SHE WILL CHOOSE ME.



DESTROY ME

TAHEREH MAFI

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Prologue

I’ve been shot.

And, as it turns out, a bullet wound is even more uncomfortable than I had imagined.

My skin is cold and clammy; I’m making a herculean effort to breathe. Torture is roaring through my right arm and making it difficult for me to focus. I have to squeeze my eyes shut, grit my teeth, and force myself to pay attention.

The chaos is unbearable.

Several people are shouting and too many of them are touching me, and I want their hands surgically removed. They keep shouting “Sir!” as if they’re still waiting for me to give them orders, as if they have no idea what to do without my instruction. The realization exhausts me.

“Sir, can you hear me?” Another cry. But this time, a voice I don’t detest.

“Sir, please, can you hear me—”

“I’ve been shot, Delalieu,” I manage to say. I open my eyes. Look into his watery ones. “I haven’t gone deaf.”

All at once the noise disappears. The soldiers shut up. Delalieu looks at me. Worried.

I sigh.

“Take me back,” I tell him, shifting, just a little. The world tilts and steadies all at once. “Alert the medics and have my bed prepared for our arrival. In the meantime, elevate my arm and continue applying direct pressure to the wound. The bullet has broken or fractured something, and this will require surgery.”

Delalieu says nothing for just a moment too long.

“Good to see you’re all right, sir.” His voice is a nervous, shaky thing. “Good to see you’re all right.”

“That was an order, Lieutenant.”

“Of course,” he says quickly, head bowed. “Certainly, sir. How should I direct the soldiers?”

“Find her,” I tell him. It’s getting harder for me to speak. I take a small breath and run a shaky hand across my forehead. I’m sweating in an excessive way that isn’t lost on me.

“Yes, sir.” He moves to help me up, but I grab his arm.

“One last thing.”

“Sir?”
“Kent,” I say, my voice uneven now. “Make sure they keep him alive for me.”
Delalieu looks up, his eyes wide. “Private Adam Kent, sir?”
“Yes.” I hold his gaze. “I want to deal with him myself.”

One

Delalieu is standing at the foot of my bed, clipboard in hand.

His is my second visit this morning. The first was from my medics, who confirmed that the surgery went well. They said that as long as I stay in bed this week, the new drugs they've given me should accelerate my healing process. They also said that I should be fit to resume daily activities fairly soon, but I'll be required to wear a sling for at least a month.

I told them it was an interesting theory.

"My slacks, Delalieu." I'm sitting up, trying to steady my head against the nausea of these new drugs. My right arm is essentially useless to me now.

I look up. Delalieu is staring at me, unblinking, Adam's apple bobbing in his throat.

I stifle a sigh.

"What is it?" I use my left arm to steady myself against the mattress and force myself upright. It takes every ounce of energy I have left, and I'm clinging to the bed frame. I wave away Delalieu's effort to help; I close my eyes against the pain and dizziness. "Tell me what's happened," I say to him. "There's no point in prolonging bad news."

His voice breaks twice when he says, "Private Adam Kent has escaped, sir."

My eyes flash a bright, dizzying white behind my eyelids.

I take a deep breath and attempt to run my good hand through my hair. It's thick and dry and caked with what must be dirt mixed with my own blood. I'm tempted to punch my remaining fist through the wall.

Instead I take a moment to collect myself.

I'm suddenly too aware of everything in the air around me, the scents and small noises and footsteps outside my door. I hate these rough cotton pants they've put me in. I hate that I'm not wearing socks. I want to shower. I want to change.

I want to put a bullet through Adam Kent's spine.

"Leads," I demand. I move toward my bathroom and wince against the cold air as it hits my skin; I'm still without a shirt. Trying to remain calm. "Tell me you have not brought me this information without leads."

My mind is a warehouse of carefully organized human emotions. I can almost see my brain as it functions, filing thoughts and images away. I lock away the

things that do not serve me. I focus only on what needs to be done: the basic components of survival and the myriad things I must manage throughout the day.

"Of course," Delalieu says. The fear in his voice stings me a little; I dismiss it. "Yes, sir," he says, "we do think we know where he might've gone—and we have reason to believe that Private Kent and the—and the girl—well, with Private Kishimoto having run off as well—we have reason to believe that they are all together, sir."

The drawers in my mind are rattling to break open. Memories. Theories. Whispers and sensations.

I shove them off a cliff.

"Of course you do." I shake my head. Regret it. Close my eyes against the sudden unsteadiness. "Do not give me information I've already deduced for myself," I manage to say. "I want something concrete. Give me a solid lead, Lieutenant, or leave me until you have one."

"A car," he says quickly. "A car was reported stolen, sir, and we were able to track it to an unidentified location, but then it disappeared off the map. It's as if it ceased to exist, sir."

I look up. Give him my full attention.

"We followed the tracks it left in our radar," he says, speaking more calmly now, "and they led us to a stretch of isolated, barren land. But we've scoured the area and found nothing."

"This is something, at least." I rub the back of my neck, fighting the weakness I feel deep in my bones. "I will meet you in the L Room in one hour."

"But sir," he says, eyes trained on my arm, "you'll need assistance—there's a process—you'll require a convalescent aide—"

"You are dismissed."

He hesitates.

Then, "Yes, sir."

Two

I manage to bathe without losing consciousness.

It was more of a sponge bath, but I feel better nonetheless. I have an extremely low threshold for disorder; it offends my very being. I shower regularly. I eat six small meals a day. I dedicate two hours of each day to training and physical exercise. And I detest being barefoot.

Now, I find myself standing naked, hungry, tired, and barefoot in my closet. This is not ideal.

My closet is separated into various sections. Shirts, ties, slacks, blazers, and boots. Socks, gloves, scarves, and coats. Everything is arranged according to color, then shades within each color. Every article of clothing it contains is meticulously chosen and custom made to fit the exact measurements of my body. I don't feel like myself until I'm fully dressed; it's part of who I am and how I begin my day.

Now I haven't the faintest idea how I'm supposed to dress myself.

My hand shakes as I reach for the little blue bottle I was given this morning. I place two of the square-shaped pills on my tongue and allow them to dissolve. I'm not sure what they do; I only know they help replenish the blood I've lost. So I lean against the wall until my head clears and I feel stronger on my feet.

This, such an ordinary task. It wasn't an obstacle I was anticipating.

I put socks on first; a simple pleasure that requires more effort than shooting a man. Briefly, I wonder what the medics must've done with my clothes. *The clothes,* I tell myself, *only the clothes*; I'm focusing only on the clothes from that day. Nothing else. No other details.

Boots. Socks. Slacks. Sweater. My military jacket with its many buttons.

The many buttons she ripped open.

It's a small reminder, but it's enough to spear me.

I try to fight it off but it lingers, and the more I try to ignore the memory, it multiplies into a monster that can no longer be contained. I don't even realize I've fallen against the wall until I feel the cold climbing up my skin; I'm breathing too hard and squeezing my eyes shut against the sudden wash of mortification.

I knew she was terrified, horrified, even, but I never thought those feelings were directed toward me. I'd seen her evolve as we spent time together; she

seemed more comfortable as the weeks passed. Happier. At ease. I allowed myself to believe she'd seen a future for us; that she wanted to be with me and simply thought it impossible.

I'd never suspected that her newfound happiness was a consequence of Kent.

I run my good hand down the length of my face; cover my mouth. The things I said to her.

A tight breath.

The way I touched her.

My jaw tenses.

If it were nothing but sexual attraction I'm sure I would not suffer such unbearable humiliation. But I wanted so much more than her body.

All at once I implore my mind to imagine nothing but walls. Walls. White walls. Blocks of concrete. Empty rooms. Open space.

I build walls until they begin to crumble, and then I force another set to take their place. I build and build and remain unmoving until my mind is clear, uncontaminated, containing nothing but a small white room. A single light hanging from the ceiling.

Clean. Pristine. Undisturbed.

I blink back the flood of disaster pressing against the small world I've built; I swallow hard against the fear creeping up my throat. I push the walls back, making more space in the room until I can finally breathe. Until I'm able to stand.

Sometimes I wish I could step outside of myself for a while. I want to leave this worn body behind, but my chains are too many, my weights too heavy. This life is all that's left of me. And I know I won't be able to meet myself in the mirror for the rest of the day.

I'm suddenly disgusted with myself. I have to get out of this room as soon as possible, or my own thoughts will wage war against me. I make a hasty decision and for the first time, pay little attention to what I'm wearing. I tug on a fresh pair of pants and go without a shirt. I slip my good arm into the sleeve of a blazer and allow the other shoulder to drape over the sling carrying my injured arm. I look ridiculous, exposed like this, but I'll find a solution tomorrow.

First, I have to get out of this room.

Three

Delalieu is the only person here who does not hate me.

He still spends the majority of his time in my presence cowering in fear, but somehow he has no interest in overthrowing my position. I can feel it, though I don't understand it. He's likely the only person in this building who's pleased that I'm not dead.

I hold up a hand to keep away the soldiers who rush forward as I open my door. It takes an intense amount of concentration to keep my fingers from shaking as I wipe the slight sheen of perspiration off my forehead, but I will not allow myself a moment of weakness. These men do not fear for my safety; they only want a closer look at the spectacle I've become. They want a first look at the cracks in my sanity. But I have no wish to be wondered at.

My job is to lead.

I've been shot; it will not be fatal. There are things to be managed; I will manage them.

This wound will be forgotten.

Her name will not be spoken.

My fingers clench and unclench as I make my way toward the L Room. I never before realized just how long these corridors are and just how many soldiers line the halls. There's no reprieve from their curious stares and their disappointment that I did not die. I don't even have to look at them to know what they're thinking. But knowing how they feel only makes me more determined to live a very long life.

I will give no one the satisfaction of my death.

"No."

I wave away the tea and coffee service for the fourth time. "I do not drink caffeine, Delalieu. Why do you always insist on having it served at my meals?"

"I suppose I always hope you will change your mind, sir."

I look up. Delalieu is smiling that strange, shaky smile. And I'm not entirely certain, but I think he's just made a joke.

"Why?" I reach for a slice of bread. "I am perfectly capable of keeping my eyes open. Only an idiot would rely on the energy of a bean or a leaf to stay awake throughout the day."

Delalieu is no longer smiling.

“Yes,” he says. “Certainly, sir.” And stares down at his food. I watch as his fingers push away the coffee cup.

I drop the bread back onto my plate. “My opinions,” I say to him, quietly this time, “should not so easily break your own. Stand by your convictions. Form clear and logical arguments. Even if I disagree.”

“Of course, sir,” he whispers. He says nothing for a few seconds. But then I see him reach for his coffee again.

Delalieu.

He, I think, is my only course for conversation.

He was originally assigned to this sector by my father, and has since been ordered to remain here until he’s no longer able. And though he’s likely forty-five years my senior, he insists on remaining directly below me. I’ve known Delalieu’s face since I was a child; I used to see him around our house, sitting in on the many meetings that took place in the years before The Reestablishment took over.

There was an endless supply of meetings in my house.

My father was always planning things, leading discussions and whispered conversations I was never allowed to be a part of. The men of those meetings are running this world now, so when I look at Delalieu I can’t help but wonder why he never aspired to more. He was a part of this regime from the very beginning, but somehow seems content to die just as he is now. He chooses to remain subservient, even when I give him opportunities to speak up; he refuses to be promoted, even when I offer him higher pay. And while I appreciate his loyalty, his dedication unnerves me. He does not seem to wish for more than what he has.

I should not trust him.

And yet, I do.

But I’ve begun to lose my mind for a lack of companionable conversation. I cannot maintain anything but a cool distance from my soldiers, not only because they all wish to see me dead, but also because I have a responsibility as their leader to make unbiased decisions. I have sentenced myself to a life of solitude, one wherein I have no peers, and no mind but my own to live in. I looked to build myself as a feared leader, and I’ve succeeded; no one will question my authority or posit a contrary opinion. No one will speak to me as anything but the chief commander and regent of Sector 45. Friendship is not a thing I have ever experienced. Not as a child, and not as I am now.

Except.

One month ago, I met the exception to this rule. There *has* been one person

who's ever looked me directly in the eye. The same person who's spoken to me with no filter; someone who's been unafraid to show anger and real, raw feeling in my presence; the only one who's ever dared to challenge me, to raise her voice to me—

I squeeze my eyes shut for what feels like the tenth time today. I unclench my fist around this fork, drop it to the table. My arm has begun to throb again, and I reach for the pills tucked away in my pocket.

"You shouldn't take more than eight of those within a twenty-four-hour period, sir."

I open the cap and toss three more into my mouth. I really wish my hands would stop shaking. My muscles feel too tight, too tense. Stretched thin.

I don't wait for the pills to dissolve. I bite down on them, crunching against their bitterness. There's something about the foul, metallic taste that helps me focus. "Tell me about Kent."

Delalieu knocks over his coffee cup.

The dining aides have left the room at my request; Delalieu receives no assistance as he scrambles to clean up the mess. I sit back in my chair, staring at the wall just behind him, mentally tallying up the minutes I've lost today.

"Leave the coffee."

"I—yes, of course, sorry, sir—"

"Stop."

Delalieu drops the sopping napkins. His hands are frozen in place, hovering over his plate.

"Speak."

I watch his throat move as he swallows, hesitates. "We don't know, sir," he whispers. "The building should've been impossible to find, much less to enter. It'd been bolted and rusted shut. But when we found it," he says, "when we found it, it was . . . the door had been destroyed. And we're not sure how they managed it."

I sit up. "What do you mean, *destroyed*?"

He shakes his head. "It was . . . very odd, sir. The door had been . . . mangled. As if some kind of animal had clawed through it. There was only a gaping, ragged hole in the middle of the frame."

I stand up entirely too fast, gripping the table for support. I'm breathless at the thought of it, at the possibility of what must've happened. And I can't help but allow myself the painful pleasure of recalling her name once more, because I know it must've been her. She must've done something extraordinary, and I wasn't even there to witness it.

"Call for transport," I tell him. "I will meet you in the Quadrant in exactly ten

minutes.”

“Sir?”

I’m already out the door.

Four

Clawed through the middle. Just like an animal. It's true.

To an unsuspecting observer it would be the only explanation, but even then it wouldn't make any sense. No animal alive could claw through this many inches of reinforced steel without amputating its own limbs.

And she is not an animal.

She is a soft, deadly creature. Kind and timid and terrifying. She's completely out of control and has no idea what she's capable of. And even though she hates me, I can't help but be fascinated by her. I'm enchanted by her pretend-innocence; jealous, even, of the power she wields so unwittingly. I want so much to be a part of her world. I want to know what it's like to be in her mind, to feel what she feels. It seems a tremendous weight to carry.

And now she's out there, somewhere, unleashed on society.

What a beautiful disaster.

I run my fingers along the jagged edges of the hole, careful not to cut myself. There's no design to it, no premeditation. Only an anguished fervor so readily apparent in the chaotic ripping-apart of this door. I can't help but wonder if she knew what she was doing when this happened, or if it was just as unexpected to her as it was the day she broke through that concrete wall to get to me.

I have to stifle a smile. I wonder how she must remember that day. Every soldier I've worked with has walked into a simulation knowing exactly what to expect, but I purposely kept those details from her. I thought the experience should be as undiluted as possible; I hoped the spare, realistic elements would lend authenticity to the event. More than anything else, I wanted her to have a chance to explore her true nature—to exercise her strength in a safe space—and given her past, I knew a child would be the perfect trigger. But I never could've anticipated such revolutionary results. Her performance was more than I had hoped for. And though I wanted to discuss the effects with her afterward, by the time I found her she was already planning her escape.

My smile falters.

"Would you like to step inside, sir?" Delalieu's voice jolts me back to the present. "There's not much to see within, but it is interesting to note that the hole is just big enough for someone to easily climb through. It seems clear, sir, what the intent was."

I nod, distracted. My eyes carefully catalog the dimensions of the hole; I try to imagine what it must've been like for her, to be here, trying to get through. I want so much to be able to talk to her about all of this.

My heart twists so suddenly.

I'm reminded, all over again, that she's no longer with me. She does not live on base anymore.

It's my fault she's gone. I allowed myself to believe she was finally doing well and it affected my judgment. I should've been paying closer attention to details. To my soldiers. I lost sight of my purpose and my greater goal; the entire reason I brought her on base. I was stupid. Careless.

But the truth is, I was distracted.

By her.

She was so stubborn and childish when she first arrived, but as the weeks passed she'd seemed to settle; she felt less anxious to me, somehow less afraid. I have to keep reminding myself that her improvements had nothing to do with me.

They had to do with Kent.

A betrayal that somehow seemed impossible. That she would leave me for a robotic, unfeeling idiot like Kent. His thoughts are so empty, so mindless; it's like conversing with a desk lamp. I don't understand what he could've offered her, what she could've possibly seen in him except a tool for escape.

She still hasn't grasped that there's no future for her in the world of common people. She doesn't belong in the company of those who will never understand her. And I have to get her back.

I only realize I've said that last bit out loud when Delalieu speaks.

"We have troops all across the sector searching for her," he says. "And we've alerted the neighboring sectors, just in case the group of them should cross ove —"

"What?" I spin around, my voice a quiet, dangerous thing. "What did you just say?"

Delalieu has turned a sickly shade of white.

