

Progeny of Time #1:  
THE GROWER'S GIFT  
By  
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## CHAPTER ONE

Sunrise colored the sky a bright orange, blending with the surface of the biological shield that protected the city of Neo York from the harsh, unpredictable weather elsewhere in the world. Ty entered the enclosure where his pet tiger Isis lived, a world of sand dunes and random shrubbery, and called her. She bounded towards him and let him attach the collar around her neck, probably already sensing she'd soon be roaming the open wastelands beyond the shield.

Ty's phone buzzed as he was adjusting the wireless connection to Isis' collar. His father's wide face dominated one of the tiles of the phone, shaped like a bracelet today, the man's cheeks red and puffed out.

"What do you mean you're going hunting today?" Caesar Remarque shouted as soon as Ty answered the phone.

"It's just for one night, Dad," Ty protested. "Why is it a problem?"

"The most important conference of this decade is about to take place in three days," his father barked. "If you want to succeed me in running this city one day you better start acting more maturely."

"Are you insisting I stay, Dad?" Ty asked. "Because I'm eighteen, and you can't order me around like that anymore."

"I can do far worse than order you around," his father warned.

The door to his apartment hissed open. Ty turned to see his mother beaming at him, the floor length light blue silk dress she wore billowing when she walked into the room. Her pitch black hair fell in a straight glossy sheet down to her hips. The color of her dress matched her eyes. And Ty's. The tiger growled softly when his mother approached and took the phone from Ty's hand.

"Come now, Caesar, don't be so strict," she said to his father. "Of course he has time to have some fun before the boring legal talks begin. If I can spare him from the facility for a few days, surely you can too."

She winked at Ty conspiratorially, her eyes alive with kindness. Ty smiled at her, hoping nothing on his face betrayed how fake the sentiment behind it was.

"You'll spoil him right out of his place as my heir one of these days, Violetta," his father said, and hung up.

His mother handed the phone back to Ty. "Don't worry, I'll smooth this over for you with your father. Go and have fun."

Ty turned and headed for the door.

His sister Eve came running down the hallway as he exited his apartment, and dropped to her knees beside Isis. "I heard you were leaving, Ty. And without so much as a goodbye."

Isis lay on her back and purred while Eve stroked her thick fur.

"I'll be gone for two days. Why is everyone so worried about it?" Ty asked exasperatedly.

Eve stood up. "Don't be so harsh, Ty."

Isis hissed and backed away when his mother attempted to pet her too.

"She doesn't like you, Mom," Eve said, making Ty cringe.

*How many times do I have to tell Eve to be nice to Mom?*

His mother cleared her throat and straightened up. "It is a little childish for you to be leaving the Ring now, Ty. Then again, once the talks start you might not be able to for a while."

Ty almost asked her what she was planning, then decided he didn't really want to know.

She stood on tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. "Have fun. And bring me back a gifted one to study, if you find one."

Ty's stomach felt as though he'd swallowed a fistful of ice. His eyes flashed to Eve before he had the sense to stop them.

All he could do was nod to his mother's request. She walked away down the hallway chuckling.

The moment she disappeared, Ty knelt on the floor beside his sister so that their eyes were level. "Whatever you do, don't ever let her know you have a special gift."

Eve brushed a strand of his hair away from his eyes. "How many times do you think you have to tell me that? I understood it the last hundred times."

"You're eleven. You forget things. Promise me," Ty insisted.

Eve's soft brown eyes were every bit as kind as their mother's, but in her case they didn't tell a lie.

"I do not forget things," she sighed. "But fine. For the 101st time, I promise."

~

"What took you so long?" Lana snapped at Ty when he finally entered the hovercraft, then glared at Isis. "And why did you have to bring your pet with you?"

If Ty had ever expected any sort of loving compassion from Lana, he gave up the dream long ago. Still, she worked out great as a girlfriend. Ruthless enough to please both his mother and father, and self-absorbed enough to think love equaled gifts, power and money. Her ruthlessness and lack of compassion didn't make her much of a companion, but at least she wasn't very needy. Besides, she was every bit as hot as her fiery hair and slanted green eyes promised.

Ty pulled her closer and kissed her to stop any more questions.

"What, you can't wait ten minutes for me?" he asked once he broke the kiss.

Lana's brother Rober cleared his throat behind them. "Can we leave now? If you two are quite done, that is?"

Ty turned to stand between them. As usual, it wasn't enough to prevent Lana from lashing out. "I will thank you not to parade your jealousy so proudly, Rober. Ty is my boyfriend, he doesn't want to be yours."

She laughed harshly at her own joke.

Ty shrugged his shoulders at his friend. Rober should've stayed quiet. "Is everyone else here?" he asked.

Rober nodded and started walking to the cockpit. "Yes, obviously."

Ty followed him. "Don't taunt her if you don't want her to be mean to you," Ty said as soon as the doors slid shut behind them.

"I can handle my sister," Rober said. "What I don't understand is what you see in her."

Ty shrugged. "She's hot, and fierce."

"So it's not that you see in her a lifelong companion to cherish and support you, and stand by you in good and bad?"

Ty laughed aloud. "No. All that's just a fairytale. No one ever finds someone like that! And I'm not even looking."

Rober called up the map of the Badlands. "Where do you want to go?"

Ty peered at the map for a few seconds, then pointed at a spot about two hundred miles away. Nothing but wilderness flanked the five small towns in the area. "That should be fine."

"So far? You realize we have to be back by tomorrow night at the latest."

"Don't tell me you're eager to participate in the Nova 18 talks?" Ty asked as he read off the coordinates of the spot he'd chosen. He sat behind the control screen and punched in the numbers. "It will just be more of the same tedious back and forth. Nothing ever gets settled in those talks."

"Of course I care what happens with Nova 18. I think abandoning Earth to settle and eventually destroy another planet is the stupidest idea in the history of humanity!"

Ty regretted asking. Rober was breathing hard beside him, his green eyes bulging, already all riled up about his favorite topic: saving the world. He never shut up about it for more than five minutes since he learned what went on in the world beyond the shield surrounding the city. And that was over ten years ago.

Ty took over the control of the hovercraft and eased it out of the hanger. As soon as they cleared the building, he guided it straight down to the lowest highway and sped up.

"Slow down to the appropriate speed limit!" a mechanical voice chimed from the speakers.

Ty ignored it and sped up even more. There was hardly any traffic on the lowest highway anyway, and he wanted to leave the Ring as quickly as possible.

"No need to kill us all with your flying, Ty," Rober said. "I get it, you don't like talking about politics."

"Politics is fine by me. It's these revolutionary ideas of yours I have a problem with," Ty replied, slowing the craft down when they reached the shield.

The word PASSCODE flashed across the control screen. Ty unzipped his left sleeve and pressed his tiger tattoo, the mark of House Remarque, against the glass. Heat spread through the inked lines as the machine read the code that would open the gate. A few seconds later the craft squeezed through the shield and into the Badlands. Ty let the autopilot take over and leaned back.

Rober glared, his nostrils flaring. "Wanting to help the displaced in the Badlands survive doesn't make me a criminal, Ty."

"I'm not saying you're a criminal. My parents and the rest of the panel, on the other hand, might take that view." Ty chuckled at his own joke.

"Well, they're wrong," Rober said with a straight face. "And it's time someone did something to change their minds."

"I'm fine with it as long as by 'someone', you don't mean me," Ty said, fighting down another chuckle.

Rober kicked Ty's chair, making it wobble. "Of course I mean you. You have the most to lose if things don't change."

Cold seared through Ty's forehead. He grit his teeth to stifle it before it grew. "Don't talk about that, I'm warning you."

The door hissed open before Rober had a chance to reply.

"Are you two quite done bonding in here?" Lana asked. "Where are we going anyway?"

She shrieked when she saw the flashing point of their destination. "It will take us the whole day to get there. Whose idea was it?"

Rober shrugged and pointed at Ty.

"Change it!" Lana insisted. "I don't want to go that deep into the Badlands. Who knows what kind of horrors breed there?"

Ty rose from his seat and approached her. "Don't tell me you're scared. I thought you were the best hunter among us."

Lana blushed, the color clashing with her hair. "I am. That still doesn't mean I have to prove it so far from home."

Ty placed his arm around her shoulders and led her from the room. "I'm too lazy to change it now. And we do have the whole day to ourselves now. That's a good thing, right?"

"I guess," she said and melted into him.

## CHAPTER TWO

Maya huddled into a nook in the fork of an old oak tree that must have seen hundreds of years of spring and summer, winter and fall. The bark now peeled off the majestic trunk behind her and she felt no life inside it. The tree didn't have many more years ahead of it.

Below her a stream, swelled by the torrential rains that fell for the last three days and washed away the last of their grain, frothed and raged. Already it had formed a river with no bank. The current brought a piece of roof here, a chest there, a chair, a table, sometimes a doll. Only yesterday the current brought a woman. Bloated, tinged purple, unrecognizable. She wasn't from their town, so they let her float on by for some other town or village to worry about. Maya shuddered at the memory, tears welling in her eyes. She bit down hard on her bottom lip.

*I'm too much of a crybaby. I can't ever help anyone if all I do is cry.*

In the distance, along the horizon, the afternoon sun was setting dusty orange, and cold white stars already twinkled in the sky. Frost would come this night.

*Some spring we're having.*

Maya had known it wasn't the real Spring when the temperatures rose so soon after New Year's. She should have tried harder to warn the people of her town not to plant yet. Not that they ever listened to her. Winter snows had started back in September, and everyone was eager to begin planting. The Spring of 2102 brought only false hope. A fine start to the new year that was. Nearly everyone lost their crops in the floods that followed the brief spring. Many had feared the end of the world. Yet if the world was ending, it had started years ago. Earth had been dying a slow death for decades now, as had the people who still survived in the Badlands.

Frosts would last for months, the thick snow clouds obscuring the sun. And people froze or died of heat and dehydration when the sun beat down mercilessly, drying everything in its path, the soil, the plants, animals and people. There was no more telling when either would come, or if the next flood would take your home in its frothing passage.

There was only today in the Badlands and what you made of it. And you were either happy to be alive, or not. Too many weren't.

A familiar whistle chased Maya's dark thoughts away. She whistled back and extended her hand to help Giles climb up and join her in the tree.

"Off work already?" she asked.

He nodded and nestled in close to her. He had to, now that both were too big to easily fit side by side on the oak's thick branch. Not like they could as children, back when Giles had come to live in Maya's town eight years ago. Now they were both 16, both of age.

Giles bumped her arm with his elbow when he fished out something from his pocket. He held out the paper wrapped thing to her. "Happy Birthday, Maya!"

She gasped. "What is this? You shouldn't have spent money on me."

"Who else do I have to spend it on?" Giles asked quietly.

Maya clutched his hand over the present and hugged him, silently cursing her insensitivity. Giles' mother and his little sister had both died barely a month ago, coughing

themselves to death. Maya couldn't help them. She'd tried so hard, so very hard. For a time, she had thought she found the spark of life in Giles' sister, the survival streak, as Maya thought of it, and was sure she could save her. Then Giles' mother died and the girl just wasted away.

Giles' body shook in sobs, and Maya let her own tears flow. "I should have saved them. I could have, if only I could figure out how to use my gift. I'm so sorry, Giles."

Giles tensed up and pulled out of their embrace. He wiped away her tears with his sleeve and leaned in to kiss her before she realized what he was planning. She turned away hastily, so his lips brushed her cheek instead.

"Giles, no," she said, not daring to meet his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he sobbed.

Giles was her friend, her confidant, the one person who listened and never judged. Why did he have to insist on something more?

Maya focused her eyes on the rushing water. "I already told you. You're like a brother to me...my best friend. I don't want to lose that..."

She let her voice trail off. It was true though. The day he moved to her town was like getting a brother, a twin even. They even resembled each other, and had the same golden brown eyes and sun-kissed skin. Giles' hair matched his eyes though, and turned yellow in the summer. Her own hair was so dark brown it looked almost black. The color of healthy spring earth her mother would say. Maya had never seen such soil. All they had for planting was brittle, light brown soil scorched by the heat of summers that went on too long, or was destroyed by the snows and rains that came when they weren't supposed to.

Giles had stopped sobbing, and sat rigid beside her. Maya chanced a small peek at him from the corner of her eyes.

His golden brown eyes twinkled through the tears. "Let's try that again...happy sixteenth birthday, Maya."

He forced the package into her hand and didn't try to kiss her again. "I made this for you, I didn't buy it."

Maya unwrapped the paper. Inside lay a circle of leather, its tasseled ends tied in a neat bow. She pulled the ends and a bracelet uncoiled, an inch wide, its face covered with intricate carvings: a blooming tree, a couple with a child, fruits, birds, even cows. All the living creatures moved as though alive, and the fruits gleamed as though freshly grown, the leaves on the trees rippling in a soft summer breeze. Real talent made the bracelet.

"Do you like it? I thought it could remind you of what you want to learn so much," Giles said, studying her face seriously.

Giles was the only other person in the world who knew that Maya was certain she had the ability to give life back to the dying.

"I love it!," she exclaimed and extended her left arm towards him. "Will you tie it for me?"

It was the left hand, through which the warmth of her healing power always flowed. No, not always. Not even close. Only sometimes. And it never flowed, more like trickled. Perhaps the bracelet would help. All those living things. How could it not?

"You could earn good money selling things like this," Maya said, admiring the bracelet.

"No one in the Badlands has money enough to spend on trinkets," Giles replied quietly.

"Perhaps in one of the cities in the Ring then," Maya urged. He could make such beautiful things of leather, shoes and belts and gloves. "It's a shame to give it away for free."

Giles looked off into the distance. "The main purpose of the things I make is to have beauty in our lives. That's what my father always said. They have no real purpose except as trinkets, and they have too many of those in the cities. Besides, I can't work all that fast with these." He held out his hands, the last two fingers of each ending in stumps.

Maya smiled at him sadly.

"It's all pointless talk anyway," Giles continued. "You know very well that no one from the Badlands is allowed into the Ring."

Maya bit her bottom lip. The five cities of the Ring were overcrowded and none had accepted refugees for decades. Besides, who'd want to live there anyway? Behind glass windows in buildings so tall you couldn't see the ground because you were too high in the sky. At least in the Badlands, nature was still all around you every day. Even if the Earth was dying, someone should still be there to see it pass. Maya could change all that, she knew. Bring back hope to the people of the Badlands.

"If only I could learn to work my gift properly. If I could heal the Badlands, they'd open up the cities again," Maya muttered.

Giles' eyes flashed. "Do you think you can transform the entire planet? A few shoots here and there is all you've ever managed to grow."

"I'm still learning. I know in my heart that I have the power to make the Earth come to life again! I thought you believed me!"

Maya punched him in the arm and jumped from the tree. "I don't need you to believe me. I don't need anyone to believe me. You'll all see what I can do eventually, as soon as I learn to control it."

Giles jumped down too and took her hand. "I'm sorry. Of course I believe you. After all, I just saw the wheat shoots you managed to coax back to life."

Maya gasped. "What shoots? The ones that got soaked in the floods?"

Giles nodded.

"Why didn't you say right away?" Maya asked him, knowing it was the absolute worst thing to say as soon as the last sound left her mouth. Palpable hurt filled the air between them.

His eyes turned cold and distant. "I thought you already knew. My gift would fade in comparison to that news. I spent a long time working on it."

Maya squeezed his hand. "Don't say that. Your gift is already working. I can feel it. I'm sure that with its help, I can make those shoots grow all the way."

Already Maya thought the flow of life giving warmth was increasing down her left arm, pooling in her palm. She pulled him after her as she started running back home.

~

Dusk covered the town square by the time Maya and Giles reached it. A jet black hovercraft hummed in front of the pub, blue lights twinkling around the edges of its wings. Maya twisted her ankle painfully on a hole in the ground where some cobblestones were missing. She winced and grabbed onto Giles' hand tighter then led him back into the shadow of the houses that lined the square. It was better not to be noticed by any Citizens.

"I hope they're not here for another of their hunts," Maya whispered when they reached the road that led to her home at the edge of town, even though most of the houses that lined it were dark and deserted.

"The craft looked Special Forces to me, so maybe they're here for something else," Giles whispered back.

Maya groaned. "I doubt it. When was the last time Citizens came all the way out here for anything other than a hunt?"

Adventure seekers from the Ring would sometimes come to their town bringing along a pack of genetically engineered beasts and have themselves a hunt. For them, the wild animals that managed to adapt to the ever changing, unpredictable weather weren't fun enough to hunt. The vicious beasts they let loose and weren't able to hunt down were no fun for anyone. As if staying alive in the Badlands with barely enough food wasn't nearly impossible without having to worry about wild beasts attacking you as well.

The flickering light Maya's parents left burning on the back porch cast a pool of light into the small field beside Maya's home. She let go of Giles' hand and ran towards it. True enough, green shoots of wheat had pushed through the brittle earth, reaching towards the sky.

"I did it, Giles! I really did," she said when he knelt beside her.

He smiled and gazed at her with such softness and love in his eyes she had to look away.

Maya forced her thoughts back to the warmth building in her left arm, pooling in her palm. Somehow, the bracelet helped channel the warmth there and contained it. Now all she had to do was release the life giving energy and the wheat would shoot straight up into the air, ready for harvest. If snow fell in flurries tomorrow it wouldn't matter. They'd have grain to eat and enough seeds for the next planting. The whole town could have enough to eat, all of the starving and poor could have enough grain forever.

Maya fixed the image of healthy, ripe wheat firmly into her thoughts as she let the warmth flow from her fingers and into the soil. She saw it seeping into the earth, feeding the shoots with a life giving drink of energy. She closed her eyes, imagined the wheat saplings growing, turning from green to brown, the grains swaying in the soft summer breeze.

"What are you doing out there, Maya?" her mother called from the back door. Her voice was soft and strained, like she could make it go no higher, like it would break at any moment.

Maya jumped to her feet and hid her left hand behind her back. She waved to her mother with her right. "Coming! I wanted to check on the crops first!"

The hollows in her mother's pale cheeks filled out when she returned the smile. She wore her best dress of red velvet with a collar of lace.

"Come on in, both of you. There's turkey and birthday cake." Her mother waved them inside, still smiling.

"You shouldn't have, Mom," Maya said as she followed her mother inside. Yet the smell of the bird made her mouth water. Baked potatoes lined the turkey, glistening in the half light.

Her father pulled the platter from the oven, and turned to them. "It's not every day our only daughter comes of age. Of course we must celebrate."

They sat in the dining room that they never normally used, and ate off sparkling white china plates with golden scrolls worked into the edges. The turkey was a skinny, wiry thing, yet still the best that Maya had had in a long time. Probably the best that could be gotten anywhere in the Badlands.

Maya joined in as they sang her the happy birthday song, right before she blew out the single candle on her cake. It was the same candle they'd used for quite a few birthdays now.

After they finished the cake, her father uncorked a bottle of wine and poured for all of them. "A toast!" he said and raised his glass. Maya and the rest followed suit. "To Maya, who is now finally old enough to know better!"

"My father, the joker!" Maya said, laughing. She raised her glass and took a long drink. A full glass of wine. She'd only ever had a sip here and there. Finally being of age had its privileges, it seemed.

Her father took a black box with a light blue ribbon tied around it from a drawer by the door, and held it out to Maya. Her mother beamed beside him. "We hope you like it."

Maya kept her smile wide, but inwardly she frowned. The box alone was too costly. They shouldn't have. Not with their last grains destroyed by the floods.

The light in her mother's eyes was so bright, Maya didn't want to destroy the moment. Her mother looked younger, the way Maya remembered her from her earliest birthdays.

She untied the bow and slowly lifted the lid. Light glinted off a golden pendant shaped as a magnificent tree, its branches and roots entwined, encircling it. All thought of refusing the gift evaporated. The intricately carved leaves seemed to move in the glimmering light.

Still they shouldn't have.

Her father cleared his throat. "Do you like it?"

Some of the light had already disappeared from her mother's eyes, Maya saw when she looked up. "I love it. But this must have cost a fortune."

Her parents exchanged a strained look and then her father turned back to her. "Don't worry about any of that, Maya."

She hung it around her neck and grinned. "Thank you so much."

She hugged her mother, startled as always at how frail she was. Her father hugged both of them.

"It is an old heirloom, passed down for generations in the family," he whispered into her hair.

From the corner of her eye, Maya saw Giles stare out the window, his eyes unfocused. Hurt still clung to him like a rain cloud.

She held out her left arm. "Look what Giles made me."

They both leaned closer to admire the work, her father whistling appreciatively. "I haven't seen work this fine outside the Ring. You would do well there, Giles."

Giles waved his hand through the air dismissively, beaming. "The cities are no place for normal people."

Maya studied the bracelet and necklace side by side. "With both of these to channel my powers, I'm sure I can make a difference."

Her father coughed, and sprayed Maya with the wine he had tried to swallow.

"I thought you agreed you would stop saying things like that," he said when he regained control of his breathing. "Claiming you have a gift is a dangerous thing. People don't understand that kind of talk."

"They'd understand living a better life and that's what I want to give them," Maya protested. "Honestly, Dad, I've never heard of a bad thing happen to anyone with a gift."

Her father poured himself more wine. "You never knew anyone with a gift, so you have no idea what you are talking about."

"You know someone with a gift?" Maya asked. "Who?"

Her parents exchanged another strained look, and her mother shook her head. Maya's

father looked down at the table and continued anyway. "I went to the copse on the north side of town once to gather some firewood and found a dying woman there. In front of my very eyes, grass shot up from all around her, burying her from my sight."

"She could grow things? Like me?" Maya interrupted. "Where is she now?"

This woman had the same gift as Maya, and she could use it at will. She could teach Maya so much.

"She died. Our doctor couldn't heal her. She kept pleading with us all not to reveal to anyone what she could do, that they would kill her if they knew."

"Who's 'they'?" Maya asked, her heart beating furiously in her chest now.

"She never said. We assumed she spoke of the people of whatever town she was from. So you see, it's not safe to go around telling people you have a gift."

Maya glared at her father. His story was too fitting, the woman had a gift too much like her own. "I'm not a little girl anymore. You can't just tell me lies to scare me."

Her mother laid a hand on Maya's. "It's the truth."

Maya looked at Giles for some support, but he was turned away from them staring fixedly out the window. He turned to face them, his face pale and his eyes wide. "I can't believe it. You did it."

"Did what?" Maya asked.

"Come see," Giles said and pointed out the window. Maya walked up to him.

Tall, ripe wheat hissed in the night breeze.

*I did it! It worked.*

She opened the window and jumped out, ignoring the others' surprised yells.

Frost would come this night. The wheat needed to be picked.

Once it was all safely inside she'd listen to her parents' admonitions and warnings. They wouldn't refuse ripe, healthy wheat, not once it was collected and stored inside the house.

~

"How is this possible?" her father demanded, pulling Maya back from collecting the wheat, his voice hoarse, almost threatening. "These were no more than shoots this morning."

Maya looked into his eyes defiantly. "I did this with my gift. I let the life giving warmth water them, and make them grow. I also made sure the shoots survived after the floods."

Maya cowered when her father grabbed her arms, his strong fingers digging into her flesh painfully. "You will stop this silly talk. You can't heal with your touch!"

Spittle hit her face, and his blue eyes bulged the way they did every time he got angry. Maya wasn't about to back down, not with the proof of her powers brushing against her legs in the breeze.

"How can you say that?" she yelled, pulling herself free from his grasp. "This wheat is ready for picking."

Giles and her mother had followed them outside. Her mother was staring from one to the other, opening and closing her mouth. Giles shook his head slightly behind her mother's shoulder.

What was he saying? That she should calm down?

He was right, probably. Yet she had to make them understand, had to make them believe.

Her father pushed her aside and started trampling the wheat viciously.

"No!" Maya yelled and threw herself at him. He pushed her back and continued to destroy the crop.

Giles wrapped his arm around her chest and pulled her back.

"Let me go!" Maya yelled, fighting against Giles' arm. "Dad! Stop it! What's wrong with you?"

"Be quiet! No one must see this." Her father started kicking soil over the destroyed crop.

"Why? Imagine all the food we could grow! Why can't I practice my magic?"

Her father moved to her side so quickly that Giles pulled her back out of his reach. "Magic? I see no magic, just a silly girl with crazy ideas who will get hurt because of them. I will not hear you speak of gifts again. And if you ever do such a thing as this again, we are leaving this town."

Maya could count on one hand the number of times her father had truly lost his temper. His anger tonight made all those times pale in comparison. Yet, he was being unreasonable.

"Why can't you accept that I have a special gift?" Maya rounded on her father, Giles' arm still tight around her chest.

"You do *not* have a gift!" her father hissed. "This is dangerous talk. You could be kicked out of town for saying it. And how would you survive then? Out in the Badlands all alone with no drinking water and no food, and who knows what prowling around?"

"I could make an oasis," Maya retorted.

"Let's go back inside," her mother pleaded softly. Maya ignored her.

She finally succeeded in prying away Giles' arm and took a step towards her father.

"I have the ability to feed this whole town and I plan to use it! I am of age now. You can no longer tell me what to do," she said, keeping her voice low.

The muscles in his face tensed into a grimace, and Maya was sure he would strike her. Her mother stood between them and took hold of his arm.

"She is of age."

She turned to Maya, such sadness in her eyes that had been so bright not half an hour ago. "I bought the grains from a strange merchant who came here for market day about a month ago. Who knows what kind of mutated gene strand they contained? Maya, please listen to your father. He only wants the best for you. Let's not argue anymore. Let's go inside."

She tried to pull Maya's father after her, but he stood his ground and looked around nervously. "At least no one else saw this."

Maya's face heated up. Those grains were not from market. Or were they?

The night swam around Maya, her father's fast breathing making a cloud of smoke in front of her face.

No, she had the healing touch, had always had it. Didn't flowers grow taller after she sent the warmth into them? Didn't the apple tree grow larger fruits? Didn't the sick she visited and touched with her warmth sometimes get better? Didn't her dog still draw breath even after it was mauled by that gleaming eyed puma from the city?

Coincidences all, her parents always claimed. Maya knew better, and she had always hoped her parents would believe her if she gave them proof.

Maya bunched her hands into fists. "Fine, destroy this wheat. I'll grow more. And you can't stop me!"

Tears streamed down her face as she ran from them, trying to stifle the hurt and anger. Not even her own parents were on her side.

## CHAPTER THREE

Maya ran all the way to the town square before she finally had to stop. The icy air froze her lungs as she tried to draw deep breaths.

Giles stopped beside her, out of breath from trying to catch her. "Now what?"

She turned to face him so fast he took a step backwards. "You do believe me don't you? Or do you agree with my parents?"

He smiled and held out his hands pretending to ward her off. "Of course I believe you. Didn't I spend the last two nights in the freezing cold while you tried to bring the wheat back to life?"

He had. Some of the fire left her, replaced by the bitter cold of the night. "I'm not ready to go back and face my parents just yet."

Guilt started to creep over her anger, but anything she said to them now would still lead to another argument.

"Let's go to my house," Giles suggested.

Maya shook her head and pointed to the pub. "I want another glass of wine first." Maybe the pleasant fuzziness would take some of the edge off her anger.

Laughter and loud voices came through the open windows of the pub. The hovercraft was still parked outside, and by the sound of it everyone inside was having a blast.

"I'm not so sure it's a good idea with the Citizens in there," Giles said.

"They don't scare me," Maya said and hurried towards the pub. "This is the Badlands, it's our home, not theirs."

The heat escaping through the door as they entered the pub almost knocked her back. Marvin the pub keeper was talking quietly at the bar to Lavinia the town doctor. They were the only townspeople in the tavern.

Most of the merrymaking was coming from a group of about ten teenagers who occupied most of the front room. Guns, crossbows and even a spear lay on the floor and tables around them.

"Hunters, like we thought," Giles whispered to her as they took their seats by the bar.

Marvin asked them what they would like and to Maya's surprise, he didn't argue when she ordered mulled wine. "Turned of age today, didn't you? Your father was in here beaming about it earlier when he came to buy a bottle of wine."

A painful pang of guilt stabbed at Maya's heart at the mention of her parents.

Giles nodded in the direction of the rowdy kids. "Coming or going?"

Marvin's face turned dark, but he didn't look at the Citizens. "Not sure. They drank so much already, I doubt they'll hunt down anything tonight."

"I thought that hovercraft was large enough to transport at least a couple of large cats," Giles said quietly, bringing Maya right out of regretting how she spoke to her parents.

"Please let it not be big cats," Maya said. Of all the animals, she feared lions and tigers the most. They had no real ties to other living creatures, except as predators are tied to their prey.

Lavinia tapped her glass against the bar loudly. "Keep your voice down, Maya. We

don't want any trouble."

"Trouble? One of their beasts tore the baker's leg right off...and mauled my dog!" Not that those two were equal. Maya had only been able to save her dog. "They shouldn't let anything loose if they can't hunt it down."

She turned and glared at the group, ignoring Giles' hand on her arm.

One of the girls saw her looking and fixed her snake-like green eyes on Maya's. Her pale red hair hung perfectly straight down her face, over her shoulders, and to her waist.

The girl hushed her friends. "Listen up, this piece of Badlands trash doesn't think much of our hunting abilities!"

