked.” He squeezes my shoulder. “Just train your ass off until we leave for the main ward.”

I will. If Mom can do it, so can I.

“Until you’re chosen by one of the leaders, I’m doing your mom a favor training you.”

“Chosen?” I ask.

“It’s tradition. It will happen in a couple of days.” There’s a weird expression on his face I can’t place.

“What kind of tradition?” I get the feeling I’m not going to like it.

“Nothing you can’t survive.”

Well, that tells me nothing.

“Off to bed with you.” Kenzo nudges me out of the enclosure. “You need all the rest you can get for tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I mutter. “Good night.”

Walking to the sleeping quarters, my mind turns to Mom. I can’t wait to see her. I’ll work hard and make her proud.

As I kick off my shoes and lie down on the mat, I realize I’m already

changing. I don't feel guilty about being proud of my achievements.

No, I feel empowered.

My mouth curves into a smile as I realize the emissaries are wrong. The seven virtues don't matter to me any longer. The only important thing is becoming stronger.

And maybe one day Chance will look at me with a pleased smile and say those words to me he said to the car.

Good girl.

I grin into my pillow, and with the memory of him hugging me, I drift off to sleep.

Chapter 21

Jai

I was woken early by the first crows of the chickens and after getting ready for the day, I'm jogging slowly around the arena while waiting for Kenzo.

He's not the first to come, though. Idris stalks in with a subdued-looking Aaron on his heels.

My face flushes red when I see Aaron's only wearing underwear.

What's going on?

I keep jogging as I watch Idris walk to the concrete floor. He presses all the buttons on the stand, and the air fills with noise as everything moves into place for training.

"You can run, jump, and climb," Idris says as he walks to a cabinet. He pulls bags out of it, then glares at Aaron. "Let's see if you can do it under pressure."

I almost trip over an untied shoelace and quickly crouch to tie it. My eyes keep darting to Idris and Aaron.

"You *will* run the full course. If you fall, you start over." Idris opens one of the bags. "Pretty easy for a strong guy like you." I watch as he takes two metal balls from the bag, then he nods to the path I'm on. "You better get going."

Aaron lunges forward and runs to the opposite side of the path than me. As Aaron jumps to the first scaffold, Idris throws a ball at him.

I stop running when the ball hits Aaron in the stomach, stunned by what I'm seeing.

Aaron's arms wrap around his waist, and he slides right off the first scaffold, hitting the floor hard.

I cringe, taking a step back. My eyes dart between Idris and Aaron, fearing what this exercise will escalate to. Chance said there were times he wished he was dead.

Did Idris do this to him too?

"Up and at it!" Idris' voice thunders, and I take another step back, away from the hostility filling the air.

Aaron gets up, and as soon as he starts to run, Idris throws the next ball. I move to the side as if I can make Aaron move with my actions, but it whacks him against his leg.

Come on, Aaron. Duck away. You can do this.

My heart starts to race faster as Idris lifts his arm, and I want to shout a warning.

Aaron runs and jumps, and the next ball smacks hard into his collarbone.

I slap a hand over my mouth to keep myself from calling out to Aaron as he slides in between the two scaffolds. He grunts and falls.

"Come on, newbie," Idris sneers. "I'm only throwing a ball. What will you do if I start shooting bullets?"

He throws another while Aaron is still getting up. It smacks him on his lower back, making him sprawl over the floor.

"You were fast when the trackers attacked right outside the ward," Idris says, his voice booming against the walls. "You were quick when you left Ethan behind. Where's that speed now?"

Idris throws two balls in quick succession. They both smack hard into Aaron's back, and he stumbles before dropping to his knees.

My heart is pounding in my ears. I might not know Aaron that well, but this isn't humane.

I wish I could help him.

“A few millennia ago, there was a powerful empire. They called themselves Romans. They were a supreme force because they fought as one.” Idris takes more balls from the bag, then turns toward Aaron.

As Aaron gets ready to jump to the scaffold, my breathing speeds up, and I fist my hands at my sides.

“Did you know the Romans considered a left-handed man to be disabled? He was useless as a Roman soldier. He couldn’t hold a shield, and those men-” Idris throws a ball as Aaron lands on the second scaffold. It smacks into his leg, leaving another red welt on his skin.

“Well, you weren’t considered a man if you didn’t make the army. We need the best in our army, Aaron,” Idris shouts at him. “Are you the best?”

Aaron manages to hold his balance, and he launches himself at the third scaffold. A ball smacks against his face, and he drops.

When Aaron screams for the first time, I can’t stop myself and run toward him. The scaffolds slam together, pinning him for a second. He falls, and I reach him right after he hits the floor.

“If a soldier dishonored his group, he was stoned to death,” Idris continues, rage coming from him in waves.

I take hold of Aaron’s arm, and he groans. He isn’t all here with me. I can see his eyes are glazing over, his skin pale and clammy.

“Let me help you up,” I whisper. I’m scared to death of Idris, but I can’t leave Aaron like this.

I manage to pull his arm around my shoulders, but he’s too heavy for me to lift.

“If you leave a man to die, you dishonor this ward,” Idris snaps. His voice is cold, and it sends shivers down my spine.

“Can’t you see he’s hurt?” I cry, my voice unsteady with fear.

Idris tosses a ball to his right hand, and I freeze. “Ethan was hurt as well. Aaron was nearest to him. Did he stop to help him?” he asks.

No. He didn't even look back and ran for his life.

I clear my throat, and with a quivering voice, I admit, “If it's anyone's fault Ethan is dead, it's mine.”

My eyes stay glued to Idris' right hand, his fingers rolling the ball in his palm.

“Could you have carried Ethan?” Idris asks.

“I...” The answer is no. I'm not that strong, and I wasn't close enough to help him. Still, I answer, “I could've tried.”

“If you can get Aaron to the entrance, I'll pretend, this once, you didn't interfere with my training session.”

What? Really?

I look at Aaron. I won't be able to carry him, but I can try to drag him. I take hold of his arms and yank. He only moves an inch or so.

Shoot, this is going to be difficult.

Aaron groans and tries to pull himself up, but he only manages to drag me down. I stumble onto my knees, and my eyes lock on the two bags of balls lying at Idris' feet.

Standing up, I move behind Aaron and hook my forearms under his armpits. I pull with all my strength and begin to drag him across the floor. Aaron groans whenever I yank him, but I don't care, because we're moving.

When a ball smacks against my thigh, I'm shaken to my core. The realization of what Idris just did slams the breath out of my lungs, and I almost let go of Aaron. Pain shoots through my leg, then it stings where the ball hit.

“You've just been shot, little girl. What do you do?” Idris asks, dead serious. “Do you leave your man behind and run for your life or help him?”

The thought that Idris will keep throwing balls at me is terrifying, but I can't leave Aaron behind. He's barely conscious.

I tighten my grasp on Aaron, and I yank at him, pulling harder. All the while, I keep my eyes on Idris' hand. I make it to the stand when he lifts his hand. I tense up, and when the ball flies toward me, I duck out of the way. It sails past my hip and smacks into the ground.

Rushing, I grab Aaron, and ignoring his groans, I drag him a couple of feet farther while watching Idris.

I'm exhausted, and my breaths race over my lips, but I can't stop.

The next ball flies through the air, and I duck to the side. It slams into the wall and rolls down the slope of the pathway.

When I grab Aaron and pull, the muscles in my arms protest painfully. His head wobbles to the side, but he doesn't groan this time.

"Aaron?" I call. "Wake up!"

I want to stop and check on him, but another ball flies, and I let go, scrambling out of the way. It thwacks hard into the wall and rolls away.

The balls come faster, and it feels like it's taking me forever to get Aaron to the entrance, but finally, I reach it. I scramble over Aaron and lift his shirt. There's already a line forming on his chest from where the scaffolds pinched him, but it doesn't look that bad. The bump on his head from where the ball smacked him is red and swollen. I don't know if he passed out from that.

"You made it," Idris sneers behind me. "You only got shot in the leg."

He doesn't sound impressed.

I glare up at him, not understanding how this is training.

"There's a deviant in you, after all, Jasper Matthias." He crouches next to me until we're eye to eye. "At least I know you won't leave a man behind to die." He stares at me for a second. "Train hard, Jasper, and get some muscle on your arms." He rises to his feet and walks to the archway. "When you

eventually figure out a way to get the coward to a bed, pick up all the balls.”

Even though Aaron's in pain, extreme pride fills my chest.

I didn't leave a man behind.

I'm not the coward I always thought I was.

Chapter 22

Jai

Luckily Raze and Aldric carry Aaron to a bed while I pick up all the balls. I quickly shower, and when I walk into the dining hall, I see Kenzo sitting with Idris.

I wonder where he was this morning. He probably heard Idris shouting at Aaron and decided not to come.

I take enough bacon and toast to make a sandwich and walk to the table where Skater, Valen, and Jarek are sitting.

“I have dung duty today. Anybody wanna swap with me?” Eggs slush in Skater’s mouth as he asks the question.

Gross.

“I did it yesterday.” Valen pulls a disgusted face.

Out of curiosity, I ask, “What is dung duty?”

“You have to clean up the animals’ shit and take it up to the cornfields. We work it into the ground for fertilizer. You interested?”

I shake my head at Skater.

“You’ll have to do it at some point,” Valen says. “Check the schedule in the kitchen to see when your duties are.”

“Newbie alert!” Chance’s shout echoes down through the ward.

“Seriously?” Valen says as she gets up. “I’m surprised someone survived.”

I watch as she jogs out of the dining hall, then looks at Skater. “What’s going on?”

“Two of the crusaders survived the trackers. It’s Valen’s job to show them the ward.”

I take a bite of my sandwich, wondering who survived. My eyes keep darting to the archway, and minutes tick by before I hear Valen’s voice.

“The dining hall. You eat here.” Valen’s tone is dry. “The bathroom, self-explanatory.”

“How many people live here?” Jasper’s familiar voice ask.

Holy crap! He survived?

I dart up as Valen answers, “Eleven. Each ward can sustain up to thirty people at a time.”

“Do you know him?” Skater asks.

“Yes.” My eyes are locked on the archway.

“Can I have some water?” I hear Ruth’s voice.

A gasp escapes my lips, and I run out of the dining hall. “Ruth!” I cry, and when I see her, my throat closes.

“Jai.” Her face crumbles at the sight of me, then she runs, slamming into my body. Her grip is tight around my neck, and her tears soak my shirt.

“You made it.” I can’t believe she survived.

“It was... awful, Jai,” she sputters through her tears, and I bite mine back. “There were... these people... waiting on the other... s-s-side. They just s-s-shot at... us. We didn’t d-d-do anything wrong.”

I brush my hand up and down her back to comfort her. “Shhh, you’re going to be okay now.”

My words sound empty in my ears because I don’t know if she will be okay. I don’t know if she’s going to make it. I don’t even know if I’m going to make it.

After she manages to calm down, I pull her into the dining hall and give them both a glass of water. Jasper doesn’t look as emotional while he drinks

every drop.

Knowing they must be hungry, I make them a bacon and egg sandwich.

It's quiet while they eat, then Jasper says, "Mr. Demetrius and one of the others helped us get away, but they were gunned down two night ago."

No. That's so sad.

I watch Jasper take another piece of bread.

They must be starving. Wow, I can't believe they're actually here.

"Kid." Kenzo is standing in the archway of the dining hall, his face set in a scowl. "Drill zone. Now."

Oh, crap.

"I have to go. Do as you are told, and you'll be fine." I offer Ruth and Jasper a comforting smile and run after Kenzo.