"I was unconscious for all of one night! And you've already alerted the other sectors to this *catastrophe*—"

"I thought you would want to find them, sir, and I thought, if they should try to seek refuge elsewhere—"

I take a moment to breathe, to gather my bearings.

"I'm sorry, sir, I thought it would be safest—"

"She is with two of my own soldiers, Lieutenant. Neither one of them are stupid enough to guide her toward another sector. They have neither the

clearance nor the tools to obtain said clearance in order to cross the sector line."

"But—"

"They've been gone one day. They are badly wounded and in need of aid. They're traveling on foot and with a stolen vehicle that is easily trackable. How far," I say to him, frustration breaking into my voice, "could they have gone?"

Delalieu says nothing.

"You have sent out a national alert. You've notified multiple sectors, which means the entire country now knows. Which means the capitals have received word. Which means what?" I curl my only working hand into a fist. "What do you think that means, Lieutenant?"

For a moment, he seems unable to speak.

Then

"Sir," he gasps. "Please forgive me."

Five

Delalieu follows me to my door.

“Gather the troops in the Quadrant tomorrow at ten hundred hours,” I say to him by way of good-bye. “I’ll have to make an announcement about these recent events as well as what’s to come.”

“Yes, sir,” Delalieu says. He doesn’t look up. He hasn’t looked at me since we left the warehouse.

I have other matters to worry about.

Not counting Delalieu’s stupidity, there are an infinite number of things I must take care of right now. I can’t afford any more difficulties, and I cannot be distracted. Not by her. Not by Delalieu. Not by anyone. I have to focus.

This is a terrible time to be wounded.

News of our situation has already hit a national level. Civilians and neighboring sectors are now aware of our minor uprising, and we have to tamp down the rumors as much as possible. I have to somehow defuse the alerts Delalieu has already sent out, and simultaneously suppress any hope of rebellion among the citizens. They’re already too eager to resist, and any spark of controversy will reignite their fervor. Too many have died already, and they still don’t seem to understand that standing against The Reestablishment is asking for more destruction. The civilians *must* be pacified.

I do not want war in my sector.

Now more than ever, I need to be in control of myself and my responsibilities. But my mind is scattered, my body fatigued and wounded. All day I’ve been inches from collapsing, and I don’t know what to do. I have no idea how to fix it. This weakness is foreign to my being.

In just two days, one girl has managed to cripple me.

I’ve taken even more of these disgusting pills, but I feel weaker than I did this morning. I thought I could ignore the pain and inconvenience of a wounded shoulder, but the complication refuses to diminish. I am now wholly dependent on whatever will carry me through these next weeks of frustration. Medicine, medics, hours in bed.

All this for a kiss.

It’s almost unbearable.

“I’ll be in my office for the rest of the day,” I tell Delalieu. “Have my meals

sent to my room, and do not disturb me unless there are any new developments."

"Yes, sir."

"That'll be all, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

I don't even realize how ill I feel until I close the bedroom door behind me. I stagger to the bed and grip the frame to keep from falling over. I'm sweating again and decide to strip the extra coat I wore on our outside excursion. I yank off the blazer I'd carelessly tossed over my injured shoulder this morning and fall backward onto my bed. I'm suddenly freezing. My good hand shakes as I reach for the medic call button.

I need to get the dressing on my shoulder changed. I need to eat something substantial. And more than anything else, I desperately need to take a real shower, which seems altogether impossible.

Someone is standing over me.

I blink several times but can only make out the general outline of their figure. A face keeps coming in and out of focus until I finally give up. My eyes fall closed. My head is pounding. Pain is searing through my bones and up my neck; reds and yellows and blues blur together behind my eyelids. I catch only clips of the conversation around me.

—seems to have developed a fever—

—probably sedate him—

—how many did he take?—

They're going to kill me, I realize. This is the perfect opportunity. I'm weak and unable to fight back, and someone has finally come to kill me. This is it. My moment. It has arrived. And somehow I can't seem to accept it.

I take a swipe at the voices; an inhuman sound escapes my throat. Something hard hits my fist and crashes to the floor. Hands clamp down on my right arm and pin it in place. Something is being tightened around my ankles, my wrist. I'm thrashing against these new restraints and kicking desperately at the air. The blackness seems to be pressing against my eyes, my ears, my throat. I can't breathe, can't hear or see clearly, and the suffocation of the moment is so terrifying that I'm almost certain I've lost my mind.

Something cold and sharp pinches my arm.

I have only a moment to reflect on the pain before it engulfs me.

Six

“Juliette,” I whisper. “What are you doing here?”

I’m half-dressed, getting ready for my day, and it’s too early for visitors. These hours just before the sun rises are my only moments of peace, and no one should be in here. It seems impossible she gained access to my private quarters.

Someone should’ve stopped her.

Instead, she’s standing in my doorway, staring at me. I’ve seen her so many times, but this is different—it’s causing me physical pain to look at her. But somehow I still find myself drawn to her, wanting to be near her.

“I’m so sorry,” she says, and she’s wringing her hands, looking away from me. “I’m so, so sorry.”

I notice what she’s wearing.

It’s a dark-green dress with fitted sleeves; a simple cut made of stretch cotton that clings to the soft curves of her figure. It complements the flecks of green in her eyes in a way I couldn’t have anticipated. It’s one of the many dresses I chose for her. I thought she might enjoy having something nice after being caged as an animal for so long. And I can’t quite explain it, but it gives me a strange sense of pride to see her wearing something I picked out myself.

“I’m sorry,” she says for the third time.

I’m again struck by how impossible it is that she’s here. In my bedroom. Staring at me without my shirt on. Her hair is so long it falls to the middle of her back; I have to clench my fists against this unbidden need to run my hands through it. She’s so beautiful.

I don’t understand why she keeps apologizing.

She shuts the door behind her. She’s walking over to me. My heart is beating quickly now, and it doesn’t feel natural. I do not react this way. I do not lose control. I see her every day and manage to maintain some semblance of dignity, but something is off; this isn’t right.

She’s touching my arm.

She’s running her fingers along the curve of my shoulder, and the brush of her skin against mine is making me want to scream. The pain is excruciating, but I can’t speak; I’m frozen in place.

I want to tell her to stop, to leave, but parts of me are at war. I’m happy to have her close even if it hurts, even if it doesn’t make any sense. But I can’t

seem to reach for her; I can't hold her like I've always wanted to.

She looks at me.

She searches me with those odd, blue-green eyes and I feel guilty so suddenly, without understanding why. But there's something about the way she looks at me that always makes me feel insignificant, as if she's the only one who's realized I'm entirely hollow inside. She's found the cracks in this cast I'm forced to wear every day, and it petrifies me.

That this girl would know exactly how to shatter me.

She rests her hand against my collarbone.

And then she grips my shoulder, digs her fingers into my skin like she's trying to tear off my arm. The agony is so blinding that this time I actually scream. I fall to my knees before her and she wrenches my arm, twisting it backward until I'm heaving from the effort to stay calm, fighting not to lose myself to the pain.

"Juliette," I gasp, "please—"

She runs her free hand through my hair, tugs my head back so I'm forced to meet her eyes. And then she leans into my ear, her lips almost touching my cheek. "Do you love me?" she whispers.

"What?" I breathe. "What are you doing—"

"Do you still love me?" she asks again, her fingers now tracing the shape of my face, the line of my jaw.

"Yes," I tell her. "Yes I still do—"

She smiles.

It's such a sweet, innocent smile that I'm actually shocked when her grip tightens around my arm. She twists my shoulder back until I'm sure it's being ripped from the socket. I'm seeing spots when she says, "It's almost over now."

"What is?" I ask, frantic, trying to look around. "What's almost over—"

"Just a little longer and I'll leave."

"No—no, don't go—where are you going—"

"You'll be all right," she says. "I promise."

"No," I'm gasping, "no—"

All at once she yanks me forward, and I'm awake so quickly I can't breathe.

I blink several times only to realize I've woken up in the middle of the night. Absolute blackness greets me from the corners of my room. My chest is heaving; my arm is bound and pounding, and I realize my pain medication has worn off. There's a small remote wedged under my hand; I press the button to replenish the dosage.

It takes a few moments for my breathing to stabilize. My thoughts slowly retreat from panic.

Juliette.

I can’t control a nightmare, but in my waking moments her name is the only reminder I will permit myself.

The accompanying humiliation will not allow me much more than that.

Seven

“Well, isn’t this embarrassing. My son, tied down like an animal.”

I’m half-convinced I’m having another nightmare. I blink my eyes open slowly; I stare up at the ceiling. I make no sudden movements, but I can feel the very real weight of restraints around my left wrist and both ankles. My injured arm is still bound and slung across my chest. And though the pain in my shoulder is present, it’s dulled to a light hum. I feel stronger. Even my head feels clearer, sharper somehow. But then I taste the tang of something sour and metal in my mouth and wonder how long I’ve been in bed.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t find out?” he asks, amused.

He moves closer to my bed, his footsteps reverberating right through me. “You have Delalieu whimpering apologies for disturbing me, begging my men to blame him for the inconvenience of this unexpected visit. No doubt you terrified the old man for doing his job, when the truth is, I would’ve found out even without his alerts. This,” he says, “is not the kind of mess you can conceal. You’re an idiot for thinking otherwise.”

I feel a light tugging on my legs and realize he’s undoing my restraints. The brush of his skin against mine is abrupt and unexpected, and it triggers something deep and dark within me, enough to make me physically ill. I taste vomit at the back of my throat. It takes all my self-control not to jerk away from him.

“Sit up, son. You should be well enough to function now. You were too stupid to rest when you were supposed to, and now you’ve overcorrected. Three days you’ve been unconscious, and I arrived twenty-seven hours ago. Now get up. This is ridiculous.”

I’m still staring at the ceiling. Hardly breathing.

He changes tactics.

“You know,” he says carefully, “I’ve actually heard an interesting story about you.” He sits down on the edge of my bed; the mattress creaks and groans under his weight. “Would you like to hear it?”

My left hand has begun to tremble. I clench it fast against the bedsheets.

“Private 45B-76423. Fletcher, Seamus.” He pauses. “Does that name sound familiar?”

I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Imagine my surprise,” he says, “when I heard that my son had finally done something right. That he’d finally taken initiative and dispensed with a traitorous soldier who’d been stealing from our storage compounds. I heard you shot him right in the forehead.” A laugh. “I congratulated myself—told myself you’d finally come into your own, that you’d finally learned how to lead properly. I was almost proud.

“That’s why it came as an even greater shock to me to hear Fletcher’s family was still alive.” He claps his hands together. “Shocking, of course, because you, of all people, should know the rules. Traitors come from a family of traitors, and one betrayal means death to them all.”

He rests his hand on my chest.

I’m building walls in my mind again. White walls. Blocks of concrete. Empty rooms and open space.

Nothing exists inside of me. Nothing stays.

“It’s funny,” he continues, thoughtful now, “because I told myself I’d wait to discuss this with you. But somehow, *this* moment seems so right, doesn’t it?” I can hear him smile. “To tell you just how tremendously . . . *disappointed* I am. Though I can’t say I’m surprised.” He sighs. “In a single month you’ve lost two soldiers, couldn’t contain a clinically insane girl, upended an entire sector, and encouraged rebellion among the citizens. And somehow, I’m not surprised at all.”

His hand shifts; lingers at my collarbone.

White walls, I think.

Blocks of concrete.

Empty rooms. Open space.

Nothing exists inside of me. Nothing stays.

“But what’s worse than all this,” he says, “is not that you’ve managed to humiliate me by disrupting the order I’d finally managed to establish. It’s not even that you somehow got yourself shot in the process. But that you would show sympathy to the family of a *traitor*,” he says, laughing, his voice a happy, cheerful thing. “This is unforgivable.”

My eyes are open now, blinking up at the fluorescent lights above my head, focused on the white of the bulbs blurring my vision. I will not move. I will not speak.

His hand closes around my throat.

The movement is so rough and violent I’m almost relieved. Some part of me always hopes he’ll go through with it; that maybe this time he’ll actually let me die. But he never does. It never lasts.

Torture is not torture when there’s any hope of relief.

He lets go all too soon and gets exactly what he wants. I jerk upward, coughing and wheezing and finally making a sound that acknowledges his existence in this room. My whole body is shaking now, my muscles in shock from the assault and from remaining still for so long. My skin is cold sweat; my breaths are labored and painful.

"You're very lucky," he says, his words too soft. He's up now, no longer inches from my face. "So lucky I was here to make things right. So lucky I had time to correct the mistake."

I freeze.

The room spins.

"I was able to track down his wife," he says. "Fletcher's wife and their three children. I hear they sent their regards." A pause. "Well, this was before I had them killed, so I suppose it doesn't really matter now, but my men told me they said hello. It seems she remembered you," he says, laughing softly. "The wife. She said you went to visit them before all this . . . unpleasantness occurred. You were always visiting the compounds, she said. Asking after the civilians."

I whisper the only two words I can manage.

"Get out."

"This is my boy!" he says, waving a hand in my direction. "A meek, pathetic fool. Some days I'm so disgusted by you I don't know whether to shoot you myself. And then I realize you'd probably like that, wouldn't you? To be able to blame me for your downfall? And I think no, best to let him die of his own stupidity."

I stare blankly ahead, fingers flexing against the mattress.

"Now tell me," he says, "what happened to your arm? Delalieu seemed as clueless as the others."

I say nothing.

"Too ashamed to admit you were shot by one of your own soldiers, then?"

I close my eyes.

"And what about the girl?" he asks. "How did she escape? Ran off with one of your men, didn't she?"

I grip the bedsheet so hard my fist starts shaking.

"Tell me," he says, leaning into my ear. "How would you deal with a traitor like that? Are you going to go visit his family, too? Make nice with his wife?"

And I don't mean to say it out loud, but I can't stop myself in time. "I'm going to kill him."

He laughs out loud so suddenly it's almost a howl. He claps a hand on my head and musses my hair with the same fingers he just closed around my throat. "Much better," he says. "So much better. Now get up. We have work to do."

And I think yes, I wouldn’t mind doing the kind of work that would remove Adam Kent from this world.

A traitor like him does not deserve to live.

Eight

I’m in the shower for so long I actually lose track of time.

This has never happened before.

Everything is off, unbalanced. I’m second-guessing my decisions, doubting everything I thought I didn’t believe in, and for the first time in my life, I am genuinely, bone-achingly tired.

My father is here.

We are sleeping under the same godforsaken roof; a thing I’d hoped never to experience again. But he’s here, staying on base in his own private quarters until he feels confident enough to leave. Which means he’ll be fixing our problems by wreaking havoc on Sector 45. Which means I will be reduced to becoming his puppet and messenger, because my father never shows his face to anyone except those he’s about to kill.

He is the supreme commander of The Reestablishment, and prefers to dictate anonymously. He travels everywhere with the same select group of soldiers, communicates only through his men, and only in extremely rare circumstances does he ever leave the capital.

News of his arrival at Sector 45 has probably spread around base by now, and has likely terrified my soldiers. Because his presence, real or imagined, has only ever signified one thing: torture.

It’s been so long since I’ve felt like a coward.

But this, this is bliss. This protracted moment—this illusion—of strength. Being out of bed and able to bathe: it’s a small victory. The medics wrapped my injured arm in some kind of impermeable plastic for the shower, and I’m finally well enough to stand on my own. My nausea has settled, the dizziness is gone. I should finally be able to think clearly, and yet, my choices still seem so muddled.

I’ve forced myself not to think about her, but I’m beginning to realize I’m still not strong enough; not just yet, and especially not while I’m still actively searching for her. It’s become a physical impossibility.

Today, I need to go back to her room.

I need to search her things for any clues that might help me find her. Kent’s and Kishimoto’s bunks and lockers have already been cleared out; nothing incriminating was found. But I’d ordered my men to leave her room—*Juliette’s* room—exactly as it was. No one but myself is allowed to reenter that space. Not

until I’ve had the first look.

And this, according to my father, is my first task.

“That’ll be all, Delalieu. I’ll let you know if I require assistance.”

He’s been following me around even more than usual lately. Apparently he came to check on me when I didn’t show for the assembly I’d called two days ago, and had the pleasure of finding me completely delirious and half out of my mind. He’s somehow managed to lay the blame for all this on himself.

If he were anyone else, I would’ve had him demoted.

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry, sir. And please forgive me—I never meant to cause additional problems—”

“You are in no danger from me, Lieutenant.”

“I’m so sorry, sir,” he whispers. His shoulders fall. His head bows.

His apologies are making me uncomfortable. “Have the troops reassemble at thirteen hundred hours. I still need to address them about these recent developments.”

“Yes, sir,” he says. He nods once, without looking up.

“You are dismissed.”

“Sir.” He drops his salute and disappears.

I’m left alone in front of her door.

Funny, how accustomed I’d become to visiting her here; how it gave me a strange sense of comfort to know that she and I were living in the same building. Her presence on base changed everything for me; the weeks she spent here became the first I ever enjoyed living in these quarters. I looked forward to her temper. Her tantrums. Her ridiculous arguments. I wanted her to yell at me; I would’ve congratulated her had she ever slapped me in the face. I was always pushing her, toying with her emotions. I wanted to meet the real girl trapped behind the fear. I wanted her to finally break free of her own carefully constructed restraints.