The rest whipped around to stare at Maya, some chuckling, others glaring at Maya like she had mortally insulted them.

"Why did you have to provoke them?" Giles whispered and stood in front of Maya to shield and protect her.

Maya stood up and pushed past him. This was her fight and she could take care of herself.

"Barbaric is what your little hunting parties are. And no, I do not think you are very good. Not if you were the one who failed to catch that mutated puma a month ago!"

The red haired girl rose too. A knife was tucked into a sheath in the belt of her tight blue body suit. She was at least a few years older than Maya, but no taller. Maya's rage at the barbarity of their hunts was a furnace in her chest.

"The baker died from the puma attack. He left two toddlers behind!" Maya yelled. The futility of her efforts to save him, his little daughter sobbing into her mother's arm while Maya tried so hard to convince the man's blood to stop rushing from his torn leg crashed into her, eliminating all impulse to give life. "Was it you who failed to catch it?"

"I always catch what I set out to hunt," the girl said, advancing with a scary smile on her lips, a snake ready to strike. Several of the others stood up and joined her. "Even if it was me, what are you going to do about it?"

Maya sensed Giles beside her reach into his pocket for the small knife he used to carve the leather.

The redhead reached for her own knife.

Maya stood between her and Giles. The girl unsnapped her knife and pulled it halfway from its sheath. Behind her, a black haired kid rose from the table. "That's enough, Lana. We're their guests here."

The girl threw her head back and laughed. "Guests? Well, then I should teach her to show a little more hospitality."

The kid who spoke stood and grabbed her arm before she could withdraw her knife all the way. "I said, enough, Lana."

Maya broke eye contact with the snake girl to look at him. His black hair glimmered in the light, and his eyes were the blue of a deep ocean. His short sleeved body suit brought forth every ripple of his muscled arms, torso and stomach. A roaring tiger tattoo done in thin black lines covered the inside of his left forearm.

When his cold blue eyes met hers, an odd recognition flooded her chest. She felt like she had known him since forever, and was equally certain they'd never met before.

The red haired girl snatched her arm from his grasp and shrieked at him. "Are you in the mood for a girl from the Badlands now, Ty? And you don't have any authority to order me around. I'm not one of your Special Forces soldiers."

The kid kept his eyes fixed on Maya's, as though he couldn't help himself. Then he laughed and swept the red haired girl into his arms and kissed her, deep and long.

"No, Lana, you are definitely the boss of me," he said when he came up for air, and laughed. Most of their friends laughed too. Lana's snake eyes melted into something less dangerous, if not quite friendly.

"So long as you never forget that," she warned him. "And you're right. I don't want to dirty up my knife on this little girl."

"We're going now!" the kid yelled to the others, and waited by the bar for them to collect their weapons and leave. Lana still hung on his arm, and he pushed her off gently to follow the others. She frowned but didn't argue.

Once the door closed behind her, he laid two crumpled bills on the counter to pay for their drinks. It was enough to pay for at least half the liquor in the tavern. Marvin muttered he had no way to give change back. The kid waved him off.

"Give it to the baker's family after you take what we owe you for the drinks."

His eyes flickered to Maya's again, but now, up close, his look made her take a step backwards. Maya had only ever seen eyes that cold on the dead. He looked down hastily and strode out of the tavern.

"Still a pompous idiot!" Giles spat when the doors closed.

"You know him?" Maya asked. Giles' eyebrows shot up into his hair. His jealousy stabbed through her like it was her own.

"Who was he then?" Marvin asked, sparing Maya the need to repeat her question.

"That was Tyberious Remarque, heir to the city of Neo York."

~

Once the hovercraft left, Maya followed Giles to his home, a two-story house that looked onto the square. It was one of the newer homes, built about fifty years ago and entirely self-sufficient, with solar panels able to draw power from the sun even during the winter. Giles flipped a switch and the heating units whooshed to life. At Maya's house, they sometimes had to burn wood to stay warm during long winters.

"Let's turn in, it's Market Day tomorrow," Giles said and headed to the stairs that led to the bedrooms. Maya followed.

She stripped to her underwear, a tight fitting long sleeved thermal shirt and matching leggings, and climbed under the covers of the large family bed in the master bedroom. Maybe it was too cruel to sleep in the same bed with Giles, knowing how he felt about her. But they'd been sleeping like that since they were children. She hoped he wouldn't try to kiss her again. If he did, she'd just explain to him how she couldn't return his feelings. How the only kind of love she had ever felt for anyone was that of a mother for her children. Even towards her own parents.

She needn't have worried. Giles stayed well on his side of the bed after he climbed in and turned off the light.

The wind outside picked up, swinging the doors and windows of the empty houses that lined the square. No sound entered through the thick windows of the house.

"How come you knew so much about that kid?" Maya asked.

The impossible recognition she felt still nagged her, leaving an ache in the pit of her stomach.

"I was born in Neo York City," Giles mumbled into his pillow.

Was that it? Did she only feel Giles' recognizing that kid? Usually she only felt others'

emotions though, she couldn't read their thoughts.

She flipped on the light switch and balanced on one elbow to stare at the back of his head. "Why didn't you ever tell me?"

He flipped over and stared at the ceiling. "Not something you flaunt in the Badlands, now is it? At least that's how my father saw it."

Maya opened and closed her mouth a few times, unsure what to say. Giles still had secrets from her? After all these years? How? Why?

Perhaps sensing her confusion, or hurt, though she had no real right to feel it, Giles turned his face to her. "After we left Neo York all we wanted to do was forget all about it. However, the Badlands are hardly the place for a fashion designer and his artist wife. Or so it turned out."

Giles' mother had wasted away, like so many others in the Badlands. Not even from lack of food, just lack of hope. There was no future in the Badlands. Giles' grief shared the bed with them, solid enough to touch.

"You might have told me sooner," Maya said and grasped Giles hand, because she thought it was safer that hugging him. "I'm glad you left the city though. Glad you're here."

It wasn't the best thing to say, maybe, but it was true. In the Badlands, all you had was the now. Maya was always sure you had to make the best of it.

Giles looked away to hide tears. She turned off the light to make it easier for him.

Giles squeezed her hand tighter, then let go. "There's something else I never told you..."

His voice trailed off. Maya was too stunned to urge him on.

"There is a school for those who claim they have gifts in Neo York. They advertise it and everything, let it be known all who have gifts are welcome there."

Maya shot up in bed, knocking the covers off both of them. "A school? And you never said anything? Not for eight years? Not after spending night after night in the freezing cold with me trying to control my powers? You know how much I want to learn to use my gift!"

Her heart was racing. Heat was building not only in her arm, but in her chest and head as well. She took a few calming breaths once the room started spinning around her. Nothing was lost yet. She could still go to the school, still bring the Badlands back to life.

Giles sat up too and tried to take hold of her hand again. She yanked it away.

"I didn't want you to leave."

The sadness in his voice took the edge off her fury. Still, she was too mad to speak.

"The city is barred to anyone from the Badlands. You know that. There's no way in," Giles continued. "I didn't want to make you wish for something you could never have."

There had to be a way, Maya was sure. "I'll go there and make them let me in."

Giles grabbed her arm before she could evade him. "Neo York is hundreds of miles away, and all the roads are riddled with checkpoints and mines and who knows what else. How will you get there?"

"I'll walk if I have to!"

"In the winter? Come on, Maya, you'll learn to use your gift on your own. You're smart. I'm sure you can do it."

"I can learn a lot faster at a proper school." Once there, she'd finally be with people who were like her, who could understand her for who she truly was. She had a purpose now, a way to give the future back to the people in the Badlands.

"I read and reread all I could find on those born with gifts at school and the library

here." Not that there was very much, and the newest books they had were thirty years old. "If there's a school for people like me, I'm going!"

Giles glared at her. "I was serious before. The city is not a place for normal people. It's no place for you. There's hardly any nature and most people just stay inside the buildings all day. Besides, you will never even reach it."

"Fine, be that way." Maya lay back down and turned her back on him.

She covered her head with the blanket and imagined entering the school, teachers showing her precisely how to use her gift. Others like her would be there too, and they'd talk well into the night of all the exceptional things they could do. Once she learned all they had to teach, she'd return home and heal the brittle, tired soil, plant a forest to cleanse the air, create grasslands for cattle and goats to graze and children to play in. She saw it all in her mind, as clear as if she was looking out a window.

The last thing she wanted was for Giles to try and talk her out of it. Knowing he was right and that she would never get anywhere near Neo York on her own was torture enough.

## CHAPTER FOUR

"Let's go home now, Tyberious!" Lana's agitated voice screeched through the headpiece.

Ty clucked his tongue impatiently. "No, we have to hunt down all the animals before we leave."

Dawn was breaking on the horizon, and the wolves they'd let loose to hunt down would be finding a place to settle down for the day. These weren't normal wolves, altered as they were, with their sharp teeth, extra sensitive eyes and a heightened thirst for blood. Some of their unnatural abilities came from the way they were engineered, the rest were a mistake. Nature had a way of keeping a balance among its varied species that could never be replicated in a laboratory.

"Stop being so responsible, Ty, and let's leave," Lana insisted. "I want to get to sleep. We'll catch the rest next time."

"There's no telling how much damage it will do before then. They breed goats here, if nothing else," Rober cut in, making it worse.

"You stay quiet, Rober," Lana replied. "We all know you're on his side, there's no need for you to actually speak."

Some of the others laughed at this. They all wanted to leave.

"Shut up, Lana. We're staying until we catch them all," Ty said in his best commanding voice.

Not that it ever worked on Lana.

Isis growled low in her throat by his side. Maybe she had a scent. Ty let the tiger lead the way and followed at a distance. The copse was really only a small circle of stunted pine trees and shrubs, surrounded by a stretch of dried up earth. It was probably from one of those failed attempts at re-greening the Badlands that were made before the Ring was established and separated from the dying world.

Beyond the copse, smoke was already rising from a few of the chimneys of the town. Ty couldn't be responsible for another townsman dying from a wolf attack.

"I bet you just want to run into that girl again tonight," Lana sneered over the headpiece. "I'll grant you, she looked pretty fresh, but I'm not in the mood to share tonight."

Ty ignored her. That was another good thing about Lana. She didn't mind sharing him, nor did any of the guys she went with ever make Ty jealous.

The girl in the pub last night had a presence that filled the room. Most natural born ones did. That was another thing that couldn't quite be replicated in a lab. And hers was so strong, especially once she got angry. It mounted then, filled the pub, beat against its confines, lashing out to break free and cover the world.

A hiss, followed by a heart wrenching meow, sounded from the copse, ripping through Ty's thoughts. He slung his bow across his back and pulled out his gun, breaking into a run. In his mind, he already saw Isis in a pool of blood, wolves feasting on her flesh, her green eyes pleading with Ty to save her.

"Spread out and surround the copse," Rober ordered the others. "Ty, wait for everyone

to get into position."

Isis didn't have that kind of time, and Ty could take those three wolves on his own.

"Your stupid pet, Ty, I swear," Lana panted. "I told you to leave it at home."

"Shut up!" Both Ty and Rober said at almost the same time. Someone laughed into the headpiece.

Ty reached the tree line, keeping to the trees as he approached. Isis couldn't be far. Soft growling came from the three o'clock direction.

The three wolves had Isis surrounded, her back against a dense shrub. A long gash had opened her side but she kept them at bay with her knife sharp claws.

The wolves hadn't sensed Ty yet. They would soon. He lay low and took careful aim. Grey fur and blood and bones exploded in the silent pulse from his gun.

One of the remaining wolves fled into the trees. The other turned, its grey eyes fixed on Ty's. It growled again and leapt towards him, a blur in its unnatural speed. Ty's shot missed its head by less than an inch.

The blur cleared into a wide open jaw, sharp teeth gleaming. Ty had no time to move, no time to raise his gun. No time for anything but to wait.

An arrow pierced the wolf's side, the force knocking it aside.

"Are you all right?" Rober's worried voice echoed in Ty's ear. "Did it get you?"

Ty shook his head and half crawled, half stumbled to Isis. She licked his hand when he bent to check her wound.

"Look what I caught me," came Lana's triumphant voice. "Can we go home now?"

She strode from the trees to their left with a dead wolf slung across her shoulders, its blood matting her hair. A revolting sight.

"This needs stitches," Rober said beside him, examining Isis' wound.

Ty stroked Isis' head, his clammy hand sticking to the fur. None of them were trained to heal.

He picked up Isis as gently as he could. It was lucky that she never grew much larger than a medium sized dog. She was all natural, and Ty couldn't let her die like this.

"They must have some sort of doctor in that town." He took off running, not caring if any of the others followed, willing his cat to live.

~

Ty ran all the way back to the town square with Isis clutched in his arms before remembering he was far from welcome there. Despite it being barely past dawn people milled around the square, yawning as they hauled benches and stools into the wide open space. Some of them even had holographic ads for the wares they sold flashing over the stalls.

The dark haired girl from the pub sat beside her friend at one of the plain metal tables, staring bleary eyed at nothing in particular.

She'd help him, Ty was sure. He was noble enough by giving them the money for the baker's family.

He ran to her stall and ignored the girl's friend who stood up menacingly. The girl's eyes widened in surprise when she saw him, her lips forming a perfect 'O'.

"Can you take me to your veterinarian?" Ty asked. She leaned forward to examine the wound in Isis' side. Concern and loving pity replaced the surprise in her eyes. Isis hissed softly and the girl jerked away.

"She won't hurt you," Ty said, clutching Isis tighter.

The girl brushed her hair behind her ears and stood up. "Follow me. We'll fix her up at

the hospital."

Her friend caught her arm and held her back, never taking his angry eyes off Ty. "No, Maya. Just tell him where to go."

She shook off his hand. "They'll never help him if I don't speak for him."

She walked away briskly, motioning for Ty to follow.

"It's only a little further," she said when they passed the first row of houses. Her long hair swayed as she walked, catching the pale sunlight, glimmering bronze.

Maya led him into a low white structure with a blue 'H' printed on the door. The sour smell of disinfectant and heat mingled in the air of the empty front room. An old woman sat behind a steel desk in the otherwise empty room.

The doctor took in every inch of Ty and then asked, "What is it, Maya?"

She must have seen Isis in his arms, which made it a stupid question.

"His tiger is hurt," Maya blurted out nervously. "And I know Eddie won't go near any Citizen or their beast, not after what happened to his brother."

Ty's heart raced in his chest. This woman would refuse to help and it was a full day back to the city. Would Isis make it? Ty had never considered they might have need of a medic. Arrogant in the extreme. He imagined the heavy lid of a thick steel chest slamming down on all his panic and anger. Too many emotions were coming through. It wasn't safe.

The doctor was still eyeing him belligerently until Isis let out a pleading meow.

"Fine, take it through," the woman finally relented. "Only because you asked, Maya."

The girl motioned for Ty to follow her through a set of smoky glass doors. The woman followed, switching on the bluish lights in the room as the door closed behind her.

"Lay the cat on the table, I'll examine it," she ordered.

Ty hurried to the stainless steel operating table in the middle of the room before she could change her mind. Isis' claws dug into the sleeves of his body suit, then slipped off uselessly, nowhere near sharp enough to pierce it. No animal claw, bullet, knife or laser could. Still, he should have brought a medic with them to the hunt.

"Hold her down while I sedate her," Maya whispered, her warmth filling the room. "Don't worry, I'll make sure she lives."

Most of his panic melted in her warmth.

Maya stuck Isis with a long needle. Ty concentrated on the pale blue liquid as it disappeared from the syringe, willing his panic to disappear completely. Isis went limp on the table.

"Can you save her?" he whispered to Maya.

The woman looked at him sharply, then focused her eyes on Maya. "I'm sure I can. The wound's not very deep."

Maya turned to him as she fixed a mask over her mouth. "Why don't you wait in the square for me? I'll find you once we're done here."

Ty left the room. Most likely she was worried Eddie or someone else would come in and see him there. And somehow he knew he could trust her.

~

Rober was milling through the crowd in the market. He pushed his way toward Ty when he emerged back into the square. "What happened? Where's Isis?"

The compassion in his friend's eyes and voice was real, Ty knew that. Rober was one of the handful of people born with any real empathy. "They're stitching her up. That girl from the pub last night and some doctor."

"Good. Lana's with the hovercraft and she wants to leave as soon as possible."

"She'll have to wait," Ty said and strolled towards the first of the stalls.

Rober followed. "She won't like that."

Ty chuckled. "I know."

All around them people in drab clothing jostled each other to get to the stalls. The one packed with dead rabbits, rodents and squirrels was by far the most crowded. Ty stepped back and watched them trade all sorts of things for the meat, jewelry, leather, sacks of flour, old style tablet computers. One woman even tried to trade her hair for a dead rat, but the seller shooed her away. Hardly anyone offered cash.

People this far from the nearest city didn't have much use for money. He should have remembered it before he gave all that money for the baker last night.

"Are you listening to me?" Rober asked, an edge of annoyance in his voice.

Ty turned to him questioningly.

"I asked if you have anything on you to trade?"

"I only have my phone and some money. You should go back to the hovercraft and get some sleep. I'll be there soon."

"I'll wait with you."

Ty shrugged and stopped by a nearly empty stall, behind which a woman with a heavily wrinkled face and dark grey hair sat. Only a small jewelry box and a bracelet made of brown grass and clear blue beads lay on the tabletop in front of her. No one was trading anything for those two things.

She smiled up at him, though her grey eyes were so unfocused he doubted she saw more than his outline. He picked up the box and examined the flowers worked into its surfaces. Meticulously carved, not a line out of place. His little sister Eve would love it.

"How much for the box?" he asked the woman.

"Some bread if you have it. Or at least enough flour to make some," the woman said in a raspy voice.

"All I have to trade is money."

"Money? What would I do with money?" the woman chuckled, then a coughing fit took her.

Ty sat the box back on the tabletop.

"No, no. Take it. And this bracelet to go with it. It is made from real aquamarine and wheat grass. It will ward away any and all evil energy from the person who wears it. Aquamarine's even been known to stop the flow of magic right in its tracks. Here, hold out your arm, I will affix it for you."

Ty ignored Rober's shocked gasp as he stretched out his right arm. A cool stream of water seemed to flow up his arm as soon as the stones touched his skin. Maybe it really worked. Usually, the freezing cold only ever ran down his arm. Not that he liked to think of his power at all.

"How much for the box and the bracelet?"

The woman smiled again. "Keep your money, young man. These two things are the last of what I have to trade, unless you count the clothes on my back. Only then I would have to walk around naked."

The woman laughed at her own dark joke and slowly rose from her stool.

"I want to pay you," Ty insisted.

"Give the money to the girl who took care of your pet then, she needs it more than I."

Rober grabbed his shoulder. "You have to give her something. Let's find some bread for her."

The woman shuffled away through the crowd. Ty called for her to wait but she didn't turn back. Rober was already hurrying to the bakery. By the time he returned with a shriveled looking black loaf the woman was gone.

"Why didn't you stop her, Ty?"

"She didn't want to stop."

"Want? These poor people. It's no longer about what they want, Ty. They have so little they've forgotten about all that they *could* want. Trading hair for a rat to have at least some meat? Refusing money, because they might starve to death before they'll find someone to take it in exchange for food..."

*Not this same pointless conversation, again.* Ty hastily checked that his ear piece was off, hoping Rober had done the same before launching into his "Save the Badlands" tirade. Most of their friends back at the hovercraft knew how Rober felt about the displaced people in the Badlands, yet someone from the city could be listening in.

"Why do you even come out here if it makes you so angry?" Ty asked.

Spots of color rose in Rober's cheeks. "I want to help them, not pretend they don't exist. I thought you agreed with me."

Ty gritted his teeth and pulled Rober away from the crowd, willing all the emotions mixing in him to subside. "Sure, I agree with you in theory. In practice, nothing can be done and you know that. None of the cities are willing to take care of these people. Besides, there's no room for them in the Ring."

"They could go north, if only someone would help them get there." Rober flicked the bracelet on Ty's wrist, uncharacteristic mockery in his eyes. They looked almost as predatory as his sister's now. "How safe do you think you are? In the long run? Think this trinket will keep your gift from showing?"

Searing cold exploded in Ty's forehead. He grabbed Rober's throat and squeezed, watched the mockery turn to fear in his friend's eyes, hoping he'd be able to hold it in, riding the wave of fear and anger, struggling to keep the freezing cold from flowing down his arm. "Never speak of that where anyone can hear. You mention my gift again and you're going to the north."

Ty released his grasp on Rober's neck. The stones on the bracelet were icy cold. He half expected them to be stuck to his skin in frost. Maybe it did work in stopping his power!

Rober rubbed his neck. "Fine. I'm sorry, I went too far."

Ty met his eyes for a moment, then looked down. "No. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that." Fear of discovery, of losing control, was a constant in Ty's mind, a burden Rober would never understand. It was growing heavier and heavier, and it always manifested in murderous rage. "I never should have told you about it in the first place."

All that painful anger fled, ice crackling and melting when Maya ran up to them through the square.

~

"Is she alright?" Ty asked Maya as soon as she stopped in front of him. She was tall, yet she still had to crane her neck to meet his eyes. Spring fields of lush green earth stretched out inside her dark eyes. Her warmth seared through the cold that still gripped his head and right arm.

"Yes, but you should let her rest until morning," Maya replied.

"Morning?" Rober asked. "You mean *tomorrow*?"

"Of course, tomorrow," Ty cut in before Maya had a chance to. "It's alright. We'll get some sleep in the hovercraft."

"The others won't like it," Rober protested. "Lana especially."

Maya's eyes flickered to the blue gem bracelet on Ty's wrist. "Oh, you bought Mary's bracelet. That was kind of you. It matches your eyes."

Her cheeks turned red and she looked back over the crowd nervously.

Ty unzipped the side pocket in his body suit. "She didn't want the money. She said I should give it to you instead."

He held out a few bills. "This is for the medical supplies too."

Maya looked from the money to his face, her eyes wide. "Mary didn't want money? Where did she go?"

Ty pointed with his free hand. "Over that way. Here take this."

"I must find her!"

Maya took off running, elbowing her way through the crowd. Ty took off after her, ignoring Rober's surprised yells to let her go.

They caught up to her as she reached the houses on the other side of the square.

"What's the panic?" Ty asked.

"Only that Mary...she's so old and the bracelet and box were her last two possessions. I'm afraid she's going to kill herself!" She sprinted past the last row of houses towards a frothing muddy river that had started to spill over its shallow bank.

The old woman sat on the roots of an old oak tree, her feet in the water.

Maya reached her and laid a hand on her shoulder. "Come, Mary, I'll take you home."

The woman laid a gnarled old hand over Maya's, her gaze still fixed on the water.

"No, child."

"Please, Mary. I will bring you some bread," Maya insisted.

Rober strode over and held out the loaf he bought earlier. "Here, I got some bread for you."

The woman glanced at the bread. "I remember a time when bread was white and fluffy, and everyone had enough. When these fields were covered in grass, and seasons followed each other every year like clockwork. Now the clock is broken."

How old was she? She'd have to be over a hundred years old to remember the time before the weather broke.

The old woman let go of Maya's hand and rose slowly. "It is time for me to go."

"Yes, come on, I'll take you home. I'll bring you some cake later," Maya said and held out her hand for the woman to take. The woman didn't take it. Instead, she took a step towards the river and toppled in.

"No, Mary, you'll fall!" Maya screamed. The whooshing current swallowed the woman. Ty only just managed to grab Maya's arm and pull her back before the current took her too.

Maya shook off his grasp. "Let me go! I have to save her."

"I'll get her," Ty said without thinking. Maya's need to save the old woman seemed to come from his own heart.

He let go of Maya and ran further down the bank, trying to spot the woman. One of her arms rose from the water farther downstream. Ty waded into the river, only just managing to grab onto the woman's arm and haul her out.

Her pale eyes stared unblinking into the sky, mud and muck clinging to the wrinkles on her face.

Maya dropped to her knees beside the woman and checked for signs of life.

She beat at the woman's chest and tried to breathe life back into her lungs. The old woman's ribs cracked like dry wood. Ty didn't want to tell her that it was no use, that the woman was dead. Maya realized it on her own soon enough.

She stopped, then laid her left hand against the woman's chest and closed her eyes. A tear trickled down her cheek when she opened them again.

"She's gone," Ty said.

Maya looked at him with those deep eyes, so full of life, tears streaming down her face. "Why did she do it?"

"She saw no point in going on. In being a burden," Rober answered, glaring at Ty the way he had before, in the square. As if Ty had the power to change anything in the way people of the Badlands lived.

"I'll carry her back to town," Ty offered. Maya shook her head and beat his arm away.

"No, leave now. If anyone suspects you had anything to do with Mary's death it won't end well. " Maya stood up and brushed the muck off her pants. "Come back tomorrow before dawn for your cat and then go back to your city."

Ty watched her run back into town, fighting the urge to follow. Rober pulled him up. "Let's go, she's right. They'll be furious if they find us here."

Ty followed Maya with his eyes until she disappeared behind the houses. "She never took the money."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Maya ran into the square, tears streaming down her face, blinding her. Some of those who had trekked there from neighboring towns for Market Day still milled around, but mostly it was only her fellow townsfolk there. Marvin was talking to Eddie and Lavinia by one of the empty stalls.

"What's wrong, Maya?" Lavinia asked when she saw her.

"Mary drowned. Down by the river. We need to go collect her body and arrange a funeral."

Marvin shook his head. "Poor Mary. She had a good long life. I don't know about burying her though. It was a good day today. A funeral would spoil everyone's mood."

Maya gasped, and stared at Marvin with her mouth open.

"He's right, Maya," Lavinia said wrapping her arm around Maya's shoulder. "We should just let the river take her."

"How can you say that? Mary was one of us, she deserves a proper burial!"

"By whom?" Eddie said, fumes of whiskey on his breath hitting Maya's face. "Pastor James died two years ago. There's no one to give her a sendoff. Best to just let her float away."

"I can't believe you're all saying this!" Maya shook off Lavinia's arm, looking wildly from one to the other. "Mary shouldn't be left for the predators!"

She still tasted the muddy water in her mouth from trying to give Mary the kiss of life. Her left hand burned from all the power she'd released into the dead woman. How could they all be so careless?

A crowd had gathered around them, drawn by her yells.

Her father pushed through to stand by her side.

"What is going on?" he asked.

"Mary has died, and no one wants to collect her body and bury her."

Marvin shuffled his feet nervously. "Now look here, Maya. All we said is that a funeral would depress everyone. Mary's had a long life, and she has no family left anywhere."

Maya fixed her eyes on her father. He bit the inside of his cheek and stayed quiet.

"But...but..." Maya stammered, her bottom lip trembling. She knew they were beat down and had little enough to look forward to. However, a life was lost today. They should honor Mary.

"I will bury her myself, then!" Maya declared.

"Let the river take her body," Eddie repeated.

Maya moved to walk back to the river, but her father held her back. "You're not strong enough to dig a grave. Eddie is right. A water burial is honorable."

Giles pushed his way through the crowd to stand by her side. "I'll help you, Maya."

She gratefully took his hand. This funeral would be the most painful for him. He'd only just buried his mother and sister, and yet he was the only one in the whole town willing to help her.

"Hold on," her father said. "I will help too."

In the end, Eddie and Marvin went with them to collect Mary's body and carry it back to town.

They laid Mary to rest in the field next to the church. The cemetery had been filled up before Maya was even born. Death was too common in the Badlands. Ten died for every one newborn. Less than half of the town gathered for the funeral. When Giles' sister had been buried, nearly the whole town had gathered. Death of the children was harder to ignore. And, strangely, it had given the people the will to survive. For a time. Because the hopelessness of life in the Badlands always crept back.

If only Maya could learn her gift, everything would be so much better then.

The funeral was a hasty affair, Maya the only speaker. Hopelessness filled the air, hung over those gathered like a thick fog. Tears born of it choked Maya as she spoke of the time, years ago, when Mary had taught her how to harvest the seeds of a cherry, and make sure it didn't turn wild once they grew into a tiny tree. That cherry tree still bloomed in their yard every year, and still gave fruit every summer.

No one seemed to be listening.

After her speech was over, Eddie and Giles started heaping the earth over the grave. Maya walked over to her parents.

"I'm sorry for how I acted last night," she murmured. Her mother drew her into a hug and her father stroked her hair.

"Let's go home," her mother whispered.

Maya didn't let go of her mother all the way back to the house. A fresh mound of mud stood where the wheat had swayed in the breeze the night before. Her father must have placed it there, wary of anyone seeing Maya's work. Maya bit back her anger.

She could bring hope back to the Badlands. Only first she had to learn to use her gift properly. And that meant leaving her home and her family behind.

~

They ate a dinner of cold turkey and black bread in the kitchen. Her father didn't offer her wine tonight. Her mother tried for some light conversation, but Maya couldn't force out more than one word answers.

She had to tell them she was leaving. Had to make them understand.

Each time she worked up the nerve to tell them, her mother would ask a question. About Maya's work at the hospital; about Giles and how he was coping all alone; about Mary and her stories of the days before nature started dying.

A lump as hard as rock formed in Maya's throat as her mother brought out the leftovers of her birthday cake. There was no other way. Maya going to the school in Neo York was the best chance any of them had.