When I jog into the arena, Kenzo's standing in the middle of the dome with his back turned to me. I go cold.

He points at the scaffolds. "Up and at 'em."

I watch Kenzo out of the corner of my eye as I run up the path. I launch myself at the first scaffold, and my left side aches as I stretch. When I land on my feet, the scaffold starts to sway.

Just as I get ready to jump, there's a loud bang, and something bounces off the scaffold. I stop, scrambling back, my eyes wide as I peek down at Kenzo. A shockwave hits me when I see the gun in his hand.

"Kenzo," I breathe, shocked out of my mind. "You shot at me?"

Pain bleeds into my heart, unable to believe the man I thought was my friend fired a gun at me.

"You've been shot at before," He says, sounding nonchalant. "Chance says you react well under pressure, so I thought I'd test it."

"By shooting at me?" I cry as I get up.

Kenzo lifts his hand, pointing the gun at me, and I quickly drop back to

the metal sheet of the scaffold.

“Should I throw chickens at you, kid? Will that make you run faster?”

My heart rockets to my throat, thumping hard.

Will Kenzo really shoot me?

I'd like to think not.

I focus on the next scaffold and launch myself at it. There's a loud bang, and my ears ring again. I cringe, and my shoulder slams into the edge of the next scaffold. Not able to grab hold of something, I slide right off and fall hard on the concrete. A sharp pain shudders through my ribcage, pulling a groan from me.

My body aches, but I scramble to my feet and run. Kenzo lifts his arm, pointing the gun at me, and at the last minute, I swerve and throw my body into his. There's no way I can outrun a bullet, but maybe I can stop him from shooting.

When I slam into Kenzo, he staggers back a step. I reach for his right hand, the one holding the gun, but he flings it away from us. The weapon skids across the floor, and relief washes over me.

Suddenly, Kenzo grabs hold of my shoulders, and as he kicks my legs from under me, pain burns through my ribs. I land on my back, the air whooshing from my lungs. Before I can gather my senses, Kenzo's on top of me, and he pins me to the ground.

I try to scramble out from under him, but he grabs hold of my wrists, shoving me back against the floor. When his knee presses into my stomach, panic takes hold of my chest. I gasp for air, and with my entire torso on fire, I'm unable to move.

“Get up. Come on,” he taunts me. “I'm not that heavy.”

I try to roll to my right, but his knee presses deeper into my stomach, sending another wave of pain through my chest.

I take shallow breaths and try to pull my arms to my chest, but his fingers tighten his hold on my wrists.

Fear ripples through me as I realize I'm not strong enough to fight him off.

With panic flooding my veins, I scream, "Get off me."

I twist my arms, trying to free them from his tight grip. I manage to roll my hips again, but I only budge him an inch.

Kenzo lets out a dark chuckle. "You're totally at my mercy, kid. I can do anything to you, and you won't be able to stop me."

His hands are getting sweaty from holding my wrists, and I pull and twist until I manage to free my right arm. He reaches for my wrist, but I duck into him, which has him grabbing hold of my shoulder. When he shoves me back to the floor, my vision darkens from the pain.

"It hurts!" I scream, but he doesn't seem to care as he restrains me again.

I bring my knees up as hard as possible and slam them into his back.

"Good one," he laughs as if this is funny.

My chest feels like it is going to explode, and Kenzo is laughing at me.

With a roar, I rip my right arm free, and a second later, a slap echoes through the arena.

My palm stings, and I fist it against my chest as Kenzo pulls away. His neck is red from where I slapped him.

The moment I'm able to, I scramble out from under him and put a safe distance between us. My throat is thick, and my chin trembles as I whisper, "I told you to get off me."

Kenzo doesn't look angry but instead smiles. "You did good, kid. Tomorrow I'll teach you how to throw a punch."

"What?" I shake my head, not understanding what this lesson was meant to teach me. "Why did you do that?"

“I needed to see if you would give up or keep fighting when the odds were against you.” He pats me on my shoulder. “I’m glad you chose the latter.”

I watch Kenzo walk away, the urge to cry still stuck in my throat.

I can’t pretend everything is fine after the training session.

Chapter 23

Jai

I'm woken in the middle of the night with an ominous growl in my ear. "Time to pay your dues, newbie."

Before I can wake up properly, I'm yanked from my mat. Confusion blurs my mind, then a piece of cloth covers my eyes. The cloth pulls my hair as someone ties a knot at the back of my head, and as I struggle, arms lock around me, restraining me.

"Let go!" I scream, fear flooding my senses.

It's definitely more than one man. Crap.

Before I can cry for help, a rag is shoved into my mouth with so much force I gag. Another piece of fabric is tied around my mouth to keep me from spitting it out.

I'm picked up and tossed over a shoulder, making pain streak through my side. No amount of writhing dissuades them.

Almighty! What's happening?

With every step I'm carried away from the sleeping quarters, my fear thickens. I try to concentrate on where they're taking me while I struggle to free myself. My screams are stifled by the cloth, and I know it's useless, but I keep trying.

It feels as if we're turning right, but where are they taking me?

When I hear the click of a door, I realize I'm being taken outside. I kneel the one carrying me in his chest and get a growl as a reward.

Idris?

I wiggle as much as I can and let out a frustrated scream. It hurts, making my throat burn.

Suddenly I'm thrown on the floor, and again, my chest feels like it's been set on fire. Before I can suck in a breath of air, strong fingers clamp around my throat, and the man starts to choke me.

Bile churns in my stomach, and wave after wave of nausea hits while my lungs are starved of air. My panic and terror become a living, breathing thing. My body starts to jerk as I hit and scratch the hand, but I get dizzy from the lack of air.

Someone grabs my hands, and I can't fight back as I slip away into the darkness.

When I regain consciousness, it's cold. I'm tied down by my wrists and ankles, lying on a steel surface with my arms to my sides and my legs spread apart.

Shock shudders through me, causing goosebumps to spread over my body.

What's happening?

Why?

I can't keep back the tears because I'm cold, and it's only then I realize I'm only wearing underwear.

No.

Why are they doing this to me?

I scream because it's all I can do, the sound raw and hopeless.

I yank at the ropes tied to my wrists and ankles, but nothing gives. I only scream two more times before stopping. My chest hurts too much to try and call for help.

I glance around wildly to see where I am, but nothing looks familiar in the dark. I can't even see the stars.

The floor I'm on is ice cold, and I'm surrounded by some kind of steel fence.

Wait. Is this the nest?

The wind blows cold over me, taking more of my body's heat and making me shiver.

Suddenly, I hear a rumbling in the distance, echoing into my bones.

NoNoNo!

This is not happening.

Rain means freeze, and freeze means death.

I start to writhe and yank harder, trying to get loose. Terror threatens to make my chest explode with each roar of thunder.

There's a bright flash in the sky, ripping a cry from me. A second later, the crack thunders through the night, so loud I almost wet myself.

"Please!" I cry, desperation tightening my voice. "I don't want to die."

The first drop splats against my arm, and I arch my back off the ground, trying to get away.

"Noooo!" I shriek beside myself with panic.

My tears run into my hair, and it's only then I realize I'm crying.

"I don't want to die like this," I scream. "I don't want to freeze."

The second drop hits my chest, and then they come faster. Every drop of rain is ice cold, and I lose my mind, screaming and crying for help.

The steel floor I'm lying on jerks beneath me, but I hardly register the movement.

"I don't want to freeze," I sob pathetically. "What did I do wrong? Why would you do this to me?"

The floor jerks again, or maybe it's my imagination.

There's another streak of bright light flashing through the sky, and a thunderous crack follows. I don't know what it is, only that I'm terrified of it.

I hear a gate clanging, metal against metal. Someone crouches over me, and I start to plead, "Please. Help me. I don't want to die. Help me."

Warm hands untie my left wrist first, and as my rescuer moves over me, a streak of light flashes through the sky, and I see his face.

Chance.

Knowing Chance will see me in my underwear, embarrassment mixes with my fear. I yank to try and free my right hand, sobs shuddering from my aching chest.

"Hold on," he snaps.

As hard as I try, I have no strength to free myself, and I cry uncontrollably. When my hands are free, I dart into a sitting position and reach for my left ankle while Chance unties my right.

The moment the ropes are off, I scramble to my feet. I don't look at Chance, because I'm too humiliated that he's seeing me like this.

I've never worn so little in front of anyone before, and the shame is overwhelming. Not thinking clearly, I jump off the nest. I hit the ground, my legs shuddering with a sharp pain from landing hard.

"Jai!" Chance shouts, but I'm too ashamed and dart up.

Another streak of light has me running toward the ward's entrance. Just as I can reach the tunnels, Chance's arm wraps around my waist, yanking me into the air before I slam into his chest.

Grabbing at his arm, I scream, thrashing wildly to get free.

"Shh, you're going to be okay." His voice almost sounds worried.

Sobs strangle my breaths, and I keep fighting against his hold as he carries me into his bedroom.

I hear the door slam closed, and the second he lets go of me, I scramble

away from him. My breaths are coming too fast, and my throat cramps as if it's threatening to clamp shut. Strangled sounds escape from me, and I frantically search for a way to get out of the dark room.

I can make out as Chance holds up his hands in front of him, his eyes locked on my face.

"Calm down." He gestures at the bed. "There's a shirt for you."

I don't even look at it but instead, storm him. My fists pound against any part of his chest I can reach, and I try to get past him to reach the door.

"Jesus," he growls, wrapping his arms around me like steel bands.

"No!" I scream. I lose my ever-loving mind, trashing madly in his arms.

"Jasper!" he shouts as he throws me onto a bed.

Just as I shoot up, he's on top of me, clamping my arms against the mattress, his body straddling mine.

"Please," I gasp, hyperventilating from all the trauma.

The entire room lights up, and the crack is so loud my tongue goes numb with fright. I almost dislocate my shoulder in an attempt to get closer to him, so I can hide from the demonic rain.

Chance pulls me up, and again his arms wrap around me. This time I sob against his chest, and with every flash of light, my body jerks.

"You're safe." Chance moves to sit down and cradles me against his chest. "The rain can't hurt you."

I cry my heart out against his damp shirt, clinging to the fabric as if it's the only thing standing between me and death.

His hand brushes over my hair, then he folds his body around mine, pressing a kiss to the side of my head. "I've got you, little one. Shh..."

I have no idea how much time passes before I manage to calm down. I don't move from where I'm lying against Chance.

The rain comes down so hard it sounds like it's going to break through

the ceiling.

After a couple of minutes, Chance asks, “Better?”

Not bothering to answer him, I push away from him and climb off the bed. My eyes lock on the drops hitting the large bedroom window.

What if it breaks the glass?

The light flickers on, and as I turn my head back to Chance, I watch as his eyes drift over my body.

I’m bare, and my wet underwear is practically see-through!

I dart back to the bed and, yanking the blanket off, I hold it in front of me.

His eyes lift to mine, then he lets out a sigh. “Put on the shirt.”

I glance around the room and see it lying on the floor. Picking it up, I quickly yank the fabric over my head. It only reaches above my knees.

Picking up the blanket again, my fingers cramp as I hold it to my chest. Glancing at the window, I watch the drops streak down the glass. I move to the farthest wall and press my back to it.

A bright light fills the room, and the crack of thunder is so loud I feel the ground move beneath my feet. I shriek and sink down on my butt, covering my head with my arms.

“It’s lightning. It can’t hurt you in here,” Chance says. I hear him walk toward me and quickly look at him. He holds his hand out to me. “Come on, sit on the bed.”