Because while she might be able to feign timidity within the confines of isolation, out here—amid chaos, destruction—I knew she’d become something entirely different. I was just waiting. Every day, patiently waiting for her to understand the breadth of her own potential; never realizing I’d entrusted her to the one soldier who might take her away from me.

I should shoot myself for it.

Instead, I open the door.

The panel slides shut behind me as I cross the threshold. I find myself alone, standing here, in the last place she touched. The bed is messy and unmade, the

doors to her armoire hanging open, the broken window temporarily taped shut. There's a sinking, nervous pain in my stomach that I choose to ignore.

Focus.

I step into the bathroom and examine the toiletries, the cabinets, even the inside of the shower.

Nothing.

I walk back over to the bed and run my hand over the rumpled comforter, the lumpy pillows. I allow myself a moment to appreciate the evidence that she was once here, and then I strip the bed. Sheets, pillowcases, comforter, and duvet; all tossed to the floor. I scrutinize every inch of the pillows, the mattress, and the bed frame, and again find nothing.

The side table. Nothing.

Under the bed. Nothing.

The light fixtures, the wallpaper, each individual piece of clothing in her armoire. Nothing.

It's only as I'm making my way toward the door that something catches my foot. I look down. There, caught just under my boot, is a thick, faded rectangle. A small, unassuming notebook that could fit in the palm of my hand.

And I'm so stunned that for a moment I can't even move.

Nine

How could I have forgotten?

This notebook was in her pocket the day she was making her escape. I'd found it just before Kent put a gun to my head, and at some point in the chaos, I must've dropped it. And I realize I should've been looking for this all along.

I bend down to pick it up, carefully shaking out bits and pieces of glass from the pages. My hand is unsteady, my heart pounding in my ears. I have no idea what this might contain. Pictures. Notes. Scrambled, half-formed thoughts.

It could be anything.

I flip the notebook over in my hands, my fingers memorizing its rough, worn surface. The cover is a dull shade of brown, but I can't tell if it's been stained by dirt and age, or if it was always this color. I wonder how long she's had it. Where she might've acquired it.

I stumble backward, the backs of my legs hitting her bed. My knees buckle, and I catch myself on the edge of the mattress. I take in a shaky breath and close my eyes.

I'd seen footage from her time in the asylum, but it was essentially useless. The lighting was always too dim; the small window did little to illuminate the dark corners of her room. She was often an indistinguishable form; a dark shadow one might never even notice. Our cameras were only good at detecting movement—and maybe a lucky moment when the sun hit her at the right angle—but she rarely moved. Most of her time was spent sitting very, very still, on her bed or in a dark corner. She almost never spoke. And when she did, it was never in words. She spoke only in numbers.

Counting.

There was something so unreal about her, sitting there. I couldn't even see her face; couldn't discern the outline of her figure. Even then she fascinated me. That she could seem so calm, so still. She would sit in one place for hours at a time, unmoving, and I always wondered where she was in her mind, what she might be thinking, how she could possibly exist in that solitary world. More than anything else, I wanted to hear her speak.

I was desperate to hear her voice.

I'd always expected her to speak in a language I could understand. I thought she'd start with something simple. Maybe something unintelligible. But the first

time we ever caught her talking on camera, I couldn't look away. I sat there, transfixed, nerves stretched thin, as she touched one hand to the wall and counted.

4,572.

I watched her count. To 4,572.

It took five hours.

Only afterward did I realize she was counting her breaths.

I couldn't stop thinking about her after that. I was distracted long before she arrived on base, constantly wondering what she might be doing and whether she'd speak again. If she wasn't counting out loud, was she counting in her head? Did she ever think in letters? Complete sentences? Was she angry? Sad? Why did she seem so serene for a girl I'd been told was a volatile, deranged animal? Was it a trick?

I'd seen every piece of paper documenting the critical moments in her life. I'd read every detail in her medical records and police reports; I'd sorted through school complaints, doctors' notes, her official sentencing by The Reestablishment, and even the asylum questionnaire submitted by her parents. I knew she'd been pulled out of school at fourteen. I knew she'd been through severe testing and was forced to take various—and dangerous—experimental drugs, and had to undergo electroshock therapy. In two years she'd been in and out of nine different juvenile detention centers and had been examined by more than fifty different doctors. All of them described her as a monster. They called her a danger to society and a threat to humanity. A girl who would ruin our world and had already begun by murdering a small child. At sixteen, her parents suggested she be locked away. And so she was.

None of it made sense to me.

A girl cast off by society, by her own family—she had to contain so much feeling. Rage. Depression. Resentment. Where was it?

She was nothing like the other inmates at the asylum—the ones who were truly disturbed. Some would spend hours hurling themselves at the wall, breaking bones and fracturing skulls. Others were so deranged they would claw at their own skin until they drew blood, literally ripping themselves to pieces. Some had entire conversations with themselves out loud, laughing and singing and arguing. Most would tear their clothes off, content to sleep and stand naked in their own filth. She was the only one who showered regularly or even washed her clothes. She would take her meals calmly, always finishing whatever she was given. And she spent most of her time staring out the window.

She'd been locked up for almost a year and had not lost her sense of humanity. I wanted to know how she could suppress so much; how she'd achieved such

outward calm. I'd asked for profiles on the other prisoners because I wanted comparisons. I wanted to know if her behavior was normal.

It wasn't.

I watched the unassuming outline of this girl I could not see and did not know, and I felt an unbelievable amount of respect for her. I admired her, envied her composure—her steadiness in the face of all she'd been forced to endure. I don't know that I understood what it was, exactly, I was feeling at the time, but I knew I wanted her all to myself.

I wanted to know her secrets.

And then one day, she stood up in her cell and walked over to the window. It was early morning, just as the sun was rising; I caught a glimpse of her face for the very first time. She pressed her palm to the window and whispered two words, just once.

Forgive me.

I hit rewind too many times.

I could never tell anyone I'd developed a newfound fascination with her. I had to effect a pretense, an outward indifference—an arrogance—toward her. She was to be our weapon and nothing more, just an innovative instrument of torture.

A detail I cared very little about.

My research had led me to her files by pure accident. Coincidence. I did not seek her out in search of a weapon; I never had. Far before I'd ever seen her on film, and far, far before I ever spoke a word to her, I had been researching something else. For something else.

My motives were my own.

Utilizing her as a weapon was a story I fed to my father; I needed an excuse to have access to her, to gain the necessary clearance to study her files. It was a charade I was forced to maintain in front of my soldiers and the hundreds of cameras that monitor my existence. I did not bring her on base to exploit her ability. And I certainly did not expect to fall for her in the process.

But these truths and my real motivations will be buried with me.

I fall hard onto the bed. Clap a hand over my forehead, drag it down the length of my face. I never would've sent Kent to stay with her if I could've taken the time to go myself. Every move I made was a mistake. Every calculated effort was a failure. I only wanted to watch her interact with someone. I wondered if she'd seem different; if she'd shatter the expectations I'd already formed in my mind by simply having a normal conversation. But watching her talk to someone else made me crazy. I was jealous. Ridiculous. I wanted her to know *me*; I wanted her to talk to *me*. And I felt it then: this strange, inexplicable sense that she might be the only person in the world I could really care about.

I force myself to sit up. I hazard a glance at the notebook still clutched in my hand.

I lost her.

She hates me.

She hates me and I repulse her and I might never see her again, and it is entirely my own doing. This notebook might be all I have left of her. My hand is still hovering over the cover, tempting me to open it and find her again, even if it's only for a short while, even if it's only on paper. But part of me is terrified. This might not end well. This might not be anything I want to see. And so help me, if this turns out to be some kind of diary concerning her thoughts and feelings about Kent, I might just throw myself out the window.

I pound my fist against my forehead. Take a long, steadying breath.

Finally, I flip it open. My eyes fall to the first page.

And only then do I begin to understand the weight of what I've found.

I keep thinking I need to stay calm, that it's all in my head, that everything is going to be fine and someone is going to open the door now, someone is going to let me out of here. I keep thinking it's going to happen. I keep thinking it has to happen, because things like this don't just happen. This doesn't happen. People aren't forgotten like this. Not abandoned like this.

This doesn't just happen.

My face is caked with blood from when they threw me on the ground, and my hands are still shaking even as I write this. This pen is my only outlet, my only voice, because I have no one else to speak to, no mind but my own to drown in and all the lifeboats are taken and all the life preservers are broken and I don't know how to swim I can't swim I can't swim and it's getting so hard. It's getting so hard. It's like there are a million screams caught inside of my chest but I have to keep them all in because what's the point of screaming if you'll never be heard and no one will ever hear me in here. No one will ever hear me again.

I've learned to stare at things.

The walls. My hands. The cracks in the walls. The lines on my fingers. The shades of gray in the concrete. The shape of my fingernails. I pick one thing and stare at it for what must be hours. I keep time in my head by counting the seconds as they pass. I keep days in my head by writing them down. Today is day two. Today is the second day. Today is a day.

Today.

It's so cold. It's so cold it's so cold.

Please please please

I slam the cover shut.

I'm shaking again, and this time I can't stop it. This time the shaking is coming from deep within my core, from a profound realization of what I'm holding in my hands. This journal is not from her time spent here. It has nothing to do with me, or Kent, or anyone at all. This journal is a documentation of her days spent in the asylum.

And suddenly this small, battered notebook means more to me than anything I've ever owned.

Ten

I don’t even know how I manage to get myself back to my own rooms so quickly. All I know is that I’ve locked the door to my bedroom, unlocked the door to my office only to lock myself inside, and now I’m sitting here, at my desk, stacks of papers and confidential material shoved out of the way, staring at the tattered cover of something I’m very nearly terrified to read. There’s something so personal about this journal; it looks as if it’s been bound together by the loneliest feelings, the most vulnerable moments of one person’s life. She wrote whatever lies within these pages during some of the darkest hours of her seventeen years, and I’m about to get exactly what I’ve always wanted.

A look into her mind.

And though the anticipation is killing me, I’m also acutely aware of just how badly this might backfire. I’m suddenly not sure I even want to know. And yet I do. I definitely do.

So I open the book, and turn to the next page. Day three.

I started screaming today.

And those four words hit me harder than the worst kind of physical pain.

My chest is rising and falling, my breaths coming in too hard. I have to force myself to keep reading.

I soon realize there’s no order to the pages. She seems to have started back at the beginning after she came to the end of the notebook and realized she’d run out of space. She’s written in the margins, over other paragraphs, in tiny and nearly illegible fonts. There are numbers scrawled all over everything, sometimes the same number repeating over and over and over again. Sometimes the same word has been written and rewritten, circled and underlined. And nearly every page has sentences and paragraphs almost entirely crossed out.

It’s complete chaos.

My heart constricts at this realization, at this proof of what she must’ve experienced. I’d hypothesized about what she might’ve suffered in all that time, locked up in such dark, horrifying conditions. But seeing it for myself—I wish I weren’t right.

And now, even as I try to read in chronological order, I find I’m unable to

keep up with the method she's used to number everything; the system she created on these pages is something only she'd be able to decipher. I can only flip through the book and seek out the bits that are most coherently written.

My eyes freeze on a particular passage.

It's a strange thing, to never know peace. To know that no matter where you go, there is no sanctuary. That the threat of pain is always a whisper away. I'm not safe locked into these 4 walls, I was never safe leaving my house, and I couldn't even feel safe in the 14 years I lived at home. The asylum kills people every day, the world has already been taught to fear me, and my home is the same place where my father locked me in my room every night and my mother screamed at me for being the abomination she was forced to raise.

She always said it was my face.

There was something about my face, she said, that she couldn't stand. Something about my eyes, the way I looked at her, the fact that I even existed. She'd always tell me to stop looking at her. She'd always scream it. Like I might attack her. Stop looking at me, she'd scream. You just stop looking at me, she'd scream.

She put my hand in the fire once.

Just to see if it would burn, she said. Just to check if it was a regular hand, she said.

I was 6 years old then.

I remember because it was my birthday.

I knock the notebook to the floor.

I'm upright in an instant, trying to steady my heart. I run a hand through my hair, my fingers caught at the roots. These words are too close to me, too familiar. The story of a child abused by its parents. Locked away and discarded. It's too close to my mind.

I've never read anything like this before. I've never read anything that could speak directly to my bones. And I know I shouldn't. I know, somehow, that it won't help, that it won't teach me anything, that it won't give me clues about where she might've gone. I already know that reading this will only make me crazy.

But I can't stop myself from reaching for her journal once more.

I flip it open again.

~~*Am I insane yet?*~~

~~*Has it happened yet?*~~
~~*How will I ever know?*~~

My intercom screeches so suddenly that I trip over my own chair and have to catch myself on the wall behind my desk. My hands won't stop shaking; my forehead is beaded with sweat. My bandaged arm has begun to burn, and my legs are suddenly too weak to stand on. I have to focus all my energy on sounding normal as I accept the incoming message.

"What?" I demand.

"Sir, I only wondered, if you were still—well, the assembly, sir, unless of course I got the time wrong, I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have bothered you—"

"Oh for the love of God, Delalieu." I try to shake off the tremble in my voice. "Stop apologizing. I'm on my way."

"Yes, sir," he says. "Thank you, sir."

I disconnect the line.

And then I grab the notebook, tuck it in my pocket, and head out the door.

Eleven

I’m standing at the edge of the courtyard above the Quadrant, looking out at the thousands of faces staring back at me. These are my soldiers. Standing single-file line in their assembly uniforms. Black shirts, black pants, black boots.

No guns.

Left fists pressed against their hearts.

I make an effort to focus on—and care about—the task at hand; but somehow I can’t help but be hyperaware of the notebook tucked away in my pocket, the shape of it pressing against my leg and torturing me with its secrets.

I am not myself.

My thoughts are tangled in words that are not my own. I have to take a sharp breath to clear my head; I clench and unclench my fist.

“Sector 45,” I say, speaking directly into the square of microphonic mesh.

They shift at once, dropping their left hands and instead placing their right fists on their chests.

“We have a number of important things to discuss today,” I tell them, “the first of which is readily apparent.” I gesture to my arm. Study their carefully crafted emotionless faces.

Their traitorous thoughts are so obvious.

They think of me as little more than a deranged child. They do not respect me; they are not loyal to me. They are disappointed that I stand before them; angry; disgusted, even, that I am not dead of this wound.

But they do fear me.

And that is all I require.

“I was injured,” I say, “while in pursuit of two of our defecting soldiers. Private Adam Kent and Private Kenji Kishimoto collaborated their escape in an effort to abduct Juliette Ferrars, our newest transfer and critical asset to Sector 45. They have been charged with the crime of unlawfully seizing and detaining Ms. Ferrars against her will. But, and most importantly, they have been rightly convicted of treason against The Reestablishment. When found, they will be executed on sight.”

Terror, I realize, is one of the easiest feelings to read. Even on a soldier’s stoic face.

“Second,” I say, more slowly this time, “in an effort to expedite the process of

stabilizing Sector 45, its citizens, and the ensuing chaos resulting from these recent disruptions, the supreme commander of The Reestablishment has joined us on base. He arrived," I tell them, "not thirty-six hours ago."

Some men have dropped their fists. Forgotten themselves. Their eyes are wide.

Petrified.

"You will welcome him," I say.

They drop to their knees.

It's strange, wielding this kind of power. I wonder if my father is proud of what he's created. That I'm able to bring thousands of grown men to their knees with only a few words; with only the sound of his title. It's a horrifying, addicting kind of thing.

I count five beats in my head.

"Rise."

They do. And then they march.

Five steps backward, forward, standing in place. They raise their left arms, curl their fingers into fists, and fall on one knee. This time, I do not let them up.

"Prepare yourselves, gentlemen," I say to them. "We will not rest until Kent and Kishimoto are found and Ms. Ferrars has returned to base. I will confer with the supreme commander in these next twenty-four hours; our newest mission will soon be clearly defined. In the interim you are to understand two things: first, that we will defuse the tension among the citizens and take pains to remind them of their promises to our new world. And second, be certain that we will find Privates Kent and Kishimoto." I stop. Look around, focusing on their faces. "Let their fates serve as an example to you. We do not welcome traitors in The Reestablishment. And we do not forgive."

Twelve

One of my father’s men is waiting for me outside my door.

I glance in his direction, but not long enough to discern his features. “State your business, soldier.”

“Sir,” he says, “I’ve been instructed to inform you that the supreme commander requests your presence in his quarters for dinner at twenty-hundred hours.”

“Consider your message received.” I move to unlock my door.

He steps forward, blocking my path.

I turn to face him.

He’s standing less than a foot away from me: an implicit act of disrespect; a level of comfort even Delalieu does not allow himself. But unlike my men, the sycophants who surround my father consider themselves lucky. Being a member of the supreme commander’s elite guard is considered a privilege and an honor. They answer to no one but him.

And right now, this soldier is trying to prove he outranks me.

He’s jealous of me. He thinks I’m unworthy of being the son of the supreme commander of The Reestablishment. It’s practically written on his face.

I have to stifle my impulse to laugh as I take in his cold gray eyes and the black pit that is his soul. He wears his sleeves rolled up above his elbows, his military tattoos clearly defined and on display. The concentric black bands of ink around his forearms are accented in red, green, and blue, the only sign on his person to indicate that he is a soldier highly elevated in rank. It’s a sick branding ritual I’ve always refused to be a part of.