"I'm going to the Ring," she blurted out before her courage failed.

Both of her parents turned to her sharply. Then her mother smiled tentatively. "What are you talking about, Maya?"

Maya steeled her voice, her heart. "Giles told me they have a school for people like me in Neo York, people with special abilities."

Her father leapt to his feet and slammed his fist against the table. "You *have* no special ability. And even if you did, you can't go to the Ring. They'll never let you in. You'll die in the wilderness."

"The same will happen here," Maya shot back.

"You can have a full life here, if you are careful," her father replied. "Like Mary. She

was 101 years old."

Maya had made up her mind during Mary's funeral. The lush green grass Mary remembered from her childhood could grow back, if only Maya learned to use her ability properly. And that meant going to Neo York. "You can't stop me. I'm of age."

"You can't be serious," her father bellowed. "How will you even get there?"

Her mother had tears in her eyes as she looked from one to the other. She locked her eyes on her husband's and held them. He shook his head, but she nodded, silently asking him to agree to something. He shook his head fiercely, and her mother looked away, clutching her hands together so tightly they shook.

She turned to Maya, her eyes still wet with unshed tears. "Let's sleep on it. We'll talk more in the morning."

Maya's fire died under the pleading in her mother's voice. "Yes, alright."

She followed them upstairs and lay down on her bed fully dressed. The whooshing of the river grew louder outside as the night grew deeper. She counted the seconds in her mind, not wanting to even think of the silent decision she had made downstairs in the kitchen.

It was childish to think her parents would just let her go. She was naive to expect it. At least this way, when they would find her room empty tomorrow morning, they'd know where she went.

And hour or so later, her father's snores filled the hallway. Maya rose and began to pack. It took her all of five minutes to cram an extra set of clothes, a comb and her toothbrush into a black backpack. She decided to leave the shiny black tablet that held her books and photos. If worse came to worst her parents could trade it. Still, at least they'd have one less mouth to feed after she was gone.

Her father's snores followed her as she tiptoed from her room and down the stairs. She nearly screamed out when a hand clasped her arm in the kitchen.

Her mother materialized in front of her. "Shhh, don't wake your father." Then she pulled her into a tight embrace. "Don't go," her mother whispered.

Maya didn't want to let go, but had to, before her resolve melted away in her mother's warm arms. "I don't want to. I have to."

Her mother brushed a strand of Maya's hair away from her face and kissed her cheek. "I know. Even if we stop you today, you'll just go some other day. You have such life inside you, Maya, such fire. I always knew you couldn't be tamed. Please come back and see us again. Please come back."

"I will. I promise, Mom. Thank you for understanding."

Tears made her choke on the last words.

She *would* be back. No matter what.

Her mother's ghostly white face looked through the window, watching Maya run across the field towards the town. She only turned back the one time. Any more, and she'd run right back.

~

The light was still on in Giles' kitchen. Maya rapped loudly on the window and pointed for him to let her in.

"What now?" he asked when she walked past him into the house. She hadn't expected such coldness in his voice. Perhaps it was for the best. This was goodbye after all.

A half empty bottle of wine sat on the kitchen table. Of course he'd be drinking, today's was the first funeral since his sister's.

"I'm going to that school tomorrow," she said. "But I'll be back soon."  
Giles laughed a harsh laugh. "Of course you are, and of course you will."  
"What do you mean?"

"And of course I'm coming with you," he finished.

Maya shook her head. "No." Although, if she were honest, she'd expected him to say it.

"I can't let you go wandering in the Badlands on your own, now can I?"

He sat down at the table and took a swig of wine from the bottle, chasing away the sadness that spilled from his eyes, no doubt.

She took the bottle from him and took a drink herself, the sour taste burning her throat. "What will you do there? You can't enter the school with me."

Giles shrugged. "You can't be in the school all day. And my two brothers are somewhere in Neo York. I haven't seen either of them in eight years."

Maya smacked herself on the forehead, a little too hard. "Of course, you still have family there."

He grinned at her as she rubbed the sore spot on her forehead.

"Now we have to figure out how to get there," Giles said. "We had that hovercraft when we left, but my father traded it years ago."

Maya sat down at the table across from him. "Don't worry, I have it all figured out. We'll ask those kids to take us. That Tyberious owes me a favor for saving his cat today."

Giles threw his head back and laughed.

"You're joking, right?" he finally managed to say, still shaking with laughter.

Maya felt the blood rush to her head. "No, I'm not. You said yourself he was like the ruler of Neo York. If anyone can get us in, he can."

"Right. And you just have to ask him nicely and it's done. Come on, Maya."

"That about sums it up, yes," Maya said. "And if it doesn't work, we'll walk there."

"I guess we're walking then," Giles said and took another swig of wine.

"Why would he say no?"

Giles wiped a drop of wine from his chin. "Because no one from the Badlands is allowed into the Ring, and because he's a Remarque. He's most likely just like his mother. He already looks exactly like her."

Maya screwed up her eyebrows, not even sure what kind of question to ask. "What's that got to do with anything? I saved his pet, and he will return the favor."

Giles' hands shot up, and Maya instinctively jerked back. But he just held the palms towards her, wiggling the stumps of his missing fingers. "He stood right by her side, her mirror image, when she ordered this done to me! Right before she kicked my family out of the city. He'll never do you any favors, and he'll never go against his mother."

Maya gasped, too horrified to speak. After a few breaths she found her voice. "But... but... why?"

Giles lowered his hands. "My father displeased her. Got an order she placed wrong. He was to make her shoes from real crocodile leather, only he couldn't find the animal anywhere. So he faked it, and sold it to her as real. He lost his right hand as punishment, me and my brothers all lost fingers."

Maya's stomach turned at the barbarity. "But Ty...he couldn't've been much older than you. Surely he had nothing to do with your punishment."

"That's all you heard? I knew you liked him. It was all over your face last night."

"I don't like him. I'd actually prefer never to see him again. His dead eyes scare me. But I need him, and I'm being practical."

"Can't argue with his cold eyes. He never so much as flinched while I screamed."

Maya took Giles' hands and willed some of her warmth to calm him. "He's our best chance of getting into the city. Once we're there, we never have to see him again."

Giles stared at her for a moment, then smiled. "Like I said. I guess we're walking."

Ty couldn't be all bad. He had jumped into the water to get Mary's body out, and he'd been so worried about his cat.

Maya let go of Giles' hands. "We'll see. Go pack now. We leave at dawn."

## CHAPTER SIX

The alarm buzzed into Ty's ear at six in the morning. He slowly rose, careful not to wake Lana or any of the others sleeping in the command room of the craft. Rober rose too and joined him by the door.

"Wait here, I'll go alone," Ty whispered as he passed him.

"Yeah, Rober. Let your boyfriend have some breathing room for a change," Lana muttered, her voice thick with sleep.

"Go back to sleep, Lana," Ty said. He gave up convincing Rober to stay after that.

Before they left, Ty filled a bag with as many weapons as would fit.

"Arming the Badlands, Ty?" Rober asked wryly once they were outside. "Isn't that punishable by death?"

Ty was in no mood for jokes. "What? Are you going to turn me in? We'll say we took the weapons on a hunt and forget them on the way back if anyone asks."

They walked the rest of the way to the hospital in silence. Maya stepped out of the shadows followed by the boy who was with her at the pub. She clutched a tightly wrapped bundle of blankets, and Isis' head was poking out at the top. "Here, she's still sleeping."

She handed the bundle to him. Ty placed the bag of weapons on the ground and nudged the bag towards Maya with his foot.

"Take those. In case any more pumas come. Or to trade. I put some money inside as well."

Maya looked at the bag and back at Ty. Even in the half light of dawn, her eyes shone. "What is it? Medicine?"

"Guns," Ty replied.

Horror and revulsion had it out in her eyes. Her friend snorted derisively. "And how will guns help us?"

Ty turned to him. Faint recognition vied with wondering what Ty had done to wound him enough to warrant that murderous glare. "You could, for example, learn to hunt for yourself."

"Stop it, Ty. Let's just go," Rober urged.

Ty was about to thank Maya, gaze into her vast, light-filled eyes for the last time, when she spoke. "Take us with you to your city."

"What?" Ty and Rober asked together.

"Please. I saved your cat. I need to go to school there."

"No, absolutely —" Rober started.

"I'm sorry," Ty interrupted him. "We can't bring the displaced into the city. I'd need special clearance, and I can't get it. Not on such short notice and not from out here."

He was rambling. She had to understand he'd help her if he could.

"Why do you want to go there anyway?" he asked finally.

Maya swept her arms out to encompass the town. "To learn how to help them."

"No school can teach you that," Ty said without thinking. The hurt and anger in her eyes made him look away.

"Can't I go to one and decide that for myself?" she asked.

"We could, you know—" Rober said, but Ty motioned for him to shut up.

Maya looked at Rober hopefully, then turned back to Ty once she realized Rober wouldn't help her.

"Fine. I'll find another way. I did save your pet for you though."

"You can't go into the Badlands on your own," Ty protested, heat rising in his cheeks.

"You'll get blown to bits a hundred times before you reach the Ring. If some wild beast or men don't kill you first."

"She won't be alone," her friend said.

"Ty, you can't just let them walk into the Badlands," Rober said. "We can get them into the city."

Maya shouldered her backpack and took her friend's hand. "It's alright. I won't trouble you any further."

She meant it, Ty could tell. She'd try to walk all the way to Neo York. And die. Ty didn't know how he knew, yet he was certain of it.

"Alright, you can come with us," Ty called after her, not sure where exactly the words came from. The warmth of summer rippled around her, shone from her pleading eyes. He'd never have to be cold if she was beside him. He couldn't let her die.

Maya stopped only long enough to place the bag of weapons into the hospital.

"Let's hope Lana doesn't make too much of an issue over it," Rober said as they trekked back to the craft.

Ty shrugged. "Or my parents for that matter. You can help with Lana."

"How? By knocking her out?" Rober asked. "However, the idea is tempting."

"If all else fails." Ty turned back to Maya, who was listening to their exchange with a confused expression.

All Ty had to do was get her past the guards and into the city before his mother found out about it. She could disappear after that. The first obstacle to that plan lay sleeping in the hovercraft, the second the guards on the gate who'd be much easier to get past.

~

Once they reached the hovercraft Ty motioned for Maya and Giles to climb in, warning them to be quiet. He led them into the cockpit and locked them inside to deposit Isis in her cage and make sure Lana was sleeping.

He returned to the cockpit and punched in the coordinates for Neo York, then let the autopilot take over. He told Maya and Giles to stay put and led Rober outside, stopping near the engine where there was the least chance of being heard.

"Right, don't freak out. The only way past Lana that I can see is telling her you like Maya's friend and want to take him back home," Ty blurted it all out in one long whisper, ignoring the mounting hurt and anger in Rober's face. "Then we'll say Maya insisted she come too."

"Maya, is it?"

The question confused Ty. "Yes, so?"

"You must really like her to go to all this trouble to hide her from Lana."

"Like her? She helped me and I can help her. That's all it is."

"You like this girl so much you're asking me to submit to a full day of taunting by my sister in closed quarters?" Rober's voice rose in pitch. "And since we're broaching the subject, you're asking me to do this, knowing how I feel about you and flinging it in my face."

The whole conversation went too deep for comfort too fast. "Rober...I told you...It wouldn't be right. I don't feel the same about you. I'd only be going through the motions. Is that what you want?"

"You said you couldn't feel that way about anyone." Rober's voice was barely audible above the hum of the engine.

"It is the truth. And none of that's changed now," Ty answered, wanting the conversation to end. "Look, I know it's a huge favor. I'll make it up to you. But if you don't want to help then say it, and I'll think of something else."

Lana's whoop rose from the command room and killed the conversation. "Yes! We're finally going home."

"Fine, we'll tell her your story. You owe me a favor too now," Rober whispered. "By the way, you'll want to take more care with how you look at the girl."

"What do you mean?"

"The only person I've ever seen you look at with such devotion is Eve."

"Eve? That's totally different. She's my sister, I just want to make sure she's alright."

"All I'm saying is, Lana's not stupid. She'll see it too," Rober said and walked to the command room from which Lana's humming could be heard.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Maya sat on the floor of the hovercraft's cockpit, afraid to go near the pilot seats. Lights flashed across the transparent control board, the terrain they were flying over a constantly changing hologram off to the side of it. Giles slid down the black metal wall next to her.

"Now what did we get ourselves into?" he asked. "If this adventure involves meeting Violetta Remarque then I'm not sure it was one of your better ideas."

He chuckled after he said it, but there was an edge in his voice. Maya had growing doubts of her own. Should she have stayed at home? What if her mother didn't make it through the winter? How would she get back?

Meeting Ty's mother was the least of Maya's worries.

"Ty was eager to avoid her. He seems to think he can."

The doors slid open with a faint hiss. Ty stood in the doorway and motioned for them to accompany him. Another kid with white hair and coal black eyes came in and sat down at the control board.

"Call me once we reach the first checkpoint, Adam," Ty told him before shutting the door behind them.

A strip of blue light illuminated the sides of the vehicle's main hallway. Ty still wore his black bodysuit, and his thick black hair was wet, combed back off his forehead, forming perfect waves. His winter eyes never met Maya's. For all the recognition he gave her, they might have been complete strangers.

"Where are you taking us?" Maya asked.

Ty didn't turn around at her question. "Follow me and don't speak unless someone asks you a question. We've had to make up a reason for you to be here, and it's in your own interest to go along with it."

"What kind of reason?"

"You don't need to know."

He spoke to her as though she were his servant. Maya grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "I *want* to know."

"Calm down, Maya," Giles whispered urgently.

Ty shook off her hand and continued walking. "Do as I say, or find your own way to Neo York."

"Fine. Let us out now!" She didn't want any favors from this cold, commanding kid. He was nothing like the one who'd begged her to save his cat yesterday.

Ty looked around, as though making sure they were alone. Just as he was about to speak a door slid open. The snake-eyed girl grinned at her menacingly. "Look who it is. The loudmouth from the pub. I should have known."

Ty walked over to her and slid his arm around her waist. Maya and Giles followed them to a large common area of the hovercraft. Another control board with a wall screen dominated one of the walls, but this one was turned off.

The rest of the hunting party sat in chairs around the room. Four had their eyes

covered with the black strips of virtual reality glasses Maya recognized from her current history class in school. The other four stared at them as they entered.

Ty's girlfriend eyed Giles from head to toe, leering. Something a lot like jealousy sparked in Maya's chest, but likely it was only a desire to keep this vicious looking girl away from anyone Maya cared for.

Ty sat down and pulled his girlfriend into his lap, then introduced everyone in the room: a girl with a last name Montague, who had the same white hair and black eyes as the boy they left in the cockpit; a Greenwood, a Schwarz, and a couple of Weinsteins, a Northman. "And this is Lana Orsini and you've met her brother Rober. And I am Tyberious Remarque."

He didn't bother to introduce her and Giles to the rest. Maya recognized none of the names, yet Ty's tone as he spoke them suggested she was expected to curtsy, like people in the Middle Ages used to in the presence of kings and queens.

"This one still doesn't seem too impressed, Ty," Lana said, flicking her long finger in Maya's direction then turning to her brother. "And I don't see what it is about this Badlands' farm boy you like so much."

One of the others laughed, while the rest cast Lana dirty looks behind her back.

Maya felt Giles tense beside her, but the cold that spread from Ty's eyes seemed to have rooted him to the spot too, rendering him unable to speak.

Lana locked her eyes on Maya's. "Though if it stops you pining over Ty for a little while, I support that."

The white haired girl leaned forward in her chair. "Why don't you stop it already, Lana. It's getting boring."

Lana threw her head back and laughed. "Oh, Sage. You do know you have no chance with my brother, don't you?"

The white haired girl leaned back with a thump and slammed a pair of VR glasses over her eyes. "I give up."

Rober cast his sister a nasty look that travelled to Ty before settling on Giles. "Best go check if there's anything to support before you get too excited, dear sister."

He grabbed Giles' arm and pulled him back towards the door. Giles stumbled and Maya almost screamed at him to let him go. Would have too, if Ty hadn't shaken his head a little, and if all that winter ice in his eyes hadn't shifted to reveal a panic Maya had only seen on those about to die. His eyes went back to the dead winter stillness so fast, she might have only imagined it all. By then Giles was gone.

Soon after, the others put on their VR glasses too. Ty led Lana into the far corner of the room where they disappeared behind a dark curtain that blocked all sound as well.

Unsure what she should do, Maya sat down in a chair farthest away from the rest, trying to pretend the terror she felt at imagining what Giles might be going through wasn't suffocating her.

To calm herself, she counted the seconds in her mind.

*Four hundred and forty-seven.*

When was Giles coming back?

*A thousand.*

What if he wasn't?

*Five thousand and seventy.*

*What have I done?*

She lost the count somewhere around seven thousand, and had to start over to keep from screaming out. If only she had one of those VR glasses to escape her fear. She'd brought this on herself. And Giles. Would he ever forgive her?

The hovercraft slowed to a stop every so often, and Ty left the room each time, likely to get them past the checkpoints. He never so much as glanced in her direction.

Ty had pulled Mary from the water, and the other kid, Rober, had bought her bread. They couldn't be all bad, could they? She clung to that hope like a drowning girl would to a piece of wood.

Just as Maya was sure she would begin screaming, Ty returned from one of his exits, Giles and the white haired kid following him.

Giles sat down next to her and she eyed him anxiously.

"Are you alright?" she whispered. "What happened?"

He squeezed her hand reassuringly. "I'm fine, don't worry."

He leaned back and closed his eyes.

Ty stayed in the main room after he returned this time, and told everyone they were almost in Neo York and to stay alert.

They all removed their VR glasses, and it took several minutes for their eyes to focus.

Lana came into the room and sat in Ty's lap. He wrapped his arm around her waist. The tiger of his tattoo had golden eyes, Maya saw, so real she was sure the animal would move at any moment.

Giles continued to feign sleep beside her, so after a while Lana fixed her eyes on her.

"And what will you be doing once we get to Neo York? A pretty, natural born girl like you should have no trouble finding an occupation. Lots of people have a good appetite for a little genetic imperfection, what with everyone engineered so flawlessly in the Ring."

Maya steeled her features, determined not to show the mean girl how offensive she found her suggestion. Still, her voice was a bit too shrill when she answered. "I plan to attend school."

Lana laughed, as did a few of the others.

Ty looked at her from behind Lana's breasts. "A little old for elementary education, aren't you? Or will you be trying for one of the bio tech universities?"

Maya stifled a new wave of annoyance. Why was he pretending he didn't already know? What did any of these privileged Citizens know of anything? The schoolhouse in Maya's town had most of the learning databases still intact. From antiquity up until about 2050 anyway, when nature started dying. "It's not so much what I know, it's what I can do. I plan to go into training at the school for the gifted."

She wasn't even sure if that's what it was called, but the dead silence that settled over the room told her they knew which school she meant. Ty's eyes widened, a perfect storm whirling there, icebergs crashing down. All in the moment it would take Maya to count to one. Then the vast frozen ocean was back and Lana laughed a shrill, mean laugh.

The white haired girl leapt to her feet. "Is this why she's here, Ty? So you can give her to your mother?"

"Sit down, Sage. It's none of your business," Ty said menacingly. Icy cold wafted from him as he spoke. His panic was a physical presence in the room.

Lana turned around and pinched Ty's cheek, leaving pink spots on his snowy pale skin. "I knew that story about Rober was a lie. Your mother will take good care of this one over at her school."

"Well, she's always complaining how there's never enough new students." Ty lifted Lana off his lap and stood up. "But it's none of your business either, Lana."

The deadly ice in Ty's eyes never shifted, but beside her, Giles had stopped pretending to sleep and was staring at Maya with such terror in his eyes she thought he might faint. She put her hand on his arm reassuringly, her own heart beating furiously in her chest at all this talk about her being a gift for the woman who had cut Giles' fingers off. What had she gotten them into?

"Maybe you should just let us out here?" Maya croaked quietly.

Lana's mean laughter was drowned out by Rober's voice coming from the speakers in the ceiling. "We'll be there in five."

"Should we hide?" Maya asked shrilly.

Ty didn't look at her. "No point, the human sensors will pick you up wherever you are. Just keep quiet."

Ty walked over to the wall screen and turned it on, then faced the room. "Alright, roll up your sleeves everyone, this might take some convincing, especially since it's so late there'll be a newbie on the gate guaranteed. You know how they always insist on following the entry protocol to the letter. I want to get home and go to sleep sometime before dawn."

Animal tattoos of various sizes and detail flashed around the room as they did as he asked. Eagles, sharks, a bear, and even an elephant. Lana's arm bore a king cobra tattoo. The only thing those animals had in common was that they were all extinct.

The hovercraft stopped and the black screen melted away to reveal a person, covered completely by a black body suit. His eyes were hidden by round, protruding goggles that reminded Maya of a fly. Ty gave his name, and requested permission to enter the city.

Fly man turned this way and that, surveying the room. Ty's hunting friends paid no attention to this interruption, but kept their tattoos clearly visible. "On whose authority are the displaced on board your craft?"

"Mine," Ty answered making sure the gatekeeper had a good view of his tattoo.

"You've been gone for nearly three days, Commander Remarque. I was ordered to send through the alert that you're back right away."

The rest of the kids straightened up in their seats and Lana walked over to Ty's side, making sure the cobra on her arm was very visible. "We all know how long we've been gone, and you won't be waking anyone to tell them we're back, not if you know what's good for you. We're not children."

The others yelled their agreement with Lana, a few threatening the man to let them in without a fuss or else.

"Let us through," Ty ordered. "I'll take full responsibility of letting everyone know we're back."

"With respect, I can't do that," fly man responded. "The order to detain you came straight down from your father."

"It's my mother you'll answer to if you don't let us go," Ty warned. "I have news for her that she'll want to hear right away."

*Does he mean me?*

The fly man took a moment to weigh his options. "Very well, have a good night," he finally relented.

The screen melted back to black and the hovercraft moved as though sucked into a wall of slime. They must have entered through the biological shield that separated the city

from the surrounding wasteland.

~

Once they reached the Special Forces hangar and the buzzing of the engines stopped, Ty turned to the others. "Best you disappear as soon as possible. I'll take care of everything."

He dared not look at Maya. The volcano of dread that erupted as soon as she said what her real destination in Neo York was had yet to die down to a manageable flow. *What do I do with her now? Why do I even care?*

She was nothing more than a random girl from the Badlands, too cheeky for her own good, or that of anyone around her. What he should do was take her to his mother now, present her as a gift to excuse his late return. Play it so his mother would never be able to doubt his allegiance to her goal of containing the spread of special abilities among the population.

He couldn't do that. He'd promised Maya he'd get her into the city safely. She had such a big dream of helping her town. Ty couldn't let her be destroyed in his mother's facility.

Lana hung back after the others exited the craft, tapping her fingers on the edge of her seat.

"You go on home, Lana. I have to go see my parents."

"I'll go with you. We can make a present of this one to your mother together," Lana said and pointed to Maya.

Ty winked at her. "We'll do that later. There's the big meeting with New LA and Dakota tomorrow. They'll want to prep me."

"Fine, tomorrow morning then. I'm going to visit my friend in Chicago after," Lana said and jostled past Rober.

Maya and her friend looked completely lost.

It would be best if he sent them back right away, on the next craft out.

"What was Lana talking about?" Rober asked from behind his back, startling Ty.

There was no way to explain it to him without Maya overhearing. "Can you take them home with you? Make sure they don't leave. I'll come and get them tomorrow."

Rober looked at him, disbelief fighting outrage on his face. His eyes screamed no, but he stayed silent.

"I'll owe you a big favor," Ty pleaded.

Maya let go of Giles' hand and came up to Ty. "I'm not a thing to be gifted around. Don't talk about me like I'm not here either. You can let us go now. We'll find our own way from here."

Ty reached up to stroke her hair reassuringly, covering up the gesture by rubbing the back of his neck instead. What he wanted to do was apologize for the harsh way he spoke to her before, tell her all would be well, that he'd keep her safe. But they needed to move fast, and he wasn't sure keeping her safe was even in his power, not with everyone on the craft knowing she was headed for his mother's facility.

"This is for your own good. I'm not gifting you to anyone," he said.

"Let's do as he says, Maya," Giles urged.

"Fine, but tomorrow you let us go."

Ty turned back to Rober. "So?"

Rober eyed Maya and Giles, then locked his eyes on Ty's. "Alright, but I'm collecting that favor now. Be at the boathouse by six o'clock tomorrow. Come alone and don't tell anyone where you're going."

*The boathouse? What does he want, a date?*

"I'll try. I doubt the conference about Nova 18 will be over by six," Ty protested.

"I'm hoping your father will start the trials by then, actually. That should draw a crowd. Make some excuse and be there at six."

"Alright," Ty relented. "Just make sure Lana doesn't know where they are."

Ty turned back to Maya. "I'll come and get you in the morning."

She ignored him and followed Rober and Giles from the craft.

It was for the best. That odd spark of longing she ignited came because she was so natural. The girls his age in the Ring were all the result of careful tinkering with the gene pool, and the scientists had yet to figure out how to replicate all of nature's diversity and life in a laboratory.

The pull Maya had on him would fade as quickly as it came. He'd make the arrangements for her transport back out the Ring before the talks started tomorrow, put her and her friend on a craft himself and make sure the pilot didn't stop until Maya was back in her sorry little town. Safe.

~

The hovercraft was parked in a vast black chamber lit by white strip lights. The entire hall was bigger than any Maya had ever seen and filled with hundreds of crafts identical to the one they'd just exited. There wasn't a single person around. Flying drones zoomed around above them. Two of them, a row of red lights flashing along their circular bodies, flew towards the hovercraft and attached themselves under the wings. The red lights started flashing then turned different colors.

"Come on!" Rober called to her from farther down the chamber.

She jumped off the ladder and ran to him.

He walked very fast and led them through a series of hallways. Each time they reached a wall, he pressed his snake tattoo against a panel, and doors appeared. By the time they reached the elevator with a door that rippled open like water, Maya was panting, still getting over the strangeness of the place. None of her lessons at school had prepared her for structures and technology like this.

The elevator door rippled shut after them and Rober pressed a complicated sequence of keys on a wall panel before holding his tattoo against the glass.

The elevator shot up with such force it glued Maya against the side, certain her stomach was now lodged in her throat. Giles was retching beside her.

"Oh, sorry," Rober muttered and adjusted some setting on the panel. The sickening centrifugal force lessened. "I'm so used to it, I forgot how it might affect you."

"Where are we going?" Maya asked, seizing the opportunity to speak.

"To my place."

"I have to get to the school for the gifted as soon as possible. Can you take us there instead?" Maya pleaded.

"Oh, so that's why," Rober muttered to himself. He shook his head. "Can't do that. Besides, it's closed now."

The elevator came to a silent stop and the doors rippled open to reveal a wide hallway lined with dark oak panels, a carpet of red, white and black wool covering the floor. The lighting along the walls was shaped like candles.

Rober led them to a large wooden door that glistened like water in the half-light.

Maya's entire house could fit into the room on the other side of it.

Enough sofas to sit twenty people dominated the center of the room. The huge windows beyond the sofa looked onto a lush green meadow, extending towards gentle rolling hills.

Maya gasped at the beauty, then pivoted to face Rober. "You have nature like this and you let us live in the dried up Badlands? My whole *town* could fit there with so much to spare."

It was a good thing Giles held her back. She was ready to claw Rober's eyes out.

Rober stared at her, looking puzzled at her sudden anger. She pointed furiously at the windows again.

He seemed to figure it out then, because he strode to the window where he pressed a few buttons on a panel behind the curtain. The meadow disappeared, replaced by the view of tall buildings, rising high into the air, glimmering neon pink, yellow, orange, even white. The sky visible around them wasn't black, but a dark green, signs flashing across it. A hovercraft zoomed by the window, leaving an orange streak of light behind it. There was not even a blade of grass to be seen, let alone a tree or a hill.

Rober pointed out the window. "This is Neo York. No rolling hills, no meadows. Unless you press this," he showed her on the panel, and the meadow was back. "I'm sorry. I wish I could do something to change all that."

"So do I. That's why I came here, so I can learn my gift and heal Earth," Maya said.

Rober stared at her with his mouth open.

"She doesn't know if it's possible," Giles interjected.

Maya cast him an angry look. "I know I can do it."

Rober walked over to them from the window. "How does your gift work? Can you fix the weather?"

Maya turned to glare at him. Was he making fun of her? Yet, there was no trace of a smile on his lips, and his eyes were fixed on hers, hopeful for an answer.

"No, not the weather. I can make things grow. From shoot to a ripe plant it a few hours," she explained. "I know I can do more. It's why I want to go to the school for the gifted."

Rober sat down on the sofa and laced his fingers together. "Your gift sounds amazing. I'd never considered enlisting the gifted, but it would make so much sense. Especially if there were more that could do what you can do."

Maya stared at him, not sure what he meant.

"Sit, tell me what you think," he urged her. "Do you know anyone else who can do what you can do?"

Maya sat down on the edge of the sofa across from Rober. "No. My dad told me of a woman, but she died before I was born, I think. Other than her, I don't know of any others."