Hesitating, I take his hand and let him pull me up. When I sit down on the bed, he drops down next to me and looks at my wrists. “Fuck, you put up one hell of a fight.”

He takes hold of my right hand, and his fingers brush carefully over the raw skin from where I was tied to the nest.

“Whoever takes down the newbie,” he pauses for a second, then locks

eyes with me, “is responsible for their training and punishments. Tonight was your initiation.”

I can only stare at him as his words sink in. My face crumbles as the full impact of what it means hits me square in the chest.

“You were a part of this?” I shake my head, not wanting to believe Chance would do this to me.

“Yes.”

I yank my hand out of his and jump up, feeling like I can’t move quickly enough to get away from him.

Anger explodes behind my eyes, and swinging around, I scream, “How could you?!”

When my eyes dart to the door, Chance jumps up and blocks my only way of escape.

I turn my back to him and stare at the rain pounding against the window.

Everything is violent. Idris. Kenzo. The trackers and rebels. Even the nature around me.

I thought Chance was safe, but I was wrong.

Lightning flashes, making me recoil away from the window. Chance grabs hold of my arm, and suddenly I don’t know which fear is bigger, the lightning or Chance.

I thought I, at least, had Chance as a friend, and he’s always made me feel strong.

But not tonight.

I feel weaker than one of those little chicks.

Chapter 24

Jai

I glance up at Chance, not even bothering to hide the fear I feel for him. I know how strong he is. He could easily snap my neck, just like he said when we met.

He shakes his head, his expression hardening. “Don’t look at me like that.”

I pull against his hold on my arm, but it only makes his fingers tighten around me.

“I couldn’t warn you. It’s tradition.”

“Tradition?” I spit the word at him.

After tonight there’s not an ounce of virtue left in me.

A wave of anger washes through me again. “You said I could trust you.” The accusation is thick in my voice. “You lied. Just like the emissaries.” My eyes burn with rage on him. “You’re no better than them.”

I try to pull free, but Chance yanks me to his chest. He leans down until our faces are only an inch apart, anger tightening his features.

“Don’t ever compare me to those fucking bastards.”

The raw brutality coming off him in waves both terrifies and intrigues me. Even after everything, this man still makes my heart skip a beat.

I lift my chin, refusing to back down. “You betrayed me.”

“I fucking saved your ass. Again,” he roars.

The air is so tense between us, I’m sure if you lit a match, it would burn us alive.

My breaths burst from my lips, my body trembling from the cold and anger. “Don’t expect me to thank you.”

Chance lets go of me with a shove, and I stumble a step back.

“Jesus Christ,” he mutters as he stalks away from me, only to swing around and come right back. “This is the way things are done at the ward.”

“I don’t care.”

He gives me a look of warning. “Careful, little girl.”

“Or what?” I take a step forward, my anger making me braver than I’ve ever been. “You’ll punish me?” I shove a finger at his chest. “You stole my first kiss. You stripped me down to my underwear and tied me to the nest in a storm.” A burst of laughter escapes me. “What’s next?” I lift my chin, challenging him. “Are you going to use me?”

Don’t poke the bear.

‘Oh, shut up,’ I tell the voice in my head. ‘I’m done being a pushover.’

Chance leans down again until I feel his breath on my lips. “Don’t fucking tempt me, little girl.”

“I’m not a fucking little girl,” I shout, my entire body shaking from the chaotic emotions ravaging me.

Chance's eyes sweep over my body, then the corner of his mouth lifts in a smirk. “I can see that.”

I glance down, only to see the white shirt got wet from my underwear, and my nipples are hard peaks.

I cross my arms over my chest and turn my back to him. Exhaustion creeps into my bones, and I lower my head.

I hear Chance take a deep breath, then he says, “Fighting won’t get us anywhere. Every single person in this ward has been tied to the nest for initiation. You’re not the first, and you won’t be the last.”

“Doesn’t mean I have to approve of your methods,” I mutter.

“It does if you want to stay here.” I swing around to look at him, then he adds, “You’re always welcome to try your luck out there with the rebels and trackers.”

Checkmate.

Chance knows I won’t survive on my own out there, and it’s the perfect weapon to use against me.

I nod, my shoulders slumping because this is not a war I’ll win. Keeping my arms crossed over my chest, I mutter, “Message received, loud and clear. Can I go?”

“No.”

My eyes dart to his. “Why not?”

“You have to sleep here.”

“What?” I gasp. “Why?”

“Idris can’t see you walking around yet. Normally people stay up for longer.”

“How much longer?” I don’t even know how long I was up there.

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want to hear the answers to.”

“How much longer?” I demand.

“Overnight.” He shrugs. “Sometimes two days.”

My lips part in a gasp. Crap, I’d die up there if they left me the entire night.

“Why did you take me down?”

Chance lifts his hand to my neck and wraps his fingers around my throat. He doesn’t cut off my air supply, instead, his touch feels intimate and possessive. When I look into his eyes, there’s a fluttering in my stomach.

Even though I’m angry and hurt, there’s no denying this man makes me feel things I’ve never felt before.

“I took you down so Idris and Kenzo wouldn’t, because I want to train

you.” He presses closer to me, and it makes it hard to breathe. His eyes drift over my face, and all my warning bells ring loudly. “I worked my ass off to keep you alive. You belong to me.”

Chance leans down, and the fluttering in my stomach explodes into a full-blown trembling, but I turn my head away an inch before he can kiss me, and his mouth brushes hotly over my cheek.

I close my eyes, unable to look at him, whispering, “I learned my lesson the first time.”

I might feel an overpowering pull toward him, but that doesn’t mean I’ll let him hurt me by kissing me only to shove me away.

His hand slips into my hair, and his other arm wraps around my waist, locking me to his body. Bolts of excitement rush through me, making me feel tingles deep inside my abdomen.

“Look at me,” he demands.

My eyes snap open, clashing with his bright blue irises.

Why does he make me feel both strong and weak?

“Stop testing my patience,” he warns me, a dangerous glint in his eyes.

I stare at him, my body tense and my heart confused. “I can’t just kiss someone and pretend it doesn’t mean anything. I’m not like the rebels.”

“I know.”

I pull my arms from between us and place them on his biceps. My fingers dig into the fabric of his shirt.

“Everything is new and totally the opposite of what I’ve known my entire life. I don’t know if I can do it and if you keep pushing me, I’ll lose my mind.” Now that I’ve started, I can’t stop the words from coming. “Instead of worrying whether I’ll be a monumental failure at kissing and stuff like that, I have to worry about not being killed. That’s a pretty giant step to take if you don’t know where to walk.” I gulp down a few breaths, my heart pounding in

my ears.

Chance is quiet for a moment, then he tilts his head, his eyes softening a fraction. “I know it’s overwhelming. I was in the same position once.”

Giving him a pleading look, I ask, “How did you cope?”

A frown line forms between his eyebrows. “If there’s no other way, you just adapt to your new surroundings.” He brings a hand to my cheek and softly brushes a finger over the scar the bullet left. His eyes drift over my face before he looks into my eyes. “Your first kiss shouldn’t have been like that.”

After the events of the past days, and especially after this conversation, it feels as if something between us has shifted. It’s probably my imagination, but even though we’re fighting, I feel it’s brought us closer together.

My tone is soft as I ask, “What should it have been like?”

The corner of his mouth lifts, and it makes him look dangerously attractive. There’s a mad frenzy of fluttering in the region of my stomach.

“Are you going to let me show you, or will you keep fighting?”

“Are you going to use it to teach me a lesson?” I ask. I really don’t have the strength for that tonight, not after everything I’ve been through.

“No lessons for the rest of the night.”

Suddenly my heart is beating in my throat, and I swallow hard.

Chance frames my face with his hands, and too late, I realize it’s to keep me in place as his mouth slams against mine. He uses his body to push me backward until I bump into the wall.

A squeak escapes me, and I swear he inhales the sound. All my nerves explode with tingles, and for a split second, I worry whether I’ll be bad at kissing, but then his tongue pushes past my lips, and my thoughts come to a screeching halt.

I don’t get to think about being a failure or how I should kiss him. Pleasure pulses through my blood with every beat of my heart.

The kiss turns into something forceful, and his tongue lashes at mine. His breaths are hot, and his hands move into my hair, grabbing fistfuls.

Chance tilts my head, then I lose my ability to breathe as he kisses me like a starved man.

Which I guess he is, seeing as there aren't many women.

My fingers tighten their hold on his shirt, and I lift myself on my tiptoes. He wraps a strong arm around my lower back, and my feet barely touch the floor as he keeps me locked to his body.

His mouth devours mine, robbing me of all rational thinking until it feels like he's placing me in a trance.

This is magical.

Suddenly he lets go, and I slump against the wall. My eyes snap open, and I watch as he takes two steps back, putting some distance between us. His chest rises and falls visibly as he takes deep breaths, his eyes burning on me.

"I have to leave." His voice is deep and hoarse, sending waves of tingles over my skin.

"Don't tell me this was a lesson," I beg, not able to handle another blow.

"It's not." He takes another step away from me, his features strained as if it's taking a lot of effort. "It's just hard to kiss you and leave it at that."

Oh.

Ohhh.

Remembering the lessons about men and their needs and how women need to satisfy those urges to keep the peace, my cheeks flush, but I don't break eye contact with him.

"I had lessons," I remind him. "I can help."

Chance shakes his head hard. "Everything you've been taught about sex is wrong."

A light frown forms on my forehead. "It is?" I give him a confused look. "What's it like?"

He lets out a sigh and sits down on the bed, then nods at the mattress for me to join him.

I pick up the blanket, and when I sit down, I cover my legs with it. I stare at the black fabric while I wait for Chance to talk.

He rubs a hand over his face, clearly tired. "You were just taught that you'd have to share your body with the men of the ecocity. That you'd lie still, spread your legs, and let them lie on top of you."

That sounds right, so I nod.

"Remember the rebels?"

I nod again, then my eyes widen and snap to Chance's face.

"That's what sex is like." He lets out a chuckle. "I can't believe I have to teach you about sex." We stare at each other for a moment, then he says, "The man enters the woman, and he fucks her until he spills his seed inside her. It's actually a pleasurable experience for both parties."

Holy. Crap.

My mind runs away with me, and I picture Chance and me touching each other like the rebels did. If Chance had to groan like them while pounding into me... Intense heat washes through my body, and my abdomen clenches so hard I have to cross my legs.

There's friction, and I freeze from the flash of pleasure between my thighs.

Chance doesn't miss my reaction, lifting an eyebrow, his voice is a rumble of thunder as he asks, "You're turned on by the rebels?"

"No." I quickly shake my head and turn my face away. "Not them."

He takes hold of my chin, and this time his touch sets my skin alight with tingles as he forces me to look at him again. "Tell me," he demands.

I shake my head, and he seems to realize something because the corner of his mouth lifts. Much to my mortification, he murmurs, “You thought of us.”

My shoulders slump, and when Chance lets out a chuckle, I want to punch him. I get up, but he grabs hold of my hips and yanks me back down. I end up sitting right against him.

“I’m not laughing at you.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” I mutter, refusing to look at him.

“Jai.” Only when I glare at him does he continue, “It was a pleased chuckle.”

Pleased.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask why when he explains, “If you’re going to think about sex, think about us until you’re comfortable with the idea.”

“How will I know when I’m comfortable?”

A predatory expression tightens his features. “You’ll beg me to fuck you.”

My jaw drops open at his crass statement. “Wow, don’t hold back on my account.”

He lets out an amused chuckle. “Give me half a chance, and I’ll corrupt you the way I was corrupted.”