The soldier is still staring at me.

I incline my head in his direction, raise my eyebrows.

“I am required,” he says, “to wait for verbal acceptance of this invitation.”

I take a moment to consider my choices, which are none.

I, like the rest of the puppets in this world, am entirely subservient to my father’s will. It’s a truth I’m forced to contend with every day: that I’ve never been able to stand up to the man who has his fist clenched around my spine.

It makes me hate myself.

I meet the soldier’s eyes again and wonder, for a fleeting moment, if he has a name, before I realize I couldn’t possibly care less. “Consider it accepted.”

“Yes, s—”

“And next time, soldier, you will not step within five feet of me without first asking permission.”

He blinks, stunned. “Sir, I—”

“You are confused.” I cut him off. “You assume your work with the supreme commander grants you immunity from rules that govern the lives of other soldiers. Here, you are mistaken.”

His jaw tenses.

“Never forget,” I say, quietly now, “that if I wanted your job, I could have it. And never forget that the man you so eagerly serve is the same man who taught me how to fire a gun when I was nine years old.”

His nostrils flare. He stares straight ahead.

“Deliver your message, soldier. And then memorize this one: do not ever speak to me again.”

His eyes are focused on a point directly behind me now, his shoulders rigid.

I wait.

His jaw is still tight. He slowly lifts his hand in salute.

“You are dismissed,” I say.

I lock my bedroom door behind me and lean against it. I need just a moment. I reach for the bottle I left on my nightstand and shake out two of the square pills; I toss them into my mouth, closing my eyes as they dissolve. The darkness behind my eyelids is a welcome relief.

Until the memory of her face forces itself into my consciousness.

I sit down on my bed and drop my head into my hand. I shouldn’t be thinking about her right now. I have hours of paperwork to sort through and the additional stress of my father’s presence to contend with. Dinner with him should be a spectacle. A soul-crushing spectacle.

I squeeze my eyes shut tighter and make a weak effort to build the walls that would surely clear my mind. But this time, they don’t work. Her face keeps cropping up, her journal taunting me from its place in my pocket. And I begin to realize that some small part of me doesn’t want to wish away the thoughts of her. Some part of me enjoys the torture.

This girl is destroying me.

A girl who has spent the last year in an insane asylum. A girl who would try to shoot me dead for kissing her. A girl who ran off with another man just to get away from me.

Of course this is the girl I would fall for.

I close a hand over my mouth.

I am losing my mind.

I tug off my boots. Pull myself up onto my bed and allow my head to hit the pillows behind me.

She slept here, I think. She slept in my bed. She woke up in my bed. She was here and I let her get away.

I failed.

I lost her.

I don't even realize I've tugged her notebook out of my pocket until I'm holding it in front of my face. Staring at it. Studying the faded cover in an attempt to understand where she might've acquired such a thing. She must've stolen it from somewhere, though I can't imagine where.

There are so many things I want to ask her. So many things I wish I could say to her.

Instead, I open her journal, and read.

> *Sometimes I close my eyes and paint these walls a different color.*
>
> *I imagine I'm wearing warm socks and sitting by a fire. I imagine someone's given me a book to read, a story to take me away from the torture of my own mind. I want to be someone else somewhere else with something else to fill my mind. I want to run, to feel the wind tug at my hair. I want to pretend that this is just a story within a story. That this cell is just a scene, that these hands don't belong to me, that this window leads to somewhere beautiful if only I could break it. I pretend this pillow is clean, I pretend this bed is soft. I pretend and pretend and pretend until the world becomes so breathtaking behind my eyelids that I can no longer contain it. But then my eyes fly open and I'm caught around the throat by a pair of hands that won't stop suffocating suffocating suffocating*
>
> *My thoughts, I think, will soon be sound.*
>
> *My mind, I hope, will soon be found.*

The journal drops out of my hand and onto my chest. I run my only free hand across my face, through my hair. I rub the back of my neck and haul myself up so fast that my head hits the headboard and I'm actually grateful. I take a moment to appreciate the pain.

And then I pick up the book.

And turn the page.

> *I wonder what they're thinking. My parents. I wonder where they are. I*

wonder if they're okay now, if they're happy now, ~~if they finally got what they wanted~~. I wonder if my mother will ever have another child. I wonder if someone will ever be kind enough to kill me, and I wonder if hell is better than here. I wonder what my face looks like now. I wonder if I'll ever breathe fresh air again.

I wonder about so many things.

Sometimes I'll stay awake for days just counting everything I can find. I count the walls, the cracks in the walls, my fingers and toes. I count the springs in the bed, the threads in the blanket, the steps it takes to cross the room and back. I count my teeth and the individual hairs on my head and the number of seconds I can hold my breath.

But sometimes I get so tired that I forget I'm not allowed to wish for things anymore, and I find myself wishing for the one thing I've always wanted. The only thing I've always dreamt about.

I wish all the time for a friend.

I dream about it. I imagine what it would be like. To smile and be smiled upon. To have a person to confide in; someone who wouldn't throw things at me or stick my hands in the fire or beat me for being born. Someone who would hear that I'd been thrown away and would try to find me, who would never be afraid of me.

Someone who'd know I'd never try to hurt them.

I fold myself into a corner of this room and bury my head in my knees and rock back and forth and back and forth and back and forth and I wish and I wish and I wish and I dream of impossible things until I've cried myself to sleep.

I wonder what it would be like to have a friend.

And then I wonder who else is locked in this asylum. I wonder where the other screams are coming from.

I wonder if they're coming from me.

I'm trying to focus, telling myself these are just empty words, but I'm lying. Because somehow, just reading these words is too much; and the thought of her in pain is causing me an unbearable amount of agony.

To know that she experienced this.

She was thrown into this by her own parents, cast off and abused her entire life. Empathy is not an emotion I've ever known, but now it's drowning me, pulling me into a world I never knew I could enter. And though I've always believed she and I shared many things in common, I did not know how deeply I could feel it.

It’s killing me.

I stand up. Start pacing the length of my bedroom until I’ve finally worked up the nerve to keep reading. Then I take a deep breath.

And turn the page.

> ~~*There’s something simmering inside of me.*~~
>
> ~~*Something I’ve never dared to tap into, something I’m afraid to acknowledge. There’s a part of me clawing to break free from the cage I’ve trapped it in, banging on the doors of my heart, begging to be free.*~~
>
> ~~*Begging to let go.*~~
>
> ~~*Every day I feel like I’m reliving the same nightmare. I open my mouth to shout, to fight, to swing my fists, but my vocal cords are cut, my arms are heavy and weighted down as if trapped in wet cement and I’m screaming but no one can hear me, no one can reach me and I’m caught. And it’s killing me.*~~
>
> ~~*I’ve always had to make myself submissive, subservient, twisted into a pleading, passive mop just to make everyone else feel safe and comfortable. My existence has become a fight to prove I’m harmless, that I’m not a threat, that I’m capable of living among other human beings without hurting them.*~~
>
> ~~*And I’m so tired I’m so tired I’m so tired I’m so tired and sometimes I get so angry*~~
>
> *I don’t know what’s happening to me.*

“God, Juliette,” I gasp.

And fall to my knees.

“Call for transport immediately.” I need to get out. I need to get out right now.

“Sir? I mean, yes, sir, of course—but where—”

“I have to visit the compounds,” I say. “I should make my rounds before my meeting this evening.” This is both true and false. But I’m willing to do anything right now that might get my mind off this journal.

“Oh, certainly, sir. Would you like me to accompany you?”

“That won’t be necessary, Lieutenant, but thank you for the offer.”

“I—s-sir,” he stammers. “Of course, it’s m-my pleasure, sir, to assist you—”

Good God, I have taken leave of my senses. I never thank Delalieu. I’ve likely given the poor man a heart attack.

“I will be ready to go in ten minutes.” I cut him off.

He stutters to a stop. Then, “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

I’m pressing my fist to my mouth as the call disconnects.

Thirteen

We had homes. Before.

All different kinds.

1-story homes. 2-story homes. 3-story homes.

We bought lawn ornaments and twinkle lights, learned to ride bikes without training wheels. We purchased lives confined within 1, 2, 3 stories already built, stories caught inside of structures we could not change.

We lived in those stories for a while.

We followed the tale laid out for us, the prose pinned down in every square foot of space we'd acquired. We were content with the plot twists that only mildly redirected our lives. We signed on the dotted line for the things we didn't know we cared about. We ate the things we shouldn't, spent money when we couldn't, lost sight of the Earth we had to inhabit and wasted wasted wasted everything. Food. Water. Resources.

Soon the skies were gray with chemical pollution, and the plants and animals were sick from genetic modification, and diseases rooted themselves in our air, our meals, our blood and bones. The food disappeared. The people were dying. Our empire fell to pieces.

The Reestablishment said they would help us. Save us. Rebuild our society.

Instead they tore us all apart.

I enjoy coming to the compounds.

It's an odd place to seek refuge, but there's something about seeing so many civilians in such a vast, open space that reminds me of what I'm meant to be doing. I'm so often confined within the walls of Sector 45 headquarters that I forget the faces of those we're fighting and those we're fighting for.

I like to remember.

Most days I visit each cluster on the compounds; I greet the residents and ask about their living conditions. I can't help but be curious about what life must be like for them now. Because while the world changed for everyone else, it always stayed the same for me. Regimented. Isolated. Bleak.

There was a time when things were better, when my father wasn't always so angry. I was about four years old then. He used to let me sit on his lap and search

his pockets. I'd get to keep anything I wanted as long as my argument was convincing enough. It was his idea of a game.

But this was all before.

I wrap my coat more tightly around my body, feel the material press against my back. I flinch without meaning to.

The life I know now is the only one that matters. The suffocation, the luxury, the sleepless nights, and the dead bodies. I've always been taught to focus on power and pain, gaining and inflicting.

I grieve nothing.

I take everything.

It's the only way I know how to live in this battered body. I empty my mind of the things that plague me and burden my soul, and I take all that I can from what little pleasantness comes my way. I do not know what it is to live a normal life; I do not know how to sympathize with the civilians who've lost their homes. I do not know what it must've been like for them before The Reestablishment took over.

So I enjoy touring the compounds.

I enjoy seeing how other people live; I like that the law requires them to answer my questions. I would have no way of knowing, otherwise.

But my timing is off.

I paid little attention to the clock before I left base and didn't realize how soon the sun would be setting. Most civilians are returning home to retire for the evening, their bodies bowed, huddled against the cold as they shuffle toward the metal clusters they share with at least three other families.

These makeshift homes are built from forty-foot shipping containers; they're stacked side by side and on top of one another, lumped together in groups of four and six. Each container has been insulated; fitted with two windows and one door. Stairs to the upper levels are attached on either side. The roofs are lined with solar panels that provide free electricity for each grouping.

It's something I'm proud of.

Because it was my idea.

When we were seeking temporary shelter for the civilians, I suggested refurbishing the old shipping containers that line the docks of every port around the world. Not only are they cheap, easily replicated, and highly customizable, but they're stackable, portable, and built to withstand the elements. They'd require minimal construction, and with the right team, thousands of housing units could be ready in a matter of days.

I'd pitched the idea to my father, thinking it might be the most effective option; a temporary solution that would be far less cruel than tents; something

that would provide true, reliable shelter. But the result was so effective that The Reestablishment saw no need to upgrade. Here, on land that used to be a landfill, we've stacked thousands of containers; clusters of faded, rectangular cubes that are easy to monitor and keep track of.

The people are still told that these homes are temporary. That one day they will return to the memories of their old lives, and that things will be bright and beautiful again. But this is all a lie.

The Reestablishment has no plans to move them.

Civilians are caged on these regulated grounds; these containers have become their prisons. Everything has been numbered. The people, their homes, their level of importance to The Reestablishment.

Here, they've become a part of a huge experiment. A world wherein they work to support the needs of a regime that makes them promises it will never fulfill.

This is my life.

This sorry world.

Most days I feel just as caged as these civilians; and that's likely why I always come here. It's like running from one prison to another; an existence wherein there is no relief, no refuge. Where even my own mind is a traitor.

I should be stronger than this.

I've been training for just over a decade. Every day I've worked to hone my physical and mental strengths. I'm five feet, nine inches and 170 pounds of muscle. I've been built to survive, to maximize endurance and stamina, and I'm most comfortable when I'm holding a gun in my hand. I can fieldstrip, clean, reload, disassemble, and reassemble more than 150 different types of firearms. I can shoot a target through the center from almost any distance. I can break a person's windpipe with only the edge of my hand. I can temporarily paralyze a man with nothing but my knuckles.

On the battlefield, I'm able to disconnect myself from the motions I've been taught to memorize. I've developed a reputation as a cold, unfeeling monster who fears nothing and cares for less.

But this is all very deceiving.

Because the truth is, I am nothing but a coward.

Fourteen

The sun is setting.

Soon I'll have no choice but to return to base, where I'll have to sit still and listen to my father speak instead of shooting a bullet through his open mouth.

So I stall for time.

I watch from afar as the children run around while their parents herd them home. I wonder about how one day they'll get old enough to realize that the Reestablishment Registration cards they carry are actually tracking their every movement. That the money their parents make from working in whichever factories they were sorted into is closely monitored. These children will grow up and finally understand that everything they do is recorded, every conversation dissected for whispers of rebellion. They don't know that profiles are created for every citizen, and that every profile is thick with documentation on their friendships, relationships, and work habits; even the ways in which they choose to spend their free time.

We know everything about everyone.

Too much.

So much, in fact, that I seldom remember we're dealing with real, live people until I see them on the compounds. I've memorized the names of nearly every person in Sector 45. I like to know who lives within my jurisdiction, soldiers and civilians alike.

That's how I knew, for example, that Private Seamus Fletcher, 45B-76423, was beating his wife and children every night.

I knew he was spending all his money on alcohol; I knew he'd been starving his family. I monitored the REST dollars he spent at our supply centers and carefully observed his family on the compounds. I knew his three children were all under the age of ten and hadn't eaten in weeks; I knew that they'd repeatedly been to the compounds' medic for broken bones and stitches. I knew he'd punched his nine-year-old daughter in the mouth and split her lip, fractured her jaw, and broken her two front teeth; and I knew his wife was pregnant. I also knew that he hit her so hard one night she lost the child the following morning.

I knew, because I was there.

I'd been stopping by each residence, visiting with the civilians, asking questions about their health and overall living situations. I'd wanted to know

about their work conditions and whether any members of their family were ill and needed to be quarantined.

She was there that day. Fletcher's wife. Her nose was broken so badly that both her eyes had swollen shut. Her frame was so thin and frail, her color so sallow that I thought she might snap in half just by sitting down. But when I asked about her injuries, she wouldn't look me in the eye. She said she'd fallen down; that because of her fall, she'd lost the pregnancy and managed to break her nose in the process.

I nodded. Thanked her for her cooperation in answering my questions.

And then I called for an assembly.

I'm well aware that the majority of my soldiers steal from our storage compounds. I oversee our inventory closely, and I know that supplies go missing all the time. But I allow these infractions because they do not upset the system. A few extra loaves of bread or bars of soap keep my soldiers in better spirits; they work harder if they are healthy, and most are supporting spouses, children, and relatives. So it is a concession I allow.

But there are some things I do not forgive.

I don't consider myself a moral man. I do not philosophize about life or bother with the laws and principles that govern most people. I do not pretend to know the difference between right and wrong. But I do live by a certain kind of code. And sometimes, I think, you have to learn how to shoot first.

Seamus Fletcher was murdering his family. And I shot him in the forehead because I thought it'd be kinder than ripping him to pieces by hand.

But my father picked up where Fletcher left off. My father had three children and their mother shot dead, all because of the drunken bastard they'd depended on to provide for them. He was their father, her husband, and the reason they all died a brutal, untimely death.

And some days I wonder why I insist on keeping myself alive.

Fifteen

Once I’m back on base, I head straight down.

I ignore the soldiers and their salutes as I pass by, paying little attention to the blend of curiosity and suspicion in their eyes. I didn’t even realize I was headed this way until I arrived at headquarters; but my body seems to know more about what I need right now than my mind does. My footfalls are heavy; the steady, clipping sound of my boots echoes along the stone path as I reach the lower levels.

I haven’t been here in nearly two weeks.

The room has been rebuilt since my last visit; the glass panel and the concrete wall have been replaced. And as far as I’m aware, she was the last person to use this room.

I brought her here myself.

I push through a set of swinging double doors into the locker room that sits adjacent to the simulation deck. My hand searches for a switch in the dark; the light beeps once before it flickers to life. A dull hum of electricity vibrates through these vast dimensions. Everything is quiet, abandoned.

Just as I like it.

I strip as quickly as this injured arm will allow me to. I still have two hours before I’m expected to meet my father for dinner, so I shouldn’t be feeling so anxious, but my nerves are not cooperating. Everything seems to be catching up with me at once. My failures. My cowardice. My stupidity.

Sometimes I’m just so tired of this life.

I’m standing barefoot on this concrete floor in nothing but an arm sling, hating the way this injury constantly slows me down. I grab the shorts stashed in my locker and pull them on as quickly as I can, leaning against the wall for support. When I’m finally upright, I slam the locker shut and make my way into the adjoining room.