Giles sat down beside Maya, his thigh pressing against hers. Rober leaned back and studied them. "I think the atmosphere is the real problem. Unless that's fixed there is no hope."

"The air is safe enough to breathe. Safer than it was a hundred years ago, even," Maya said. "I think the real problem is the water. It doesn't circulate the way it's supposed to."

Rober studied her intently. "You think it's that simple? You may have a point. I'll have to look it up."

"What's all this to you anyway?" Maya asked. "You have everything here."

"I could never reconcile all this with the millions stuck out there in the Badlands."

Rober sat up, his eyes flashing. "More needs to be done to fix the planet. I'm sure the technology exists already. All that's missing is someone who will use it for good. And I mean to try."

"Are you serious? Why haven't they done anything yet then?" Maya took off her backpack and leaned closer to Rober.

"The general opinion is that the Earth can't support so many people anymore. It's why the ruling families of the Ring have closed it off to refugees. Basically they're waiting for most of the population to die out."

"I figured as much," Maya whispered. Hearing it confessed so plainly made the room spin around her. "I'd love to help you in any way I can."

"I'll need all the help I can get. There are not many who agree with my plans," Rober said.

Giles cleared his throat. "You know, we should get some sleep. Maybe you two can continue this conversation tomorrow."

Rober shot to his feet. "Right, I have to get up early too. I'll show you how to get some food before I go."

He walked them to the kitchen and explained how to get food by choosing from a scrolling menu beside a large black oven. "If it's not on the menu, then tell it what you want. Though this model is a couple of years old, so that might not work out so—"

"You have machines that can make food from nothing," Maya interrupted, "and you say you want to help the Badlands? Why not start with giving these things out?"

Rober blushed. "I'd thought of that. Even took some out in the beginning. The thing is, they *don't* make food out of nothing, and it's a very serious offense to give this tech to the Badlands. Life imprisonment. I thought I could do more good if I remained free."

"You're probably right. Sorry I shouted. I believe you want to help," Maya said.

After he showed them the bathroom and bedroom he left. As soon as the doors rippled closed behind him, Maya ran to the door and pulled on the handle. The door didn't move by so much as a hair.

"He locked us in?" Giles asked, appearing at her side.

Maya nodded.

Giles put his arm around her shoulders and led her to the kitchen. "I'm sure they'll let us leave tomorrow. This Rober, he seems alright. He definitely liked your gift. What do you feel like eating?"

"I'm not hungry. He didn't hurt you, did he? When he led you away?"

Giles kept his arm around her. "No, he took me to a smaller compartment, then spent the whole time reading something and muttering to himself. Probably some of those notes he was talking about before. I was going crazy worrying about you all alone with the rest of them, but he said you'd be fine and kept on reading."

Maya's appetite returned once she started scrolling through the menu.

By the time they finished eating, it was all Maya could do to get to the bed. She hadn't slept more than a few hours in the last two days. And since no one had harmed her until now, and Rober seemed to be on her side, she figured she was safe to sleep. She could hardly keep her eyes open long enough to undress before climbing under the covers.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The communication panel by his apartment door in the Remarque skyscraper froze when Ty pressed his tattoo against it to get in. An image of his father sitting in the leather armchair in his study, flashed across the screen. "Come here now, Tyberious. And turn on your phone."

Ty hastily deposited Isis into her enclosure before retreating back into the elevator. This summons was still far preferable to the alternative of his father having him shackled and brought to him directly from the landing site, which Ty had half expected to happen.

His father motioned for Ty to approach as he entered the study. There was only the one armchair by the fireplace, so Ty was forced to stand.

His father leaned forward in the chair making the leather creak. His bulky frame filled almost the entire width of it. "You know how important tomorrow's talks are. You were supposed to be back yesterday at the latest."

Ty avoided looking directly at his father's eyes, knowing how unnerving the man found his cold gaze. He looked at his forehead instead. The vein on this father's temple stood out, thick and pulsing. Ty would have to choose his words carefully or risk serious punishment. "Isis was injured during the hunt. We had to wait until she was stitched up and ready to move."

The compassion card was always his best bet with his father. Though as he got older, Ty wasn't sure his father still believed he had any left.

It worked this time, because his father's eyes lost some harshness. "So your lateness had nothing to do with the weapons that are missing off the craft? Or the two displaced you brought back?"

They'd only just landed. How could his father know all about that? Though if he was waiting this eagerly for Ty to return, he might have gotten word from any of the other checkpoints they'd passed.

"We took the weapons with us to the hunt, and forgot to retrieve them after Isis was torn up."

"You forgot the weapons?" his father yelled, then shook his head in disbelief. "What about the displaced? Did they get on the craft by mistake too?"

"Bringing them was Rober's idea. I didn't think it'd be a problem," Ty replied.

"Maybe you're not ready to take on extra responsibilities to your family and city. You'd clearly still rather be playing with your friends and your pets full time."

"I am ready," Ty mumbled. He very much hoped the day when he would have to take over as head of the family was still a long time away.

"I'm seriously beginning to doubt it," his father countered.

The door on the other side of the room slid open and his mother walked in. She fixed him with her kind gaze, smiling widely. If Ty's own eyes matched the kindness of hers, and not just the color, he wouldn't have such a hard time staying on his father's good side, he was sure.

"Don't be so hard on him, Caesar," she said. "Ty only wanted to have a little fun. You

give him too many responsibilities."

His father took a long swallow of his drink and leaned back. "Maybe you should stop forcing him to help you at that facility of yours so much. Then I'd have more time to prepare him for running the city."

His father's tone was mocking, but at least he hadn't mentioned Isis and the real reason Ty was late. If his mother actually knew how much Ty cared about Isis, she'd do something about it as a matter of principle.

"Ty is indispensable to me and my work at the facility, and he's showing a real aptitude for it." His mother wrapped her arm around Ty's and kissed him lightly on the cheek. Ty fought the urge to back away from her.

"He's my son too," his father muttered into his drink. His mother ignored him.

"Ty loves to help me with my work, don't you? More than he likes helping you with yours."

Ty would love to never set foot into his mother's terrible facility ever again. However, it was his mother he had to fool, not his father. Of the two she was by far the bigger threat. At least that's what his old teacher Salvio always insisted.

Ty grinned at her. "It's certainly interesting to work at the facility."

The lie settled like a rock in his stomach.

His father let out an exasperated sigh. "He's never going to learn how to take over the family by tinkering with other people's special gifts all day. Though if that's what you prefer, Ty, I'll start looking for a new heir."

Most days for as long as he could remember, Ty wanted nothing more than to strip off his tattoo and go somewhere far away from Neo York. Tonight was no different. Yet, it could never happen. They'd find him, drag him back.

He looked directly into his father's brown eyes, willing the man to believe he was telling the truth. "I'm ready for more responsibility. I've proven it more than once since you gave me command in the Special Forces. Haven't I?"

The corners of his father's lips flickered up into a hint of a smile. "Yes, you certainly have lots of talent for that. But it's how you perform tomorrow that's going to prove how ready you are for more substantial command. I'd suggest you spend the rest of the night studying up on our plans for evacuation to Nova 18."

Ty drew a deep breath. "I've read and reread all the materials you gave me. Dakota and New LA are in breach of the contract on Nova 18. They've been secretly terraforming a whole section of it, and are already building the first settlements. They've been hoping to gain control over the whole planet while diverting your attention with the trade war over the new medicapsules. Now that we know, that won't happen."

*Because you will have them all executed and claim the planet Nova 18 for yourself and Neo York.*

Ty didn't say the last part out loud, and made sure nothing on his face betrayed he was thinking it. Nevertheless, he knew it was very likely the only possible outcome of tomorrow's meeting. His father hated alliances with the other cities in the Ring. The agreement on Nova 18 was one of the last such contracts he inherited from his own father and had not yet managed to terminate. It was a kind of open secret that Caesar Remarque had his sights set on becoming the head of the most powerful family in the Ring, a king of sorts. But no one spoke about that too often or too loudly.

His father's eyes flickered with something akin to pride. "Well, I'm glad to hear you

haven't been wasting your time. Go to sleep now, the meeting starts at nine tomorrow morning."

His mother ran her hand across Ty's forearm. Her fingers caught on the bracelet Ty had forgotten to remove before coming home. "What's this then? A trinket from some Badlands girl? Is this why you're late?"

His mother's eyes lost none of the kindness, but her measured tone could cut glass.

Ty pulled off the bracelet and showed it to her. "No, this is just something I picked up for Eve. Do you think she'll like it?"

His mother took the bracelet and ran it through her fingers. "I suppose. She does have a certain fondness for such base products."

Ty took it back from her and put it in his pocket, then leaned over and kissed his mother's cheek. "Alright then, I'll see you both tomorrow morning."

~

Ty dialed Rober's number as soon as he was back in the elevator.

"Did you get them to your house alright?" he asked as soon as Rober finally picked up.

"Yes," Rober said groggily. "Don't worry, they're safe for the night."

"Where are they? I want to go explain the plan to them."

"What plan? You can see her tomorrow. They're probably asleep by now."

"I'll wake them up then," Ty insisted.

"Just go to sleep. There'll be plenty of time tomorrow."

Ty reluctantly hung up and changed the coordinates in the elevator to take him up to his own apartment.

First thing tomorrow morning he'd organize transport for Maya and Giles back to their home town. With luck, he'd even be able to go with them, make sure it was done properly. Once back in his room, he set the alarm for six in the morning, and was asleep in minutes.

He and Maya were sitting by the rushing river near her town, no drowning lady to save this time. Maya had just leaned in to whisper something in his ear when the shrill beep of his phone tore right through Ty's dream.

"Are you ready yet?" his father yelled when Ty answered the call. He could still almost feel Maya's soft hair brushing against his hand. The dream left him with a warm, pleasant feeling and made him sleep right through the alarm he'd set.

Ty tossed the covers off and got up, assuring his father he'd be ready in five minutes. The suit was already prepared for him, accompanied by a note from his mother written on the interactive wall of the closet door to wear it. She'd picked out a pair of black pants, a white shirt, and a collarless jacket that fit tightly over his torso and flared out at the back. Not what Ty would have chosen to wear, but it was impressive enough, made of thin, hand-woven wool, the shirt real cotton.

He dressed hastily, popped the breakfast ration into his mouth and ran down to the garage. The ration pills were so much less messy than eating actual food and worked equally well. His mother and father waited in the craft with the tiger that was his family's emblem worked in gold into the sides. The craft sped away as soon as Ty sat down.

His father shot him a disapproving look, yet didn't seem eager to voice any criticism with Ty's mother right there, which suited Ty perfectly fine. She'd defend him, and then his parents would spend the whole ride to City Hall arguing again.

A few minutes later, they entered the assembly room at the City Hall building through

the back, coming in behind the raised panel table that looked out upon the conference room. His parents took their seats at the center of the table and Ty took his place behind them as their heir. A few seats down, Rober was standing behind his own parents as their heir. At the far end of the table Hercules Montague cast a shadow with his eight foot frame made up mostly of muscle. There wasn't much left of Hercules that was naturally grown with all the procedures the man had had. The last Ty heard, Hercules had had the bones of both arms replaced with a biotitanium skeleton.

Ty tried to catch Rober's eye, but his friend was looking straight ahead at the far door of the room. It didn't matter, they couldn't talk about Maya here.

Someone ran up to hand Ty a microphone as the delegations from the offending cities were led into the room by four black clad Special Forces officers. The men and women looked haggard, like they hadn't slept at all. Ty glanced at their tattoos while they took their seats. Most bore smaller versions of the ruling families' marks, so Ty doubted any of these people were in any real position to make decisions. He was certain his parents and the rest of the panel would not forgive a slight like that from Dakota and New LA.

His father called the meeting to order once the whole delegation was seated at a table parallel to the raised podium. Beyond that the less prominent Citizens who had come to the talks settled down into the plush velvet seats that lined the room. The Special Forces still flanked the delegation, giving Ty hope that this would be a short meeting, leaving him plenty of time to arrange for Maya's transportation out of the Ring before he had to meet Rober at six. He hoped Rober still had them hidden away.

His father began the meeting without delay.

"Dakota and New LA decided to go ahead and settle Nova 18 without consulting us first, and now they are too afraid to face us," his father's voice echoed across the room. "So they send you all, the lesser relatives of the ruling houses. Still, you're here, and I'm eager to hear what you've got to say in your defense. Why don't you start?"

His father pointed at the man on the far side of the table.

The chosen man stood up shakily and fumbled with his tablet. Murmurs had started up again before he finally cleared his throat to speak.

A holographic rendering of the planet Nova 18 sprung up from his tablet and hung in the air in front of the assembly. The man coughed again and launched into a long explanation of how and why the planet was so important. The ruling families of the cities that made up the Ring had begun preparations to abandon Earth and settle Nova 18 once it became clear that nothing could be done to prevent the rapid destruction of Earth due to the depletion of natural resources and the broken weather patterns. To date, however, the families couldn't even agree on what to name the planet that was to be their new home, which was why it was still referred to as simply Nova 18. Coming to an agreement on how to divide it up seemed even more impossible.

Ty glanced over at Rober from the corner of his eye. His friend's cheeks had already turned scarlet, and he'd balled his hands into fists. Ty hoped Rober wouldn't interrupt the talks with any of his revolution ideas today.

The delegation man was reading through a tedious list of all the families and their special roles in making sure everything was going according to plan. He zoomed in on the tablet, revealing the surface of the planet and the facilities that had already been built there for the first settlers.

Ty had almost dozed off by the time the man finished. Then Ty's father had him read

out loud and explain the clauses in which Dakota and New LA were in violation.

This was followed by a two hour round of legal arguing which even to Ty's untrained ear sounded like a lot of pointless, circular logic. By the time they finally called a recess for lunch at two o'clock, Rober was stomping his feet and muttering obscenities at the delegation and their faulty arguments.

If Ty thought the lunch break would offer an opportunity to arrange Maya's transport out of the Ring, or even inquire about her, he was wrong. His father wouldn't let him leave his side, introducing him around for the whole two hours of the break. Ty smiled, shook hands, and only spoke when someone asked him a direct question.

The delegation members weren't allowed to leave the assembly hall. Lunch was brought in to them and the Special Forces were still guarding them when the afternoon session started.

At four thirty, Rober leapt over the panel table and punched the man who'd been speaking. Ty goggled at him while an SF guard dragged him out of the room after all attempts to make him calm down failed. Rober winked at him and pointed at his watch. Ty understood perfectly, the meeting was at six and he had to be there.

By five, Ty was seriously considering trying for something similar. Not that he'd ever do it, because it would most likely take his father decades to forgive a stunt like that. Yet by five thirty the talks still showed no sign of winding down. And then what? Would Rober take Maya to his mother in retaliation if he didn't get to the boathouse by six? Ty hoped not.

The conversation was still going nowhere. The offending cities held themselves blameless, refuting every piece of evidence put forth by Ty's father and the others. Ty checked the time again. These talks could well take all night.

Suddenly, Ty's mother's stood up. "We will never reach any sort of consensus like this," she said. "I demand that members of representing families of New LA and Dakota meet with us directly." The other panel families nodded at her words. "We will keep you all here until such a time as they come to retrieve you by agreeing to make any and all of the legally binding contract between us and them null and void. Each day that they don't come, one of your number will be executed."

Ty's insides turned to ice with her words. The delegation stared at his mother with their mouths open and eyes wide, as did everyone else in the room.

The rest of the panel sat very still and very silent, indicating their agreement by saying nothing. So long as Violetta Remarque was ruthless enough to mandate the executions, they could pretend to be blameless. They all knew very well that Ty's mother never failed to come up with some medieval form of torture for those that displeased her. And this delegation had kept her in the assembly hall all day, away from her precious facility.

"You cannot do this!" the delegation lawyer finally yelled. "We have rights."

Violetta laughed. "Here in Neo York I decide what your rights are. Blame your masters. They knew this might happen. Now it's up to them to save you. Or not."

Her laugh echoed in the silent room for a moment, then his father stood up. Ty hoped he would recall his mother's order and find a more peaceful solution, however, his father merely called for a vote on the matter. The entire panel silently raised their hands. The crowd that had gathered in the velvet seats erupted in outrage, drowning out the pleading and crying of the delegation members. The Citizens of Neo York supported the idea of Nova 18 becoming the sole property of their city, as it was a Neo Yorker who first discovered it could be fit for human habitation. Nova 18 could fit the entire population of Neo York, but not if

they shared it with the other cities of the Ring. Yet his mother's barbaric negotiation tactics never went over very well with the public.

Their outraged protests did little to change anything, as usual. The panel families were already filing out through the back door. The first execution would happen soon.

Ty glanced at the delegation as he followed his parents from the room, wishing, far, very far in the back of his mind that he had the power to save them. He didn't. So there was no use even looking at them.

He muttered a hasty goodbye to his parents and ran out towards the elevator that would take him to the boathouse. He'd barely make it, but he'd be there at six like he promised Rober.

## CHAPTER NINE

The sky outside was a deep yellow by the time Maya woke up the next morning. Giles still snored softly beside her.

The apartment they were in had wraparound windows, all twice as tall as she was. Advertisements flashed across the sky, broken up by speeding hovercraft. *The new medicapsule*, one ad read. *Fix all common ailments with the press of a button. Now able to mend broken bones.* A single one of those in her town could save so many, give the people some hope.

She didn't see a single person anywhere, nor any birds or trees. Tall, wide buildings stretched out in all directions, connected by tunnels and tubes. One of those must be the school. Perhaps the one that glimmered like a thousand diamonds. She'd find out today, anyway. The apartment they were in was so high up she could not see the street below. Simply looking down she felt pulled into the abyss.

The oven in the kitchen produced a good imitation of eggs and buttered toast, but it still tasted less real than the eggs back home. The knowledge that if a single one of these machines were available in her town there would be no starvation also took all the enjoyment out of eating it.

Giles joined her while she was looking for a place to put the dirty dishes.

"It's this one, I think," he muttered and pointed to a shiny blue door with a shower head styled on its surface. The door had no handle and no buttons to press to open it. In the end, Maya stacked the dirty dishes on the floor beside it and joined Giles at the table.

"I hope someone comes to let us out soon. I want to find the school as soon as possible."

Giles swallowed hard, the unchewed bit of sausage going down bringing tears to his eyes. "About that, Maya. I'm not sure studying under Violetta Remarque is the best idea."

It took Maya a moment to place the name, but then she remembered Giles' terrible story. "What choice do I have, Giles? This is my best chance of figuring out my gift."

"I'm sure there are other schools like that, in other cities."

"We're here in this one, and I doubt we'll ever be able to enter another one."

Maya picked some dirt from under her fingernails, not wanting to meet his eyes. His intentions were good, but he totally didn't understand. The need to learn her gift was all-consuming, constantly on her mind.

Giles looked down at his hands too and didn't reply.

"I'll keep out of her way as much as I can, I promise," Maya finally said. "I want to get back home to my parents as soon as possible."

"I don't want you to go to the school at all," Giles said mutinously.

Why was he being so difficult? Couldn't Giles see this was hard enough on her as it was? Why did he insist on giving her more to worry about?

Still, she understood where his questions were coming from. She took hold of his hand with both of hers. "I'll be in and out of that school in no time. We'll still see each other each afternoon. And you'll have all the time in the world to get reacquainted with your

brothers."

Giles frowned down at his maimed hands, then looked at her like he was struggling to make a decision. He shook his head, and Maya steeled herself for more arguments, but he smiled one of those smiles that made his eyes glimmer. "You're right. This is what you need to do and I won't get in your way."

He stood up and pulled her after him. "Since we're stuck here, I think we should make the best of it. I'm sure there's enough gadgets in here to play with for the rest of our lives and never get bored."

He showed Maya the shower, where she spent the next hour enjoying the bubbles. The jet of warm air that whooshed over her as she climbed out of the shower surprised her so much she screamed.

While she was showering, Giles had found the virtual reality gaming console. They spent the next two hours wandering around a land of history, with snowcapped mountains sheltering castles made of stone. The Medieval world was so real she could smell the roses in the gardens and the pines that surrounded her castle. Maya chose to play Isabella, who would soon inherit the whole kingdom to rule as she pleased. She pulled out of the VR world once she began to feel her sense of identity slipping, merging with the mind of the princess.

Giles switched off the console soon after and turned on the television. On the news, an excited news anchor was informing them that the talks about something called Nova 18 were going well, and that soon the planet would be under the sole control of Neo York. Then a short segment showed Nova 18, explaining its significance. It was a planet they hoped to make into a second Earth so that people could abandon this dying planet.

Maya shot to her feet and pointed wildly at the screen. "Do you hear that? They mean to leave Earth, not even try to save it."

Giles moved to switch off the news but she held him back. "This can't be! I have to stop them."

Giles shook off her grasp and switched off the TV. "There isn't anything you can do, Maya."

"I can try," she said and sat back down. "As soon as that Rober kid comes back I'm going to make him take me to the school."

She spent the rest of the afternoon by the window, refusing to speak to Giles. Ads kept flashing in the sky: A state of the art oven, capable of producing even the most complicated foods; a dishwasher that could change the color and shape of your dishes while making them spotlessly clean; a comb that dyed your hair any color with the press of a button.

Who wanted all that? Was having more things all the Citizens cared about?

Maya had a whole list of ideas to speak to Rober about by the time the greenish tint of twilight colored the sky outside. Whatever he was doing to help the Badlands was too little and too slow.

The panel by the door started beeping once the sky turned a dark green color again. A picture of Rober's face flashed across the screen. It took them a few moments to figure out which button to press to answer the call.

"How are you doing?" Rober asked once they finally succeeded. His pale red hair was standing out all over the place and a faint bruise was starting to rise on his cheek.

"Fine," Maya replied. "I want to go to the school as soon as possible. Come let us out now."

Rober shook his head. "Today is not a good day for you to be wandering around the

city. Have some dinner, play a few games and I'll see you later."

Maya opened her mouth to insist he let her out now, but the screen went black.

"Try to call him back," Maya pleaded with Giles.

He only made a halfhearted attempt, muttering about how unwise it was to go against the wishes of a member of a panel family.

"What's a panel family?" Maya asked once her anger at his complacency faded.

Giles sat down on the sofa across from her. "How much do you already know about the Ring?"

Maya shrugged. "I know that it exists."

After she learned of the mines and other terrors designed to keep people from the Badlands away from the cities, she refused to learn any more about them.

"I don't know much more than that myself," Giles said. "I was only eight when we left. The Ring is made up of five megacities. This is Neo York, and then there's Chicago, Toronto, Dakota and New Los Angeles. There's no real government in any of the cities or the Ring as a whole. They're all run by families that control most of the wealth, technology and commerce."

"Didn't New York drown after the North melted?" Maya asked, trying to recall from her studies what the city once looked like. Tall buildings were all she remembered, but none of them as tall as the ones that surrounded her now.

"The old city was, yes. They safeguard it, it's a tourist attraction of sorts now."

"Great, so they preserve a drowned city, and let the rest of the world die off," Maya muttered. "It figures. They plan to leave it all behind anyway."

Giles leaned back and looked past her out the window. "Anyway, Neo York is run by a panel of six of the most powerful families, Greenwood, Schwartz, Weinstein, Orsini, Montague and Remarque, of course."

Maya recognized the names of the kids in the hovercraft. No wonder they had no problem getting Maya and Giles into the city. And no wonder they expected her to bow at the mere mention of their names.

"I don't know much more than that," Giles continued, "except that you don't want to get on the wrong side of any of them. They made sure every Citizen knew that from the start."

Out in the Badlands, no one knew very much about how the cities of the Ring operated. If they wished to let everyone die out, would they even let Maya help? How could they not? They couldn't enjoy spending their days cooped up in these tall buildings.

After a while Giles suggested they play another game and Maya agreed, mostly to pass the time before Rober finally came.

She stayed awake as long as she could. The Orsini kid didn't come like he promised he would. And after all Giles said, she was beginning to doubt they were anything other than prisoners in these comfortable rooms. The only thing she couldn't understand was why.

~

A gorgeous black skinned woman with slanting blue eyes smiled all the way to the doors of the elevator that led to boathouse eight, miles above the Earth, where Ty was expected by Rober. Seven hostile pairs of eyes locked on him as soon as he entered, but Rober said, "Ah, there you are. I'd begun to worry you wouldn't be able to make it. What happened after I left?"

"More or less as you predicted. Only there will be no trials, just executions," Ty said

and sat down in one of the plush egg-shaped chairs.

Sage Montague leapt up, sending her chair spinning. "And I suppose that was your darling mother's idea? She does like to simply kill anyone who stands in her way."

"You're right about that, Sage," Ty replied, fixing her with his icy gaze. "So it's better not to get in her way."

It was all Ty himself ever tried to do, and the only sensible way to deal with his mother.

Sage eyed him up and down. "She doesn't scare me."

The rest in the room were listening intently, but none spoke.

Ty glared at Sage. "She should."

When Sage made to protest, Rober interrupted.

"Calm down, Sage. We're just here to talk."

Sage rounded on Rober. "Why did you even ask Ty to come? We don't need his help and I doubt we'll get it."

Ty looked from one to the other. "Help with what?"

Rober motioned for Sage to sit down and she obeyed. He leaned over the table and poured Ty a glass of cognac, not the real stuff his father drank, but the artificially made one his father despised. Not that Ty had a taste for either.

He swirled his drink in the glass and scanned the room. Adam and Sage Montague. Tanya Weinstein. Anne Greenwood. Henrik Schwartz. Liam and Michael Northman. All the ones who agreed with Rober's plans, all younger children of the panel families that controlled Neo York. His friends. Outside the window, the Earth was a blue and brown ball, swathed in thick white clouds.

Rober stood up and looked at Ty. "I've called this meeting because the future of our planet is threatened and no one else is doing anything about it. We want to and we will. We need you with us, Ty."

Ty leaned forward in his chair. "Need me for what?"

Ty had listened to Rober's rants about the planet often enough. He'd been certain Rober understood he wanted nothing to do with it. The whole setup felt like a deadly trap all of a sudden, and it would be best if he simply got up and left before they said any more.

Rober turned to him. "Help us change the way things are!" He pointed through the window at Earth and continued. "They spend days arguing who has more right to be the first to leave this planet behind. I am sure, we are *all* in this room sure, more can be done to save it. If they can terraform Nova 18, they can terra save Earth!"

A few of those gathered chuckled.

"Maybe we should find another slogan, though," Liam said. "Terra save Earth sounds a little forced."

Ty laughed along with the others to hide his shock. Rober's face turned red.

"Who cares what we call it? We're not selling anything. Millions are still displaced in the Badlands, lacking food and shelter, lacking safety, while we in the cities draw the last resources to live in made up worlds, with *pictures* where real nature should be."

Ty stopped listening. He'd had no idea Rober had begun acting on his wishes to help the people of the Badlands. Organizing meetings, going against his parents' orders, the panel's orders. If he had known, Ty would have tried to stop him. Did Rober imagine he was the first to have these ideas? Didn't he see that likely thousands had been prevented from carrying out similar things in the past?

The stones on Ty's bracelet turned so cold he was sure they left burn marks. He fought against the feelings of anger, betrayal, terror before something went wrong. He imagined stuffing it all into a metal chest in his mind, its walls thick, its locks infallible. Exactly like Salvio taught him to do all those years ago when he started teaching him how to control his power. Ty hadn't had to perform this exercise to control his gift for years now.

"What do you want from me?" he asked harshly, cutting across the rest of Rober's speech.

The others turned to glare at him.

"Let him finish speaking," Tanya barked.

"Hear me out, please," Rober replied. "Between us we wield enough power to control the entire Ring. I have the power to make the shields fail, the Montagues control the space technology. We could make this world a good place for all to live. You, Ty, will be in control of this city soon."

"It's time someone did something to save the Badlands," Sage cut in. "We're in a great position to do so. It's our responsibility."

Ty looked at her. "Responsibility? How? None of us caused what is happening."

"We can't let them all die," Tanya insisted, "not when we have the means to save them. It's the right thing to do."

Ty admired their fire, wished he could share it. However, too much depended on him staying on his mother's good side. Eve's safety, his own survival. And now this.

Ty had heard too much. They all had. There was no way to unhear it ever again. He couldn't believe Rober would ambush him like this. But telling everyone in the room how he really felt about their insane plans wouldn't do any good either.

"My parents plan to rule for at least another fifty years, Rober. And you, Sage and Adam, how will you two get past Hercules to seize power?"

Unlike the ancient son of a god, Hercules had no weakness. And his only goal was to become the head of House Montague.

"The plan we propose is a long term one, one that will be carried out in stealth," Rober explained. "We will give the towns and villages the ability to begin healing the land and keep their efforts secret. Once that is achieved a coup will have to take place."

Ty locked his fingers into a tight ball in his lap, still struggling to stuff all his rage, anger, sadness and panic into the large metal chest in the darkest corner of his mind, slamming the lid down, locking it tight before the emotions could make him lose control and lash out with his power. Using his power on them all now would likely be a kinder fate than his mother finding out about their plans.

He grit his teeth, forcing himself to ignore the thought, his jaw aching. The stones on his bracelet turned so painfully cold he wanted to rip it off. Maybe that meant it was working. Maybe it was helping him stay in control of his power.