My eyebrows dart up. “Who corrupted you?”

“Hell no.” He shakes his head and gestures at the bed. “I’m not having *that* conversation with you. It’s been a long night. Get in bed, so we can sleep.

Letting out a sigh, I crawl to the side closest to the wall and lie down. I watch as Chance switches the light off, then he comes to lie beside me.

Chapter 25

Jai

The raindrops sparkle against the window, and for a while, there's only the sound of our breathing.

Chance rolls onto his side, and lifting my head, he slips his arm beneath me. He pulls me against him until we're face to face and the warmth of his body seeps into mine.

"We'll train hard, but I'll never hurt you intentionally."

I nod. "I'll do my best."

His eyes drift over my face. "It's a cruel world out there, and you need to prepare for it. You're doing much better than I expected. You're going to be just fine," he says, and I'm trying hard to listen to his every word, but with his face so close to mine, it's distracting.

I know things are different here, and everything I learned in the ecocity was a lie. My gaze flicks over every inch of Chance's face and needing to know, I ask, "You said I belong to you."

"Yeah."

My tongue darts out to wet my lips. "Does that mean the same thing as in the ecocity?" It probably doesn't, but I had to ask.

When he nods, delighted surprise hits me, making my lips stretch into a smile.

"So, I don't have to pleasure every single man?" I ask to make sure I understand him right.

"Hell fucking no," he grumbles. "Bodies will drop if the men try to fuck

you.”

This time his brutality and possessiveness make me feel safe.

I only have to worry about pleasuring Chance.

“Will you teach me?”

He brings his other hand to my face, and his fingers brush over my temple, cheek, and jaw. He leans slightly over me like he did when we slept on the platform. “So, you’re not opposed to being mine?”

I quickly shake my head. “This is all I wanted. To belong to only one man.”

His eyes narrow. “Any man?”

A smile pulls at my lips. “Before I met you, it didn’t matter who the man was.”

He leans closer until his breaths fan over my lips. I place my hand on his side and gather all my courage to admit, “But if I get to choose, it would be you.”

“Why?” It sounds more like a demand than a question.

With my eyes never leaving his, I reply, “Because you make me stronger. Whenever I think I can’t do something, I look at you and find the courage to do it. I used to think I was a coward until I met you.”

A satisfied expression relaxes his features. “Good girl.”

My abdomen tightens, and my thighs clench. An inferno of heat washes through me, chasing the chill from my body.

I’ve been taught feelings make you weak. Still, looking at this deadly man, I can’t help them from growing in my heart.

Chance presses his forehead to mine, a groan rumbling from his chest. “You’re too innocent for a man like me.”

Will all my newfound bravery, I whisper, “Then corrupt me.”

“Christ,” he hisses right before his mouth slams against mine. He kisses

me forcefully, and when his tongue slides into my mouth, delicious tingles make my skin feel sensitive.

I gasp, grabbing hold of his shoulders as he rolls me onto my back. Our breaths mingle, and the kiss becomes desperate until we make the same sounds the rebels did.

This time I'm not embarrassed but, instead, filled with a hunger for more. My mind clouds over, and I can't think straight anymore.

Chance frees my lips, leaving a trail of burning kisses over my jaw and neck. My body reacts instinctively, my back arching and my breasts feeling heavy with need.

Every sensation is a new experience, making me greedy for what Chance will make me feel next.

His mouth comes back to mine, but he doesn't kiss me. "I'm going to fuck you if you don't stop me."

I belong to Chance.

Whether it's right or wrong, I don't care. I've never felt this strong attraction toward any other man.

His eyes lock on mine. "Say it."

"Fuck me."

With a savage growl, Chance's mouth claims mine. His teeth assault my bottom lip, and his tongue lashes at mine. Just as I start to feel lightheaded from the lack of air, he breaks the kiss.

Chance grabs hold of my shirt and yanks it up my body, his movements filled with desperation as the fabric is tugged over my head.

His eyes rove over my chest, the bra doing nothing to hide my hard nipples. "Jesus," he growls, ferocious hunger darkening his eyes. He unclasps my bra then pulls the fabric off me.

I've never seen anyone lose control like this.

My heart thunders in my chest, and when Chance's lips close around my nipple, I squeak from the intense pleasure he makes me feel.

He bites my sensitive flesh, then soothes it with his tongue until my back arches and pleasure rolls through my body like a wave.

I gasp, my breaths coming fast while my hands find his muscled arms, hungry to touch his skin.

"Christ, woman," he breathes against my breast. "You're fucking perfect."

I've never received a compliment like that, and it fills my chest with pride.

I feel Chance's fingers by my hip as he takes hold of my underwear, then I hear them rip as he tears them from my body.

"I can't go slow," he rasps. "It's been too long since I've had a woman."

I hate the idea of Chance kissing another woman the way he's kissed me. His hands on her body.

I shove the thoughts away because it happened before me.

Taking hold of my thighs, he shoves my legs wide open. My eyes are as round as saucers, my face flushing from being so exposed to him. But then his fingers rub me hard between my legs, and all I can do is gasp for air.

"You're fucking soaked for me, little one," he says. It sounds like he's praising me.

He pushes a finger inside me. It feels sinful and amazing, and I can't stop my hips from swiveling. "Chance," I breathe, begging for whatever comes next.

He pumps his finger in and out of me, and his mouth finds mine again. As his tongue lashes at my lips, the pad of his thumb presses against an extremely sensitive bundle of nerves

Oh. My. Soul.

My body presses hard against his, and I lose complete control of every muscle. I start to convulse, and unable to stop the sounds, moans spill from me.

Chance inhales every single one, his fingers working magic between my legs.

Overpowering pleasure seizes my body, lights explode behind my eyes, and my lips part with a cry.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he growls. “I have to fuck you now.”

I watch as he yanks his shirt over his head, and seeing the hard planes of his chest, the square ridges over his abdomen, and all the ink covering his skin makes my pleasure so much more intense.

My body’s still convulsing, the area between my legs inundated with tingles and intense pleasure, when Chance pulls his hand away. A moment later, I feel something thick and hard nudge against my opening.

“It might hurt. Feel free to bite me,” he says, and it’s the only warning I get.

He slams into me, and the sharp pain knocks the air right from my lungs. Chance is so big, he stretches me until it burns and feels like I might tear.

I can’t stop the whimper from escaping me. His mouth crushes against mine as if he’s trying to drink the sound from me.

Pulling out, he enters me forcefully again. “So fucking tight,” he growls. “Christ.”

The ache is sharp as he forces my inner walls to take every inch of him, but after the sixth thrust, I start to become accustomed to his size.

He buries himself all the way inside me, and resting a forearm beside my head, his other hand grips my hip. His eyes lock on mine, then he praises, “Good girl. You take me so well.”

Holy crap.

His words make my muscles tighten around his thick length, pulling a pleasure-filled groan from him. “Jesus. Such a good fucking girl.” Again I clench around him, and it fills his eyes with such satisfaction I’ll practically do anything to keep him looking at me with that expression.

Chance claims my mouth with a ferocious kiss, his teeth and lips rubbing my lips until they’re swollen and tingling. His hips pull back, and I feel him move inside me. This time when he slams back into me, the head of his hard length reaches a spot that makes lights explode behind my eyes.

I gasp against his mouth, my body tensing so much I can only hold on to him as he starts to pound into me. The sounds of our bodies hitting against each other fill the room.

Something builds in me, and when it becomes frustratingly unbearable, I cry, “Chance. Please!” My fingers dig into his skin, and not knowing what else to do, I bite down on his shoulder.

“Fuck, Jai,” Chance snaps, but he doesn’t sound angry. His hips move faster, his hard length pounding into me until I’m blinded by my need and overcome with excruciating pleasure.

When a scream rips from me, Chance slaps his hand over my mouth to smother it. His hips hammer with such force my body jerks with each relentless thrust.

“You.” Thrust. “Are.” Thrust. “Mine.”

The ecstasy seizing my body is merciless, making me weep, and his name spills over my lips like a prayer.

His mouth claims mine in a searing kiss, branding me his property right before he jerks against my body. Growls and groans shudder from him as he finds his pleasure in my body.

I continue to cling to him, my soul desperate to be as close to him as physically possible.

He jerks twice more, then his thrusts slow down until he plunges inside me one last time and stills.

For a moment, I only hear our harsh breaths. I become aware of our sweaty skin, and everywhere we touch.

Chance lifts his head, and seizing my eyes with a possessive look, he says, “You’ll fucking fill this world with my children.”

For the first time, the thought of giving birth every two years doesn’t fill me with dread.

Not if creating life feels this good.

I bring my hands to his square jaw and trail my fingers through the bristles. With a sated body, I admit, “I never imagined sex would feel like this.”

Not moving off me or pulling out, he tilts his head. “How does it feel?”

“So... full.” I scrunch my nose, not sure how to describe it. “Intense pleasure.”

The corner of his mouth lifts, then there’s a flash of worry in his eyes. “Did I hurt you?”

In the beginning, yeah, but I don’t tell him. Instead, I say, “I enjoy feeling you inside me.”

His right eyebrow lifts, and he gives me a predatory look. “Good. I plan on fucking you until you’re unable to walk.”

I chuckle, and it makes my inner muscles clamp around him.

Chance lets out a groan, then his mouth nips mine in a soft kiss. “This is as close to heaven as I’ll get. A woman beneath me to fuck until I’ve had my fill.”

I feel his manhood thicken and stretch inside until every inch of me is filled with him again.

Chance moves a hand to the side of my head and kisses me as if I’m

precious.

I've always known I'm a rare species, but it's the first time it doesn't feel like a burden. I can give Chance something very few can, and it makes me feel powerful.

He pulls out before pushing in deep, then he grinds his pelvis against mine, causing ripples of pleasure to spread through my body.

Chance presses his chest to mine, and moving his arm down, his hand grips hold of my butt cheek. "My breasts." Kiss. "My pussy." Kiss. "My ass." His fingers dig into my skin right before he slams into me. "Your body is mine."

My legs fall wide open in submission, and I wrap my arms around his neck, tilting my head back.

Chance licks and bites my throat and jaw, then growls, "I'll protect you, and together we'll be a team."

"Yes," I breathe, so intoxicated by him, I'll do anything he asks. My hands rove down his muscled back, my nails digging into his skin.

He pulls away from me until he's kneeling between my legs, then he stares down at where we're joined. He places his hands on the inside of my thighs, and I feel his thumb brush around my opening.

Pulling out slowly, he groans, "Christ, little one." His thumbs pull me open, then he pushes into me, a growl rumbling in his chest. "That's right, take me deep."

My body begins to tremble from how intimate the moment feels, and reaching down, I grab hold of his wrists and beg, "Please."

"Please what?" His tone is demanding, making me clench around his thick length.

"Fuck me."

He pulls out, then orders, "Tell me how you want me to fuck you."

“Hard,” I plead.

“And?”

“Chance,” I complain. “Slam into me until my body convulses.”

“Admit you want my cock to claim your pussy.”

With my eyes locked on his, and my body at his mercy, I admit, “I want your cock to claim my pussy.”

“Good girl,” he groans with satisfaction before he gives me what I need.

Every hard inch of him.

Chapter 26

Jai

When I wake up, I'm alone.

I stretch beneath the blanket, my body sore from all the sex. I'm tender between my legs as I snuggle into the pillow that smells like Chance.

Memories of last night trickle into my mind. The way he touched me, his hands branding every inch of my skin. The way he filled me, claiming my body. The words he said.