I hit another switch, and the main operational deck whirs to life. The computers beep and flash as the program recalibrates; I run my fingers along the keyboard.

We use these rooms to generate simulations.

We manipulate the technology to create environments and experiences that exist entirely in the human mind. Not only are we able to create the framework,

but we can also control minute details. Sounds, smells, false confidence, paranoia. The program was originally designed to help train soldiers for specific missions, as well as aid them in overcoming fears that would otherwise cripple them on the battlefield.

I use it for my own purposes.

I used to come here all the time before she arrived on base. This was my safe space; my only escape from the world. I only wish it didn't come with a uniform. These shorts are starchy and uncomfortable, the polyester itchy and irritating. But the shorts are lined with a special chemical that reacts with my skin and feeds information to the sensors; it helps place me in the experience, and will enable to me to run for miles without ever running into actual, physical walls in my true environment. And in order for the process to be as effective as possible, I have to be wearing next to nothing. The cameras are hypersensitive to body heat, and work best when not in contact with synthetic materials.

I'm hoping this detail will be fixed in the next generation of the program.

The mainframe prompts me for information; I quickly enter an access code that grants me clearance to pull up a history of my past simulations. I look up and over my shoulder as the computer processes the data; I glance through the newly repaired two-way mirror that sees into the main chamber. I still can't believe she broke down an entire wall of glass and concrete and managed to walk away uninjured.

Incredible.

The machine beeps twice; I spin back around. The programs in my history are loaded and ready to be executed.

Her file is at the top of the list.

I take a deep breath; try to shake off the memory. I don't regret putting her through such a horrifying experience; I don't know that she would've ever allowed herself to finally lose control—to finally inhabit her own body—if I hadn't found an effective method of provoking her. Ultimately, I really believe it helped her, just as I intended it to. But I do wish she hadn't pointed a gun at my face and jumped out a window shortly afterward.

I take another slow, steadying breath.

And select the simulation I came here for.

Sixteen

I’m standing in the main chamber.

Facing myself.

This is a very simple simulation. I didn’t change my clothes or my hair or even the room’s carpeted floors. I didn’t do anything at all except create a duplicate of myself and hand him a gun.

He won’t stop staring at me.

One.

He cocks his head. “Are you ready?” A pause. “Are you scared?”

My heart kicks into gear.

He lifts his arm. Smiles a little. “Don’t worry,” he says. “It’s almost over now.”

Two.

“Just a little longer and I’ll leave,” he says, pointing the gun directly at my forehead.

My palms are sweating. My pulse is racing.

“You’ll be all right,” he lies. “I promise.”

Three.

Boom.

Seventeen

“You sure you’re not hungry?” my father asks, still chewing. “This is really quite good.”

I shift in my seat. Focus on the ironed creases in these pants I’m wearing.

“Hm?” he asks. I can actually hear him smiling.

I’m acutely aware of the soldiers lining the walls of this room. He always keeps them close, and always in constant competition with one another. Their first assignment was to determine which of the eleven of them was the weakest link. The one with the most convincing argument was then required to dispose of his target.

My father finds these practices amusing.

“I’m afraid I’m not hungry. The medicine,” I lie, “destroys my appetite.”

“Ah,” he says. I hear him put his utensils down. “Of course. How inconvenient.”

I say nothing.

“Leave us.”

Two words and his men disperse in a matter of seconds. The door slides shut behind them.

“Look at me,” he says.

I look up, my eyes carefully devoid of emotion. I hate his face. I can’t stand to look at him for too long; I don’t like experiencing the full impact of how very inhuman he is. He is not tortured by what he does or how he lives. In fact, he enjoys it. He loves the rush of power; he thinks of himself as an invincible entity.

And in some ways, he’s not wrong.

I’ve come to believe that the most dangerous man in the world is the one who feels no remorse. The one who never apologizes and therefore seeks no forgiveness. Because in the end it is our emotions that make us weak, not our actions.

I turn away.

“What did you find?” he asks, with no preamble.

My mind immediately goes to the journal I’ve stowed away in my pocket, but I make no movement. I do not dare flinch. People seldom realize that they tell lies with their lips and truths with their eyes all the time. Put a man in a room with something he’s hidden and then ask him where he’s hidden it; he’ll tell you

he doesn’t know; he’ll tell you you’ve got the wrong man; but he’ll almost always glance at its exact location. And right now I know my father is watching me, waiting to see where I might look, what I might say next.

I keep my shoulders relaxed and take a slow, imperceptible breath to steady my heart. I do not respond. I pretend to be lost in thought.

“Son?”

I look up. Feign surprise. “Yes?”

“What did you find? When you searched her room today?”

I exhale. Shake my head as I lean back in my chair. “Broken glass. A disheveled bed. Her armoire, hanging open. She took only a few toiletries and some extra pairs of clothes and undergarments. Nothing else was out of place.” None of this is a lie.

I hear him sigh. He pushes away his plate.

I feel the outline of her notebook burning against my upper leg.

“And you say you do not know where she might’ve gone?”

“I only know that she, Kent, and Kishimoto must be together,” I tell him. “Delalieu says they stole a car, but the trace disappeared abruptly at the edge of a barren field. We’ve had troops on patrol for days now, searching the area, but they’ve found nothing.”

“And where,” he says, “do you plan on searching next? Do you think they might’ve crossed over into another sector?” His voice is off. Entertained.

I glance up at his smiling face.

He’s only asking me these questions to test me. He has his own answers, his own solution already prepared. He wants to watch me fail by answering incorrectly. He’s trying to prove that without him, I’d make all the wrong decisions.

He’s mocking me.

“No,” I tell him, my voice solid, steady. “I don’t think they’d do something as idiotic as cross into another sector. They don’t have the access, the means, or the capacity. Both men were severely wounded, rapidly losing blood, and too far from any source of emergency aid. They’re probably dead by now. The girl is likely the only survivor, and she can’t have gone far because she has no idea how to navigate these areas. She’s been blind to them for too long; everything in this environment is foreign to her. Furthermore, she does not know how to drive, and if she’d somehow managed to commandeer a vehicle, we would’ve received word of stolen property. Considering her overall health, her propensity toward physical inexertion, and her general lack of access to food, water, and medical attention, she’s probably collapsed within a five-mile radius of this supposed barren field. We have to find her before she freezes to death.”

My father clears his throat.

“Yes,” he says, “those are interesting theories. And perhaps under ordinary circumstances, they might actually hold true. But you are failing to recall the most important detail.”

I meet his gaze.

“She is not normal,” he says, leaning back in his chair. “And she is not the only one of her kind.”

My heartbeat quickens. I blink too fast.

“Oh come now, surely you’d suspected? You’d hypothesized?” He laughs. “It seems statistically impossible that she’d be the only mistake manufactured by our world. You knew this, but you didn’t want to believe it. And I came here to tell you that it’s true.” He cocks his head at me. Smiles a big, vibrant smile. “There are more of them. And they’ve recruited her.”

“No,” I breathe.

“They infiltrated your troops. Lived among you in secret. And now they’ve stolen your toy and run away with it. God only knows how they hope to manipulate her for their own benefit.”

“How can you be certain?” I ask. “How do you know they’ve succeeded in taking her with them? Kent was half-dead when I left him—”

“Pay attention, son. I’m telling you that they are not normal. They do not follow your rules; there is no logic that binds them. You have no idea what oddities they might be capable of.” A pause. “Furthermore, I have known for some time now that a group of them exists undercover in this area. But in all these years they’ve always kept to themselves. They did not interfere with my methods, and I thought it best to allow them to die off on their own without infecting in our civilians unnecessary panic. You understand, of course,” he says. “After all, you could hardly contain even one of them. They’re freakish things to behold.”

“You knew?” I’m on my feet now. Trying to stay calm. “You knew of their existence, all this time, and yet you did nothing? You said nothing?”

“It seemed unnecessary.”

“And now?” I demand.

“Now it seems pertinent.”

“Unbelievable!” I throw my hands in the air. “That you would withhold such information from me! When you knew of my plans for her—when you knew what pains I’d taken to bring her here—”

“Calm yourself,” he says. He stretches out his legs; rests the ankle of one on the knee of the other. “We are going to find them. This barren field Delalieu speaks of—the area where the car was no longer traceable? That is our target

location. They must be located underground. We must find the entrance and destroy them quietly, from within. Then we will have punished the guilty among them, and kept the rest from rising up and inspiring rebellion in our people."

He leans forward.

"The civilians hear everything. And right now they are vibrating with a new kind of energy. They're feeling inspired that anyone was able to run away, and that you've been wounded in the process. It makes our defenses seem weak and easily penetrable. We must destroy this perception by righting the imbalance. Fear will return everything to its proper place."

"But they've been searching," I tell him. "My men. Every day they've scoured the area and found nothing. How can we be sure we'll find anything at all?"

"Because," he says, "you will lead them. Every night. After curfew, while the civilians are asleep. You will cease your daylight searches; you will not give the citizens anything else to talk about. Act quietly, son. Do not show your moves. I will remain on base and oversee your responsibilities through my men; I will dictate to Delalieu as necessary. And in the interim, you shall find them, so that I may destroy them as swiftly as possible. This nonsense has gone on long enough," he says, "and I'm no longer feeling gracious."

Eighteen

I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry I’m so sorry I’m so so sorry I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry I’m so sorry I’m so so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry I’m so so sorry I’m so sorry I’m so sorry I’m so sorry I’m so so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry I’m so sorry I’m so so sorry I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry I’m so so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry I’m so sorry I’m so so sorry I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry I’m so sorry I’m so so sorry I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry I’m so so sorry. I’m sorry I’m so sorry please forgive me.

It was an accident.

Forgive me

Please forgive me

There is little I allow anyone to discover about me. There’s even less I’m willing to share about myself. And of the many things I’ve never discussed, this is one of them.

I like to take long baths.

I’ve had an obsession with cleanliness for as long as I can remember. I’ve always been so mired in death and destruction that I think I’ve overcompensated by keeping myself pristine as much as possible. I take frequent showers. I brush and floss three times a day. I trim my own hair every week. I scrub my hands and nails before I go to bed and just after I wake up. I have an unhealthy preoccupation with wearing only freshly laundered clothes. And whenever I’m experiencing any extreme level of emotion, the only thing that settles my nerves is a long bath.

So that’s what I’m doing right now.

The medics taught me how to bind my injured arm in the same plastic they used before, so I’m able to sink beneath the surface without a problem. I submerge my head for a long while, holding my breath as I exhale through my nose. I feel the small bubbles rise to the surface.

The warm water makes me feel weightless. It carries my burdens for me, understanding that I need a moment to relieve my shoulders of this weight. To close my eyes and relax.

My face breaks the surface.

I don’t open my eyes; only my nose and lips meet the oxygen on the other side. I take small, even breaths to help steady my mind. It’s so late that I don’t know what time it is; all I know is that the temperature has dropped significantly, and the cold air is tickling my nose. It’s a strange sensation, to have 98 percent of my body floating at a warm, welcome temperature, while my nose and lips twitch from the cold.

I sink my face below the water again.

I could live here, I think. Live where gravity does not know my name. Here I am unbound, untethered by the chains of this life. I am a different body, a different shell, and my weight is carried by the hands of friends. So many nights I’ve wished I could fall asleep under this sheet.

I sink deeper.

In one week my entire life has changed.

My priorities, shifted. My concentration, destroyed. Everything I care about right now revolves around one person, and for the first time in my life, it’s not myself. Her words have been burned into my mind. I can’t stop picturing her as she must’ve been, can’t stop imagining what she must’ve experienced. Finding her journal has crippled me. My feelings for her have spiraled out of control. I’ve never been so desperate to see her, to talk to her.

I want her to know that I understand now. That I didn’t understand before. She and I really are the same; in so many more ways than I could’ve known.

But now she’s out of reach. She’s gone somewhere with strangers who do not know her and would not care for her as I would. She’s been dropped into another foreign environment with no time to transition, and I’m worried about her. A person in her situation—with her past—does not recover overnight. And now, one of two things is bound to happen: She’s either going to completely shut down, or she’s going to explode.

I sit up too fast, breaking free of the water, gasping for air.

I push my wet hair out of my face. I lean back against the tiled wall, allowing the cool air to calm me, to clear my thoughts.

I have to find her before she breaks.

I’ve never wanted to cooperate with my father before, never wanted to agree with his motives or his methods. But in this instance, I’m willing to do just about anything to get her back.

And I’m eager for any opportunity to snap Kent’s neck.

That traitorous bastard. The idiot who thinks he’s won himself a pretty girl. He has no idea who she is. No idea what she’s about to become.

And if he thinks he’s even remotely suited to match her, he’s even more of an

idiot than I gave him credit for.

Nineteen

“Where’s the coffee?” I ask, my eyes scanning the table.

Delalieu drops his fork. The silverware clangs against the china plates. He looks up, eyes wide. “Sir?”

“I’d like to try it,” I tell him, attempting to spread butter on my toast with my left hand. I toss a look in his direction. “You’re always going on about your coffee, aren’t you? I thought I—”

Delalieu jumps up from the table without a word. Bolts out the door.

I laugh silently into my plate.

Delalieu carts the tea and coffee tray in himself and stations it by my chair. His hands shake as he pours the dark liquid into a teacup, places it on a saucer, sets it on the table, and pushes it in my direction.

I wait until he’s finally sitting down again before I take a sip. It’s a strange, obscenely bitter sort of drink; not at all what I expected. I glance up at him, surprised to discover that a man like Delalieu would begin his day by bracing himself with such a potent, foul-tasting liquid. I find I respect him for it.

“This isn’t terrible,” I tell him.

His face splits into a smile so wide, so beatific, I wonder if he’s misheard me. He’s practically beaming when he says, “I take mine with cream and sugar. The taste is far better that w—”

“Sugar.” I put my cup down. Press my lips together, fight back a smile. “You add sugar to it. Of course you do. That makes so much more sense.”

“Would you like some, sir?”

I hold up my hand. Shake my head. “Call back the troops, Lieutenant. We’re going to halt daytime missions and instead launch in the evening, after curfew. You will remain on base,” I tell him, “where the supreme will dictate orders through his men; carry out any demands as they are required. I shall lead the group myself.” I stop. Hold his eyes. “There will be no more talk of what has transpired. Nothing for the civilians to see or speak of. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” he says, his coffee forgotten. “I’ll issue the orders at once.”

“Good.”

He stands up.

I nod.

He leaves.

I’m beginning to feel real hope for the first time since she left. We’re going to find her. Now, with this new information—with an entire army against a group of clueless rebels—it seems impossible we won’t.

I take a deep breath. Take another sip of this coffee.

I’m surprised to discover how much I enjoy the bitter taste of it.

Twenty

He’s waiting for me when I return to my room.

“The orders have been issued,” I tell him without looking in his direction. “We will mobilize tonight.” I hesitate. “So if you’ll excuse me, I have other matters to contend with.”

“What’s it like,” he asks, “to be so crippled?” He’s smiling. “How can you stand to look at yourself, knowing that you’ve been disabled by your own subordinates?”

I pause outside the adjoining door to my office. “What do you want?”

“What,” he says, “is your fascination with that girl?”

My spine goes rigid.

“She is more to you than just an experiment, isn’t she?” he says.

I turn around slowly. He’s standing in the middle of my room, hands in his pockets, smiling at me like he might be disgusted.

“What are you talking about?”

“Look at yourself,” he says. “I haven’t even said her name and you fall apart.” He shakes his head, still studying me. “Your face is pale, your only working hand is clenched. You’re breathing too fast, and your entire body is tense.” A pause. “You have betrayed yourself, son. You think you’re very clever,” he says, “but you’re forgetting who taught you your tricks.”

I go hot and cold all at once. I try to unclench my fist and I can’t. I want to tell him he’s wrong, but I’m suddenly feeling unsteady, wishing I’d eaten more at breakfast, and then wishing I’d eaten nothing at all.

“I have work to do,” I manage to say.

“Tell me,” he says, “that you would not care if she died along with the others.”

“What?” The nervous, shaky word escapes my lips too soon.

My father drops his eyes. Clasps and unclasps his hands. “You have disappointed me in so many ways,” he says, his voice deceptively soft. “Please don’t let this be another.”

For a moment I feel as though I exist outside of my body, as if I’m looking at myself from his perspective. I see my face, my injured arm, these legs that suddenly seem unable to carry my weight. Cracks begin to form along my face, all the way down my arms, my torso, my legs.

I imagine this is what it’s like to fall apart.

I don’t realize he’s said my name until he repeats it twice more.

“What do you want from me?” I ask, surprised to hear how calm I sound. “You’ve walked into my room without permission; you stand here and accuse me of things I don’t have time to understand. I am following your rules, your orders. We will leave tonight; we will find their hideout. You can destroy them as you see fit.”

“And your girl,” he says, cocking his head at me. “Your Juliette?”

I flinch at the sound of her name. My pulse is racing so fast it feels like a whisper.

“If I were to shoot three holes in her head, how would that make you feel?” He stares at me. Watches me. “Disappointed, because you’d have lost your pet project? Or devastated, because you’d have lost the girl you love?”

Time seems to slow down, melting all around me.

“It would be a waste,” I say, ignoring the tremble I feel deep inside me, threatening to tip me over, “to lose something I’ve invested so much time in.”