Finally the waves of dangerous panic began to lessen. He had to choose his words carefully. Merely saying the things Rober was saying carried a death sentence, and Ty's mother would not be satisfied with mere executions for speeches and plans like these. No. She'd keep every one of Ty's treasonous friends alive for months, ripping out their teeth, pulling out their nails, cutting away fingers and limbs. Then she'd execute them, if there was anything else left to kill. That in itself might spark a revolution, though not likely. The panel deferred silently. And Violetta Remarque took her power very absolutely, and very personally.

Rober was eyeing him with a hint of fear in his eyes now. As well he should. He,

better than anyone, understood the terrible position Ty was in. He knew how thin a line Ty walked every day, keeping his mother happy and his sister safe. Rober knew Ty would always keep him safe too— keep all his friends safe if he could. Rober was counting on it. Why else had he dragged Ty into this?

Right then Ty hated him for it.

There was no walking away from this meeting, not ever. Neither could he go back. Rober and his revolutionaries had to be stopped before they got hurt.

Ty took a long swallow of his cognac and leaned back, smiling, knowing full well that the smile never reached his ice cold eyes.

"I agree with you all that something should be done. Rober knows this, and now you all know it as well."

Ty paused and looked at the others. Sage still eyed him suspiciously, but the rest visibly relaxed at his words.

"What you propose has to be a long term plan alright," Ty continued, "one that needs to begin now. Between us we have the command of the Special Forces. We can begin transporting the necessary tech to the towns and villages. Our family names will keep us safe from too many questions. I will make sure my mother doesn't find out."

The silence that fell in the room was absolute. They all stared at Ty with their eyes bulging out. Ty laughed. "What? I said I would help. I have no love for the way things are done here either. Now tell me more of your plans."

By the time they finished explaining all their intricately laid plans Ty's head was spinning from the strain of keeping his emotions under control.

Ty held Rober back once the others left the boathouse. "You do realize that this isn't like the plans we used to make when we were children, right? This can get you killed."

Rober fixed him with a cold gaze, nearly icy enough to match his own. "I know. And I never stopped planning. You did."

"Because *I* know it's pointless!"

"It's not! Worst case scenario is that all of the panel families leave for Nova 18 and give us command down here. The way the terraforming is going that could take years. I believe if we're going to save Earth we need to start trying now."

Ty shook his head and looked out the window. "Worst case scenario is my mother finding out about your trying."

"Our trying. Because you'll help us, right?"

Ty still did not meet Rober's eyes. "I'll do what I can."

He had other things to worry about first. Maya had to be transported out of Neo York.

"Let's go see Maya and her friend now," Ty said.

Rober checked his watch. "It's past midnight. They're probably asleep by now."

Ty strode towards the elevator. "Then we'll wake them up."

~

"Wake up," a voice from the dark was urging Maya. "You're not safe. Wake up."

Maya turned and opened her eyes, expecting to realize she had only been dreaming. Ty stood next to her, shaking her shoulder. Outside the window, the sky was the dark green of a deep river. She had fallen asleep on the sofa.

Maya sat up and brushed her fingers through her hair. "Finally, you came," she said, her voice thick with sleep. "Take me to the school now, please."

Ty sat down on the sofa across from her and fiddled with his gemstone bracelet.

"Tomorrow morning, I will arrange transport back to your town for you and your friend," he said.

Maya recoiled, feeling like he had struck her. Cold waves emanated from him as though from a block of ice. "No, please. I want to learn to use my gift. You can't send me back!"

Ty let go of his bracelet and fixed her with his dead eyes. "People from the Badlands aren't allowed to be in the Ring."

Giles stirred on the sofa across from them and sat up. "I thought the school for the gifted welcomed students from all over. At least that's how I remember all those ads for it."

Ty shot him an angry look, but Giles didn't seem cowed.

Rober came over and sat on the armrest beside Giles. "Maya's gift could be very useful for our plans to save the Badlands. I don't think she should go home."

Ty looked at him with such murder in his eyes Maya was almost sure Rober would drop dead from that gaze alone. She could've sworn the blue stones of Ty's bracelet glimmered, though it could've been a reflection of one of the advertisements in the sky outside.

"Seriously, Ty," Rober continued undeterred. "You should hear her speak of her gift. She only wants to help her people. As do I. As do we."

Maya took the cue. She looked deep into Ty's eyes, willing her warmth to melt the ice there, wishing it could. "I just need a little guidance. Once I have a good grip on how to use it, I'll go back home. Please help me. I know I have the power to make the Badlands flourish again."

Ty stood up abruptly, upsetting the coffee table. "Be ready to leave tomorrow morning."

He turned and walked to the door. Maya stood up and took a few steps towards him. "Why are you being like this? What's it to you anyway?"

The door had already rippled shut after Ty.

Rober stood up to follow Ty. Maya grabbed his arm to halt him. "Can you take me to the school now? I don't want to leave."

Rober extricated his hand from her grasp, looking worried. "The school's closed now. Besides, I don't think it's a good idea. I'll talk to Ty though, try and dissuade him."

"How about you let us go and we'll find our own way there?" Giles suggested.

Rober shook his head and strode out of the room.

Maya sat back down on the sofa with a thud. "A fine mess this is. What are we going to do now?"

Giles edged closer and put his arm around her shoulders.

"It's probably for the best that we return home. This was a bad idea from the start," Giles said.

Maya left for the bedroom. Fear— ice cold, immovable fear was all she felt coming off of Ty. It made no sense. Why would taking her to the school cause him such dread?

## CHAPTER TEN

Two fully armed SFs stood outside his apartments when Ty woke up the next morning. They didn't say much, except that he was not to leave the family building. His father's orders. Ty had a pretty good idea that it was due to his mother passing her sentence on the visiting delegation yesterday, and now his father feared retaliation. Still, Ty had to get Maya out of the city.

His father was nowhere to be reached to retract his order, and his mother had given strict instructions not to be disturbed while she performed some tests at her facility.

Ty was too afraid to call Rober and enquire about Maya. His calls might be monitored, and the risk of anyone finding out about her was too great. He asked his guards to escort him to the SF headquarters, wanting to at least secure a craft now, so that he could take her back home as soon as he got his father to revoke the dumb house arrest order.

The SFs shook their heads. "All flights are canceled. The whole city is on lockdown. The shields were sealed late last night."

"For how long?" Ty asked.

"Until further notice."

There would be no way to get Maya out until Dakota and New LA came to their senses and did as the Remarques wanted them to.

Ty left the SFs in the hallway and went back into his apartment. He pulled his phone off his wrist and transformed it into a tablet to scan the news. His mother had already executed her first hostage the night before. The second execution was scheduled for seven that evening. She had started with the members of the less prominent families. Ty was sure that wasn't because of any sense of loyalty; his mother merely wanted to save the best for torture, in case the executions didn't have the desired effect.

The aquamarine bracelet burned cold against his skin as he tried to control the panic rising in his chest. How long before his mother found out about Maya? Lana would tell her for sure once she returned from Chicago. If she hadn't already.

Ty folded up his phone again and texted Rober not to let anyone know where Maya was until he found a way to get her out of the Ring.

As soon as he got the reassuring reply from Rober, he took off the aquamarine bracelet. He turned his phone into a watch and placed it on his wrist to hide the burn marks left by the stones.

He tracked down his sister Eve in the garden, where she was fiddling with one of her hyacinth bushes in the vast park that took up floors 75 through 100 of the Remarque building. Two SFs stood a few paces to her left.

"Ty, where have you been?" Eve asked, brushing a strand of hair off her forehead and streaking it with dirt. "Daddy said you returned the day before yesterday."

She pursed her lips at him, but her eyes were kind and said she was happy he'd come.

Ty wiped the dirt off her forehead. "I came back late and I was at the talks all day yesterday. I got you something."

He crouched beside her, pulled the bracelet out of his pocket and handed it to her. She

took it and peered at it intently. Then her whole face lit up in a smile.

"This is handmade, isn't it? You can see the flaws in the weave and everything." She threw her arms around his neck and squeezed tight. "I love it, thank you."

Ty picked her up and hugged her back. "I also got you a box to put it in, but I lost that. It doesn't matter, because you should wear this all the time."

She let go of his neck and put on the bracelet. "I will. And you should take better care of your things. Me, I never lose anything."

Cold, heavy dread settled in Ty's stomach. It was a trivial sort of special power his sister had, harmless, yet she was telling the absolute truth. Whenever she misplaced a possession all she had to do was wish for it back and there it was, right beside her. The bracelet should stop her being able to do that.

Ty put her down and looked back at the SFs. They were too far to overhear, but he led Eve farther into the garden anyway, on the pretense of wanting to see her butterflies.

Sweat broke out from every pore on his face as soon as they entered the humid enclosure where thousands of multicolored butterflies of all shapes and sizes fluttered around. At least the enclosure was soundproof and all the SFs stayed outside. A lilac and yellow butterfly settled on his sister's outstretched hand, it flew away as Ty turned her to face him. "I mean it, Eve. Don't take the bracelet off at all. It will help stop your power from showing."

Eve's eyes widened, flicking from Ty's face to the bracelet and back. "Really? You mean I don't have to be so alert all the time about it if I wear this?"

Ty shook his head, wishing he could tell her that was so. "You still have to hide it from Mom and Dad. Promise me you will, Eve."

She wriggled out of his grasp. "Ouch, you're hurting me."

Ty never even realized he had grabbed hold of her.

She stood there rubbing her arms and staring at him. "I went to see Julian this morning when I saw the SFs were trailing me. You know how they scare him."

"Yes. I should have gone to see him too." Their brother would go into an all-out fit if he was left alone in the room with an SF. Ty never wanted to find out why that was so, but he had a pretty good idea. He'd been away in Africa with his father when his older brother Julian had the accident that left him a child forever, even though he was now twenty years old. Ty was sure his mother had done something to him to stop him using his special gift, and the SFs were very likely a part of it.

Eve took his hand. "Don't worry, Julian is fine. Daddy made sure he won't recognize the SFs, but you should have gone to see him. He's very upset with you. Says you haven't been to visit him since New Year's."

Ty wasn't proud of it, but it was so very hard to keep all emotion locked away when he was with his brother. If only Salvio would teach Julian to control his power the way he taught Ty, he'd be alright now.

Another butterfly, a black one with red slashes across its wings, landed on their clasped hands.

"Don't worry, I'll wear the bracelet, Ty, I promise," Eve said. "Tell me the truth. You want me to hide my powers because if anyone found out, I would end up like Julian."

Ty willed his mouth to smile, yet he was certain she saw the strain. "Julian hit his head and they couldn't fix him."

Eve bit her lower lip. "I hear them arguing about Julian, Mom and Daddy. I'm eleven, I'm not stupid, Ty. I still remember the time he made it snow in the family room. I remember

because the next time I saw him, he no longer recognized me."

Ty remembered the snow too. Vividly. A year later Ty found out his mother had stopped Julian from using his gift. He'd overheard his parents arguing about it too. Heard his mother scream she would not have one of *those freaks of nature* in her family. Nor would she experiment on her own children at the facility. The fact that Violetta Remarque refused to subject her own children to the horrors she put her students through before tossing them aside was her one redeemable feature. It wasn't much.

The same could happen to Eve. It would certainly happen to Maya if she ever set foot in his mother's facility.

"Ty, do you have a special power too?" Eve asked.

Ty's face stiffened. He forced a smile and ruffled her hair. "No, I don't. And Julian really did fall, Eve. I was with him that day."

She looked at him like she believed neither of his lies, but she didn't press him for more.

"I know what we can do! Let's go have lunch with Julian," she said as they climbed out of the butterfly enclosure.

Ty lied he had to help their father with something, because seeing Julian on top of all his others worries seemed like a bad idea. He promised Eve he'd go see him soon and left the garden. Ty spent the rest of the day playing Castle Life, where he always played a shepherd with no worse cares in the world than VR wolves getting into his flock.

~

Maya had already spent most of the day pacing up and down beside the communication panel by the door. No one called. She kept trying to convince Giles to try and call someone. He finally conceded with another halfhearted attempt and soon declared it beyond his ability.

"I think Ty's plan has merit," Giles said and slumped down on the sofa again.

"I will not go home until I learn to use my gift."

Giles smiled at her, in that way he always did when she got angry at things beyond her control. "It's like an explosion when you get this worked up."

Maya didn't even bother to reply.

Giles did manage to figure out how the dishwasher and the closet worked. It wasn't like any closet Maya had ever seen. All you had to do was stand inside and direct it to dress you, and it did.

It had fashioned a perfectly tailored, golden brown body suit for Maya, complete with knee high boots. Giles whistled appreciatively when she walked out of the closet dressed in the skintight outfit. Maya hated it. The material was too sleek to be natural, and it moved with her unnervingly like a second skin. She changed back into her regular clothes right away.

By the time the sky had turned the dark green of night Maya's feet and back ached from pacing by the door, but her heart was beating furiously in her chest. Giles had long since disappeared into the imaginary world of a VR game.

Who did they think they were, keeping them locked in like this?

She'd even tried to use her gift on the door, letting the warmth build in her palm and sending a surge of it towards the door. All it did was make her faint with the effort.

"The door ripples like water when it opens," Maya reasoned to herself as she studied the door more closely.

To the best of her knowledge the door was made of mahogany. She'd never seen wood behave like water.

"If it looks like wood, it probably acts like wood. And water ripples if a stone strikes it," she mused to herself. "So either way, if I hit it with something hard and heavy, it should open."

By eleven o'clock that still seemed like the best plan. Giles had already fallen asleep on the sofa, the VR glasses hanging off his face.

Just as well, he'd only try to stop her.

Maya hauled the food maker to the door. It was the heaviest thing in the whole apartment that she could carry.

Panting and groaning, she lifted the oven over her head and flung it as hard as she could at the center of the door.

The door rippled and she let out a whoop. They were free!

Then the ripples absorbed the oven and a streak of black water rushed towards her.

It hit her square on the chest.

Maya's heart stopped beating as the back of her head collided with the floor.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rober's call interrupted Ty as he was settling down to play a tune on a flute he'd carved from a piece of wood in Castle Life.

"Come to my house now! Maya's hurt!" Rober yelled and hung up.

The sprawling hills where the sheep grazed had yet to fully fade from Ty's vision, but his heart was beating frantically. How could Maya be hurt?

He ran past the SFs still stationed at his door to the elevator and punched in the floor number to his father's study. He pressed his tattoo against the door to get into the room, but his father wasn't back yet.

Ty called him on the phone. "Why are you keeping me locked up?"

"You know very well why. Or at least you should," his father snarled. "And don't call me at work unless it's an emergency. We'll talk when I get home."

"And when will that be?" Ty asked. His father had already hung up. It was for the best. Ty shouldn't have called him like that. He needed him in a good mood if he had any hope of leaving the house tonight.

After an hour and fifteen minutes, his father finally walked into the study. "The SFs are looking everywhere for you, Ty. It was very irresponsible of you to run from them."

His father stuck his head back out the door and told the SFs stationed there to call off the search. He sighed and went to the bar to pour himself a glass of cognac. "You really are acting like a child. It's not safe for you out there until we come to an agreement with New LA and Dakota."

Ty shot up from his father's leather armchair. "That could take weeks. Months maybe. You expect me to stay locked up in here for that long?"

"Yes," his father hissed in cold anger and pushed past him to sit down in his chair.

"No," Ty shot back. "I have duties with the SFs if nothing else."

"You will do as I tell you. There is no need for you to perform your duties for the time being. I've cleared it with the command. I'm going to start including you more in my work. Now go, it's been a long day."

Ty opened his mouth to reply, then changed his mind. He'd done it all wrong by arguing with his father, running away from his guards, acting like a teenager. Maya was hurt, and Ty had to make sure she was alright.

He should have gone to his mother for permission to leave the house.

The door slid open again and she walked in, still wearing the white jumpsuit she always wore to the office. "Ty, how nice to see you. I expected you to come to the facility today."

Ty took the opening. "I wanted to, but Dad here thinks I should be locked up like I'm eleven years old or something."

"Does he now? Well we'll just have to fix that, won't we?"

"He's staying put until this business with Dakota and New LA is concluded," his father insisted.

His mother wrapped her arms around Ty's waist. It was all Ty could do not to pull

away. "Ty's all grown up now, Caesar. We can't exactly ground him anymore."

The vein in his father's temple began throbbing. "Yes, well, you should have thought of that before you spoke at the meeting yesterday. Now they're all waiting to get their hands on him in retaliation."

"Oh, Caesar. I only did what you expected me to do. You'll get exactly what you wanted, only much faster. Ty can take care of himself."

His father rose and advanced on them. "He stays in until this matter is resolved. I won't hear another word about it."

It must have been a bad day indeed if his father was standing up to his mother like this.

"At least let me go to the Orsinis'. I'm dying of boredom here," Ty said, forestalling his mother's retort. "I'll be as safe there as anywhere."

"Caesar, he's right. If he's not safe with the shield makers he's not safe anywhere," Violetta said.

His father shrugged and sat back down. "Fine, but only there. I'd still rather you didn't."

"And take the SFs off me. I can take care of myself."

"Absolutely not. They stay," his father replied. "Don't even think about assuming any kind of command either. Leave us now."

It was something, anyway. The fact that his father had taken away his command in the SFs would make getting Maya out more difficult. Not impossible though.

~

"What did you do?" Rober yelled at Maya. Her shirt was open and he was jabbing something sharp into her chest. Her breathing became a bit easier.

He hauled her over his shoulder and started running out of the room, yelling for Giles to follow. Maya's head flopped from side to side, her long hair obscuring her vision, getting in her mouth.

The next thing she knew, she was lying on a soft bed. Giles knelt beside her, biting down on his knuckles. Rober and Ty stood by the door.

"What, you think this is my fault?" Rober yelled.

"Why'd you have to set all the failsafes on the doors?" Ty shouted back. "They'd never have figured out how to open them anyway."

"Don't you think I know that? That wasn't me. They tightened security sky high after your mother's little stunt last night. If Maya had so much as touched the door she would've been knocked out. This stupid girl hurled a food maker at it."

"Don't call her stupid. And I didn't hear your parents disagreeing with my mother yesterday."

Maya reached out to pull Giles' hand away from his mouth. Her arm missed him by several inches.

Ty walked over and knelt beside her. "How do you feel?"

She tried to say she was fine, managing only a weak croak.

Ty fixed Rober with a cold gaze. "Does she need a doctor?"

"I don't think so," Rober replied.

Ty looked at her again. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Lucky I was right outside the door when it happened. I barely had enough time to revive her and get them out of there before the SFs swooped in."

A wave of concern flashed through Ty's eyes, then they turned back to an icy ocean immediately. "I'll take you back home as soon as I can."

Maya shook her head and tried to rise. Giles and Ty each grabbed one of her arms to steady her.

"No...the school..."

Ty let go of her and stood up. "We'll talk about it when you're better."

His caring tone was completely the opposite of his cold, murderous gaze.

He turned back to Rober. "So no one knows she's here? Can you keep them for a few more days until I figure this out?"

"That's another big favor you'll owe me."

Ty fixed his cold eyes on Rober's who, of all things, smiled as though Ty's gaze didn't promise murder. "Yes, they can stay here. Just come to the next meeting, alright?"

Ty nodded quickly and looked back at Maya. Then he turned and walked out of the room, Rober right behind him.

As soon as the door rippled shut, Giles threw himself down and kissed her furiously. She was too weak to wriggle away. "I'm sorry... I thought...I thought you were dead. Why did you do it?"

Thick tears streamed down his cheeks now. Maya tried to reach up and wipe them away but her hand flopped down through empty air.

"I was being stupid, I guess," she whispered and then her eyelids became too heavy to keep open.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

"Are you coming or what?" Rober asked over the phone in the late afternoon of the next day. Ty had spent most of the day deciding the very same thing.

Getting to know Maya was pointless. She'd be gone soon and he'd never see her again. Though he should at least make sure she was alright. Obviously she was, otherwise Rober would've called sooner and told him she wasn't. Going to see Maya could lead his mother to her. Ty had to prevent that. Lana couldn't know either.

"Do you think I should?" Ty finally asked because the silence was dragging.

"Yes. I do."

"Is Lana back yet? I mean, she won't walk in on us or anything?"

Rober laughed. "You haven't spoken to Lana since we got back?"

The thought to call her hadn't even crossed Ty's mind.

"Don't worry about meeting Lana," Rober continued. "She's still in Chicago...or more likely, she can't get back because of the lockdown. You should thank me. It took me ages to convince my father she was safer staying put than traveling back."

Ty wondered why Rober thought he wanted that. "Alright, I'll come for a bit."

The decision took some weight off his chest, weight he wasn't even aware he was carrying.

It took him a good half an hour before he finally reached Rober's apartment. The extra security meant that every door had to be opened for him manually, his tiger tattoo inspected each time, even with the two SFs still trailing him. All that gave him was extra time to change his mind.

Maya would be going back to the Badlands as soon as the no fly order was lifted, and Ty would never see her again. Which was for the best, probably for both of them. If not, first his mother, and then Lana would surely claw his eyes out if he told her he preferred Maya. Not that he did. How could he? They'd hardly spoken. Going back now would mean passing all those checkpoints in reverse, and who wanted that?

Ty almost sighed with relief when Rober opened the door. "Took you long enough. I was just about to call you again."

Ty told the SFs to wait outside and entered the apartment. Maya sat on one of the velvet sofas wrapped in a fluffy blanket, her friend sitting at her feet.

"That's because every ten paces the guards had to make sure I was still me," Ty responded.

Rober laughed too loudly at his feeble joke.

Not that Ty noticed. Maya was looking directly at him, a lush plain stretching towards a far off horizon in her eyes, bathing in sunset, calling Ty to come even though she never said a word.

Maya looked down at her hands and the spell was broken.

Ty cleared his throat and looked around the room, his eyes coming to rest on the dining table still laden with dirty dishes and leftovers. "I see you've eaten."

Rober shrugged. "I would've waited for you, but I know how you prefer those ration

pills."

Ty winced. What Rober said was true. Ty usually popped three rations a day and didn't have to worry about what to eat. He didn't want Maya to know that; somehow he didn't think she'd approve. Not that the food served in the Ring was much more natural than the pills.

Rober took a seat opposite Giles and Maya and waved Ty over. "We were talking about the shields."

Ty sat down beside Rober and tried to catch Maya's eye again. "Those liquid metal doors...they're so unstable you won't find them anywhere other than in the Orsini household. They make the shields and doors, and sometimes their creations are plain deadly."

Maya still avoided his gaze, so Ty stared pointedly at Rober. "Someone should have warned you about that."

"Sorry," Rober said.

Maya's eyes flickered up to meet his for a moment. "So Ty, what does your family do?"

"Well..." Ty started, trying to hold her gaze; she already looked away. "I guess the simplest way to explain it is we make the building blocks that go into most machines, you know, like tablets, and hovercrafts and the shields...like organic building blocks, you know."

He was tripping over his words like he was an eleven year old school boy and had been asked a question he couldn't answer. Worse, she didn't seem to understand a word he was saying.

"Most things aren't made of naturally occurring materials and elements anymore," Rober said, coming to his rescue. "They're grown, constructed from the nanoparticles upwards. That's what the Remarques do, they study nanoparticles."

Maya nodded slowly. Ty was sure she still didn't quite understand. "And your mother, she runs the school for the gifted?"

Ty flinched, he couldn't stop it in time. Instead of replying he nodded, afraid his voice would come out shrill and boyish.

"Do some of her students then go to help in the work with the...what did you call them? Nanoparticles?"

The students his mother taught never went on to help with anything. The stuff she learned from her experiments did sometimes help, just never the students.

Maya was waiting for his answer. Ty coughed and fixed his eyes on the waves of the sea crashing against the windows of the apartment. "Yes, some of them help." Eager to change the topic, Ty pointed at the window. "Rober, is that the live feed from the old city?"

"Yes." Rober pulled out his phone and unfolded it, then pressed a few buttons. The old New York City filled most of the windows, completely submerged, schools of fish flashing past.

Maya gasped when a shark narrowly avoided two skyscrapers and swam right by the camera. She rose, still wrapped in the blanket and walked to the window. "There's still this much life in the sea?"

Rober nudged Ty and pointed that he should follow Maya. Ty rose, his knees banging into the little coffee table.

"Yes. The efforts to reintroduce animals to the wild were most effective in the oceans," Ty explained, coming to a stop beside Maya who was admiring the old city through the window. Warmth emanated from her as though from a camping fire. She watched the fish

swim by, her eyes sparkling.

"I knew it. All is not lost, we only have to take control of the water again," she said.

It took Ty a moment to make sense of her words. He'd mostly been watching her full lips make the shapes as she spoke, and not really listening. "What do you mean? The weather is broken."

"It can be fixed. I know it can. I can help, as soon as I go to the school and learn how to use my gift. That's why I can't go home yet."

The reflection in the window showed Giles glaring at them from the sofa. A shark darted past the underwater camera again. Maya stumbled back and got tangled up in her blanket. Ty placed his arm around her waist to steady her. She looked up at him questioningly.

Ty let her go and looked back at Rober. "You have to get me access to this feed. Remember that hunting trip we took out there? A complete disaster, but still the best ever."

Maya walked back to the sofa and sat down beside Giles.

"I remember Hercules lost a leg during that hunt," Rober grunted.

"He got a new one, and better than the last." Ty burst out laughing and sat down too.

"Is that all you do? Hunt?" Maya asked. She was sitting upright, glaring at them both. Even her sullen and silent friend looked angry now. "And to laugh like that at your friend getting hurt!"

Ty wiped away his tears, still chuckling. "You shouldn't feel sorry for Hercules, he's mean and he's only about half human these days."

"Less than half. More like a third, maybe," Rober put in, chuckling.

"See what they're like?" Giles whispered to Maya. "We should leave."

"What do you mean? We're good hosts aren't we?" Ty asked.

Giles recoiled, clearly thinking he was speaking too softly for Ty to hear.

"Never mind," he muttered and looked away.

"No, tell me," Ty insisted. "You've been looking at me like you want a fight since we met."

"Leave him be, Ty," Rober said.

Giles looked down at his hands and extended his fingers. Ty followed his gaze, thinking up some clever insult. His eyes froze on the cleanly cut stumps of his fingers. A faint, painful memory of witnessing one of his mother's punishments swam before his eyes. A boy screaming, blood streaming from his hands as he clutched them to his chest. *It couldn't be.*

Giles' face found a home in Ty's memory. He was ten years old, standing beside his mother while she ordered Giles' fingers cut off. It was the first punishment she took Ty to witness, and he nearly passed out trying to keep all the hurt, anger, shock and pain locked tightly in the metal chest in his mind. The boy Giles screamed and cried, blood pouring from his stumps.

"I had nothing to do with that," Ty said softly, making everyone look at him. It wasn't until then he realized he had spoken aloud.

"What happened to your hands?" Rober asked.

Giles looked down at his stumps. "An accident."

Rober took one of his hands and studied it more closely. "This can be fixed, you know. I'm pretty sure. A clean cut like this. What was it? A laser?"

*A sword,* Ty thought, but didn't say it.

"Yes," Giles lied. "Are you serious? I can get my fingers back?"

Rober nodded and leaned back. "I'll make some calls tomorrow, get you an appointment. It won't be cheap."

"That's alright then," Giles muttered. "I don't have any money."

Ty glanced at Maya, who was looking at Giles, smiling but with tears trickling down her face. *She's in love with him!*

The sudden realization made Ty shoot to his feet. "I-I should go," he stammered.

"No. Stay," Rober urged.

"Can you please take me to the school tomorrow?" Maya asked again. "I can learn to heal his fingers there too, then there will be no need for money."

"We already tried that Maya, it didn't work," Giles whispered.

"You're still not well from the incident with the door," Rober said. It had no effect on the storm brewing in Maya's face.

She looked Ty straight in the eyes now. "We had a deal. You said you would get me to Neo York. Now please let us go."

Ty ran his hand through his hair, thinking fast. Even her anger was like nothing he had ever seen before. A force of nature Maya was, through and through. He saw it that first night when she argued with Lana, saw it when she chased him away from the dead woman. It pushed him into the raging river after the old woman, made him bring Maya back here.

He forced an incredulous expression onto his face, doing some quick math. "Didn't I say? The school's on break now. Spring term doesn't start for another two weeks."

In two weeks the executions would be over. Either because all the hostages would be dead, or because they had come to an agreement. Then he could take Maya back to the Badlands.

"You'll take me there then?"

"I promise. Now I have to go."

Rober argued some, but Ty was determined. There was no point staying, no sense getting to know Maya. She'd be gone so soon. And she loved that friend of hers, of course she did. Why else would they come here together? Not that the Badlands runt could actually compete with Ty. Still, after how his mother had tortured him he deserved better from Ty.

It took him a long time to get to sleep that night, trying and failing to keep his thoughts away from Maya.

~

*I shouldn't have yelled at him.*

The flash of anger directed at Ty made Maya's head spin. Her heart still fluttered irregularly from time to time, especially if she got too upset. Ty had no right keeping her locked up here like she was some sort of a prisoner. She wanted to believe the school was on holiday, but it seemed like something they would tell her right away, not after keeping her locked up for three days.