Heat flushes through me, drawing a chuckle from me.

Never in my wildest imagination did I think sex would feel so good.

In an instant, my thoughts turn down a dark path, thinking the emissaries lied to all the women. I would've lost my mind if a strange man climbed on top of me and did what Chance did to me.

Sitting up, a frown forms between my eyes.

Geez, at least Chance prepared me and even asked my permission.

I wanted to have sex with him, but thinking a strange man would've just used my body in such an intimate way fills me with anger.

The emissaries are evil. I see it clearly now that my eyes have been opened to the truth.

Glancing around the room, I see the clothes they stripped off me lying neatly folded on a table. Climbing out of bed, I quickly get dressed, then straighten the blanket and pillows before opening the door. I peek into the corridor, and not seeing anyone, I sneak out of Chance's bedroom and hurry to the bathroom.

I relieve my bladder, shower, and brush my teeth and hair. When I feel better, and I'm dressed in clean clothes, I make my way to the dining hall.

There's no sign of Chance, and Raze is alone in the kitchen, preparing food.

"Where is Aldric?" I ask.

"The nest until it's time to prepare lunch. Good luck for today," she gives me an encouraging smile, and I'm not sure why.

I take my plate and find a seat at the bench Skater and Jarek are sitting at.

Just as I take a bite of my breakfast, Chance walks into the dining hall with Idris and Kenzo at his sides.

He doesn't look at me, and it makes my heart thump heavily in my chest. Not understanding why he's ignoring me, my shoulders slump.

Letting out a sigh, I keep my head down, and after breakfast, I help wash the dishes. When I step out of the kitchen, Idris signals to me. "Come here."

Damn.

My breakfast turns to rocks in my stomach while I walk to the bench where the three leaders are seated. Last night Chance made me forget about what they did to me, but now that I have to face them, anger bubbles back into my chest.

Who choked me? Who undressed me? Who tied me to the nest?

"Congratulations on being chosen by Chance," Idris says.

My eyes snap to Idris, and I notice the scratch marks on his arm and neck. Idris choked me.

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him how sick I think he is, but because his word is the law at the ward, I swallow the words back.

Idris tilts his head. "Did you want someone else to choose you?" A smirk lifts the corner of his mouth.

I glance at Chance, but his facial expression gives nothing away.

Knowing what's expected of me, I mutter, "I'm honored Chance chose me."

Having had enough, I glare at the men before I walk out of the dining room and head to the drill zone.

"What the hell was that?" Chance snaps behind me.

I start jogging down the path. "Should I be thankful Idris choked me?" When I hear Chance coming up behind me, I increase my speed. "Just because we shared the night doesn't mean I'm not angry with what they did last night."

"Jesus, this again," he snaps, his anger matching mine. "It's the way things are done here. Either you accept it, or you'll break."

He veers off at the one entrance, but I keep running. The arena fills with noise as everything falls into place. When I look to see what Chance is doing, my feet come to a faltering stop.

My lips part with shock as I watch him reach into a bag of balls.

How can he do this after the night we shared?

He tosses a ball to his right hand as his eyes flick to mine. "Don't look so surprised. I warned you I'm going to train you hard."

Was I mistaken to think he was nice, that he cared about me?

The ball looks as light as a feather as he holds it, but I know how heavy it is.

"You also said you wouldn't hurt me," I remind him.

"Unnecessarily," he corrects me. Giving me an impatient look, he says, "I caught you when you jumped. Not once did I let you fall. You need to start trusting me, little girl."

It's back to *little girl* again.

Chance gestures at the equipment.

"You're going to jump the scaffolds, then climb down the rope. You will

not fall,” he orders. “And you’re going to trust me that I won’t hurt you.”

Ha. Easier said than done.

Shaking my head at him, I run toward the section where the scaffolds are. I refuse to look at him as I jump to the first one, and I’m confused when no balls are flying my way.

The second scaffold swings forward, and I get ready. As it comes back toward the first one, I dart forward and jump.

This time a ball flies past my face, missing my head by mere inches.

I land, crouching down, my heart racing up to my throat. The scaffold bangs into the first one, and I get a glimpse of Chance. He walks in the direction of the entrance to my left.

Seizing the opportunity, I run and jump, not taking into account that the third scaffold is swinging forward.

The next ball flies past my right shoulder. It smacks into the chain as I land too close to the edge. I scramble back and duck low to catch my breath.

The instant I get ready to jump, a ball whooshes past my chin. I miss the opportunity to jump, and the scaffold smacks hard into the fourth one. Vibrations shudder through my body, but I get up and launch myself forward. Another ball whizzes past my shoulder again, but I land in a perfect crouching position.

“This should be interesting,” Idris suddenly says from where he’s standing at the archway. Aaron and Jasper are behind him.

Oh crap.

“Move it, Jai.” Chance shouts, and I know this time he won’t miss.

Bracing myself, I lunge forward and jump. As the fourth scaffold comes closer, I pull my arms and legs into my chest to make myself a smaller target. A ball smacks against my hip right before I land on the platform, throwing

me off balance.

Unable to stop the motion, I slip right over the scaffold and stretch my body, gripping the rope at the last second. I swing through the air, my heart thundering in my chest.

“Don’t you fucking dare fall,” Chance orders.

I tighten my grip on the rope and manage to lock my legs around it.

“Hold,” Chance instructs.

Crap. This is hard.

“Hold!”

I’m trying.

“Hold,” he shouts.

My fingers burn, and the rope scrapes at my neck. I pinch my eyes shut and use every bit of my strength not to slip down.

“Jump.”

Relieved, I let go and land feet first. A sharp pain shoots up my ankles and calves, and I sink to the floor.

“Not bad, Jai,” Idris mutters. He looks at Aaron and Jasper. “That’s how it’s done, newbies.”

I get up and look at Idris as he walks out of the arena. When I turn my attention to Chance, he looks proud. “You’ve gotten good at jumping the scaffolds. Over to the grid.”

I beam at the compliment and jog over to the grid.

Chance pulls a rope closer to us. There are straps at the end of the rope, and he holds it open. “Step into the harness.”

I take hold of his shoulder and step into the first loop, then the second. He hunches down and adjusts the straps around my thighs and then my waist. My stomach flutters because of the close proximity as he moves around me to fasten the harness.

I hear three clicks, then watch as he walks to the stand. “How will the rope stop me from falling if it reaches the ground?”

He holds up one finger, saying nothing, then presses a button, and my body lurches upward. The rope starts to twirl, and I take hold of it as I hang a few feet from the ground.

Chance comes back, and within seconds he climbs onto the grid, without a rope or harness. I watch him scale until he is at eye level with me. He reaches out and grabs hold of my rope, pulling me closer to him.

“It’s one thing to fall off the scaffolds. They aren’t as high,” he says. “Just follow my lead.”

For a moment, his eyes hold mine, and I can’t help but remember the night before.

His features soften, then he murmurs, “Don’t look at me like that when we’re training.”

“Like what?”

“Like you need me to fuck you.”

His hand moves to my lower back, nudging me forward, and I find grooves and holes for my fingers and toes.

Needing reassurance, I ask, “So last night wasn’t a one-time thing?” I glance at him. “Did you mean everything you said?”

Chance climbs up until I have to tilt my head to look at him.

“Yes, I sure as fuck meant it.” He frowns at me. “You better not have second thoughts.”

I shake my head. “I just wanted to make sure.”

He climbs higher. “Get your ass up here.”

We climb in silence, and halfway to the top, I glance at Chance. He looks at home on the grid, unlike me. My fingers are red from clinging and pulling.

“Why are we training for war?” I ask, hoping to get some answers to all

my questions.

“Remember I mentioned that our fathers worked together?”

“Yeah.” I climb a little farther.

“My father found a way to splice human DNA in a way that can alter the subject’s personality. The emissaries are removing our ability to feel emotions, so we’ll be nothing but robots, ready to obey every order. My father got killed because he was against it and to serve as a warning to your father.”

My hands slip, and I fall. The rope yanks at my waist, and I bounce once. The momentum carries me, and I twirl.

Shocked, I hang limply as some of the puzzle pieces fall together.

Chance jumps down, and he unfastens the harness. I’m lifted out of it, and once my feet touch the floor, he says, “When the trackers hunt a person, they take them back to the laboratories where your father has to alter the DNA. They’re called insensates – emotionless and capable of killing without feeling guilty.” I’ve never heard his tone so serious before. “The emissaries believe that emotions lead to the corruption of the soul. They call it a glitch in the human makeup. We’re going to war to stop them. We have to destroy the lab and whatever insensates they have there already. We have to stop them before they take our freedom from us.”

My dad’s been building an army for the emissaries all this time. All those late nights. “I am so stupid. I thought he developed genetically modified food.” I shake my head, horrified by what I learned.

My eyes snap to Chance’s. “What about Ethan?”

My dad won’t strip Ethan of his emotions. Would he?

“I’m hoping your father will keep him safe because I have you.”

My eyes widen, and I gasp. “Is that why you chose to train me?”

“Partly.” His hand cups my cheeks as he steps closer to me. “I also took

you down from the nest because I want you.”

Desperately needing a hug, I wrap my arms around his waist and rest my cheek against his chest. “It’s a lot to process,” I admit. “Why are the emissaries so evil?”

“When the wars ended, they were the wealthiest families. They created the ecocity – a utopia – so they had full control over everyone and to avoid future wars.”

“So all the crusaders that have been sent out?”

“Taken to the lab,” he answers.

“Everything you’ve been taught is a lie to keep the citizens from realizing what’s happening right under their noses. The virtuous have been fooled to fear us, and as long as they fear us, they’re not looking at the emissaries. They’re not seeing what’s really going on. Slowly, they’re being replaced, one by one, until the emissaries have their ecocity of insensates.” He shakes his head. “Sending out twenty-one crusaders shows they’re growing desperate, and I have a feeling they’re getting ready to attack us.”

“And my dad is at the heart of it.” I feel sick with worry.

“As long as he serves a purpose and doesn’t question the emissaries, he’ll be safe.”

“My dad told me to look for you,” I admit, trying to process everything I’ve just heard.

“Little did he know I’d train you to become a soldier while fucking you senseless.” A smile tugs at the corner of my mouth as he leans closer to me. “Everything I teach you is to keep you alive. No matter how hard things get, always remember that.”

“Okay.”

I stare up at the man who’s saved me in more ways than one.

Thank you for getting me out of the ecocity, Dad.

Chapter 27

Jai

I can't fall asleep, my mind flooded with everything I learned today.

Ruth is softly sobbing into her pillow because she's finding it very hard to adjust to the new world and misses her family.

I haven't seen Jasper since this morning.

I skipped my visit to the animals again, not ready to talk to Kenzo after he pinned me to the floor and hurt me.

Finally, Ruth's sobs slow down as she falls asleep.

I turn onto my back and wonder how Chance would react if I went to his bedroom.

I hear footsteps come into the sleeping quarters and turn my head. I frown when I see Idris, Kenzo, and Chance walk in my direction.

No. Not again.

My heartbeat speeds up, and I cover my mouth so I don't make a sound. But instead of coming to me, they go toward Ruth's mat, which is opposite from mine.

I close my eyes and lie as still as possible. I breathe out slowly when I hear her shriek with fright. I breathe in even slower when she gives a muffled cry.

I hear them move, and when their footsteps die away, I shoot up into a sitting position.

Chance can take her down once he knows she's tied to the nest.

I slip out of bed and leave my shoes, not wanting to risk being heard.

“Don’t, Jai.” Valen sits up in her bed. “Never interfere.”