He smiles. “It’s good to know you see it that way,” he says. “But projects are, after all, easily replaced. And I’m certain we’ll be able to find a better, more practical use of your time.”

I blink at him so slowly. Part of my chest feels as if it’s collapsed.

“Of course,” I hear myself say.

“I knew you’d understand.” He claps me on my injured shoulder as he leaves. My knees nearly buckle. “It was a good effort, son. But she’s cost us too much time and expense, and she’s proven completely useless. This way we’ll be disposing of many inconveniences all at once. We’ll just consider her collateral damage.” He shoots me one last smile before walking past me and out the door.

I fall back against the wall.

And crumble to the floor.

Twenty-One

Swallow the tears back often enough and they'll start feeling like acid dripping down your throat.

It's that terrible moment when you're sitting still so still so still because ~~you don't want them to see you cry~~ you don't want to cry but your lips won't stop trembling and your eyes are filled to the brim with please and I beg you and please and I'm sorry and please and have mercy and maybe this time it'll be different but it's always the same. There's no one to run to for comfort. No one on your side.

Light a candle for me, I used to whisper to no one.

Someone

Anyone

If you're out there

Please tell me you can feel this fire.

It's day five of our patrols, and still, nothing.

I lead the group every night, marching into the silence of these cold, winter landscapes. We search for hidden passageways, camouflaged manholes—any indication that there might be another world under our feet.

And every night we return to base with nothing.

The futility of these past few days has washed over me, dulling my senses, settling me into a kind of daze I haven't been able to claw my way out of. Every day I wake up searching for a solution to the problems I've forced upon myself, but I have no idea how to fix this.

If she's out there, he will find her. And he will kill her.

Just to teach me a lesson.

My only hope is to find her first. Maybe I could hide her. Or tell her to run. Or pretend she's already dead. Or maybe I'll convince him that she's different, better than the others; that she's worth keeping alive.

I sound like a pathetic, desperate idiot.

I am a child all over again, hiding in dark corners and praying he won't find me. Hoping he'll be in a good mood today. That maybe everything will be all right. That maybe my mother won't be screaming this time.

How quickly I revert back to another version of myself in his presence.

I’ve gone numb.

I’ve been performing my tasks with a sort of mechanical dedication; it requires minimal effort. Moving is simple enough. Eating is something I’ve grown accustomed to.

I can’t stop reading her notebook.

My heart actually hurts, somehow, but I can’t stop turning the pages. I feel as if I’m pounding against an invisible wall, as if my face has been bandaged in plastic and I can’t breathe, can’t see, can’t hear any sound but my own heart beating in my ears.

I’ve wanted few things in this life.

I’ve asked for nothing from no one.

And now, all I’m asking for is another chance. An opportunity to see her again. But unless I can find a way to stop him, these words will be all I’ll ever have of her.

These paragraphs and sentences. These letters.

I’ve become obsessed. I carry her notebook with me everywhere I go, spending all my free moments trying to decipher the words she’s scribbled in the margins, developing stories to go along with the numbers she’s written down.

I’ve also noticed that the last page is missing. Ripped out.

I can’t help but wonder why. I’ve searched through the book a hundred times, looking for other sections where pages might be gone, but I’ve found none. And somehow I feel cheated, knowing there’s a piece I might’ve missed. It’s not even my journal; it’s none of my business at all, but I’ve read her words so many times now that they feel like my own. I can practically recite them from memory.

It’s strange being in her head without being able to see her. I feel like she’s here, right in front of me. I feel like I now know her so intimately, so privately. I’m safe in the company of her thoughts; I feel welcome, somehow. Understood. So much so that some days I manage to forget that she’s the one who put this bullet hole in my arm.

I almost forget that she still hates me, despite how hard I’ve fallen for her.

And I’ve fallen.

So hard.

I’ve hit the ground. Gone right through it. Never in my life have I felt this. Nothing like this. I’ve felt shame and cowardice, weakness and strength. I’ve known terror and indifference, self-hate and general disgust. I’ve seen things that cannot be unseen.

And yet I’ve known nothing like this terrible, horrible, paralyzing feeling. I feel crippled. Desperate and out of control. And it keeps getting worse. Every day I feel sick. Empty and somehow aching.

Love is a heartless bastard.

I'm driving myself insane.

I fall backward onto my bed, fully dressed. Coat, boots, gloves. I'm too tired to take them off. These late-night shifts have left me very little time to sleep. I feel as though I've been existing in a constant state of exhaustion.

My head hits the pillow and I blink once. Twice.

I collapse.

Twenty-Two

“No,” I hear myself say. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

She’s sitting on my bed. She’s leaning back on her elbows, legs outstretched in front of her, crossed at the ankles. And while some part of me understands I must be dreaming, there’s another, overwhelmingly dominant part of me that refuses to accept this. Part of me wants to believe she’s really here, inches away from me, wearing this short, tight black dress that keeps slipping up her thighs. But everything about her looks different, oddly vibrant; the colors are all wrong. Her lips are a richer, deeper shade of pink; her eyes seem wider, darker. She’s wearing shoes I know she’d never wear. And strangest of all: she’s smiling at me.

“Hi,” she whispers.

It’s just one word, but my heart is already racing. I’m inching away from her, stumbling back and nearly slamming my skull against the headboard, when I realize my shoulder is no longer wounded. I look down at myself. My arms are both fully functional. I’m wearing nothing but a white T-shirt and my underwear.

She shifts positions in an instant, propping herself up on her knees before crawling over to me. She climbs onto my lap. She’s now straddling my waist. I’m suddenly breathing too fast.

Her lips are at my ear. Her words are so soft. “Kiss me,” she says.

“Juliette—”

“I came all the way here.” She’s still smiling at me. It’s a rare smile, the kind she’s never honored me with. But somehow, right now, she’s mine. She’s mine and she’s perfect and she wants me, and I’m not going to fight it.

I don’t want to.

Her hands are tugging at my shirt, pulling it up over my head. Tossing it to the floor. She leans forward and kisses my neck, just once, so slowly. My eyes fall closed.

There aren’t enough words in this world to describe what I’m feeling.

I feel her hands move down my chest, my stomach; her fingers run along the edge of my underwear. Her hair falls forward, grazing my skin, and I have to clench my fists to keep from pinning her to my bed.

Every nerve ending in my body is awake. I’ve never felt so alive or so desperate in my life, and I’m sure if she could hear what I’m thinking right now,

she’d run out the door and never come back.

Because I want her.

Now.

Here.

Everywhere.

I want nothing between us.

I want her clothes off and the lights on and I want to study her. I want to unzip her out of this dress and take my time with every inch of her. I can’t help my need to just stare; to know her and her features: the slope of her nose, the curve of her lips, the line of her jaw. I want to run my fingertips across the soft skin of her neck and trace it all the way down. I want to feel the weight of her pressed against me, wrapped around me.

I can’t remember a reason why this can’t be right or real. I can’t focus on anything but the fact that she’s sitting on my lap, touching my chest, staring into my eyes like she might really love me.

I wonder if I’ve actually died.

But just as I lean in, she leans back, grinning before reaching behind her, never once breaking eye contact with me. “Don’t worry,” she whispers. “It’s almost over now.”

Her words seem so strange, so familiar. “What do you mean?”

“Just a little longer and I’ll leave.”

“No.” I’m blinking fast, reaching for her. “No, don’t go—where are you going—”

“You’ll be all right,” she says. “I promise.”

“No—”

But now she’s holding a gun.

And pointing it at my heart.

Twenty-Three

These letters are all I have left.

26 friends to tell my stories to.

26 letters are all I need. I can stitch them together to create oceans and ecosystems. I can fit them together to form planets and solar systems. I can use letters to construct skyscrapers and metropolitan cities populated by people, places, things, and ideas that are more real to me than these 4 walls.

I need nothing but letters to live. Without them I would not exist.

Because these words I write down are the only proof I have that I'm still alive.

It's extraordinarily cold this morning.

I suggested we make a smaller, more low-key trip to the compounds earlier in the day today, just to see if any of the civilians seemed suspicious or out of place. I'm beginning to wonder if Kent and Kishimoto and all the others are living among the people in secret. They must, after all, have to have some source for food and water—something that ties them to society; I doubt they can grow anything underground. But of course, these are all assumptions. They might very well have a person who can grow food out of thin air.

I quickly address my men; instruct them to disperse and remain inconspicuous. Their job is to watch everyone today, and report their findings directly to me.

Once they're gone, I'm left to look around and be alone with my thoughts. It's a dangerous place to be.

God, she seemed so real in my dream.

I close my eyes, dragging a hand down my face; my fingers linger against my lips. I could feel her. I could really *feel* her. Even thinking about it now makes my heart race. I don't know what I'm going to do if I keep having such intense dreams about her. I won't be able to function at all.

I take a deep, steadying breath and focus. I allow my eyes to wander naturally, and I can't help but be distracted by the children running around. They seem so spirited and carefree. In a strange way, it makes me sad that they've been able to find happiness in this life. They have no idea what they've missed; no idea what

the world used to be like.

Something barrels into the backs of my legs.

I hear a strange, labored sort of panting; I turn around.

It's a dog.

A tired, starving dog, so thin and frail it looks like it could be knocked over by the wind. But it's staring at me. Unafraid. Mouth open. Tongue lolling.

I want to laugh out loud.

I glance around quickly before scooping the dog into my arms. I don't need to give my father any more reasons to castrate me, and I don't trust my soldiers not to report something like this.

That I would play with a dog.

I can already hear the things my father would say to me.

I carry the whimpering creature over to one of the recently vacated housing units—I just saw all three families leave for work—and duck down behind one of the fences. The dog seems smart enough to understand that now is not the time to bark.

I tug off my glove and reach into my pocket for the Danish I grabbed at breakfast this morning; I hadn't had a chance to eat anything before our early start today. And though I haven't the faintest idea what dogs eat, exactly, I offer the Danish anyway.

The dog practically bites off my hand.

It chokes down the Danish in two bites and starts licking my fingers, jumping against my chest in excitement, finally plowing into the warmth of my open coat. I can't control the easy laughter that escapes my lips; I don't want to. I haven't felt like laughing in so long. And I can't help but be amazed at the power such small, unassuming animals wield over us; they so easily break down our defenses.

I run my hand along its shabby fur, feeling its ribs jut out at sharp, uncomfortable angles. But the dog doesn't seem to mind its starved state, at least not right now. Its tail is wagging hard, and it keeps pulling back from my coat to look me in the eye. I'm starting to wish I'd stuffed all the Danishes in my pocket this morning.

Something snaps.

I hear a gasp.

I spin around.

I jump up, alert, searching for the sound. It seemed close by. Someone saw me. Someone—

A civilian. She's already darting away, her body pressed against the wall of a nearby unit.

“Hey!” I shout. “You there—”

She stops. Looks up.

I nearly collapse.

Juliette.

She’s staring at me. She’s actually here, staring at me, her eyes wide and panicked. My legs are suddenly made of lead. I’m rooted to the ground, unable to form words. I don’t even know where to start. There’s so much I want to say to her, so much I’ve never told her, and I’m just so happy to see her—God, I’m so *relieved*—

She’s disappeared.

I spin around, frantic, wondering whether I’ve actually begun to lose my grip on reality. My eyes land on the little dog still sitting there, waiting for me, and I stare at it, dumbfounded, wondering what on earth just happened. I keep looking back at the place I thought I saw her, but I see nothing.

Nothing.

I run a hand through my hair, so confused, so horrified and angry with myself that I’m tempted to rip it out of my head.

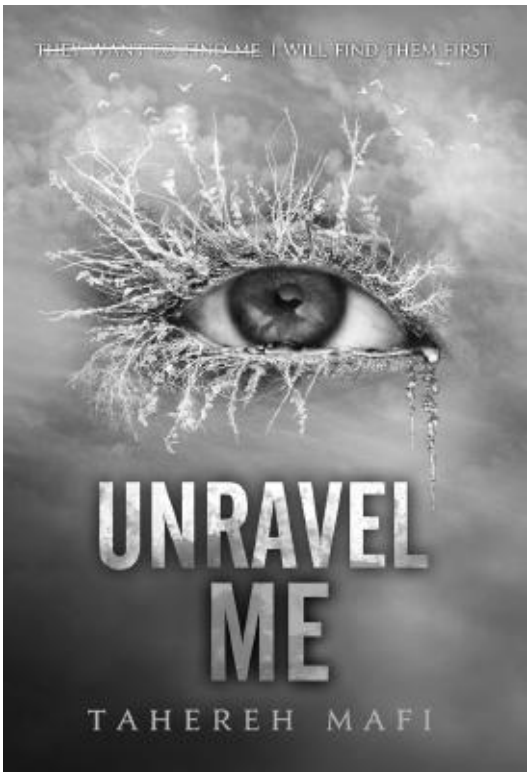
What is happening to me.

Excerpt from *Unravel Me*

Warner’s back to fight. For Juliette.

Don’t miss

UNRAVEL ME



One

The world might be sunny-side up today.

The big ball of yellow might be spilling into the clouds, runny and yolky and blurring into the bluest sky, bright with cold hope and false promises about fond memories, real families, hearty breakfasts, stacks of pancakes drizzled in maple syrup sitting on a plate in a world that doesn't exist anymore.

Or maybe not.

Maybe it's dark and wet today, whistling wind so sharp it stings the skin off the knuckles of grown men. Maybe it's snowing, maybe it's raining, I don't know maybe it's freezing it's hailing it's a hurricane slip slipping into a tornado and the earth is quaking apart to make room for our mistakes.

I wouldn't have any idea.

I don't have a window anymore. I don't have a view. It's a million degrees below zero in my blood and I'm buried 50 feet underground in a training room that's become my second home lately. Every day I stare at these 4 walls and remind myself *I'm not a prisoner I'm not a prisoner I'm not a prisoner* but sometimes the old fears streak across my skin and I can't seem to break free of the claustrophobia clutching at my throat.

I made so many promises when I arrived here.

Now I'm not so sure. Now I'm worried. Now my mind is a traitor because my thoughts crawl out of bed every morning with darting eyes and sweating palms and nervous giggles that sit in my chest, build in my chest, threaten to burst through my chest, and the pressure is tightening and tightening and *tightening*

Life around here isn't what I expected it to be.

My new world is etched in gunmetal, sealed in silver, drowning in the scents of stone and steel. The air is icy, the mats are orange; the lights and switches beep and flicker, electronic and electric, neon bright. It's busy here, busy with bodies, busy with halls stuffed full of whispers and shouts, pounding feet and thoughtful footsteps. If I listen closely I can hear the sounds of brains working and foreheads pinching and fingers tap-tapping at chins and lips and furrowed brows. Ideas are carried in pockets, thoughts propped up on the tips of every tongue; eyes are narrowed in concentration, in careful planning I should want to know about.

But nothing is working and all my parts are broken.

I’m supposed to harness my Energy, Castle said. Our gifts are different forms of Energy. Matter is never created or destroyed, he said to me, and as our world changed, so did the Energy within it. Our abilities are taken from the universe, from other matter, from other Energies. We are not anomalies. We are inevitabilities of the perverse manipulations of our Earth. Our Energy came from somewhere, he said. And somewhere is in the chaos all around us.

It makes sense. I remember what the world looked like when I left it.

I remember the pissed-off skies and the sequence of sunsets collapsing beneath the moon. I remember the cracked earth and the scratchy bushes and the used-to-be-greens that are now too close to brown. I think about the water we can’t drink and the birds that don’t fly and how human civilization has been reduced to nothing but a series of compounds stretched out over what’s left of our ravaged land.

This planet is a broken bone that didn’t set right, a hundred pieces of crystal glued together. We’ve been shattered and reconstructed, told to make an effort every single day to pretend we still function the way we’re supposed to. But it’s a lie, it’s all a lie; every person place thing and idea is a lie.

I do not function properly.

I am nothing more than the consequence of catastrophe.

2 weeks have collapsed at the side of the road, abandoned, already forgotten. 2 weeks I’ve been here and in 2 weeks I’ve taken up residence on a bed of eggshells, wondering when something is going to break, when I’ll be the first to break it, wondering when everything is going to fall apart. In 2 weeks I should’ve been happier, healthier, sleeping better, more soundly in this safe space. Instead I worry about what will happen ~~when~~ if I can’t get this right, if I don’t figure out how to train properly, if I hurt someone ~~on purpose~~ by accident.

We’re preparing for a bloody war.

That’s why I’m training. We’re all trying to prepare ourselves to take down Warner and his men. To win one battle at a time. To show the citizens of our world that there is hope yet—that they do not have to acquiesce to the demands of The Reestablishment and become slaves to a regime that wants nothing more than to exploit them for power. And I agreed to fight. To be a warrior. To use my power against my better judgment. But the thought of laying a hand on someone brings back a world of memories, feelings, a flush of power I experience only when I make contact with skin not immune to my own. It’s a rush of invincibility; a tormented kind of euphoria; a wave of intensity flooding every pore in my body. I don’t know what it will do to me. I don’t know if I can trust myself to take pleasure in someone else’s pain.

All I know is that Warner’s last words are caught in my chest and I can’t

cough out the cold or the truth hacking at the back of my throat.

Adam has no idea that Warner can touch me.

No one does.