Ty could tell her all about the school, and he didn't want to. Rober said Ty worked there with his mother. He could even begin prepping her. And he still might, if Maya hadn't flown off at him. It was too unnerving, his icy eyes that always promised no less than cold murder coupled with those shy boy looks, and soft, kind words.

Rober stared at the door for some time after Ty left, then turned to Maya. "He's not so bad once you get to know him."

Maya both believed him and didn't at the same time. "If you say so."

*Those cold eyes...* He had jumped in the water to save Mary, and he'd been so worried about his tiger. Then he looked at her like he wanted her to kneel at his feet all the way into the city, had kept her locked up after they landed, then told her he'd send her away. Ran from the room just now like he wanted nothing much to do with her. Getting to the core of her displeasure with Ty pierced her. She shook her head to chase away the displeasing thought. She didn't like the commanding, arrogant Citizen. He was tall and well built; beautiful and clean in the way ice is as a waterfall freezes over, or an iceberg. But just as cold. Liking him made no sense.

Giles leaned over and took her hand. "Thanks for the offer, Maya, to heal my fingers. Maybe my brothers can probably help me raise the money for the procedure."

"You have family here?" Rober asked.

Giles let go of her hand and wiped his sweaty palms on his pants. "Yes, I have two older brothers. I was hoping to find them and get reacquainted."

Rober leaned forward and clapped his hands. "I can help you with that! What are their names?"

Maya watched Giles' face go through all sorts of emotions: fear, elation, love, hate, confusion. It came to rest on resignation. "I don't want to trouble you like that."

Rober waved his hand dismissively. "It'd be no trouble at all."

Giles looked at her, pleading to be saved. Maya shrugged her shoulders. "Why not, Giles?"

"It might not be safe for them to be found." He turned back to Rober. "I better just go see them on my own."

"Nonsense. I'll make sure no one knows why I'm looking for them."

Giles sighed and gave him the names and last known address.

Rober got up. "Well, I'll start looking first thing tomorrow. Now we should all get some sleep."

Giles followed her to the bedroom and beamed at her as soon as the doors closed behind them. "Can you believe it? I can get my hands back!"

"I so hope you do. If not, I'm sure I can help you once I learn my gift."

The walk to the bedroom tired her more than it should have. Her heart beat furiously in her chest from the effort, every so often slowing to barely a thump.

"No need for that," Giles said, still smiling. "I'm sure my brothers will loan me the money."

Maya climbed under the covers. "I hope they do."

Giles hovered over her by the bed. "Why aren't you more happy for me? All you think of is yourself and your gift all the time. And probably Ty."

"Not so! I'm sorry, Giles, I'm just still so tired," Maya said and sat up in bed. "It's wonderful news and I'm very happy for you."

Giles climbed into bed too. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I said that."

Maya turned off the lights. She closed her eyes, willing her heartbeat to return to normal. Sleep eluded her. Giles was always so patient with her, so forgiving, yet he'd never made her feel as Ty did. Butterflies, blushing, sweaty hands and stealing kisses...that's something other girls did. Maya had always only pretended to know the feeling so she wouldn't stand out.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ty woke two hours before the alarm was set to go off. He tried to get back to sleep, but all he achieved was that fitful state that was neither sleeping nor awake. This morning it brought the familiar scenes of his nightmares.

Salvio yelling at him, making him angry. Ty lost control of his icy cold power and pushed him away. Salvio disappeared. The scene changed. Ty argued with Rober about the revolution, and couldn't hold the anger in. Rober was gone. When Maya came into the dream, her dark brown hair swaying in the breeze, her whole body radiating a velvety warmth, Ty willed himself to wake up. Not for the first time, he wished Salvio was still there to give him advice, however harshly and impatiently. But Salvio was long gone and would never return. Ty had made sure of that, couldn't stop it.

At a quarter to seven Ty headed to the dining hall for breakfast. His mother was there, already dressed for work. Ty waved the servant away when she tried to pour him some coffee and ruffled Eve's hair before sitting down beside her.

"School's out for the holidays today, isn't it?" he asked her.

She nodded and then yawned. The aquamarine bracelet peeked from the sleeve of her pajamas.

"Mom, do you think you could get Dad to let me go to work with you today?" Ty asked.

Violetta smiled. "Of course you can come. No need to ask your father. As you probably noticed, I already got him to remove the SFs trailing you. You're also no longer confined to the house."

She beamed at him, waiting for him to thank her. He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, hoping it seemed genuine. He regretted asking to go to work with her, regretted deciding to go, regretted every favor she ever did for him. After she finished her meal she rose and beckoned for him to follow.

Once they reached the facility, Ty hoped his relief didn't show on his face when his mother said he couldn't help her with today's experiment. He headed for the control room, which was run by mute Ronia and her husband Martin. Both had their own gifts, but his mother kept them awake along with a handful of others to help her with the experiments. Ronia could once force anyone to do her will by her voice alone. She had no tongue now. Violetta Remarque didn't take unnecessary chances. Ronia and Martin both knew a lot about working with the gifted, learned it all at some other school which most likely didn't exist anymore if his mother knew about it.

Why hadn't he thought of that before? Maya could go to that school instead! That way she'd be safe, and happy because she'd get to learn her gift.

Of all the gifted people who worked at the facility, Ronia and Martin were the only two who truly liked Ty. Most of the others either pretended to, or avoided him altogether after Salvio left. They'd help him, Ty was sure.

Martin patted him on the back as soon as his mother left the room. "Ty, we were wondering when you'd come back."

Ronia winked at him her dark brown eyes and typed something onto her communicator panel. The words, "Welcome back, Ty," flashed in the air in front of her.

Martin patted the seat next to him. "Come, help me with this."

Between them they usually kept Ty busy with tasks that kept him away from his mother's more gruesome experiments. That was Salvio's idea too and most of the others abandoned it after he left.

"Let him see it all!" he had overheard one of the others shouting at Martin not long after Salvio was gone. "She'll have him follow in her footsteps anyway."

Martin and Ronia still tried to protect him. Not that they succeeded— his mother took every opportunity to have him watch her work. Today's business must have been gruesome indeed if she didn't want him to accompany her.

Ty sat down at the control panel, pulled up his own screen, and typed 'gemstones' into the search. He browsed through the list until he found Aquamarine.

Martin peered at his screen. "You are interested in gemstones? Why?"

"I was playing Castle Life last night. They have so many gemstones all over the place, I thought maybe there was some link between them and gifts," Ty lied. "I mean, aren't you two always saying that special powers come from nature itself?"

"I've always been fascinated by the use of objects to channel one's powers," Martin said. "Since that's not what we do here I haven't looked at it in ages."

Martin pointed at the screen with his right hand, which was encased in a silver glove that prevented him from using his gift. His left hand ended in a stump, the result of him trying to rip the glove off soon after he was imprisoned at the facility. His gift was healing people through touch.

"Aquamarine was once thought to bring a calm, soothing feeling and offer protection," Martin mused.

Ty's heart started beating faster. So it could be true that the bracelet worked to stop gifts!

"Were gemstones ever tested on the gifted?" he asked.

Martin was still scrolling through the description of the stone, but looked up at Ty's question, peering at him intently. "Yes, but I was never able to prove they had any effect. You mother ordered me to stop fiddling with them years ago. Why do you want to know?"

"I thought it might be something that hasn't been tried yet."

Ty hoped nothing on his face or on his voice betrayed the lie. As long as everyone believed he was only there to help his mother he was safe. Eve was safe.

"Salvio once told me you used to work at another school before you came here. Does it still exist?" Ty asked.

He glanced up from the screen and saw them exchange a worried look. Ronia moved her hand to type something, but Martin stopped her.

"The truth is, we don't know," Martin said. "We were captured sixteen years ago and haven't had any contact with the people there since."

"So my mother doesn't know of it?"

"We never told her," Martin said.

"Can you tell me?" Ty asked. If his mother didn't know of it, it would be the perfect place for Maya.

"No, we can't tell you that," Ronia's words appeared in the air.

The door hissed open behind them. Ty waved his panel away so his mother wouldn't

see he was looking up aquamarines.

She didn't even glance at him as she strode in, her hair a mess, her eyes bulging. "Tell me we recorded some of that, Martin."

Martin got up and went to check something in the adjacent room, which always held a large VR representation of the latest experiment. A person lay curled up beside a large smoking crater in the wall of the exam room. His mother peered curiously at Ronia's last words. "What is she talking about, Ty?"

"Nothing. I wanted some more info on today's experiment," Ty said matter-of-factly. Relief flooded Ronia's face.

"We definitely got something!" Martin yelled from the next room. "It's not complete. It cut off after the explosion."

His mother ran to join Martin. Ty left the room.

The man his mother had experimented on today had been locked in a small room, its walls studded with spikes and slowly closing in. Clearly it worked, because the poor man made to live through that terror had used his gift to blast a hole right through a wall of his exam room.

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Rober called every fifteen minutes for the rest of the afternoon. At six-thirty he was banging on his door.

"Why aren't you picking up the phone?" Rober asked as Ty let him in.

Ty shrugged and turned off the VR console. "I was playing a game."

"Playing too many games will make you stupid," Rober said. "I arranged some alone time for you and Maya. Giles' brothers are coming."

Ty sat down on the sofa and fiddled with the VR glasses. "Why do you think I want alone time with her?"

"Come on, you admitted you liked her," Rober said. "I saw you get all nervous around her last night."

"You're imagining it." Ty leaned back on the sofa. "There's no point getting to know her better. She'll be gone as soon as I can arrange a hovercraft for her back to her town. And I'm dating your sister."

Rober sat down beside him. "I think Maya could be a valuable ally in our plans to save the planet once she learns to control her gift."

Ty turned to him. "She won't learn that at my mother's facility."

"Why? I'm sure she'll learn something."

*She'll never be able to leave, that's why.* Ty didn't say it. What went on in his mother's facility was a well-kept secret. Even the panel families didn't know much beyond the fact that it was a place to study those born with special gifts. As far as Ty knew, none of them had any idea of the type of tests his mother performed there. She sure forbade him to ever speak of it. Telling Maya or Rober about it would incur the worst wrath and punishment his mother could offer.

"I might be able to get her to another school. If not, she goes home," Ty said with finality. "Besides, I don't think I should get between her boyfriend and her."

Rober looked confused. "Boyfriend? You mean Giles? I don't think they're together."

Ty shook his head. "You're just saying that."

"No, I'm not. If anything she seems to keep her distance from him. I think she kind of likes you back." Rober stood up and tried to pull Ty up too. "Let's go and see her. The least

you can do is get to know her a little better. Don't you want to?"

Why was Rober being so accommodating? Ty didn't ask, because the last thing he wanted was another of those reproachful conversations with Rober. What harm could it do, really, to spend some more time with Maya before she was gone? Maybe once she was safely back home he could even visit her from time to time.

Four SFs stood by the entrance to Rober's apartment. Inside, two strange men sat with Maya and Giles on the sofa. They all turned when Ty and Rober entered, fear the predominant emotion on the newcomers' faces. One glance at their hands revealed they both had missing fingers, exactly like Giles.

Ty stood rooted to the spot by the door while Rober went to whisper something to Maya. She followed him back to Ty, Giles staring after her angrily.

"Why don't you show Maya the garden, Ty?" Rober suggested.

Ty tried to meet Maya's eyes, but she kept hers fixed on Rober. "If she wants to go." It was such a stupid thing to say.

"I do," she replied.

Rober escorted them to the elevator. Ty's throat went dry, his palms sweaty.

Maya peered around the elevator, her eyes widening as the numbers flashed into the hundreds. "How far up are we going?"

"The Orsinis' garden is on the roof, so 200<sup>th</sup> floor, I think," Ty muttered.

The elevator opened into a clearing surrounded by tall pines. Maya exclaimed and ran out into the soft grass, stopping by a pine tree to feel its branches. "Are these real?"

Ty walked over and touched a branch too. "Yes. I mean, I don't know if they're all fabricated, or if some are planted. Probably all fabricated. My sister Eve plants her own flowers. More often than not they grow into small, stunted things."

She whirled to face him so fast her hand slammed into his. The jolt felt like being punched, only in the heart. "If you can fabricate such forests, why do the Badlands exist at all? Why don't you come help us plant such forests there?"

Finally a question Ty could answer. "It's been tried. Not many of the trees and plants ever took. The Earth can't support them anymore."

She seemed on the verge of tears. He pointed at the sky and she followed with her gaze. Wispy white clouds covered a perfect light blue sky. "That's a hologram. This forest is sealed inside the building and the conditions are carefully controlled. The trees could never exist naturally otherwise."

"For a moment, I thought...never mind. We can explore the forest though, right?"

Ty nodded and she took off running into the trees. Ty followed more slowly. *She doesn't want me here with her. She can't run away fast enough.*

A few minutes later she called him. He found her sitting on a moss covered stone by a bubbling spring. "Water is the source of all life. Out there in the Badlands, it has gone all out of control. I think if we cure the water, the Earth will heal itself."

Ty's breath caught in his throat. She sounded exactly like someone talking about their special gifts when they were first brought to the facility, before they learned what lay in store for them there. He'd listened to them so many times, all those poor people who came to the facility, thinking they were serving humanity by exposing their gifts. Before his mother started her experiments on them.

Maya was peering at him like she was waiting for an answer, her knee resting against his thigh. She didn't move it, and neither did he. He asked her to repeat her question. "I meant

to ask you last night...how is your tiger?"

"She's fine now. I already let her out into her enclosure. I hope I'll be able to coax her out when it's time to remove the stitches."

"You keep her in a place like this?"

Ty looked around. "Not quite like this. It's a desert, with a few oases, about half as large as this garden."

Maya laid her hand on his thigh, then removed it hastily and ran her fingers through her hair. "Wouldn't it be nice if she could roam free in her own natural habitat?"

Ty's leg still tingled from her touch. A strand of Maya's hair hung down over her eyes. Ty almost brushed it back behind her ear. "It would. But all the reports and studies done over the last forty years say the same thing, that there's no way back for Earth. Serious preparations are being made to leave the planet and settle elsewhere."

She grabbed his arm, dug her fingers in painfully. "I know. It's a terrible idea. I know Earth can be saved."

Ty stared at the water trickling over the stones. "How can you know?"

He wished he hadn't said it, because her whole face contorted in annoyance.

Ty looked into her eyes, willing some of the ice in his to calm her. "I'm sorry. I wish I could tell you something different."

She let go of his arm, holding his gaze. "Well, it's not your fault."

Couldn't he help? Couldn't he do as Rober and his group suggested, try to save the Earth? Hopeful excitement fired up in his chest... until he remembered Eve, and Julian, and all those delegates fearing execution right now. Ty couldn't do anything to help the Badlands. He had to stick close to his mother, and keep his own emotions locked away tight in the chest, just like Salvio ordered. Or all would fall apart.

What kind of future did any one of them have stuck on some hostile planet? By helping Maya live her dream, there could be a future in that. For all of them.

Maya looked at him impatiently, then sighed. "Rober said you work with your mother at the school. I heard you look exactly like her too. Me, I don't look like either of my parents."

The mention of his mother jolted him back to reality.

"More precisely my mother looks like me," he said.

"That's an arrogant thing to say. She gave birth to you." Red spots rose on her cheeks.

Ty laughed. "She also changed her appearance to match mine when I was about seven."

"Why?"

Ty shrugged his shoulder. "She loves me, I guess. Or to show she favored me as heir, over my older brother." The second part was true. Ty never believed his mother was capable of love.

"I think that's a very nice thing to do," Maya insisted.

Ty didn't. He still wished his mother hadn't made herself into his copy. Still hoped she'd change back some day. People disliked Ty on sight before even giving him a chance because he looked like her. His father didn't much like it either. But his mother never cared what other people thought. He couldn't tell Maya all that, so he just shrugged.

"And you are the heir, right?" she asked.

Ty tossed a pebble into the water, watched the ripples fan out and disappear. "Only because my older brother had an accident."

Maya laid her hand on his thigh. "That's awful. What happened to him?"

Ty looked at her eyes, at the vast, warm life there. "I wasn't here when it happened. They said he fell and hit his head. He was only twelve, and he basically stayed a child forever. It took him years to relearn how to speak and feed himself."

"Couldn't they cure him?" Maya asked, real compassion in her eyes, Ty knew.

"No. Some injuries are still too grave, especially brain injuries." He laid his hand over hers. "I was in Africa with my father when it happened. I found Isis there. She was only a baby, trying to get milk from her dead mother. My father let me keep her, and I was so excited to show it to Julian when I got back..."

Ty's voice cracked on the last sentence. He kept his eyes focused on the water, hoping the cramp in his throat would give soon.

Maya shifted beside him.

*Likely because I'm such a soft crybaby.*

She put her arms around him and hugged him gently. Her hair smelled of open air and freedom. "Suffering makes us stronger. I know your pain of watching someone you love get hurt and being powerless to help."

He leaned into her, still not trusting his voice to speak. They stayed like that for a few more moments, then she let go.

"Please take me to your mother's school, Ty."

Her hug had melted something inside him. Something he didn't even know was frozen. "I can't do that."

She looked at him questioningly, tears forming in her eyes.

"I can help you in other ways. Maybe even find a better school for you. Please trust me."

"Why isn't this school alright?"

"Another would be better," Ty said. He reached over this time and brushed the strand of hair from her eyes.

She squeezed his hand. "I'm sorry if I came across too forcefully. Learning to use my gift properly is something I've dreamed about since I can remember. I'm so close now."

Her hand still rested in his palm, but she let go.

"I understand."

He let go of her hand too, and after a few moments Maya rose. "We should get back. I'd like to say goodbye to Giles' brothers."

Ty rose too and followed her to the elevator, wishing they could stay in the garden and talk all night.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Giles' brothers were already gone by the time they returned to the apartment. Ty said goodbye at the front door, and she didn't ask him to come in. She had wanted to. He was looking at her like maybe he wanted her to ask too. Then the moment passed and Rober opened the apartment door. The elevator door rippled shut after Ty.

"You had a good time, then?" Giles asked once they were alone, an edge to his voice.

Maya shrugged, still thinking she should have maybe asked Ty in.

"You haven't asked me how my brothers' visit went, or anything," Giles complained.

"Well, did it go well?"

*Ty didn't want to let go of my hand back in the forest.*

Giles' cheeks turned red.

"Will they be able to lend you the money for your hands?" Maya asked hastily.

Giles deflated a bit. "They said the procedure costs more than everything they own is worth. It's why neither of them had it done yet."

"Don't worry, we'll find a way."

Giles looked down at his hands. "Probably not. It was great seeing them after all this time. They were so on edge, though. Getting summoned by the Orsinis is not something people aspire to. They said Rober sent three of those Special Forces guys to get them in the middle of the workday. All their customers saw them get dragged off. I hope they got back home safely." Giles was out of breath by the time he finished speaking.

Maya stared at him. "I'm sure they did, Giles. Why wouldn't they? Rober's alright."

Giles got up off the sofa, glaring down at her. "I'm so glad you found some new best friends."

He strode off, not waiting for a reply.

Maya leaned back on the sofa and closed her eyes. Ty's searching eyes was all she saw, Ty brushing her hair away from her eyes, squeezing her hand. She opened her eyes and fixed them on the window, which today showed peaceful white clouds against a perfectly blue sky. Almost the color of Ty's eyes. Only warmer, not cold and dead.

She rose halfway to go apologize to Giles, then sat back down, wary of another fight. She never meant to hurt him, didn't want to keep opening the wound that was his love for her. She didn't love him back. Only now, it started to seem like Giles would never understand that.

She fell asleep on the sofa, waiting to give Giles enough time to fall asleep too.

Giles woke her the next morning with a hot cup of tea. "I'm sorry about how I acted last night. I was on edge from the visit."

Maya took the cup, lacing her fingers around it. "Giles, let's not argue all the time."

He sat next to her, blowing on his own cup of tea. They sat side by side like that for a few minutes in silence until Maya could no longer stand it. "Look, Ty can help me prepare to enter that school. Once I'm there at least I'll know someone. He doesn't seem so bad, really he doesn't."

Giles took a sip of his tea, and looked into the far end of the room. "I don't think that any school run by *his* mother could possibly be a good place."

Maya's stomach clenched. Any mention of Ty's mother always carried an edge of fear. "He says he'll take me to a different school."

"You see? Even he doesn't want you do go to that school. Let's go home."

"Stop saying that, Giles. I'll be alright. I can take care of myself, you know. Especially if Ty is my friend."

"So you're using him, is that it?"

Maya slammed her cup in the table, hot tea sloshing all over it. "That is not what I'm doing at all. He's friendly to me and I'm friendly back. I have no reason to dislike him! He tried to save Mary, and he made sure we were paid fairly for fixing up his tiger. He got us into the Ring too. He might look very arrogant and cold, but I don't think he is. Looks can be deceiving."

Giles glared at her. "In his case, I don't think they are."

Maya sat back and crossed her arms over her chest. "Fine, be that way. But you have no real reason to dislike him."

"He keeps me locked up here."

*Well there is that.*

Maya wasn't about to give Giles the upper hand in this argument. "I'm sure that's in our own best interest."

Giles gasped and looked about to retort, but no words came out. Finally he shook his head and walked away. They didn't speak for the rest of the afternoon.

Maya kept glancing at the clock. At five, the funny, jittery feeling in her stomach started like she always got before her exams at school. Ty usually came at around six. She'd only been there for a few days, though, so there was no 'usually' to speak of.

Six o'clock came and went with no visitors. It wasn't until after she'd already eaten her dinner of fried chicken with mashed potatoes that Ty and Rober finally came. Giles never even took off his VR glasses, probably too absorbed in his game to notice them come in.

Ty strode up to her, slightly out of breath. "I can't stay. I came to tell you that I haven't been able to find out anything about the other school. I will tomorrow, for sure. "

*He came just to tell me that?*

The thought alone brought a smile to Maya's lips, she had no control over it. He blushed a soft pink, which took some of the edge off his cold blue eyes.

"Thanks for telling me, I guess. But maybe you could take me to the school here."

He looked away and cleared his throat, his cheeks turning back to the paleness of snow. "We'll talk about it later. I have to go."

"Bye then," Maya said to his back, feeling like she had maybe done something wrong, not sure what.

Giles shot her a nasty look from under his VR glasses as soon as Rober and Ty left. Then he slammed them back over his eyes and didn't come back out for the rest of the night.

~

*Why did I have to blush?*

Rober's revolutionaries were already waiting in boathouse eight. He should bring Maya up here. Maybe tomorrow night he would.

"We'd begun to think you weren't coming," Sage said when they entered.

Rober nodded in Ty's direction. "He needed to take care of something first."

Ty felt his cheeks reddening all over again.

"So long as we are all ready to begin now," Sage said and folded open her phone so

that it became a tablet. She typed something onto it and a large holographic representation of the Ring filled the center of the room.

Sage pulled up Neo York, a perfect miniature replica of the real city, complete with the dome shaped shield that surrounded it. "Explain to us your plan then, Rober."

Ty was still goggling at the map when Rober joined Sage by the holograph. He'd never seen a plan so detailed outside of an SF command room. How had Sage gotten it? Did she steal it? How come no one noticed?

Rober cleared his throat and looked around the room. "I think the best chance of success we have is to steal all we need at the same time. In the same hour, if at all possible. We'll divide into four teams of two and meet at the exit point here."

Rober pointed at a spot on the shield in the warehouse district, far away from any official exits.

"There's no way out through the shield there," Ty protested.

"Well spotted," Rober said. "I'm making a secret gate, and only the six of us will have the code to open it."

Ty wished Rober had warned him how far along these plans were. Their last meeting sounded more like idle talk than any real planning. Now here he was, outlining a tactical plan. Still, maybe it could work.

"What do you plan to steal?" Ty asked cautiously.

"I already have the latest model 45 nanofabricator at home, direct from the factory. One team will get the plans for the terraforming probe from the BioTechnica facility. The third team will secure a craft, and the fourth will act as decoy to draw attention from what the rest of us are doing," Rober explained. "You know what I mean, Ty, keep it simple. At this point we only want to get the items we need into the Badlands and then return like nothing has happened. Sage and Adam will be the decoys. They get caught stealing something inconsequential from the SF headquarters, which is on the other side of where the rest of us steal the important stuff. We'll all be back home before they even know anything has gone missing."

*Keep it simple?* There was nothing simple about this treason Rober had planned. Though how could a nanofabricator in the Badlands hurt, really? Even if he couldn't get Maya into that other school, at least this would give her hope for the future.

Ty chuckled. "Kind of how we always planned our escape from here when we were younger? Remember how we'd already begun to stockpile all we needed to start our own city?"

It was one of their wilder ideas. Take a builder and go to the uninhabited lands in the north. Rober's shield making skills would keep them hidden while they founded their own town in the wilderness the ice melt revealed there. They'd have their own city and anyone wanting to come in would have to get their permission. They were about ten years old then, it was a childish dream. This was real. Even Ty would be punished if the panel found out.

Rober nodded. "That's where I got the idea from. This won't be anything as drastic as that though. Like I already said, it's a long term plan and most of it will be done in secrecy. First we give the Badlands the means to make their terraforming probes and start using them. Then we slowly take power in the Ring and make sure no one stops the work done in the Badlands."

Ty was still seeing their northern city in his mind, a place where he could finally be free of his fear.

"I have the clearance for the university databases. I could get the plans," Ty said, surprising even himself.

"That's one of the main reason we invited you on board," Tanya Schwarz said, eyeing him suspiciously. "I'm still not sure it was the best idea."

Ty ignored her. "As for taking power in Neo York, I'm not so sure it's feasible. Hercules alone could prove a deadly obstacle."

"I don't think my parents will let Hercules succeed them, when it comes to it," Sage Montague said. "Rober's parents are in their eighties, and they're already talking about stepping aside."

Tanya was still locking eyes with him. "As for your parents, Ty, the rest of the panel are already discussing getting rid of Violetta. She did herself no favors by condemning all those innocent people to death at the talks. Your father is really worried for his seat right now because of it. The end of House Remarque could come sooner than you think."

*Could it be true?* It would certainly explain why his father had been so nervous the last few days. But no, Violetta Remarque was much too powerful to be brought down.

"I doubt my mother will be dealt with so easily, and she won't go down without a serious fight," Ty said. "Even if we did have control of Neo York, there's still the other six cities to convince. I'm still more for the idea of founding our own city."

Rober clapped his hands to get their attention. "That's something we can discuss later. For right now, all we have to worry about is getting those three items out of the Ring and into the Badlands. Whatever power struggles erupt after that we will deal with as they do."

"Do you have a date for these thefts in mind then?" Ty asked.

"Not a date as such, an event. I don't think the executions will go over smoothly. I think there will be backlash from New LA and Dakota, and it will happen any day now. I say we use the commotion that will cause as a cover. I want you all to be ready to go at a moment's notice."

The more he considered it, the more Ty believed it could be done. They'd not be breaking any serious rules in these early stages and why not give the Badlands some hope?

"Best to do it during the day," he said. "I don't think I could explain away my presence at the university after nightfall," Ty said. "As it is, we'll be tracked."

Liam Northman tapped his chest. "That's where my specialty comes in. I can hack into the surveillance systems and put them on a loop so that we get one hour of no tracking. Any longer than that and we'll be seen; an hour won't be noticed, especially since the things we'll be stealing are in lower level security facilities."

"If you're sure," Ty said, not quite convinced.

"We are!" Sage said irately.

"Tonight I'll put the finishing touches on the hidden exit in the shield," Rober said. "I'm throwing a party at my house tomorrow night, and while you're all there, I'll add the necessary line and code to your tattoos so you can all open the gate as needed. It will be located here." He called up the exact coordinates for them to copy.

"Why does it have to be a party?" Ty asked Rober after the others had left.

"So no one suspects the real reason you're all there, of course. All of our plans have to be kept secret if we're to succeed."

"Fine, but make sure Maya's not there," Ty said.

"Why? They all already know her."

"They also know why she's here. Someone could say something to my mother."

Rober shrugged. "I'm sure no one would go to your mother. If you want, I'll hide her and Giles away."

Ty did want. Maya was too insistent on going to the facility. Someone might think they were doing her a favor getting her there.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ty's mother left instructions for him to join her at the facility first thing in the morning. He considered going to see Maya first and telling her about Rober's plan, but disobeying a direct order from his mother was never a good idea.

It turned out she only called him in to read off some data from yesterday's experiment while she took notes and muttered to herself. Her hair was tangled up and sticking out all over the place, her eyes completely bloodshot. She must have been at it all night.

"Why don't you go home and get some sleep?" Ty finally asked her at about noon after she'd had him reread the same data four times.

"This is too important. Think of the power our SFs could have if they had the ability to blast holes through walls."

"You're thinking of developing this as a gifter? How will you control it?"

"Leave that to me," his mother snapped.

"Either way, I don't see why all the rush."

His mother ran her hands through her hair, making an even bigger mess of it. "I have to see if we have enough, or if we need to put him through another experiment."

"Just put him to sleep," Ty protested. The gifted were usually put into a deep, artificially induced coma after their tests were completed. "You can wake him up later if you decide you need more from him."

Violetta jerked up, knocking her tablet to the floor. "Wake him up? Haven't you learned anything? Once they're asleep, they're asleep for good. It can take months to wake them up again. And I don't want to have any more to do with any of them than I absolutely have to. They're all freaks of nature. Dirty anomalies of evolution."