“I can’t leave her.”

“It’s your skin.” She lies back down, pulling the blanket over her shoulder.

I tiptoe down the tunnel, keeping close to the wall. As I near the blue door, I hear Ruth’s shrieks.

I press in the code and softly nudge the door open.

“Dammit, why do they always scratch? From now on, we should get them to cut their nails.” Idris sounds amused.

I peek through the gap and see Ruth is already unconscious. My hand hovers over my mouth, and my heart plunges.

Kenzo’s busy tugging off her pants.

Bastard!

Chance’s door opens, and I almost dart forward. The slight movement from me catches his eye. He walks toward me, and right before he closes the door in my face, he shakes his head, his eyes ice cold.

I grab at my stomach and fold over, gasping.

Kenzo undressed me. He touched my body.

And Chance did nothing to stop it.

I don’t think and just react, running down the tunnel toward the other door leading to outside. I punch in the code and quickly sneak out, sticking the shadows, so I’m not seen.

“...break. This one won’t make it,” Kenzo mutters. “At least the other two have some will to live. This one has zero fight in her. I’m not taking her down.”

I hear them moving away from me in the direction of the nest.

Keeping to the shadows, I slowly follow them at a safe distance.

I’ll take Ruth down if I have to.

“Pass the rope,” Chance says.

I hear Kenzo grunt. “Damn, she’s heavier than Jai.”

I clutch at my stomach and grit my teeth.

“I don’t have time for a sniveling child,” Idris mutters. “I’m going to bed.”

I hear him walk toward me, and I flatten myself against the wall. When the door clicks shut behind him, I sneak forward again, finding cover behind a low wall at the side of the entrance.

Chance and Kenzo must be tying her to the platform. It takes a couple of minutes before the lookout tower shudders. Seconds later, I hear their footsteps.

After they leave, it’s quiet.

Luckily, it’s not cold and rainy like last night. I glance up and see the stars, then wonder what Ruth and Jasper thought of them and if they even know their name.

Ruth’s first cry sends shivers racing over my body. I dart up and run toward the nest. My heart beats heavier with every cry and scream from her.

Suddenly, an arm wraps around me, and a hand covers my mouth. I’m yanked from my feet, and no matter how I struggle, the person carries me into the darkness.

Panic makes my muscles tense, and my insides twist. The smell of crushed leaves, of earth, wafts up my nose.

Chance!

Anger floods my body, and I yank back against his hold.

“Stop! If they catch you here, Idris will punish you,” Chance snaps angrily.

He drags me into the field, past the trees, until I can no longer hear Ruth’s cries. When he lets me go, I stumble forward. The ground is cold and rough

beneath my bare feet.

“I’m going to help her,” I spit the words out.

Chance steps into my space, towering over me. “Your ass will stay right here.”

I take a deep breath, trying to calm down, but then I remember what Kenzo did. “Did you just stand by while Kenzo undressed me?”

“I fucking undressed you,” he admits, not an ounce of guilt in his voice.

“I need to help Ruth. She’s not as strong as me.”

He shakes his head at me. “You’re playing a dangerous game.” His eyes glint in the dark.

“I’m not playing any games!” I shriek. “Why? Why do you do that to people?”

“It’s their way. I didn’t make the rules. I follow them. I also woke up on the nest, and had to lie there for three days before Idris took me down.” He leans closer, his features tense and making him look dangerous. “No one told me the sun wouldn’t burn the skin from my body or that the rain wouldn’t freeze me to death. I found out the hard way.”

Holy crap. That must’ve been terrifying.

Chance is too angry to stop as he continues, “I was taken down by Idris and chased straight to the drill zone. I had to jump those scaffolds wet. Do you know how hard those balls are when you’re fucking wet?”

He lets out a frustrated growl and reaches for me, his fingers wrap around the back of my neck, and I’m yanked so close his breaths fan over my face.

“It’s their way. It makes you strong, so you’ll fucking survive this dangerous world.”

I swallow hard and lift my hands to his chest. I want to wipe his memories clean, but then I know he wouldn’t be the same man I’ve learned to care for. He’d be like every other man in the ecocity.

“Please, take her down,” I plead with him.

Chance turns his head away and stares into the darkness. “No.”

I close my eyes and drop my forehead to his chest. “Please.”

“Look at me,” he demands.

My eyes burn with tears for Ruth as I look into his eyes.

“I can only carry you.” His hands frame my face. “I can only catch you. I can’t fight a war with her on my team. She’s fucking weak, Jai. Every second she demands my attention, it will put you and Raze at risk. It can only be the three of us. I know our team can work.” He presses his forehead to mine. “I can’t claim three women.”

Claim?

What. The. Hell?

“You claimed Raze?” I gasp, yanking free from his hands.

“Not the way I claimed you,” he answers quickly. “Raze is... the rebels tore her apart. She’s broken.”

I frown at him. “Why is she on your team?”

He shakes his head, looking exhausted. “I took her to keep her safe.” He shrugs. “Plus, she’s fucking fast and doesn’t talk my ear off.”

I need to know for sure. “So, you haven’t had sex with her?”

There’s a flash of anger on his face. “What part of she’s broken, didn’t you understand? The rebels fucked her until she almost bled to death.”

Oh, my soul.

The realization hits hard.

Poor Raze.

Chance lets out a deep breath. “Raze is a survivor, and I know she’ll have my back the way I’ve had hers.” He shakes his head at me. “You worry me, though.” His eyes lock with mine. “Can I trust you, Jasper.”

“Of course,” I breathe.

“Then you better fucking start showing me you’ll have my back and not run off to save everyone else.” The expression in his eyes darkens. “And you better start fucking listening to me. Don’t make me punish you.”

My frown deepens. “What kind of punishment?”

“You’ll run the course until you pass out, then I’ll tie you to the nest.”

Okay, no disobeying Chance again.

I nod, still feeling bad for Ruth. “Is the war worth it? All of this brutality?”

“It’s worth our freedom.” Chance reaches for me, wrapping his fingers around the back of my neck. Yanking me against him, his mouth hovers over mine. “It’s worth this.” His lips press firmly to mine.

I grab hold of his shirt, my stomach fluttering and my heart skipping a beat.

It’s a quick kiss, but it still carries a punch. When he lifts his head, I feel his breath on my lips, then he says, “It’s worth the freedom to feel, Jai.”

He lowers one of his hands to the small of my back and pulls me into a hug. I inhale his scent as I wrap my arms around his waist.

“Just do as I say, and everything will be fine,” he murmurs.

“Okay.”

We’re silent for a while, then he points at the sky. “Look there.”

It looks like the sun has been dimmed, and someone took a bite out of it.

“It’s called the moon,” he explains. “It’s shape changes as the sun moves behind it.”

“The moon.” I love the soft yellow glow and stare a while longer before I turn to Chance. “What’s going to happen now?”

“It’s getting crowded here. You’re going to have to focus on just Raze and me – your team.”

“Okay.”

“We’ll train together so we can get used to each other while completing the course.”

He draws me back against his chest, looking toward the nest. His lips brush my forehead, and heat tingles over my skin. “You can’t worry about Ruth and the others. It will get you killed.”

I let his arms protect me from the harshness of his words and the war closing in on us.

Chapter 28

Jai

“Do you want to go back to the ward?” Chance asks.

I don’t look in the direction where Ruth is tied to the nest.

“It’s not cold out here. If you don’t mind, I’d rather not.” I glance up at him. “Can we stay here?”

A smile tugs at his mouth, softening his features. “Of course.”

Chance pulls me down onto the grass, and with my head on his chest, I stare at the moon. He caresses slow circles on my back, and every time he reaches my lower back, tingles rush over my body. His other hand is relaxed on his stomach, close to my arm resting over his chest.

He looks so relaxed, while my emotions are having a full-on tug-and-release war with my stomach.

His hand stills on my back, and I wait a few more seconds before I slowly lift my head. His eyes are closed, and with only the moon and stars as light, he looks like he did when we met, older and tougher, but less scary now that I’ve gotten to know him.

Lifting myself up on one arm, I lean over Chance and press a soft kiss to his lips. As I pull away, he tightens his hold on me, opening his eyes.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” I whisper.

“I wasn’t sleeping.” Bringing his other hand up to my face, he trails his fingers over my cheek and down to my jaw. “By all means, don’t let me stop you.” He smiles, and it makes me want to melt against him.

I lean forward again, but this time I’m nervous I won’t be as good at

kissing as he is.

I brush my lips gently over his a couple of times. His hand slips into my hair as I part my lips, my tongue darting out to taste his bottom lip.

I must be doing something right because Chance's hand tightens in my hair, and he flips me onto my back. His tongue sweeps into my mouth and the night fades away around me.

Chance takes hold of my shirt, and we break the kiss so he can lift the fabric over my head. He drops it beside me, then trails his fingers from my throat down between my breasts.

"Close your eyes and focus on what my touch feels like," he murmurs.

My eyelashes drift closed, and I concentrate on his fingers brushing over my skin. There's a sweet ache in my abdomen, and I can't keep myself from arching my back.

"This is torture," I mutter.

He lets out a dark chuckle. "Wait until I make you beg to come on my cock."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"The pleasure you felt when your body convulsed is called an orgasm or come. So, when I say I'm going to make you come on my cock, I mean I'm going to make you orgasm."

"Oh."

I have an urgent need to feel him everywhere. His body on top of mine. His hard length buried deep inside me. His mouth kissing me senseless. And I definitely want to orgasm again.

The moment is incredibly intense as his breath heats my lips and his fingers trail over the sensitive skin above the junction between my thighs.

I lift my arms and wrap them around his neck, then crush my mouth to his. When I taste him, I moan with satisfaction, but I still want more.

I slip my hands over his back and under his shirt. His muscles tighten beneath my touch, and he pulls back so I can tug the fabric off him.

I stare at the hard planes of his chest, my fingers following the dips and swells of his abs. “Thank you for choosing me.”

His mouth latches onto mine with hunger, and soon I forget where I am.

When I wake up, my body is stiff from sleeping on the ground. I realize I’m outside and smile because my cheek is resting on Chance’s chest.

I keep still for a while, taking in how peaceful everything feels.

Chance stirs, lifting his hand to his face. Figuring we can’t lie like this all day long, I sit up and brush a hand through my hair.

My eyes lock on the horizon, then my lips part in a gasp.

“Chance,” I breathe in absolute wonder as I stare at the pinks and purples tainting the sky. “Look.”

He sits up, then lets out a chuckle. “It’s the sunrise.”

“So pretty,” I breathe, watching as the colors slowly change.

I feel his breath on my ear, then his arm snakes around my waist, his fingers fanning over my side. “Not half as beautiful as you.”

A grin stretches over my face, and I turn to look at him. “Morning.”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “Morning, little one.”

“Until we’re training,” I mutter. “Then I’m *little girl* again.”

“Only if you piss me off.” He stands up and holds his hand out to me. “Come, it’s time to make you hate me again.”

I scrunch my nose as I let him pull me to my feet. Chance wraps his arm around my shoulders, then we walk back toward the ward.

As we approach the nest, it’s quiet. I can’t hear Ruth and hope she’s been taken down.

When we enter the tunnel, Idris steps out from behind the first archway, his arms crossed over his chest. “What do we have here?”

I stop dead in my tracks, all the blood draining from my face. Chance continues walking until he’s standing in front of Idris.

“Did you need something?” His voice is calm, almost void of emotion.

“Imagine my surprise when I couldn’t find either of you.” Idris raises his one eyebrow in mock surprise. “Do you want the newbie?”