Warner was supposed to be dead. Warner was supposed to be dead because I was supposed to have shot him but no one supposed I'd need to know how to fire a gun so now I suppose he's come to find me.

He's come to fight.

For me.

Two

A sharp knock and the door flies open.

“Ah, Ms. Ferrars. I don’t know what you hope to accomplish by sitting in the corner.” Castle’s easy grin dances into the room before he does.

I take a tight breath and try to make myself look at Castle but I can’t. Instead I whisper an apology and listen to the sorry sound my words make in this large room. I feel my shaking fingers clench against the thick, padded mats spread out across the floor and think about how I’ve accomplished nothing since I’ve been here. It’s humiliating, so humiliating to disappoint one of the only people who’s ever been kind to me.

Castle stands directly in front of me, waits until I finally look up. “There’s no need to apologize,” he says. His sharp, clear brown eyes and friendly smile make it easy to forget he’s the leader of Omega Point. The leader of this entire underground movement dedicated to fighting The Reestablishment. His voice is too gentle, too kind, and it’s almost worse. ~~Sometimes I wish he would just yell at me.~~ “But,” he continues, “you do have to learn how to harness your Energy, Ms. Ferrars.”

A pause.

A pace.

His hands rest on the stack of bricks I was supposed to have destroyed. He pretends not to notice the red rims around my eyes or the metal pipes I threw across the room. His gaze carefully avoids the bloody smears on the wooden planks set off to the side; his questions don’t ask me why my fists are clenched so tight and whether or not I’ve injured myself again. He cocks his head in my direction but he’s staring at a spot directly behind me and his voice is soft when he speaks. “I know this is difficult for you,” he says. “But you must learn. You have to. Your life will depend upon it.”

I swallow so hard I hear the gulp echo in the gulf between us. I nod, lean back against the wall, welcome the cold and the pain of the brick digging into my spine. I pull my knees up to my chest and feel my feet press into the protective mats covering the ground. I’m so close to tears I’m afraid I might scream. “I just don’t know how,” I finally say to him. “I don’t know any of this. I don’t even know what I’m supposed to be doing.” I stare at the ceiling and blink blink blink. My eyes feel shiny, damp. “I don’t know how to make things happen.”

“Then you have to think,” Castle says, undeterred. He picks up a discarded metal pipe. Weighs it in his hands. “You have to find links between the events that transpired. When you broke through the concrete in Warner’s torture chamber—when you punched through the steel door to save Mr. Kent—what happened? Why in those two instances were you able to react in such an extraordinary way?” He sits down some feet away from me. Pushes the pipe in my direction. “I need you to analyze your abilities, Ms. Ferrars. You have to focus.”

Focus.

It’s one word but it’s enough, it’s all it takes to make me feel sick. Everyone, it seems, needs me to focus. First Warner needed me to focus, and now Castle needs me to focus.

I’ve never been able to follow through.

Castle’s deep, sad sigh brings me back to the present. He gets to his feet. He smooths out the only navy-blue blazer he seems to own and I catch a glimpse of the silver Omega symbol embroidered into the back. An absent hand touches the end of his ponytail; he always ties his dreads in a clean knot at the base of his neck. “You are resisting yourself,” he says, though he says it gently. “Maybe you should work with someone else for a change. Maybe a partner will help you work things out—to discover the connection between these two events.”

My shoulders stiffen, surprised. “I thought you said I had to work alone.”

He squints past me. Scratches a spot beneath his ear, shoves his other hand into a pocket. “I didn’t actually want you to work alone,” he says. “But no one volunteered for the task.”

1 then 2 then 15 rocks fall into the pit of my stomach. Several are stuck in my windpipe. I don’t know why I suck in my breath, why I’m so surprised. I shouldn’t be surprised. Not everyone is Adam.

Not everyone is safe from me the way he is. No one but Adam has ever touched me and enjoyed it. ~~No one except for Warner.~~ But despite Adam’s best intentions, he can’t train with me. He’s busy with other things.

Things no one wants to tell me about.

But Castle is staring at me with hopeful eyes, generous eyes, eyes that have no idea that these new words he’s offered me are so much worse. Worse because as much as I know the truth, it still hurts to hear it. It hurts to remember that though I might live in a warm bubble with Adam, the rest of the world still sees me as a threat. A monster. An abomination.

~~Warner was right. No matter where I go, I can’t seem to run from this.~~

“What’s changed?” I ask him. “Who’s willing to train me now?” I pause. “You?”

Castle smiles.

It's the kind of smile that flushes humiliated heat up my neck and spears my pride right through the vertebrae. I have to resist the urge to bolt out the door.

~~Please please please do not pity me, is what I want to say.~~

"I wish I had the time," Castle says to me. "But Kenji is finally free—we were able to reorganize his schedule—and he said he'd be happy to work with you." A moment of hesitation. "That is, if that's all right with you."

Kenji.

I want to laugh out loud. Kenji *would* be the only one willing to risk working with me. I injured him once. By accident. But he and I haven't spent much time together since he first led our expedition into Omega Point. It was like he was just doing a task, fulfilling a mission; once complete, he went back to his own life. Apparently Kenji is important around here. He has a million things to do. Things to regulate. People seem to like him, respect him, even.

I wonder if they've ever known him as the obnoxious, foul-mouthed Kenji I first met.

"Sure," I tell Castle, attempting a pleasant expression for the first time since he's arrived. "That sounds great."

Castle stands up. His eyes are bright, eager, easily pleased. "Perfect. I'll have him meet you at breakfast tomorrow. You can eat together and go from there."

"Oh but I usually—"

"I know." Castle cuts me off. His smile is pressed into a thin line now, his forehead creased with concern. "You like to eat your meals with Mr. Kent. I know this. But you've hardly spent any time with the others, Ms. Ferrars, and if you're going to be here, you need to start trusting us. The people of Omega Point feel close to Kenji. He can vouch for you. If everyone sees you spending time together, they'll feel less intimidated by your presence. It will help you adjust."

Heat like hot oil spatters across my face; I flinch, feel my fingers twitch, try to find a place to look, try to pretend I can't feel the pain caught in my chest. I have to swallow 3 times before I can respond. "They're—they're afraid of me," I tell him, I whisper, I trail off. "I don't—I didn't want to bother anyone. I didn't want to get in their way. . . ."

Castle sighs, long and loud. He looks down and up, scratches the soft spot beneath his chin. "They're only afraid," he says finally, "because they don't know you. If you just tried a little harder—if you made even the smallest effort to get to know anyone—" He stops. Frowns. "Ms. Ferrars, you have been here two weeks and you hardly even speak to your roommates."

"But that's not—I think they're great—"

"And yet you ignore them? You spend no time with them? Why?"

~~Because I've never had girl friends before. Because I'm afraid I'll do something wrong, say something wrong and they'll end up hating me like all the other girls I've known. And I like them too much, which will make their inevitable rejection so much harder to endure.~~

I say nothing.

Castle shakes his head. "You did so well the first day you arrived. You seemed almost *friendly* with Brendan. I don't know what happened," Castle continues. "I thought you would do well here."

Brendan. The thin boy with platinum-blond hair and electric currents running through his veins. I remember him. He was nice to me. "I like Brendan," I tell Castle, bewildered. "Is he upset with me?"

"*Upset*?" Castle shakes his head, laughs out loud. He doesn't answer my question. "I don't understand, Ms. Ferrars. I've tried to be patient with you, I've tried to give you time, but I confess I'm quite perplexed. You were so different when you first arrived—you were excited to be here! But it took less than a week for you to withdraw completely. You don't even look at anyone when you walk through the halls. What happened to conversation? To friendship?"

Yes.

It took 1 day for me to settle in. 1 day for me to look around. 1 day for me to get excited about a different life and 1 day for everyone to find out who I am and what I've done.

Castle doesn't say anything about the mothers who see me walking down the hall and yank their children out of my way. He doesn't mention the hostile stares and the unwelcoming words I've endured since I've arrived. He doesn't say anything about the kids who've been warned to stay far, far away, and the handful of elderly people who watch me too closely. I can only imagine what they've heard, where they got their stories from.

Juliette.

A girl with a lethal touch that saps the strength and energy of hot-blooded human beings until they're limp, paralyzed carcasses wheezing on the floor. A girl who spent most of her life in hospitals and juvenile detention centers, a girl who was cast off by her own parents, labeled as certifiably insane and sentenced to isolation in an asylum where even the rats were afraid to live.

A girl.

So power hungry that she killed a small child. She tortured a toddler. She brought a grown man gasping to his knees. She doesn't even have the decency to kill herself.

None of it is a lie.

So I look at Castle with spots of color on my cheeks and unspoken letters on

my lips and eyes that refuse to reveal their secrets.

He sighs.

He almost says something. He tries to speak but his eyes inspect my face and he changes his mind. He only offers me a quick nod, a deep breath, taps his watch, says, “Three hours until lights-out,” and turns to go.

Pauses in the doorway.

“Ms. Ferrars,” he says suddenly, softly, without turning around. “You’ve chosen to stay with us, to fight with us, to become a member of Omega Point.” A pause. “We’re going to need your help. And I’m afraid we’re running out of time.”

I watch him leave.

I listen to his departing footsteps as they echo alongside his last words and I lean my head back against the wall. Close my eyes against the ceiling. Hear his voice, solemn and steady, ringing in my ears.

We’re running out of time, he said.

As if time were the kind of thing you could run out of, as if it were measured into bowls that were handed to us at birth and if we ate too much or too fast or right before jumping into the water then our time would be lost, wasted, eaten up, already spent.

But time is beyond our finite comprehension. It’s endless, it exists outside of us; we cannot run out of it or lose track of it or find a way to hold on to it. Time goes on even when we do not.

We have plenty of time, is what Castle should have said. We have all the time in the world, is what he should have said to me. But he didn’t because what he meant tick tock is that our time tick tock is shifting. It’s hurtling forward heading in an entirely new direction slamming face-first into something else and

tick
tick
tick
tick
tick
it’s almost

time for war.

Excerpt from Warner’s Files

Want more from Warner? Get a peek inside his private log, as well as confidential files from The Reestablishment.

Log: Day 1

She is currently sleeping in my bed.

I finally provided her with the perfect opportunity to display her abilities and she fainted. The tiny, frail thing—I must make sure she eats more—just collapsed in my arms. I've seen my fair share of horrified persons in my nineteen years—emotions competing on the faces of my dying enemies, my own men, even myself. But the kind of terror and paralyzing fear on her face was so unexpected as to be remarkable. Jenkins, yes, I expected him to be perhaps mildly concerned for his own welfare. But this girl. The insanity I've been told about was all over her face only in that moment.

She perplexes me.

Every account I've read of her—every record, report, every incident on file—claims that she is vicious and delusional. But she is neither. She does not seem to understand the breadth of her abilities; she can't see the limitless potential in who she could become; she doesn't even seem interested. She is not at all like how she was described. I thought I was enlisting a willing warrior—someone eager to unleash herself—and I was wildly mistaken. This is going to be much more difficult than I anticipated.

It should also be noted that the photos I found in her medical records are ridiculous. They are such a misrepresentation of this girl as to be laughable. She is scared and broken, yes. But she is also angry—and stunningly beautiful. I'm certain I've never seen such a beautiful creature in my life. This comes as a great surprise, actually, as I was prepared to be at least mildly repulsed by her. Unfortunately, not only did her beauty immediately distract me—such odd blue-green eyes—but I noticed a sweetness in her features that I'm afraid might actually be sincere. I'm not sure yet if it's just a clever facade designed to fool her enemies (I doubt it), but I can't take any chances with her safety.

I've decided that she cannot, under any circumstances, be allowed to communicate with my men. They've been isolated for too long; a generous smile from a beautiful girl would ruin the best of them. And this is precisely why I

decided her incident with Jenkins had to be public. I needed to make sure the men knew exactly what she was capable of; they cannot be allowed to think of her as a meek and vulnerable girl—I do not want her to be harassed while she's here. I'm confident that it will be much safer for her if she is feared, if they think she is a wild, uncontrollable monster. It's better for her that way. I don't think she'd listen if I were to simply instruct her to be unkind to the soldiers.

~~A belated~~ (***see below****)

She is a very stubborn creature.

She fights me over dresses and shoes and refuses to eat her food, like some kind of petulant child. She falls apart at the sight of lavish decor and doesn't seem pleased to have an actual bed to sleep in. It's absurd. Who but a child would fight over food and outfits? What rational being refuses a warm meal and an armoire full of clothes? It's becoming increasingly apparent to me that not only does she not know how to fight but she doesn't even know how to fight for the right things. Food and clothing are staples, necessary items; it didn't once occur to me that she would be unhappy to eat solid meals or be unwilling to change out of the same ragged outfit she's worn for almost a year.

This is not the mind of a vicious human being.

This is the mind of a broken girl who thinks she is showing strength by refusing the very basic components of survival: Food to give her energy. Clothes to protect her body. Sleep to revive her spirit. She does not think like a fighter. She does not know how to equip herself, how to take advantage of her surroundings in order to dominate her opponents. If she were thinking like a predator, she'd be attempting to break out of here—she would've used dinner as an opportunity to kill or disarm as many of my men as possible. She would not have sat at a table laden with food, refusing to speak, refusing to eat, refusing to answer my questions, as though she were a wounded little girl mortally offended to be ordered to eat her vegetables and wear a pretty dress to dinner.

She is, in a word, harmless.

I've only known her for less than one day, so I hope my later observations will prove these early hypotheses wrong, but it seems abundantly clear that she has no idea what she's capable of. So much so, in fact, that I'm confused as to how she even got to this point. She is no more of a danger to society than a pair of

scissors locked in a drawer. How could her parents look at her in fear? How could they—why would they—give her up to the authorities? How could the doctors not see that she is probably more afraid of herself than they are? She has been outrageously wronged in her life. Misjudged. Mistreated. Locked away and labeled insane for no reason. She may have killed that little boy, but even I can see now that it was very likely an accident. I tested her—I gave her an opportunity to embrace her true nature, to be the terror she's accused of being, and instead she stood screaming in front of me, tears streaming down her face, looking like the pain she's been carrying might actually kill her—

I'm surprised by my reaction to her.

Surprised that my hands shake just a bit as I type this, that I want to give in to my own rage, this blind anger I feel in knowing that there's been a great injustice done to her. She is so innocent. So small. But I see the hurt, the pain simmering just under the surface of her skin, this fierce stubbornness that gives me hope. In time, I'm sure I can coax the emotion out of her. I can help her. She can be so much more than what they've done to her. Years of abuse and neglect and unfounded cruelty created this cowering girl, but I can attempt to undo the damage. It will be more work than I had anticipated, but I think in the end it will be worth it. She has so much potential—such tremendous, extraordinary power she's unaware of—and I will teach her how to use it. She's been wronged by the world, and the anger she undoubtedly feels (and that I will endeavor to provoke out of her) will be the fuel she'll require in order to fight back, to exact revenge in a satisfying manner. She will be perfect, and perfectly suited to my needs. I know it.

But I have a lot of work to do.

THE
(RE)ESTABLISHMENT
our future, redefined.

THE REESTABLISHMENT
ARMED FORCES
Department of Police

Section One: DEFENDANT

CASE SUMMARY

Case No.: 186415

DEFENDANT: Juliette Ferrars

DOB: 5/18/[redacted] ID #: [redacted]

HOME ADDRESS: 162 Forest Road [redacted] HOME PH: [redacted]

BUSINESS ADDRESS: BUSINESS PH:

SEX:	RACE:	HT.:	WT.:	HAIR:	EYES:
F	W	5'3"	102 lb.	Brown/long	Blue-green

CORR. LENSES: ☐ Hard Contacts ☐ Soft Contacts

FACIAL HAIR: ☐ Full Beard ☐ Goatee ☐ Mustache

DRIVER'S LICENSE #: STATE:

REVOCATION: ☐ YES ☐ NO

Section Two: VEHICLE

VEH. MAKE: YR.: STYLE: COLOR:

MODEL: VEH. LIC. #: STATE: VIN:

VEH. P/L: ☐ YES ☐ NO

TOWED: ☐ YES ☐ NO

TOWED BY:

KEYS:

VEH. LOC.:

REL. TO:

Section Three: OFFENSE

OFFENSE (REASON FOR CONTACT): Domestic disturbance.

LOC. OF OFFENSE: 162 Forest Road [redacted]

PROOF OF INS.: ☑ YES ☐ NO

OFFENSE DATE: 4/22/[redacted]

TIME: 22:30 DAY OF WEEK: Saturday

THE (RE)ESTABLISHMENT

THE REESTABLISHMENT
ARMED FORCES
Department of Police

Section Four: TEST

VISUAL SOBRIETY: ☐ YES ☐ NO	BY:	
	WITNESS:	
BREATHALYZER TEST: ☐ YES ☐ NO	BY:	
	TIME:	RESULT:
B.A. BY (PRINT NAME):	WITNESS:	TIME:
BLOOD DRAWN FROM (PART OF BODY):	RESULT:	

Section Five: NARRATIVE

FACTS OF THE CASE (WHAT OCCURRED?):

Received call about a domestic disturbance, neighbors complaining about screaming and fighting going on at Defendant's home. They feared violence; D is known to be volatile and combative. Spoke to parents of D and they confirmed she was being violent and the mother said, "She's sick. She has some kind of problem and we don't know how to deal with her." I asked if D is mentally unstable and both parents said yes. I suggested they send her to a Facility if the situation got worse. They thanked me and said they were looking into it. I asked if there was anything else I could do for them and they thanked me again and said goodnight. I did not enter the home of D. I did not see the D in person, but the parents seemed genuinely afraid.