Ty bent over to pick up her tablet, hoping to hide the shock that gripped him.

She took the tablet from him and stood up hastily. "Maybe I do need some rest."

Martin looked up at him with bloodshot eyes and sighed with relief once Ty's mother left. Ronia had dark purple bags under her eyes and looked like she was about to faint.

"Have you two been up all night?" Ty asked.

Ronia nodded and turned back to the wall panel. The center screen showed the man with the ability to blast holes through walls, his arms tied to his sides, sitting with his back to the wall of his padded cell. The man's eyes were wild, darting from one end of the room to the other. A tube extending down from the ceiling disappeared down his left arm, a greenish liquid flowing through it.

Ronia peered at the man intently, adjusting settings on the tablet in front of her constantly.

Ty couldn't look away from the terror in the man's eyes. Those could be Maya's eyes. Or his sister's. Or his own, if he wasn't careful.

Martin sighed and took his arm, leading him away from the screen. "It's not necessary for you to watch this, Ty."

Ty shook off Martin's arm. "What's happening to him?"

"The last exam unhinged him, but we may have to do more tests. He's being sedated

now."

"He doesn't look sedated."

White letters appeared at Ronia's side, though she never turned from the screen. "I'm not to give him enough to make him drowsy, only enough so he doesn't seize on us, or use his gift."

*Is this what happened to Julian? Did she test him like this?*

He could ask Martin and Ronia what had happened to his brother all those years ago. He'd always planned to one day, but feared he could never look at his mother again if he ever found out the truth about what happened to his brother.

"How can you two do this to your own people?" The words left Ty's mouth before he even thought them.

"It's either help her or coma," Ronia's words appeared in the air. "Most days I'd prefer coma."

Martin told Ronia to be quiet and gripped Ty's arm again, pulling him from the room. Ty followed this time.

Ty rounded on Martin as soon as the door hissed shut behind them. "Why don't you two put him to sleep? You could say it was an accident. He's shown her all he can do."

"What's gotten into you, Ty? Why all these questions?" Martin looked down at his metal clad hand. "You know how things work in this facility. You know me and Ronia do all we can for these poor people."

Ty felt his cheeks grow red. He struggled to force all the anger, panic and sadness into the metal chest. "Are all the other schools for the gifted liked this? Does no one treat these people well? What about the school you are from?"

Martin smiled sadly. "You know very well that all the other facilities defer to your mother. She's forced the ones in Toronto and Chicago to shut down. We are the only study facility left. Some good did come of it. Chicago had developed a pill that inhibits the use of magic and we have inherited the full formula for it now that they are closed down."

"Like a cure?" Ty interrupted. If he could get the pills to Maya, she'd lose her gift, at least long enough to be willing to go back home. If Eve took some, all his worries over his mother finding out she had a gift would be over.

Martin tapped his metal hand with the stump of the other one. "We are still studying the full effects of it. Hopefully now there will be no more maiming and no more lifelong comas."

Ty didn't believe for a moment that his mother would be so merciful.

"Who's working on the pills?" Ty asked.

"Martin's already told you more than he's supposed to, Ty," his mother's voice came from the doorway behind their backs. Ty felt like he'd been doused in freezing water. "There are things about this facility you're not yet ready to know."

He whipped around and plastered the most innocent smile on his face. "Mom, how can I help you and learn from you if you keep secrets from me?"

His mother's whole face radiated glee. "You got me there, Ty."

The red lights over the door into the control room started flashing, accompanied by a piercing alarm.

His mother ran back in, Martin and Ty following.

Ronia had both her hands clasped over her mouth. On the screen, the man in the padded room thrashed, his head smacking against the floor. Green liquid trickled from the

tube he'd knocked loose.

Ty's mother pushed Ronia aside so harshly the woman fell to the floor. "What happened? What did you do?"

"Nothing," Ronia's words flickered above her. "I didn't take my eyes off his vitals for a single moment. He must have had an allergic reaction."

Martin helped Ronia rise from the floor, looking at her suspiciously.

The doctors on the screen had managed to sedate the man. He was again leaning against the wall, his eyes no longer wild. Ty's mother hastily scrolled through the information about his vitals.

"You're in luck, Ronia. He's stabilized for now. Leave. I'll deal with you later." His mother settled into Ronia's seat. "You go too, Ty. We'll talk more about your future here tomorrow. You'll have to clear it with your father. I won't have your time divided."

Ty had hoped to get his hands on the gift stopping pills tonight, but knew his mother would tolerate no arguments right then.

~

Ty rushed to the SF flight command as soon as he left the facility. Later he'd collect Isis and go visit Maya. He'd tell her more about where he found Isis, how she was quite possibly the last of her kind. He'd also explain more fully why going to the facility was a bad idea, and tell her all about what he and Rober were doing to help the Badlands.

Several heads turned when he entered the command room, and Ty quickly saw the one person he knew would be able to help him. Jon Black, a distant cousin, eager to rise through the ranks of the SFs, was always willing to exploit his blood ties with the Remarque family by doing Ty favors.

Ty called him out into the hall.

"I was thinking it's high time for another hunting trip," Ty said after making sure they were quite alone. "Any chance of getting me and a couple of others out despite the ban?"

Jon winked at him conspiratorially. "There's every chance. The flying ban was lifted this morning. Lana Orsini just came back from Chicago, shouting how the next person to keep her locked out of her city will find themselves in the Badlands forever. If you take her with you, I don't think anyone will try and stop you."

Ty felt his skin grow tight. It was all he could do to force his mouth to a smile. "Tomorrow night then."

He wanted to say right now, but he needed access to the pills first. After that, he'd take Maya out of the city.

He rushed to Rober's apartments. He called and called Rober on the way there so he could move Maya to the guest room now, left several urgent messages but got no answer.

Lana opened the door to Rober's apartment. Her eyes turned to slits as she saw him. Ty knew he should hug and kiss her; his body did neither of those things. Behind Lana, Maya lounged beside the window, which today showed a vast range of jagged, snowcapped mountains. Lana pulled him into the room, pressing her lips to his. Maya turned away and looked at the window.

"I must admit I'd expected a warmer welcome," Lana whispered in his ear. "What do I find instead? Your little Badlands girlfriend and you rushing here to meet her."

Ty extricated himself from her tight embrace, loosely keeping his arms around her shoulders. Keeping Lana happy was the most important thing right now. "I wasn't running here. I was down in flight control and they told me you were back. I looked for you in your

apartments, then thought maybe you came here."

She still peered at him like she didn't believe a word. He interlocked his fingers at the back of her head and pulled her in for another kiss, this one wet and wild.

"I do have a phone, you know," she said once she finally pulled away. "You might have even called me while I was in Chicago."

Ty shrugged. "I thought you wanted your privacy. Let's go back to your apartment now."

"No. I am waiting right here for my dear brother to return. It turns out it was his idea to keep me out of the city." Lana took his hand and led him back to the sofa.

Maya was still staring out the window, her cheeks flushed. Ty tried to meet her eyes in the reflection, tried to silently let her know he'd much rather be holding hands with her. Maya kept her lips pursed tightly and her eyes on a point somewhere on the horizon.

Lana's eyes flashed to Maya and back to Ty. He fixed the most detached expression on his face that he could manage.

"Now we can exchange some pleasantries with your Badlands friends," Lana concluded.

"My friends? I didn't even know Rober kept them both here. I thought it was just him," Ty said and pointed at Giles.

Maya whipped her head around and fixed him with an angry glare, lighting flashing. Ty pretended not to notice. On the sofa opposite them Giles was looking from Ty to Lana to Maya, panic tightening his face.

Lana turned to Maya. "Why are you even still here? I understood you wanted to go to the school for the gifted."

"I still do," Maya replied. "I was told term didn't start for another two weeks."

She glared at Ty as she said it, but at least she didn't reveal it was him who'd told her that.

Lana dug her nails into Ty's forearm. "That was one big lie. You can enter any time you wish. I wonder why they would lie to you like that?"

She studied Ty's face. He pretended not to notice.

Maya gasped in surprise, eagerness fighting anger in her eyes. "You mean I can go now?"

"Sure," Lana answered and stood up. "Me and Ty will take you."

Ty pulled her back down into his lap, his heart beating furiously in his chest, throat and cheeks. "Not right now. My mother's not there, and you just got back. Let's go back to your place now. Or mine."

He smoothed her hair back from her face and pulled her closer for another kiss. Lana was easy enough to distract, all she craved was being the center of attention. She bit his lip and pushed him away, then stood up, pulling him to his feet after her. "That's a great idea, actually."

The urge to look back and apologize to Maya almost made it impossible to follow Lana from the room.

~

*That lying, conniving, dishonest, cold eyed...what's his game?*

Ty had lied about the school being on break. Looked right at her eyes and lied. And all that talk of taking her to another school, what was that? Did he just want to keep her for a bit of fun while his girlfriend was away. Maya's chest burned with anger at Ty. She was done

with all of it. Someone would take her to the school and soon. Maya would make sure of it.

Rober came in a few minutes after Ty and Lana left. "Has Ty been here?"

"You just missed him," Maya said in an emotionless voice. "He left with his girlfriend."

The thought brought back visions of Lana's and Ty's passionate reunion.

"My sister was here?" Rober asked, his eyes bulging.

Or the copperhead snake, as Maya preferred to think of her. Lana was no king cobra as her tattoo claimed, she was nothing more than a poisonous little no good, jumped up grass snake.

Maya nodded. "I think they will be... indisposed for a while."

She shook her head, trying to free it from the visions of Lana entwined with Ty on the sofa. It was not the reason Maya was angry at all; it was the lies Ty had told.

Rober fixed himself a drink at the bar and drank it in one long swallow. "Alright. I'll figure it out. Right now I'm moving you back to the guest room. I have people coming over for a party."

"A party? I want to stay," Maya said. It would be the perfect opportunity to get Lana to take her to the school tomorrow, or anyone else for that matter.

Giles groaned. "Let's not, Maya."

Rober shook his head. "The fewer people know you're here, the better."

"I want to. I thought we were your guests here, not prisoners. Why can't we stay for your party?"

Maybe she pushed it too far. But Rober had lied to her too. These people were not her real friends.

Rober checked his watch and shrugged. "Fine, but you have to change. Here, I'll show you how to use the closet."

"No need," Maya said. "I already got the hang of it."

Rober didn't protest anymore and left soon after.

"I told you neither of them were to be trusted," Giles said as soon as they were alone again.

"Look, Giles, maybe if you made some friends here it could help you get the procedure for your hands," Maya said, more harshly than she intended. "I'm not constantly thinking of myself like you're always accusing me of doing."

"I'm not that great at making friends," Giles complained.

Maya swallowed her anger before she said anything she might regret. She was angry at Ty, and Giles didn't deserve to be the one she lashed out at.

She strode over to the closet. "Come on, help me set up that outfit you found for me the first day. I want to look my best."

~

Ty's phone kept buzzing. He ignored it, wanting to give Lana no reason to doubt him or suspect Maya of anything. She certainly seemed appeased, but all Ty could see was the lightning flashing in Maya's eyes; Maya dragged off by the doctors in the hospital; experimented on by his mother; tied up and fed medicine in a padded cell, her beautiful eyes wild and panicked.

Lana whipped her head back, strands of her hair hitting Ty in the eye. "Answer it already."

Ty rubbed his stinging eye and picked up.

"Where are you? The others are here already," Rober barked into his ear.

It took Ty a few moments to realize what Rober was talking about. "Oh, the party. I don't think we'll be able to make it."

Lana ripped the phone out of his hand.

"What party?" She waited a bit, listening to Rober's reply. "We'll be right there."

Ty looked at her questioningly as she hung up. "Wouldn't you rather stay here?"

She rose and went to the bedroom to change. "No, I want to have words with Rober. I'm so angry at him, it's all I can think about anyway."

A half an hour later, she came out dressed in a floor length shimmering green dress that set off her eyes. Her face was framed by rows of complicated braids.

She looked striking, as always. Ty wondered what Maya would look like with her hair all braided up like that. He'd only ever seen her with her hair down, loose, falling in thick glowing locks around her shoulders and down her back.

"Do you want to go and change?"

Ty shook his head. He was still wearing the dark green pants and black cashmere sweater he'd dressed for work in. It didn't matter what he looked like. He planned to disappear from the party as soon as Lana got high.

He followed her out the door and into the elevator, already feeling sorry for Rober. Lana would not go easy on him.

As soon as they entered Rober's place he wished he had gone to change. The lights in the room shimmered from green to blue to red and lilac. About thirty people milled around, all dressed up. Maya stood by the window, drinking a pink colored drink, wearing a golden brown body suit that matched her eyes and left little to the imagination, despite the fact that every inch except her face was covered.

She looked right through him when he entered, and turned back to Adam Montague, laughing heartily at one of his jokes. A joke that couldn't possibly be all that funny, because Adam's jokes never were. Giles stood next to them, looking exactly how Ty felt: mutinous.

Lana had already found Rober. "Who do you think you are, having me locked out?"

Several heads turned to listen in, but not Maya.

"It was for your own safety," Rober replied.

"You can't decide on my safety!" Lana yelled. "Or did you think Ty would be more willing without me around!"

"Get over it already, Lana," Rober said.

Ty strode over and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "You have nothing to worry about, Lana. I'm sure Rober only wanted you to be safe."

Lana smiled serenely, baring her teeth. "We'll talk more about this."

Ty steered Lana to the sofa and sat down as close to the window as he could. Liam Northman was showing everyone there how he intended to change his appearance as soon as he could. Lana leaned forward and studied the holographic representation of Liam's planned changes.

Ty stretched his arms over his head and took a peek at what Maya was doing by the window. She glared right at him, tornados replacing the lighting in her eyes. Ty turned away hastily.

Maya came over and balanced her drink on the armrest right next to Ty. She peered at Liam's holograph. He was explaining how he planned to change his black hair to yellow, and wear it in spikes across his head.

"So why don't you change your appearance now?" Maya asked. "Or have you not decided on one yet? Is it a painful procedure?"

A few exchanged incredulous glances, and a group of girls giggled at her question.

"Did I say something wrong?" Maya's eyes darted over the crowd like she was looking for a fight.

"We're not allowed to change our appearance until we turn twenty-one," Liam explained. "It's a stupid rule, only there because our parents want to force us to stay the way they made us for as long as they can."

Maya nudged Ty's arm. "So in a few years you'll be able to change and then you won't look like your mother anymore."

Ty coughed in shock. The rest of those gathered went silent as though someone had turned off the volume in a game.

Lana's green eyes were slits, promising bloody revenge. "Why would she say that, Ty? I thought you didn't even know Rober kept her here."

"I...I..."

Liam came to Ty's rescue. "What he's trying to stutter there is that he's too proud of the way he turned out, he'd never consider changing his appearance."

Lana was still glaring at him, so Ty laughed loudly, pointing at himself. "Well, what can I say? I came out perfect on the first try."

Lana smacked his hand. "You could do something about this arrogance of yours."

"What do you mean on the first try?" Maya asked. "Are you saying you all were genetically engineered?"

Lana shot up and stood over Maya menacingly. "And what's wrong with that?"

Maya backed away, a sneer on her face. "Easy now. I'm just asking a question."

Ty took Lana's arm to restrain her. "It's no secret we were all made according to our parents' specifications. Why are you getting so worked up?"

Lana yanked her arm away from him. "I don't get you, Ty. What do you see in this base girl?"

*Everything.*

"Don't worry about that," Maya said. "All I want is to get to the school. Can you take me tomorrow?"

A surge of icy cold erupted in Ty's forehead, snaked its way down his arm. He quickly let go of Lana, before anything happened that couldn't be undone.

Lana turned her glare on Maya, then her eyes softened. "Sure, why not? I'll come pick you up first thing tomorrow morning."

Rober appeared and stood between Lana and Maya. "Don't fight. This is supposed to be a party."

Lana glared at him like she was about to hit him. Rober pulled a tiny bottle of pills from his pocket and shook them in front of her face. "Why don't you try one of these? I've been saving them for a special occasion."

Lana's eyes widened as she reached for the bottle and held it up to the light. "Are these gifters? Where did you get them?"

"Straight from the lab and yes, they're the latest formula. The blue ones will make you see sounds and the green ones take you on a journey through all your happiest memories."

"Do they really?" Sage asked. Tanya and Liam also leaned closer. Maya stared from one to the other looking puzzled.

"Apparently," Rober said. "And I have enough for everyone."

Lana dumped a few pills into her palm and turned to Ty. "Blue or green?"

He could do with some happy memories. He chose the blue one instead, figuring it'd be easier to fake seeing sound. The rest swooped down on the pills in Lana's hand, and Ty slipped his into his sleeve, pretending to swallow it.

Minutes later, some of them started smiling gleefully, others laughing loudly at something only they could see.

Maya looked from the pills to Ty's laughing friends, a few of whom had dropped to the floor right where they stood.

Ty eased the giggling Lana onto the sofa, then followed Rober to the kitchen. Maya and Giles had retreated to the window casting shocked looks at the others.

"Those gifters sure work fast," Ty said, glancing back to the others. Most were curled up on the floor around the sofas now, gleeful expressions on their faces.

Rober shrugged. "I thought we could both do without Lana's snarky comments. You can go talk to Maya now."

Ty glanced at Maya and Giles, but neither of them were looking his way. "Why did you let her come anyway?"

"She accused me of keeping her locked up. I was afraid she'd do something dumb again."

"Don't call her dumb," Ty said.

Rober looked at him appraisingly. "I'll distract Giles for you."

Ty watched him walk over to Giles, and start showing him something on his phone. He joined them soon after, and stopped right beside Maya.

Rober announced he could show Giles a video of how fingers could be regrown in the other room. Maya moved to follow, but Ty held her back. "Can we talk?"

She whipped her hand out of his grasp. "I don't know why you refuse to take me to the school and I don't care. I'm going there tomorrow. Your girlfriend is taking me."

Ty ran his fingers through his hair and glanced over to the sofa to make sure Lana was still stuck in her hallucinations. "The school is not safe for you. Me and Rober are working on a plan to help the Badlands. You can help with that, and get to stay at home."

Her mouth twisted in a snarl. "You lied to me and pretended like you don't even know me on more than one occasion. I don't trust you. I left home so I can learn my gift. I'm not going back until I do."

"You should," Ty said, his anger rising. All he was doing was trying to protect her.

She turned so fast Ty took a step backward reflexively. "Well I don't and I never will again! Now please leave me alone so I can enjoy this party."

"The party is over," Rober said as he returned with Giles in tow. "Once they come to, they'll all want to go to sleep anyway. Apparently the come down from these new gifters is no fun thing. I'll take you to the guest room now."

Maya protested but Rober wouldn't hear any argument. Ty accompanied them, still seething from Maya's harsh tone. He'd leave right then, only he wanted to find out which guest room they were staying in.

"Right, now for the code," Rober said as soon as the door rippled shut on Maya.

"Can't you give it to me tomorrow?"

"No. Everyone else already got theirs," Rober said and led the way back to the elevator. "I swear, this gate I made is a piece of art. Undetectable to the point that it won't

even register a disturbance if a whole fleet of crafts goes through it. Even if they seal the whole shield, this exit will still stay open."

Ty had to smile at his friend's excitement. "So you finally found a way to make the perfect secret gate? Like we always talked about."

Rober punched him in the arm playfully. "Yes! This one is even better than anything I ever imagined. It took me years to figure out how to make it."

"You really never stopped planning this, did you?"

Rober grinned widely. "No."

Back in his apartments, Rober had him place his arm into the machine that would inject the necessary line under Ty's skin.

As it congealed into just another stripe on his tiger tattoo, the dye containing the code to open Rober's secret exit left Ty's whole arm burning and throbbing painfully for the rest of the night. A fitting end to a terrible day.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

His mother wasn't in her office, nor was she in the control room at the facility. Ty had just sat down, preparing to coax more information about the pills from Martin when he and Ronia were summoned to the reception area. Ty followed, though he didn't want to see the poor person brought in today. However, his mother would be there and he wanted to make sure she saw him at work bright and early. Maya was still safe, there was no way Lana would've found where she was staying so quickly. Lana likely wasn't even awake yet.

As he neared the wraparound windows that separated the reception area from the rest of the facility his heart stopped, then began racing furiously. His freezing cold power exploded in his forehead.

Maya sat in one of the plush seats, Lana standing over her.

Ty still had time to send her away. His mother wasn't there yet. He pushed past Ronia and Martin and broke into a run towards Maya.

The door on the opposite side of the room slid open seconds before he reached her.

"Who is this, Lana?" his mother's voice rang sweetly from across the room.

Maya never looked back when he entered. Lana did, her eyes slits, then she turned back to Violetta. "Ty and I brought this one back ages ago for you. I'm surprised he waited so long to bring her to you."

Maya turned and looked around at him, lighting flashing in her eyes.

Ty hoped none of his terror showed on his face. He concentrated on the cold building in his mind, willed it to subside, fearing to touch anything, think anything. The emotions whirling in his mind were strong enough to wipe the whole room from existence. He *had* to regain control.

Ty forced a wide smile and walked to his mother's side. "I'm sorry about that, Mom. I didn't want to take all the credit, what with Lana gone. I was sure she'd never forgive me, and we did find this one together."

The words were shards of glass in his mouth. He had to lie to his mother. If she ever suspected he meant to hide Maya from her forever he'd get a cell right next to her.

His mother stood on tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. "You did absolutely right. You don't want to mistreat your girlfriend, after all."

She pointed at Martin and Ronia. "Prepare her, Ronia. I will call her shortly for the interview."

Ty fought back the urge to scream at Ronia to let Maya go, to not lead her from the room. All he could do was keep smiling.

He watched Maya retreating down the hallway, her dark curls swaying as she walked.

Why hadn't he sent her away last night? He could have led her and Giles to the SF headquarters, even used Rober's secret passage out of the Ring. Instead, he had gone home to sleep, feeling sorry for himself. That wasn't even all of it. He didn't send Maya away because he wanted to spend more time with her, and now he'd never see her again.

"Come to the control room after lunch, Ty, and I'll see about getting you a higher clearance," his mother said then left the room too.

"See how easy that was?" Lana asked innocently.

Yes, it was incredibly easy for Lana to hurt others. She had no empathy or compassion.

"See you later," Ty managed to choke out then left the room, not really caring what she made of it.

~

Giles started from the sofa as soon as Ty entered the guest room.

"Get your things. You're leaving," Ty barked at him.

Giles made no move to obey.

"Now!"

"Where's Maya? When is she coming back?"

Ty struggled to control his panic before it turned to rage. They had no time for Giles to argue. The SFs sent to collect him could already be on their way. His mother didn't leave loose ends. "I know who you are. If she exiled you once, she'll execute you now for returning."

The shocked gasp that escaped Giles' mouth told Ty he understood perfectly. He hurried to stuff his belongings into a backpack and was ready to leave in minutes.

Ty led him down the hallway and to the servants' elevator. Luckily the Orsinis kept human servants too. Most had androids these days, and the robots could fly up and down chutes on their own. Ty paced in front of the elevator, expecting the SFs to appear at any moment.

"You won't tell your mother I was here, will you?" Giles whispered.

Ty tapped the elevator button furiously. "No, why else do you think I'm here? Though she probably already knows, thanks to Lana."

The elevator finally arrived and Ty pushed Giles into it. He set it to take them to the visitor's plaza at top speed. "Where do your brothers live?"

"Southside, building 13," Giles muttered once he regained his balance in the speeding elevator. "Thank you, but what about Maya?"

"You should've stayed away. You should have kept Maya away."

"I tried. She's not easy to convince once she's made up her mind."

*Force of nature.* Not that she would be for much longer.

"Will you tell Maya where I'm going?" Giles asked. "So she can find me once she gets out of the school."

"She's not coming back out," Ty said coldly. The words were a sharp jab through his stomach. It was the truth, unless he found a way to get her the pills in the next few hours.

"What do you mean?" Giles asked breathlessly.

The elevator stopped and Ty pressed his tattoo against the panel. The door rippled open and they stood in a vast plaza that stretched for miles in all directions. A handful of people milled around it, but otherwise it was deserted.

"Nothing," Ty said. "Maya'll be at the school full time for a while. You go hide with your brothers and I'll tell her where you are."

Ty led the way to an info booth at the far corner of the plaza and showed Giles how to ask the android manning the desk to find his family. Once Giles got the information and directions, Ty left him to find his own way. Giles looked like he still had a thousand questions to ask.

"Don't try and find me," Ty warned him, then turned away and walked back to the

elevator.

~

Ty's father called while he was in the elevator heading back to the facility.

"Talks with Dakota and New LA are starting in fifteen minutes. I want you there with me."

"They've agreed to your demands?" Ty asked stupidly.

"They're here to talk," his father snapped. "Haven't you been following the news?"

Ty should have known. They wouldn't have lifted the flying ban if the executions hadn't stopped and the two offending cities were ready to talk.

"I can't now. I have to go help Mom."

The line went dead.

Ty hoped she'd be able to smooth this over for him later. He never wanted to choose between them. His father held more power than his mother, that much was always clear to Ty. But his father did everything on his own, always in secret and his mother was able to manipulate him in ways Ty hadn't quite figured out yet. Still, his father loved Eve too. Perhaps one day Ty could tell him all about how he tried to protect her. One day when his mother lost some of her power.

Rober called just as Ty entered the facility. Ty rejected the call and turned his phone off. The talks starting meant Rober wanted to execute his treasonous plan. Rober's plans never worked out. Not when they were children, dreaming of their own city in the north, not now when they had so much more to lose. For Ty, getting Maya out of the facility was the priority now. All else would wait.

Martin was alone in the control room. The windows of the adjacent exam control room were dark, which meant they hadn't started Maya's exam yet.

"Ty, why did you have to bring that girl here?" Martin asked in a shaky voice. "She's so young, she had her whole life in front of her."

Ty leaned on the wall by the door. "I didn't want to. She insisted. I should've sent her back home right away."

"Why didn't you?"

*Because I wanted to get to know her.* The thought alone brought too much pain. Pain that could turn to uncontrollable anger and rage.

"Where is she now?" Ty asked. "Has there been an interview yet?"

Martin looked at him sharply. "No, she's been taken to a cell."

"Tell me more about those anti-gift pills. Where do they make them?"

"I shouldn't, Ty. Your mother will tell you when she's ready," Martin replied. "Why do you want to know so much about them?"

"Please, Martin. I think she's mad at me for keeping that girl hidden. If I discover something new she won't punish me," Ty lied. He couldn't trust Martin with his plans to get Maya out of the facility. The lengths that man went to protect his life, experimenting on people exactly like him, meant he'd betray Ty too.

The windows in the exam control room turned translucent.

"I'm not angry at you, Ty. Still, you should have told me about the girl right away," Violetta said as she glided into the room. "You can't help with the pills. They're in the final trials stage. We have it covered."

*How much did she hear?*

"If you say so," Ty managed.

"Go to your father's talks now, or neither of us will hear the end of it. He just called me, furious that I'm keeping you from him."

~

Ty was sitting in his mother's chair beside his father in the private conference room in the Remarque building when the talks were interrupted by an urgent message.

Sage Montague had been caught breaking into a top security vault at the Special Forces headquarters.

*Those idiots went ahead without me?*

Ty dreaded the moment when the news that Rober had been caught too came through.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ty had never even looked at her. And the way he lied to his mother... maybe he was telling the truth. More likely he meant to bring her here all along and was only stalling with all his talk of other schools. Either way it didn't matter. Maya's wish had finally come true. She was at the school, finally able to begin learning to use her gift.

The silent woman and the man with the steel hand led Maya down a silver-walled hallway lined with identical blue doors, finally stopping in front of one. It opened into a white walled cubicle. The door hissed shut on the man with the steel hand.

Maya turned to the woman. "When will I have the interview?"

The woman looked at her, her lips quivering. She typed something on a small panel in her hands and white words appeared in the air between them. It took a few moments for Maya to figure out they were the woman's. "Soon. Now you must undress and change into this."

The woman held out a dark blue body suit made of shiny nylon.

Maya unzipped her windbreaker and tossed it onto a hospital bed that was the only furniture in the room.

"And how soon after I'm done with the interview can I begin my studies?"

"Soon," the woman's words appeared in the air.

"Where are all the others?" Maya asked.

The woman shook her head, and didn't reply.

Maya took off her shoes and unzipped her pants. She kind of wished the woman would turn around, but it didn't matter. She seemed to be staring right through Maya, not seeing her at all, tears welling in her eyes.

The whole scene unnerved Maya so much that her hands shook. It was too late to worry now. She was at the school, she'd gotten what she wanted.

She struggled to pull her shirt over her head. When she finally freed herself of it, the silent woman inhaled sharply and backed away, pointing at Maya's chest.

Maya looked down, thinking she was bleeding at the very least from the woman's reaction, but only the tree pendant her parents had given her hung there.

"This?" Maya asked, holding up the pendant.

The woman held one hand over her open mouth. With the other she fumbled to type something on her panel.

"Where? Get...that?" the woman's words appeared in the air.

Maya let go of the pendant. "It was a gift."

"Who gave it?"