“I’m happy with the team I have.”

“You sure?” Idris uncrosses his arms and starts to walk toward me.

My heart beats with every step he takes.

“Are you sure you don’t want to take the other one and rather let me have this one?” He looks right at me as he asks the question. “This one has more guts. I’m going to break the other one within minutes.”

Ruth!

It’s a test to see if I care enough to swap places with Ruth.

“I said I’m happy with my team,” Chance snaps.

“Do you want to save your friend?” Idris asks me.

When I look at Chance, his eyes are hard on me. He shakes his head lightly.

He knows what I’m thinking. I can save Ruth if I trade places with her. Idris will kill her.

Chance’s face hardens, then he shouts at me. “The drill room. Now!” I stare at him for a moment. “Are you deaf?” he hisses at me. “Move it, Jasper, or I swear to God I’ll make you regret the day you were born.”

Crap.

I dart forward and run.

How the hell am I in trouble for caring about Ruth? *This is insane.*

When I reach the drill room, with Chance right behind me, I walk to the

open space and stand bare feet in the middle of the arena while Chance presses the buttons.

I can hardly hear the room roar to life above the thundering of my heart.

I manage to stand my ground when he stalks toward me, then he grabs me by my shoulders and shakes me hard.

“What the hell was that?” he shouts, looking like he’s a second away from killing me. Shoving me backward, he steps away, sucking in deep breaths of air in an attempt to control his anger. “You have a fucking death wish.”

I stand still, my eyes wide and my breaths fast. He’s never been this angry before.

“I’ve really, and I mean really, put myself out there for you.” He shoves both his hands through his hair.”

“I’m-”

“Don’t you fucking dare say you’re sorry!” he snaps. “You don’t get to fix this with a couple of words.” I cringe back. “You wanted to go to Idris?”

I shake my head. “No. I’m just worried about Ruth.”

“She doesn’t fucking matter!” Chance roars.

He walks to the cabinet, and opening it, he takes out a gun. I start shaking my head when he loads it with a clip. Coming back to me, he grabs hold of my hand and shoves the weapon into my palm.

The metal is cold against my skin.

Grabbing a bag of balls, he drags them closer and drops them at my feet.

Tears blur my vision, and I can’t look at him, my fingers trembling around the handle of the gun.

“I’m going to run the course, and I’ll keep fucking running until you either shoot that target three times.” He points to a paper man stuck to the wall beneath the scaffolds. “Or you have to hit me with a ball three times.”

“I ... I don’t know how to shoot a gun,” I stammer over the words as the first tear rolls down my cheek.

The gun is heavy, and I struggle to keep hold of it.

He glares at the gun in my hand, then back at me. “You aim and pull the fucking trigger.” He starts to jog toward the pathway, then yells, “You can always just throw the balls.”

I hear his shoes slapping against the concrete and move away from the bag of balls. There’s no way I’m hurting Chance.

“It’s going to be a long day if you don’t get going,” he shouts.

A loud bang sounds through the dome as he lands on the first scaffold.

I walk closer to the target, and raise the gun. It’s so heavy I have to place my left hand under my elbow to steady my arm.

Fear that I’ll miss and shoot Chance as he moves above the target makes my hands shake. The gun starts to rattle in my line of sight.

It goes silent until I hear his feet hit the floor behind me. I glance over my shoulder at Chance and see him run toward the extension of bars that looks like a horizontal ladder.

He’s doing the whole course, not just the one Kenzo made me do.

He jumps up and reaches the first bar easily. From one end to the other, he pulls his body across, the muscles in his arms straining.

He lets go of the last bar and runs to the grid, not once looking at me.

Knowing he’s behind me, I look at the paper target, lift the gun, and pull the trigger.

The sound is deafening, and the force of the blast shudders up my arm, making me stumble backward. The gun falls from my hand, a sharp ringing in my ears.

When I look, there’s no sign of the bullet anywhere near the paper man.

Crap. Am I even doing it right?

I wait for Chance to run around the arena and jump the scaffolds. Only when I hear him land behind me do I pick up the gun and point at the target once more.

Again, the blast jerks my arm back, and I drop the gun. Looking at the target, a smile stretches over my face. At least, this time, I can see a hole in the wall.

It's better than nothing.

When I pick up the gun again, I hear Chance stop behind me.

Crap, knowing he's watching, makes it twice as hard.

My fingers clamp white around the handle as I aim, and when I pull the trigger, the blast forces me to stumble backward.

Chance's hand presses against my lower back, so I don't lose my balance, then his cheek presses against mine, his arms reaching around me. He takes hold of my right hand and shows me how to hold the gun correctly.

"It doesn't help you try to throw the bullets and hope they hit the target. Keep the barrel level with your eyes." He nudges his foot against my heels. "Stand wider and bend your knees, so your legs can take some of the impact and not just your upper body."

I bend my knees, lowering myself a couple of inches.

"Too much." He doesn't sound as angry anymore.

"Like this?" I ask as I bend them slightly.

"Perfect."

His left hand drops to my stomach, and I feel every one of his fingers press into my muscles.

"Tighten your abdomen and hold. Focus everything here so when the blast comes, you're prepared."

"Okay." I do as he instructs.

"Barrel level with your eyes." His right hand moves beneath mine, and he

nudges the gun a little higher. “When you pull the trigger, you have to prepare yourself for the noise and the force. That way, it doesn’t catch you off guard.”

I swallow and close my eyes for a moment.

“Open them. You need to see where you’re shooting, Jai.” Heat creeps up my neck. It’s an uneasy feeling having him watch everything I do. “When you’re ready,” he whispers.

I’ll never be ready.

I squeeze the trigger, and the loud bang stings my ears. Chance helps me keep a hold of the weapon and stops me from staggering backward. He’s a solid wall behind me.

“Let’s check,” he says.

Walking closer, I see I hit the target in the shoulder. Happy, I swing around and throw my arms around his neck.

“You’re still in shit,” he mutters, not sounding angry at all.

Chapter 29

Jai

Ruth's sobbing fills the tunnel, and it echoes into the drill zone.

As my eyes snap to the entrance, Chance takes the gun from me and walks back to the cabinet. He places the weapon on a shelf, then grabs the bag of balls and throws it to the side.

"Jai!" He snaps urgently. "Come."

I jog to catch up as he walks toward the extender bars on the other side of the arena.

"I said run, newbie!" Idris roars at Ruth.

When I reach Chance, he grabs hold of my hips and lifts me into the air. "Grab hold."

I take hold of the first set of bars, my eyes jumping between Chance and the archway as nerves spin in my stomach.

"Hold on as long as you can," he orders, sounding as tense as I feel.

"Run, run, run!" Idris hollers, then Ruth sprints into the drill zone, her face ashen with fear.

Her whimpers fill the air, and my heart plummets to the ground.

Idris didn't even let her get dressed!

I feel Chance's fingers tap against my thigh. "Hold!"

I tighten my grasp again and then glance down at him.

"Just focus on me. When people are dying around us, you have to keep going. Got it?"

“Yes,” I breathe.

“Using only your hands, like you saw me do earlier, climb across to the other side.” I hear Chance, but my eyes are glued to Ruth. “Jasper! Focus.”

My eyes snap back to Chance’s face, and seeing the look of warning, I nod.

Just do as you’re told. You can’t save Ruth even if your heart breaks for her.

Don’t let Chance down in front of Idris.

The metal is cold as I tighten my fingers around it again. I suck in a deep breath of air, then move my left hand to the next bar. My body swings, and I spread my legs to try and stop the motion.

“Good girl,” Chance murmurs.

I reach for the second bar and hang for a moment. I almost lose my grip, my fingers red and my arms shaking.

Ruth lets out a shrill scream as she slips over the first scaffold. When she falls, I hear the same thudding sound as when I fell.

Get up, Ruth.

Clenching my teeth, I swing to the next bar. My hands are sweaty, and it’s hard to hold on.

“Up. Up. Up!” Idris bellows.

I lose my grip, and my bare feet slap hard against the floor. Giving Chance an apologetic look, I ask, “Again?”

He shoots Idris a glance. I can’t see what he sees, only his reaction to it. His lips are set in a hard line, and he doesn’t look happy.

“This way,” Chance says, and I follow him to the open space in front of the grid. My arms are too tired to climb the grid now.

Please, not the grid.

“Kenzo told me you slapped him.”

“Do you guys discuss every little thing I do?” I ask, unable to keep the frown from forming on my face.

“He said we should work on it,” he says, ignoring my question.

Chance turns to face me, a predatory look tightening his features.

I step away from him. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to attack you.” He starts to move in a circle around me. “How are you going to stop me?”

Stop Chance? Be serious.

I let out a sputter of laughter. “I’m going to run?”

Ruth shrieks behind me, and as I glance over my shoulder, Chance pounces on me. His arm wraps around my neck, ripping a startled squeak from me. My hands come up, my fingers digging into his forearm. He squeezes until I can feel the pressure of his arm on my throat.

“Stop me,” he growls in my ear.

I couldn’t stop Kenzo or Idris. How can I stop Chance?

I gasp for air as he tightens his hold, and my head presses hard against his chest. My feet lift, and I feel for the floor with my toes.

“You’re stronger,” I gasp.

“Really? You’re not even going to try?” he taunts me, and his arm squeezes some more.

Chance won’t hurt me.

I suck for air, and a strangled noise escapes me. It turns into a cough, and I claw at his arm, but it’s useless. My heart pounds in my chest, and I clutch at his arm.

He won’t choke me like Idris did.

He wants me to figure this out.

“Come on, little girl,” he chuckles.

I feel Chance tap his fingers against my side.

Without thinking, I swing my elbow back with all my strength and slam it into his ribs.

When he releases me, I gasp for air.

“Good girl,” Chance praises me.

I’m still catching my breath when he takes hold of my arm and ducks forward. My body flies into the air, and I’m thrown over his shoulder.

My back slams down onto the concrete floor, and I struggle to breathe from the pain flaming up in my side.

I think I broke a rib.

Ruth shrieks, and I couldn’t care less at the moment.

Chance crouches next to me, shaking his head. “We have a lot of work. Get up.”

“I get it,” I mutter as I push myself up into a sitting position. “You can hurt people just as much as Idris can.”

“Get. Up.”

Climbing to my feet, I glare at Chance.

“Use that anger to defend yourself, little girl.”

I dart forward and swing a fist at him, but he easily slaps my arm out of the way.

“If we’re attacked, I’d like to know you can defend yourself. I know you can do better than that.”

Fuck this shit.

I run and jump onto Chance’s back, wrapping my arm around his throat. “Brace yourself,” he chuckles before ducking and sending me flying up and over his head.

I land with a thud on the floor, letting out a groan. As I sit up, I scowl at him. “It doesn’t matter what I do. You’re stronger.”

“Everybody has a weakness.”

I climb to my feet, and only able to think of one, I dart forward. I bring my knee up and manage to slam it against Chance's thigh. Jumping away before he can catch me, I taunt him, "Oops. I missed."

He lets out a bark of laughter. "As long as you know you're massaging my cock later."

Feeling good that I managed to attack him, I wink at him.

"Again," he orders.

I shoot forward, but instead of kneeling him, I try to kick his feet from under him, but he jumps out of my way.

"Eyes, throat, and balls," Chance says. "Those are the weak spots."

Ruth lets out a harrowing scream, and it takes all my strength to keep my eyes on Chance.

His lips curve into a pleased smile then he nods toward the archway. "Let's get out of here."

"Thank Almighty," I mutter as I jog after him.

"Raze," Chance shouts as we jog past the dining hall.