Section Six: ADMINISTRATION

INV. OFFICER: J. Campbell	SER. #: 00027	ASSIGNMENT: 857
INV. OFFICER:	SER. #:	ASSIGNMENT:
DET. ASSIGNED:	SER. #:	ASSIGNMENT:
CASE FILED BY:	SER. #:	ASSIGNMENT:

SECTOR 45

REHABILITATION CENTER QUESTIONNAIRE

Parent(s)/Guardian(s) surrendering custody of individuals to the care of the Sanitarium please fill out this intake form to the best of your abilities for the records of our psychiatric attendants and staff members.

Name of Patient: Juliette Ferrars

Date of Birth: 5/18/[redacted]

Today's Date: 6/24/[redacted]

Name(s) of Parent(s)/Guardian(s): Eric Ferrars

Evelyn Ferrars

Residence (town, county): 142 Forest Road [redacted]

Place of Birth (town, state, nation if foreign born): [redacted]

Sex: F

Single, married, divorced, or widowed: Single

Children: None

Occupation: Student

Education (collegiate, academic or common school, read or write) or none: High School

Religious belief or denomination: None

MEDICAL HISTORY

Please assist us in providing your dependent with the most up-to-date care available by providing health history information.

HEIGHT: 5' 3" WEIGHT: 102 lbs BLOOD TYPE: AB-

Check YES below if your dependent currently has any of the following or NO if your dependent does not.

CONSTITUTIONAL

Yes	No	
☐	☑	Fever
☑	☐	Weight loss/gain

CARDIOVASCULAR

Yes	No	
☑	☐	Heart pain
☐	☑	High blood pressure
☑	☐	Low blood pressure
☑	☐	Chest pains
☑	☐	Heart murmur

MUSCULOSKELETAL

Yes	No	
☐	☑	Muscle pain
☐	☑	Joint pain

HEMATOLOGIC/LYMPHATIC

Yes	No	
☑	☐	Anemia
☐	☑	Bleeding problems

ALLERGIC/IMMUNOLOGIC

Yes	No	
☐	☑	Lupus
☐	☑	Allergies

NEUROLOGICAL

Yes	No	
☑	☐	Headaches
☐	☑	Migraines
☑	☐	Fainting/Seizures
☑	☐	Frequently tired
☑	☐	Difficulty sleeping

EYES

Yes	No	
☐	☑	Glaucoma
☐	☑	Cataracts
☐	☑	Blindness
☐	☑	Eye pain
☑	☐	Light flashes
☐	☑	Double vision
☐	☑	History of eye surgeries
☐	☑	Retinal detachment
☐	☑	Eye/head injury
☐	☑	Tired eyes

RESPIRATORY

Yes	No	
☑	☐	Asthma
☐	☑	Chronic bronchitis
☐	☑	Emphysema

PSYCHIATRIC

Yes	No	
☑	☐	Symptoms of depression, anxiety
☑	☐	Symptoms of bipolar disorder
☑	☐	Symptoms of schizophrenia

GENITOURINARY

Yes	No	
☐	☑	Dialysis, kidney failure

ENDOCRINE

Yes	No	
☐	☑	Diabetes
☐	☑	Hyper-/Hypothyroid

MEDICAL HISTORY *(continued)*

1. Is there any family history of mental illness? None.

2. Is there any family history of epilepsy, convulsions, or delusions?
None.

3. Is there any family history of addiction or substance abuse?
None.

4. Does the patient present any signs of addiction or substance abuse?
No.

5. Does the patient have suicidal thoughts or tendencies?
possibly.

6. Is the patient taking any medications at present? Paroxetine for anxiety, Olanzapine for unusual thinking and emotion suppression, Valproic acid for mania and convulsions.

7. Does the patient suffer from recurring hallucinations?
Y.E.S. She claims to suffer from severe nightmares where she claims she's being suffocated to death. Wakes up gasping for air.

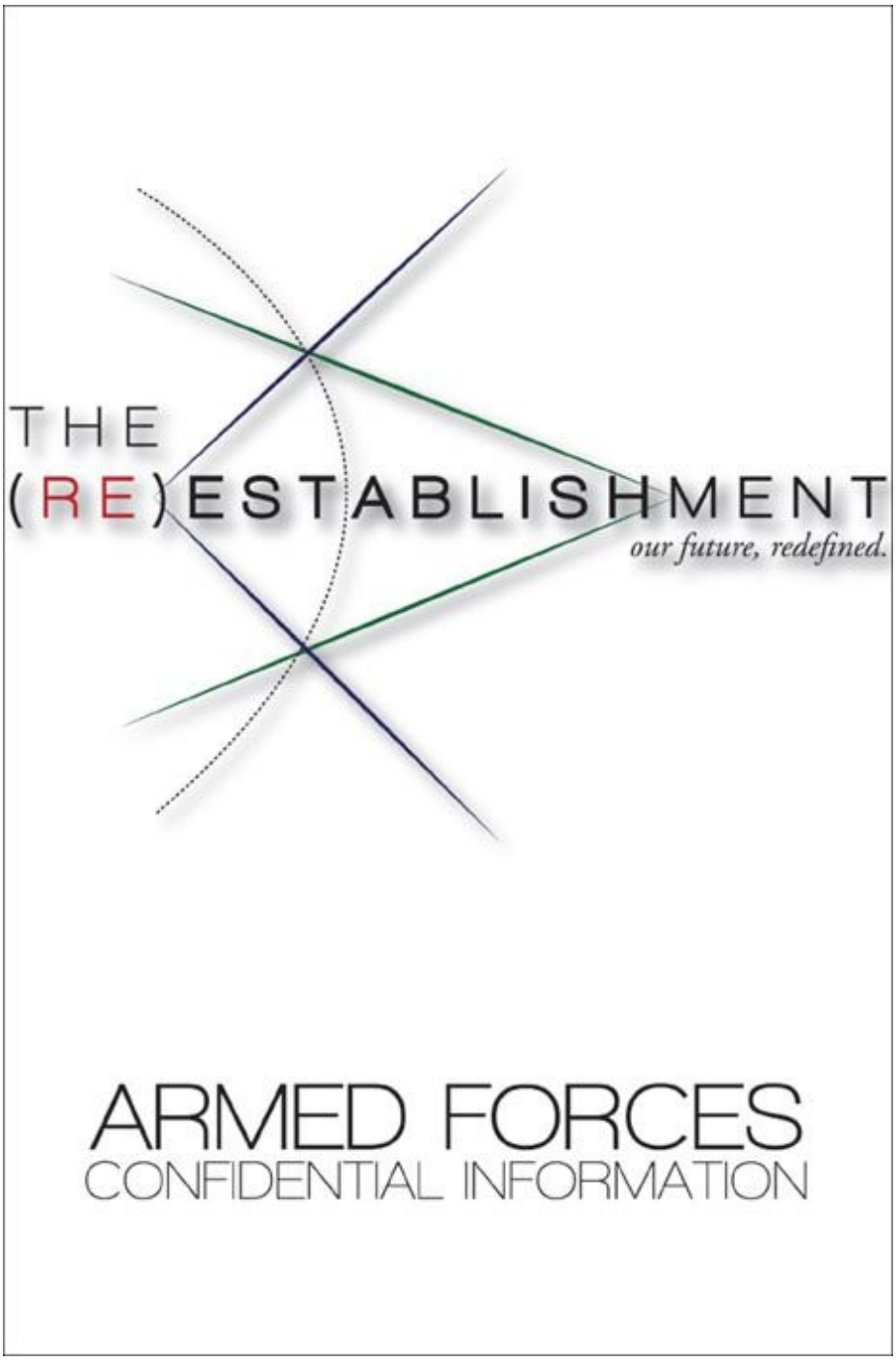
MEDICAL HISTORY *(continued)*

8. Does the patient have any delusions? She is entirely delusional. Thinks she has some kind of "power" to harm others.

9. Has the patient ever exhibited violent tendencies or attempted to harm or injure others? Yes. Murdered a small child in a grocery store by choking him to death. Claims innocence - blames her "touch."

10. Are there any physical manifestations of the patient's psychological illness? Claims paralysis during "touching" fits.

Mode of Patient Admission
Voluntary? Y (N)
Please explain: she murdered a little boy. She is clinically insane. Doctors/police recommended locking her away.



ARMED FORCES
CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION

ARMED FORCES

PERSON OF INTEREST

CONDENSED FACT SHEET

PROFILE

FULL LEGAL NAME (last, first, middle, suffix)	AGE	BIRTHDATE (mm/dd/yyyy)
Kent, Adam	18	12/02/####

GENDER	HEIGHT	WEIGHT	EYE COLOR	HAIR COLOR
M	5'11"	180 lbs	Blue	Dark Brown

STREET NAME	COMPOUND NO.	SECTOR NO.
N/A	none assigned	45

TITLE	IDENTIFICATION NO.
Private First Class, Level 4, R.A.F.	45B-86659

RELATIONS

PARENTS (list name(s), if any)	SIBLINGS (name/age/gender)
deceased	James Kent / 10 / male

NOTES

COMMENTS, NOTABLE INFRACTIONS, ETC.

Private Adam Kent has been placed on special assignment to guard the focus of Experiment 5H-A773RM3, alias Juliette Ferrars. His past history (verified through school records) with JF may prove integral to the success and/or failure of said experiment and, as a result, his interactions with the test subject must be monitored closely.

Note: There exists no record of registration for either Adam Kent or younger sibling, James Kent, in The Reestablishment's regulated territory. Whereabouts of sibling are unknown.

ARMED FORCES

PERSON OF INTEREST
CONDENSED FACT SHEET

PROFILE

FULL LEGAL NAME (last, first, middle, suffix)	AGE	BIRTHDATE (mm/dd/yyyy)
Warner, [redacted]	19	04/24/#####

GENDER	HEIGHT	WEIGHT	EYE COLOR	HAIR COLOR
M	5'9"	170 lbs	Green	Blond

STREET NAME	COMPOUND NO.	SECTOR NO.
N/A	resides on base	45

TITLE	IDENTIFICATION NO.
Colonel, Chief Regent, R.A.F.	45B-00001

RELATIONS

PARENTS (list name(s), if any)	SIBLINGS (name/age/gender)
Supreme Commander Anderson, R.A.F.	
Leila Warner	

NOTES

COMMENTS, NOTABLE INFRACTIONS, ETC.

Colonel, Chief Regent Warner is the son of Supreme Commander Anderson, and the head of Sector 45. Most notable of his many responsibilities: He oversees all 3,700 soldiers currently housed on base and communicates with other H.O.S. (Heads of Sectors) on defense strategies, R.A.F. rules and regulations, work and housing concerns for citizens, and the further development of every stage in our evolving world.

Currently he is at work on Experiment 5H-A773RM3, which he hopes to utilize as a weapon of mass destruction in securing our future.

ARMED FORCES

PERSON OF INTEREST
CONDENSED FACT SHEET

PROFILE

FULL LEGAL NAME (last, first, middle, suffix)	AGE	BIRTHDATE (mm/dd/yyyy)
Kishimoto, Kenji	20	08/26/#####

GENDER	HEIGHT	WEIGHT	EYE COLOR	HAIR COLOR
M	5'10"	175 lbs	Black	Black

STREET NAME	COMPOUND NO.	DISTRICT NO.
N/A	none assigned	45

TITLE	IDENTIFICATION NO.
Private First Class, Level 1, R.A.F.	45B-67999

RELATIONS

PARENTS (list name(s), if any)	SIBLINGS (name/age/gender)
father deceased	
mother unknown	

NOTES

COMMENTS, NOTABLE INFRACTIONS, ETC.

Note: Private Kenji Kishimoto has received 17 demerits since enlisting.

Repeat offenses include:

- wandering around base after curfew
- quarreling with other soldiers
- asking for larger portions at meals
- failing to uphold R.A.F. (Reestablishment Armed Forces) standards for personal hygiene and uniform.

ARMED FORCES

PERSON OF INTEREST
CONDENSED FACT SHEET

PROFILE

FULL LEGAL NAME (last, first, middle, suffix)	AGE	BIRTHDATE (mm/dd/yyyy)
Ferrars, Juliette	17	05/18/####

GENDER	HEIGHT	WEIGHT	EYE COLOR	HAIR COLOR
F	5'3"	102 lbs	Blue/Green	Dark Brown

STREET NAME	COMPOUND NO.	SECTOR NO.
N/A	none assigned	45

TITLE	IDENTIFICATION NO.
Experiment 5H-A773RM3	45B-11111

RELATIONS

PARENTS (list name(s), if any)	SIBLINGS (name/age/gender)
Eric Ferrars	
Evelyn Ferrars	

NOTES

COMMENTS, NOTABLE INFRACTIONS, ETC.

Juliette Ferrars is the focus of Experiment 5H-A773RM3, a new project initiated and monitored by Colonel, Chief Regent Warner. Details of the experiment are not readily available, but the subject is classified as an abnormal human specimen with a genetic deviation. She is known to be volatile and lethal; all interaction with JF must first be approved by C.C.R. Warner.

Note: Unless otherwise directed by C.C.R. Warner, no soldier should touch Experiment 5H-A773RM3.

About the Author

Tahereh Mafi is a girl. She was born in a small city somewhere in Connecticut and currently resides in Orange County, California, where the weather is just a little too perfect for her taste. When unable to find a book, she can be found reading candy wrappers, coupons, and old receipts. *Shatter Me* and *Unravel Me* are the first two novels in a trilogy about Juliette, the girl with the deadly touch. You can visit Tahereh online at www.taherehmafi.com or on Twitter: @TaherehMafi.

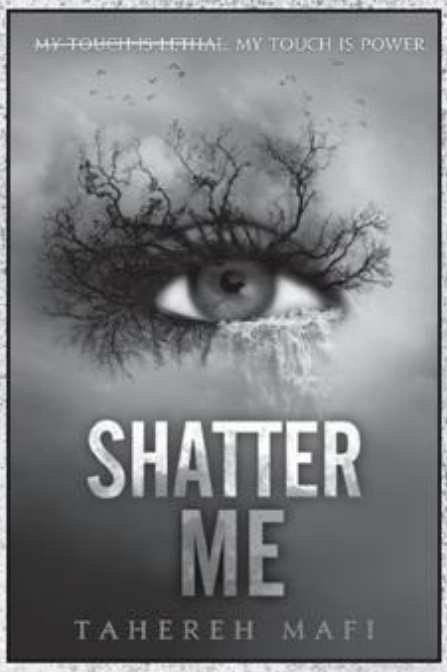
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Also by Tahereh Mafi

Shatter Me

Back Ads

Don't Miss the Book That Started It All!



GO BACK TO WHERE IT ALL BEGAN WITH

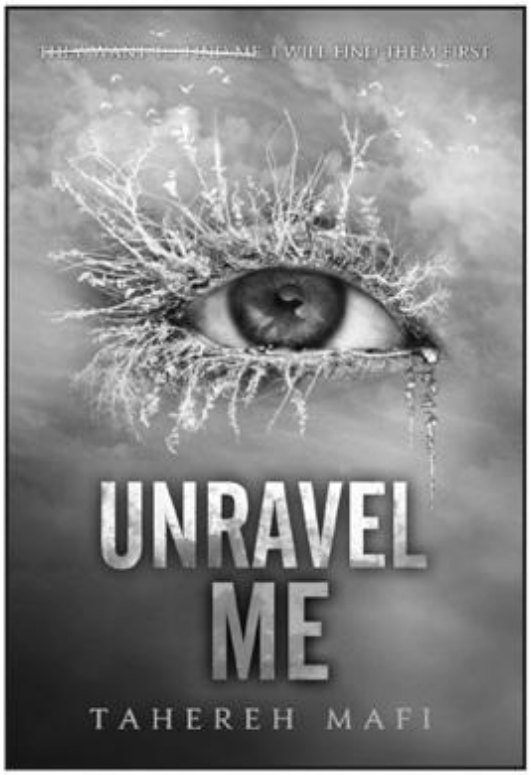
SHATTER ME.

No one knows why Juliette's touch is fatal. The Reestablishment has plans for her, but Juliette has plans of her own. After a lifetime without freedom, she's finally discovering a strength to fight back for the very first time—and to find a future with the one boy she thought she'd lost forever.

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JOIN THE RESISTANCE



Juliette has escaped to the rebel headquarters at Omega Point. She's free from The Reestablishment. Free to be with Adam. Free to fight.

But Warner still has plans for her.

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Destroy Me
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(A belated, slightly irrelevant observation, but one that occurred to me nonetheless: It doesn't seem possible that she's had any experience with the opposite gender. This, compounded by a lifetime of degradation and isolation, leads me to believe that she has no grasp on the extent of her physical attractions. This is a weakness that must be remedied somehow; she could use this information to her advantage. She must be able to understand—and harness—every tool in her arsenal. I'll find a way to work on this.)


SHE WILL CHOOSE ME.
DESTROY ME
TAHEREH MAFI