She comes running after us, not even asking why Chance called her.

"No breakfast?" I ask.

"Not while Idris kills the newbie," Chance answers.

Guilt ripples through me, but I force it away.

Only focus on Chance and Raze.

We jog out of the building and alongside the wall around the ward until Chance stops and gestures at it. "Up."

"What?" I ask.

Raze, on the other hand, starts to climb the wall as if she'd done it a million times.

I quickly find grooves I can take hold of and start to climb at a much slower pace. Before I'm halfway, Chance practically sails past me and sits on

top of the wall where Raze is waiting.

Just great.

I focus on where to put my hands and toes, and minutes later, I pull myself onto the wall with a groan. “Geez,” I mutter, and when I’m sitting next to Chance, I add, “Sorry it took so long.”

“This is why you have to practice.”

“I will.”

He points to something in the distance. “The main ward is that way. It’s only a day’s walk.”

“When will we go?”

“When Idris says training is over,” Chance answers.

I nod, staring into the distance and wondering what the future holds.

Will we win the war?

Will I ever be as good as Chance?

“So,” Raze talks for the first time, “Are you a couple?”

“A couple of what?” I ask.

Chance lets out a bark of laughter. “Yes, I’ve claimed Jai.”

“I’m not following,” I mutter.

“A couple is when two people are in a relationship. Almost like being married,” Chance explains.

“Oh.” I swing my legs, then my eyes widen. “Are we getting married?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “At least not anytime soon. The deviants live as a couple, initially, so they can get to know each other before getting married.”

The corner of my mouth lifts. “That sounds so much better.”

“Everything is better here,” Raze murmurs.

“Down.”

Without hesitation, Raze jumps to the ground.

Chance looks at me. “You have to follow my orders the way Raze does. Got it?”

I nod and push myself off the wall, landing on my feet.

“I know I have a lot to learn, but I’ll do my best,” I promise.

Chance smiles at me and pulls me into a hug, his strong arms wrapping around me. “Just focus on me.”

“I will.”

“You did much better today,” he praises me.

I snuggle against his chest, then ask, “Can we have breakfast? I’m starving.”

“Yeah, let's feed you before we get back to training.”

Chapter 30

Jai

I twirl my fork in my bowl of mac and cheese, my eyes glued to the bruises covering almost every inch of Ruth.

She looks like she's been through hell and doesn't even cry anymore. Jasper doesn't look any better, and Aaron is sporting another black eye.

It's been three days of grueling exercise and I still haven't spoken to Kenzo after I slapped him.

"Listen up, everyone," Idris shouts. "Aldric, you too,"

The fork clangs as I drop it on the table, and I let out a sigh.

"Newbie season is over. I don't expect any more surprise visitors." His eyes roam over everyone. "We'll only train for five more days, before we head up to the main ward." Idris walks to Nate and pats him hard on the back. "You'll have some peace and quiet again with all of us gone."

Leaning closer to Skater, who I've found out is on Kenzo's team, I ask, "Why is Aldric staying?"

"Someone has to take care of the animals. This is his home."

"Oh." I nod as I gather my bowl and fork. "See you later."

Walking into the kitchen, I wash my bowl, then glance at Aldric. "Doesn't it get lonely if you're alone here?"

He shakes his head. "Animals are better company than humans."

That's the truth.

Just as I step out of the dining hall, Raze throws her arm around my shoulder. "Time to pack. We're leaving."

“Idris said we’re leaving in five days.”

She shakes her head. “Chance wants to get to the main ward before the other groups.”

There’s a stab of disappointment he sent Raze to tell me.

I get a bag from Raze and shove my three sets of clothes into it. I take the comb and toothbrush as well.

“Ready?” she asks.

“Yeah, but you go ahead. I’ll catch up.”

I want to say goodbye to the animals.

I watch as Raze jogs down the corridor, then walk toward the animal enclosure. The chickens are all over the ground, looking for food. The little chicks run after their moms, constantly making peeping sounds.

“Cute,” I whisper as I rest my forearms on the fence and stare at them.

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

Hearing Kenzo’s voice, I glance over my shoulder. Things have felt weird since I slapped him, but instead of answering the truth, I lie, “No, I’ve just been busy with training.”

He comes to stand next to me. “Chance says you’re doing well.”

“I try my best.”

Kenzo glances down at me. “Are you still pissed off because I pinned you to the floor?”

“No.” I shake my head and meet his eyes. “Chance told me to focus only on him.”

Kenzo nods. “He’s right.”

I’m about to leave when he reaches into his back pocket. He takes out the picture of my mother.

My lips part with a gasp.

How did I forget about it?

“Where did you get that?”

“In your jeans,” he answers. Turning to face me, he gives me a serious look. “One last lesson before you leave.”

“Chance is waiting for me.”

Kenzo steps into the chicken enclosure and picks up a chick. He holds the baby bird in one palm and the photo in the other.

“Life is all about the choices you make.”

I frown at him, lowering my arms from where they were resting on the fence.

“Choose between the picture of your mother and the chick's life.”

I blink at Kenzo, not sure I heard right. “What?”

“Choose. A photo or the bird.”

I let out a burst of incredulous laughter. “No.” Seeing the determined look in his eyes, I shake my head. “Seriously?”

He lifts an eyebrow at me.

I'm so tired of lessons. Walking closer, I stare down at Mom's photo, imprinting her features in my mind.

I'll see her soon.

I take the photo and tear it right down the middle, then throw the pieces at Kenzo's chest. “Put the chick down.”

Without another word, I walk away from him, glad we're leaving today.

“The chick will die anyway, kid.” He calls after me.

“Not by my choice,” I yell. “Besides, I'll find my mother. I don't need a photo to remind me what she looks like.”

“It's only a matter of time before you have to kill someone,” Kenzo shouts.

I shake my head as I walk out of the ward and find Chance and Raze waiting at the side of the building.

I instantly notice the guns tucked behind Raze and Chance's backs in the waistband of their jeans.

Why don't I have one?

"Finally," Raze says as I catch up with them.

Chance doesn't say anything, and we start to walk in the direction he pointed out to me the other day.

We walk in silence for a while before I glance at Chance. "How do you become a leader?"

"You challenge a current leader," he answers, then a grin tugs at his mouth. "Why? Are you interested in the position?"

"No, thank you," I chuckle. "I was just wondering about it."

Raze picks up her pace, saying, "I'm going to go check out the area."

I watch as she jogs off, then I turn my attention back to Chance. "Who did you challenge?"

"Warrick."

"Why?" I pry for more information.

He looks at me and is quiet for a moment before he says, "So I could protect Ethan."

"Oh." I take a deep breath, then try to joke, "Instead, you got me."

"Instead, I got you," he repeats. "When you came through that hole, I wanted to strangle Ethan for bringing you along." He glances in the direction Raze ran. "But you did everything I said even though you were scared. You trusted me without me giving you any reason to."

He looks back at me, and I can see the blue of his eyes clearly today.

"If I have to do it all again, I would. I'd challenge Warrick to protect you."

Warmth spreads through my heart, and I smile at him.

"Time for a lesson."

I let out a groan. "I was just starting to enjoy the walk."

He chuckles, then says, "When we go to war, you can't try to save every wounded person. If someone falls, you step over them and keep going."

I feel the blow deep in my gut. "Why? That's not what Idris taught me."

"I don't care what Idris taught you. Stopping to help the wounded might get you killed." His eyes darken with sadness. "I had to leave Ethan to save you. I would've left you if you were injured and Ethan wasn't."

"It's sad that we have to live this way," I mutter.

"We live in a cruel world, little one." Chance lets out a sigh. "There's no place for friends. You'll only set yourself up for more pain when they die."

He reaches for my hand, his fingers linking with mine.

"Then why bother with me?" I ask. "Or Raze, for that matter?"

Instead of answering me, Chance just shakes his head and focuses his attention on the horizon.

We've been walking for hours. The sun is so hot, I'm sweating through my clothes.

I feel bad about how I left things between Kenzo and me. Even though things turned out the way they did, he was still nice to me. He tried to teach me in his own way.

I also regret not saying goodbye to Ruth, Jasper, Aaron, and the others.

"Look over here." Chance crouches down and pulls some wildgrass out of the ground. "See this bulb here."

I crouch down beside him. "The root?"

“No, this stringy part is the root. The fat part is the bulb and the only part usable of the plant.”

“What do you use it for?” I ask as I touch it. It’s hard, almost like a potato.

“It’s what we make the ointment from. The one we used for your ribs.”

Chance rises to his feet, then continues, “It’s great for inflammation, pain relief, that kinda thing.” He breaks the bulb open, and I catch a whiff of the familiar spicy smell.

“It smells like pepper,” I comment.

We continue walking as Chance explains, “If you roast them, the hot ashes can be used on open wounds.”

“Really?”

He nods. “Eating them will help with stomach problems and fevers. The shit is bitter, though.” He glances around then yanks another one out of the ground. “It has to have this type of flower.”

The flower is tiny, not really what I would call a flower. It looks more like a yellow-reddish kind of thorn, but if he calls it a flower, who am I to differ?

I nod. “Who would’ve thought such an invasive weed could be so useful?”

We shove what we find into my bag, and I can only hope my clothes won’t smell like pepper by the time we reach the main ward.

“Where did you learn about the weed?” I ask once we get going again.

Raze comes running toward us, her arms waving. She’s been missing all day, most probably enjoying being outside and away from people.

“My dad,” Chance answers. “He taught us a lot about surviving in the

wild before he died.”

“Come on, run a bit,” Raze calls out. “The ward is just over the hill.”

Chance waves at her, then takes hold of my arm, holding me back. “The people are different at the main ward. You have to try and see the beauty in the bad.”

“How can there be beauty in bad?” I don’t understand. You’re either good or bad.

He takes my hand and brings it to his cheek. My heart skips a beat when he turns his face into my palm, his lips firm against my skin.

“Is that good or bad?” he asks. He leans down, a smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

“Good,” I answer.

He tilts his head and presses his lips to the skin beneath my ear.

I clench my other hand into a tight fist, not moving a muscle because I don’t want him to stop.

I feel his hand on my waist, and he moves closer until his chest presses against mine.

“Is this bad or good?” he asks again.

A chuckle escapes me. “Good.”

Taking hold of my hand, he presses my palm to his chest, then he presses a tender kiss to my lips. “Don’t you think this is beautiful?”

“Of course,” I whisper, tired of the lesson, just wanting to kiss him. I lift myself the on my tiptoes to take what I want. Satisfaction washes through me when his hands frame my face and he kisses me with so much passion I forget where I am.

My lips are swollen and tingling by the time he lifts his head.

“To the virtuous, this is bad, but to the deviants, it’s good. You and I need to make our own beauty in this world. What both groups don’t understand is

that you need both the good and bad.”

Nodding, I say, “That’s true.”

We start walking again, and when we reach the top of the hill, my lips part in a gasp.

In the distance is a massive version of our ward. It’s buried between two hills, and to the side is the biggest body of water I’ve ever seen. It shines like a mirror.

Pointing at the water, I ask, “What’s that?”

“It’s a dam.” Chance leans closer to me. “See that river.” He shows me where to look, and when I nod, he explains, “That’s where the dam gets its water from. It’s the same river that runs through the ecocity.”

Wow.

My eyes take in the vast land before me, and I realize the world is much bigger than I ever thought.

“Come on.” Chance takes hold of my hand and pulls me down the hill. “It’s time for you to see what we’re fighting for.”

Chance & Jai’s story will be continued in Sweetest Awareness

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