"My mother and father," Maya replied, letting her confusion show plainly on her face.

"Gabiella?" the woman asked, her eyes wet and glistening.

"Who?"

The woman typed more slowly. "Is that your mother's name?"

Maya shook her head. She couldn't read this woman, because no tone, no inflection accompanied the woman's words. Yet those tears, that silent scream made Maya almost rigid

with fear. "No, my mother's name is Daisy."

The woman's eyes twinkled through her tears. "You look like her."

Maya edged away from her. "No, my mother is short and blonde. Why are you asking me so many questions about her?"

"I knew a woman who had a necklace exactly like this one," the woman's words appeared in the air.

"I don't know, maybe she sold it to my parents," Maya said and continued undressing. The air in the room was thick with death and suffering, grief and hopelessness. Maya concentrated on changing to block it all out.

Once she zipped up her body suit, and the woman visibly steeled her features and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "Give me the necklace, I will keep it safe for you." Her eyes flashed to Maya's wrist. "And the bracelet, please."

"Why?" Maya demanded, clutching her wrist. "This bracelet helps me use my gift. I will do better in my tests with it on."

"Fine. You can keep the bracelet." the woman's words flashed in the air. "But you can't wear any metal jewelry to the interview. It interferes with the readings and will just get taken away. I will keep the necklace safe for you. Please trust me."

"What do you mean, taken away? I'll leave it in here and collect it when I go home this evening."

"Please give me the necklace for safekeeping," the woman urged.

Maya decided to trust her. She unclasped the necklace and handed it to the woman. Tears spilled from the woman's eyes as she took it. She brought the tree pendant to her lips and kissed it.

"Wait here. Someone will come and collect you soon," the woman's words read.

Then she was gone, and Maya was left alone in the tiny room with only a hospital bed inside it.

She sat down on the bed to wait, counting the seconds in her head, still trying to block out all the pain and sadness that hung in the air of this place.

It wasn't only coming from the silent woman, Maya now realized. Hopeless suffering hung thick in the air, oozed in through the walls. At one point she was certain she heard a scream.

She eased herself off the bed and walked to the door. After it had closed behind the woman, it became just another panel in the walls. Maya wasn't even sure she was looking for it in the right place.

Her own panic rose in her mind.

Ty, Giles, and Rober had all warned her against coming here. What if Ty wasn't lying to her?

~

Ty followed a few steps behind his father as they rushed to the holding cells of the SF headquarters. Nothing tangible connected him to the revolutionary plans Rober and the others made. He'd only been to two meetings, and the only one who ever called him about it was Rober, who had called him daily since they were kids, so nothing to suspect there. If Sage managed not to implicate him, he'd be fine.

Sage Montague was held in one of the smaller cells, one level down from the SF command room. Shackles on her wrists and ankles bound her to the chair, red lights blinking along them. Her black eyes bored into the two SFs in the room with her. Ty looked on

through the one-way window as his father entered the room.

"Why did you try to steal the plans?" his father barked at her, the thick vein on his temple throbbing.

She should be going for sympathy, make his father feel sorry for her. It was the only way to douse the man's rages.

Instead, Sage fixed her defiant look on him. "I will not speak without fair representation of my house present."

His father asked her the question a few more times; Sage refused to budge.

The vein on his father's temple was still pulsing as he exited the room.

"What do you want us to do with her, sir?" SF commander Ryker who was in the room with Ty asked.

It took Ty's father a few seconds to get his rage under control. "Call the Montagues. And then I'll call my wife."

"Why don't you let the Montagues handle this? Sage didn't steal anything, after all," Ty interjected.

His father's head whipped around. "You dare question my word? We are on the brink of war as it is. I can't have resistance from within. And I certainly do not need you second guessing my command."

"You know what Mom will do, and Sage doesn't deserve it!" Ty protested.

The SF commander looked at his feet, probably wishing he was anywhere else but in that room. At best he'd lose his job for overhearing Ty speaking to his father like that, at worst he'd be transferred out to the wild north.

*How am I suddenly responsible for so many people?*

Ty never wanted that.

His father glared at him. "I will let this slide, Ty, but only because Sage is your friend. Now get out before I change my mind."

Ty opened his mouth to plead some more.

"Get out!"

Ty didn't hesitate this time. Out in the hall, he fought back the urge to break into Sage's cell and at least apologize for not being able to help her.

That was nothing new. Ty couldn't help his own brother, couldn't help Maya, and once Sage revealed all about the revolutionary plans he wouldn't be able to help Rober or anyone else. The fact that he might not be able to save himself either hardly registered beyond worrying about what would happen to Eve then. Someone with a power like his shouldn't be allowed to live anyway.

The door at the end of the hallway slid open and Hercules Montague bounded through at a run, his white hair trailing behind him. He pushed past Ty, knocking him into the wall, and burst into Sage's cell. Her defiant look changed to fear in an instant. Hercules lifted her, chair and all, and shook her. Her head flopped side to side until Ty was sure he'd break her neck.

"What have you done? You have trampled out family honor!" Hercules yelled. The SFs in the room couldn't stop him shaking Sage. "I hope they let me punish you for this."

"Stand aside, Hercules, I will deal with her," Ty's mother said from behind him. Ty ran from the SF headquarters. The last thing he wanted was to watch while his mother tortured Sage.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Once the sitting became unbearable, Maya began pacing up and down the tiny cell. She was eager to begin her studies, but the suffocating sadness in the air wouldn't let up.

Her legs were aching from the pacing and still no one came. She began counting the seconds again. After four hours of that she gave up.

She had told Giles she'd be back by that afternoon, evening at the latest. He must be going mad with worry.

Maya tried to stifle the thought. She'd be frantic for Giles' safety had their roles been reversed, but getting all riled up about it didn't help at all.

She leapt at the door as soon as it hissed open. The silent woman walked in, carrying a covered plate of food and a bottle of water.

"When will I have my interview?" Maya demanded, a bit more harshly than she intended since she hadn't used her voice all day.

The woman set the plate on the bed. Her words appeared in the air. "Dr. Remarque has been otherwise detained today. At least now you have the chance to get some rest and be ready for the interview tomorrow. I have brought you some dinner."

Maya's eyes flashed to the bed. "Where should I eat? There is no table or chair. Can't I go now and come back tomorrow?"

The woman set the platter on the bed. "Sit, please." She began typing more quickly. "You will have to stay here tonight. Before you can begin your studies you need to be cleansed of all the outside interference. That is why you are in this room. That will only take a day or so more."

Maya read the words as fast as she could. "And then I will be able to go home?"

"To prevent outside interference with their gifts, students stay inside this school for the duration of their training," Ronia answered. "Are you sure you have a gift? Have you ever used it?"

"Of course I'm sure. Only a week ago I made wheat ripen from mere shoots in a matter of hours," Maya replied.

The woman inhaled sharply, then regained her composure immediately. "Perhaps you were only mistaken. The seeds could have been the fast growing kind."

Maya shook her head. "I've never seen seeds grow that quickly."

A trader from another town once brought some fast growing seeds to market, and those matured in a few days. But their accelerated growth didn't stop. In a week they rotted as though they'd been kept for years.

Maya sat down on the bed. "Can I send a message to my friend so he does not worry about me?"

"Communication with the outside is not allowed," Ronia answered.

"Please," Maya begged. "We didn't know I won't be returning. He must be worried to death about me."

Ronia studied her for a few moments and then pulled a small, thin tablet from her pocket. "Write down your message here. I will see it is delivered. Where is your friend

staying?"

"With the Orsini family, in one of the guest houses," Maya replied as she wrote out a quick note for Giles not to worry about her.

Maya handed back the tablet. The woman pulled a small glass vial containing a single dark purple pill from her pocket, unstopped the vial, and moved closer to Maya. "Hold out your hand," she typed. "This medicine will cleanse you faster and make it possible for you to sleep all through the night."

"I can get to sleep fine on my own, I'm sure," Maya said. After seeing the effect those gifters had on the kids at Rober's party Maya didn't want to take any pills unless they were from someone she trusted completely. And this woman wasn't it.

Ronia took another step closer, her eyes open wide. "You must take this medicine," she typed. "Otherwise they will feed it directly into your vein."

Maya studied the woman, weighing her options quickly. If she didn't take this pill, they'd probably force the medicine into her some other way. She needed this woman on her side so she would deliver the message to Giles.

Maya extended her hand. "Fine, give it to me then."

Ronia watched Maya swallow the pill and chase it down with a gulp of water.

"Eat and rest now," Ronia's words flashed.

As soon as the door hissed shut behind her, Maya spat out the purple pill and stuffed it under the mattress.

~

The door hissed open again just as Maya was finishing her meal. She looked up, expecting to see the silent woman. Ty stood in the doorway. He was slightly out of breath, like he'd run all the way there.

His presence brought a heightened note of panic to the air.

Maya looked down at her food and moved some of the chicken around idly, trying to ignore the fear rising in her chest. "Did you come take me to the interview?"

Ty walked closer and hovered over her. "She hasn't questioned you yet? She doesn't know what you can do?"

Maya dropped the fork and stood up. He was so close she had to crane her neck to look at his face. "No, I've been locked up here all day."

"Why couldn't you trust me and stay away from here?" Ty sat down on the bed, upsetting the tray of food and making her fork and knife clatter to the ground.

Maya placed her hands on her hips. "Why is that so important to you? A few hours ago you said you meant to bring me here all along."

He wouldn't meet her eyes. His silence dragged, brought panic that was all her own.

"What is this place? Why is everyone so frightened here?"

Ty stood up quickly and took hold of her arms gently. "When you get to the interview, deny you have any powers at all. Say you made it all up. If she tests you anyway, do *not* let your gift show, Maya."

Cold hung in the air between them. Maya didn't move back. "Why would I want to do that?"

Ty ignored her. "Isolate the place where your power comes from. Contain it somehow, make sure it doesn't escape. Whatever you see, don't react. Then she'll let you go."

Maya tore her arms away. "I don't want to do that. You're scaring me with all this talk. Why can't you tell me exactly what the danger is?"

The black band on his wrist started buzzing and his mother's face flashed on one of the tiles. He cursed and turned the buzzing off.

"Do what I say. Please," he said urgently. "I have to go."

Maya stared at the place he disappeared through for a while after he was gone, trying to make sense of it.

His panic was real, it left the room with him. Maya sat on the floor and tried to do as he instructed. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the warmth of her gift, bubbling deep inside her chest. She imagined a tall fence holding it in. The warmth swallowed it up. She imagined a wall of stone; that too disappeared in the heat.

If anything, her power grew the more she tried to stifle it, bubbled over, filled her entire torso, trickled down her legs and arms.

It was pointless.

She didn't want to stop her power, she wanted to *use* it. It was her one calling in life, the thing she was born to do. If she failed, she failed.

~

Ty unsnapped his phone to call his mother back once he reached the control room, but she was already there.

"Where have you been?" she asked as the door hissed shut behind him.

He avoided her gaze. "Around."

"Your friend Sage has been released for her parents to deal with," Violetta said. "Your father thought it was best."

Ty stifled a relieved sigh.

"I actually wanted to talk to you," Ty said and sat next to her at the table. "That girl Lana brought this morning, I don't think she actually has a gift. She only said that so that we'd bring her into the Ring."

His mother studied him from beneath raised eyebrows. "You wouldn't let her fool you like that. I'm sure you questioned her before bringing her here."

Ty leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. "I did. I also kind of liked the look of her, so I thought why not go along with it? I never intended to waste your time bringing her to you. That was all Lana's doing. Maybe I should go and release her."

His mother giggled. She sounded unnervingly like his little sister when she did that.

"I think you were wrong, Ty. I definitely don't think she's giftless," his mother said. "I'll interview her tomorrow and then we'll know."

Ty lost his balance on the chair. His mother grabbed his arm to steady him. "Don't worry about it. I don't expect you to recognize the gifted on sight yet. In a few years, you'll be able to, just like I can."

Ty's mind raced, looking for something, anything to make her change her mind. "I could interview her again. Get some practice."

His mother grabbed the back of his chair and pulled it so he was facing her. "Whatever kind of feelings this girl stirred in you, it's over. She's been brought here, and no one leaves once they arrive."

Ty tried to laugh it off. The sound caught in his throat.

"You're so soft," his mother barked, the cutting tone jarring against her kind, smiling eyes. "You know very well that our work here is secret. How else would we get new subjects to study if everyone knew what we really did to the ones who come? This girl has already seen too much. She's staying whether she has a gift or not."

Ty laughed, but it came out a grunt. The cold exploding in his head made him see double. He forced it all into the metal chest in his mind, barred the locks. "Fine. I just thought I'd ask. You're absolutely right."

Every word was preceded by a shard of ice stabbing his brain.

His mother looked at him for a few more moments, then she stood up and brushed her long hair back behind her ears.

"It's better you don't see this girl again," she said. "But I want you there for her first testing, if we have one."

Ty stood up too. "Whatever you say."

She studied him for a few more moments, then left the room.

It took a full fifteen minutes before the room came back into clear focus. Longer still before Ty fully understood that Maya was lost forever.

~

Ty called Rober as he was out of the facility. Rober answered on the fourth ring.

"Where are you?" Ty asked. "We need to talk."

They didn't have much time. Sage might still give them all up, especially if Hercules was now questioning her. Hercules and Violetta were so equally matched in ruthlessness and cruelty, Ty sometimes wondered if he hadn't maybe been mixed up at birth.

"I'm at home," Rober replied. "Where are you?"

Ty ignored the edge in Rober's voice. "I'm coming over."

Maybe Rober would listen to reason now that his plans failed so miserably. Ty found him lounging on the sofa, the windows of his apartment showing scenes of the Badlands, the world beyond the Ring.

"Sage has been caught," Ty blurted out. "Tell me you abandoned the rest of the plan."

"That's partly your fault," Rober said and hiccupped.

"I never asked to get dragged into your dumb plan."

"True," Rober said. He walked to the other side of the room and returned to the sofa with a bottle of cognac. An empty wine bottle already sat on the table. The last thing Ty needed was to get drunk. Rober seemed to have a different idea. He filled their glasses and drank all of his before Ty had the time to refuse.

"Sage tried to force us into action today, as soon as the talks started. You didn't answer your phone, and Liam didn't either. In the end we had to abort. Sage went ahead anyway. Now, who knows what will happen?"

Rober raised his second glass in a defeated toast and drank that too.

"They're letting the Montagues handle it," Ty said quietly.

Rober raised his glass again. "At least it's not your mother. There was always a very real possibility that we'd get caught. Sage knew that. She won't talk."

Ty took hold of Rober's hand over the bottle, preventing him from refilling his glass again. "Call it all off, Rober, disband. Wait for a better time to carry out your plans. Once you have more power."

Rober looked down at his hand. "I thought you getting to know Maya better, falling for her like you did, you'd see how important the work we're doing is."

Ty let go of his hand and looked up at the ceiling noticing the new wallpaper, shimmering stars against velvet blue night. "Lana took her to my mother's facility this morning. There was nothing I could do to stop it."

Cognac sloshed into the glass. "It's what she wanted."

*What a rotten thing to say.*

And then it hit him, bursting open the metal box that Ty had struggled so hard to keep shut all day. Freezing cold erupted in his forehead. He knocked the glass away from Rober's mouth, dousing them both in cognac. "Did you tell Lana where Maya was?"

Rober's eyes widened in shock. "No, of course I didn't."

"Lana knew exactly where to find her," Ty continued.

Rober reached for the bottle and refilled his glass. "She didn't hear it from me."

Ty studied him, trying to find the lie or truth in his friend's eyes, his face. To prevent himself from striking out, unleashing anything he couldn't undo, he balled his hands into fists, squeezing so hard his nails dug into his palm.

In the end, he decided to believe Rober. It was easier.

Warm sticky blood trickled down his palms when he finally released the grip.

Rober looked at his hands, then stumbled to get the first aid kit. "Here, let me see that."

Ty waved him away and wiped up his own blood, then traced the healing cream over the cuts, watching his flesh seal shut.

Rober was drinking his third glass of cognac. "I didn't tell her, Ty. I might have, eventually, to make you see."

Ty didn't doubt it. Rober had the most compassion of anyone Ty knew, except Eve, but it still wasn't much. Empathy was a dying thing in the Ring, one of the first traits to be bred out after the genetic engineering of babies started. "I have no power to change anything. Never did, never will."

"Things need changing," Rober replied. "I thought we agreed on that. Why else did we make all those plans to found our own city when we were younger?"

Ty shrugged. "That was always more about running away for me."

"There's no running!" Rober said, then dropped his voice to a whisper. "How long do you think you'll be safe, before she finds out you have a special gift too, and locks you up in that facility?"

"That could be for the best," Ty said. He never told Rober what his gift was, only that he had one.

Rober gasped. "You can't mean that."

"I do," Ty said. "You have to let it go too, for your own safety. Promise me you'll give up your plans."

Rober snorted. "I can't do that. I see now it was a mistake bringing you in. You're too much of a coward. One would never guess it, just looking at you."

Ty ignored the insult. "We're not children anymore. I can't help you with your plans. I won't. And I can't risk anyone else being pulled in and destroyed because you're trying to convince me otherwise."

Even if Rober had never told Lana where Maya was, he could have made her harder to find. All Ty needed was one more day, and Maya would have been safely back in her home in the Badlands. Now he was being forced into action he never wanted to take.

He leaned down and pulled Rober's VR console from under the sofa. It was the same one he had at home. Top of the range, with seamless immersion, complete control and freedom over the experience, and the ability to inject anyone's DNA into it and have their clone in the setting of their choice, along with a part of their consciousness. As much of it as could be extracted from blood, anyway.

"You want to play a game *now*?" Rober asked indignantly. "That's one of the root causes of all this crap in the world, everyone plugging themselves in to fake, perfect worlds, completely blind to what's going on in the real one."

Rober had missed the point. Ty didn't want to play games. Not anymore. And Rober now proved he would never abandon his revolutionary plans on his own, not until someone stopped him or he got killed. He took one of the glass vials from the side compartment on the console and uncapped it to reveal the thin needle.

He rolled up his sleeve and plunged the needle into a vein, watching his blood fill the vial. A drop of blood trickled over his tiger tattoo as he pulled the needle out.

He recapped it and held it out for Rober to take. "Here. Now you can have me in VR. I cannot associate with you anymore if you won't abandon your plans."

Rober gaped at him. "You're blackmailing me?"

"I want you to see reason."

It wasn't only that. The blood was a goodbye gift.

Rober knocked the vial from Ty's hand. "You think too much of yourself, always have. I don't need you. You think I'll give up now, after all I've been saying for years?"

Ty stood up. "Your plans will get you killed. I don't want any part in that."

Rober's glass shattered by his feet before Ty reached the door.

"Coward!" Rober shouted after him.

Ty strode out of Rober's apartments without replying. He had to finish it all fast now, before his resolve failed.

~

Ty headed straight for his father's study. He sat in his father's armchair, staring into the fake flames in the fireplace, letting no thought linger.

"May I speak to you in confidence?" Ty asked as soon as his father entered, startling him.

Caesar studied him for a few moments. "And by that you mean—"

"Without Mom knowing," Ty finished the sentence for him.

His father punched a code into the panel by the door and went to pour himself a cognac. "Your friend Sage has not been harmed. But she will be tried. I won't do anything to change that."

"It's not her I wanted to talk about," Ty said, vacating the armchair so his father could sit down.

His father did so with a groan. "Tell me then."

Ty looked into the flames to avoid looking at his father. "I'm afraid Rober will try to rescue Sage. Or do something equally stupid."

His father snapped forward in the armchair. "What do you know about all this, Ty?"

Ty steeled his features to let nothing show on his face. "I think Rober and Sage might be dating. And I know it won't end well if he tries to rescue her or something. Can you send Rober away? To the North maybe, somewhere safe?"

His father laughed a cold laugh. "The North is hardly safe, Ty. It's almost on par with the Badlands."

"It's safer than here," Ty muttered, still staring at the fire.

His father patted him on the arm. "So you're not as ruthless as your mother, are you? I'd begun to fear it... Do you really think it is necessary I send your friend away?"

Ty nodded. "I think it's the only way."

His father took a long swallow of his drink before replying. "I understand how it is for you, the younger generation. You want power, and you want it now. I was the same way. Running a city takes more than grand gestures and honorable plans, son. I want to teach you. I want to prepare you for running this city. Yet you haven't shown me any real interest in holding power."

Ty showed no interest because he had none. He'd never tell his father that.

His father waited silently, probably for Ty to say something.

"You do want to run the city after me?" his father finally asked.

"Yes, of course I do."

"I don't see any real fire in you for the job. Never did."

"Julian would have been better for it," Ty said quietly. "Even Eve would probably be better."

The decision that had hovered in the back of Ty's mind for a long time had finally crystalized that afternoon. He'd follow his mother, take over the facility when she stepped down. Let everyone there go as soon as he could.

His father leaned forward so quickly half his cognac spilled on the floor and the chair. He cursed as he wiped it off. "Julian will never be fit to rule. And Eve would be destroyed by the other houses. She's too kind and too soft."

Ty regretted saying anything, wished he hadn't been honest. This wasn't the time to disagree with his father. "I do want to succeed. I'll do a good job of it."

His father stared at him intently for a few moments. Then he sighed and leaned back in his chair. "You'll do alright when the time comes, I'm sure of that. I will make the arrangements to send Rober away tomorrow. Anyone else you want to save?"

Ty shook his head. Very likely the others from Rober's group would give up on their own after Rober was gone. If not, he'd worry about it later.

"Don't let him know I asked you to," Ty said.

"I won't," his father promised.

Ty turned off his phone again as soon as he exited his father's study. He spent the rest of the night immersed in playing Castle Life. After about six hours, he was so thoroughly immersed he even stopped wishing he had some of Maya's blood to bring her into the game with him.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Maya was awakened by the silent Ronia, who brought breakfast and another purple pill. Maya pushed the pill to the side of the platter and started eating. The eggs and sausage tasted like paper in her mouth, the bread like cardboard.

"Have you been able to get the message to my friend?" Maya asked between bites.

The woman shook her head and pointed to the pill. "Take that," she typed.. The woman's eyes were red rimmed and her hands shook.

Maya nodded agreeably and chewed her food. "When will I have my interview?"

Ronia shrugged her shoulders. "Sometime today."

Then she turned and left the room, her long grey hair shaking. Maya took the purple pill and stuffed it under the mattress as soon as the door hissed shut.

After that Maya was alone again, counting and pacing, pacing and counting. She practiced hiding her gift again, imagined it enclosed in a bubble inside her chest this time. The heat of her power didn't burn through its confines this time, it collected in the bubble, growing hotter, vaster, urgently seeking an outlet.

For the first time, Maya noticed the nuances, the layers that made up her gift. Parts of it were a searing white hot heat, demanding release; other parts were a slow burning less urgent thing. Yet still powerful.

Maya gasped at her discovery. The searing parts were the ones that gave the most life, she was sure. The slow burning layers would prepare the subject to be infused with the stronger dose.

Why hadn't she seen it before?

She'd never simply sat with her power and concentrated on it. To do that never even occurred to her until Ty suggested it.

The door hissed open. A strange man wearing a spotless white bodysuit walked in. He was young but with a sort of washed out look, like he hadn't been out in the sun for a long time. "Dr. Remarque will see you now."

Maya followed him down the corridor lined with the identical blue doors. They took a swift elevator up and arrived at a cheerful looking office, flowered wallpaper on the wall, all pastel pinks, yellows and blues. A large oak door with golden handles dominated the far wall. A pleasant looking middle aged woman sitting behind a reception desk told Maya to sit and wait to be summoned.

Half an hour later she was called into the office. Violetta Remarque smiled at Maya pleasantly, her eyes alive with mirth. She did look almost exactly like Ty, from her perfectly straight nose to the black hair that fell down her back. Even the color of her eyes was the same. There was no cold in them, however, no ice.

She asked Maya to sit in a chair across from her desk and pulled out a tablet and pen. "I hope you've had a pleasant night. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. I've had urgent matters to attend to."

Maya had a few choice words ready about her imprisonment in that cell, but this woman was so pleasant, so kind, that she couldn't utter them. She nodded and smiled back.

"Yes, I've had a nice rest."

The doctor fiddled with her tablet then looked at Maya again. "Tell me about your gift and the level of command you have over it. In your own words."

Maya thought about it for a moment. *Should I lie about it like Ty said?* No, she was here to learn.

"Go on," the doctor urged.

Maya plunged right in. "For as long as I can remember, I've had an affinity with flowers and trees, animals and even people. All living things have a stream of life, the survival streak I call it, running inside them. I can feel this and am sometimes able to make it grow deeper. Or, in the case of the dying I might be able to coax it to return."

Maya paused and looked at the doctor, to see if she had lost her. The woman nodded for her to continue.

Maya cleared her throat. "There is a fire that lights up inside my chest, and I believe it's heat channeled through my left hand has healing powers. Before I came here, I was able to coax seeds to grow even after they had been destroyed in a flood."

The doctor scribbled something on her tablet, then waved her hand for Maya to continue.

"I've only ever been able to coax plants back to life, and my dog once. I've never been able to save a person, not yet. I've even been able to alleviate the pain of someone mauled by a puma once, though I couldn't heal him. Which is why I'm here. I'm sure I could do so much more with my gift, if only I had some proper training."

The doctor stared at her then jotted a few things on her tablet that Maya couldn't read. "So beyond making some plants grow, you haven't been able to do anything else with your power?"

Maya was taken aback by the edge in the woman's voice and thought maybe she'd only imagined it. Violetta's eyes were still as kind as her own mother's. "I've also been able to make a whole patch of wheat grow from saplings to fully matured plants in a matter of hours."

It was her biggest success ever. Her father's angry red face flashed before her eyes. She pushed the memory away.

The woman replaced the tablet in a drawer. "Very good. You'll return to your room for now and will very likely begin studying tomorrow."

"I thought I would be given a proper room if I am to stay indoors for the duration of my training," Maya said. "And meet the others who study here."

The last thing she wanted was to spend another day alone in that tiny room.

The woman's eyes were as happy as ever, but her lips were pulled into a thin line. "We find that isolation and minimal external stimuli make for the fastest learning."

Maya's gift had grown despite never being alone for more than half a day back home. The woman was making no sense. "I need people around me, I need to feel their energy. My power doesn't work if I'm all alone in a sterile room."

"You are here to learn now and you will follow my rules. You will also neither talk back, nor question my orders." There was no mistaking the malice in the woman's voice this time. Her eyes never lost the kind, warm look. "Do you understand?"

Maya had no patience for bullies. Never did. "I will leave then and go learn my gifts elsewhere."

The doctor chuckled and pressed a button. "Your life givers are always the hardest to

subdue. You all have too much life inside you and that's not fair to the rest of us, now is it?"

"I am, as I am," Maya countered. "There's no need for jealousy."

The doctor slammed both her hands on the table, palms open. "Jealousy? You insolent girl! I'm not jealous of you. You are not in an enviable position."

Violetta's harsh laugh echoed in the room. Malice lashed from the woman, coiled itself around Maya's throat, taking her air.

*What have I done?*

Before Maya could demand to be let go, two burly men dressed in identical green body suits came into the room.

"Take her back to her cell. Sedate her if you must," Violetta ordered.

"I wish to leave this place!" Maya shouted, backing away towards the door. "You will let me go right now!"

The woman stopped laughing. "I will do no such thing. Ever."

The two men approached. Maya beat at them once they had her cornered against the locked door. Each grabbed one of her arms and, wriggle as she might, their grip was too tight. Her elbow cracked painfully and she stopped struggling.

"You will do as I say until I decide it's enough. It shouldn't take very long." The doctor turned to the guards. "Take her away now."

Maya shouted for them to let her go all the way to the elevator. One of the men finally clasped his large hand across her mouth to silence her. The other one jabbed a needle into her neck.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

"Let me in right now!" Lana's angry shouts tore right through the peaceful afternoon Ty was enjoying in the sunny French Alps of 1357. He had just brought his flock to pasture for the summer, not a care in the world beyond what to do during the long evenings. The sun was setting dark orange, and he was starting a fire in the vast open field to have some light.

"Open the door, Ty!" Lana screeched again.

It took him a few minutes to realize Lana wasn't in the Castle Life game with him, or that he wasn't either, for that matter. Lana was in fact at his front door, her shouts getting angrier and shriller, and Ty had more problems and worries than he could handle.

"What is it?" Ty asked as he opened the door, though he really didn't want to know.

She blazed into the room, knocking Ty back. "Rober's been ordered to Alaska for no good reason. By your father. Why? How could you let that happen?"

She hit him after each question. Ty grabbed her wrists and held her at arm's length. "Sending him north is far better than the alternative. He's been accused of undermining the regime."

"Did that idiot Sage say that? She's always been a little liar. You know that, Ty. Why didn't you try and save him? You could have!" Spittle flew from Lana's mouth, and her face was orange like the setting sun.

If he told her the truth, that he was the one who'd gotten Rober sent away, she'd probably kill him.

Ty let her go and moved back. "All I know is that he's lucky my mother wasn't part of the punishment. I didn't think you cared this much about him, honestly."

"He's my only brother, Ty. Of course I care about him. I've been so mean to him lately! You can bring him back, can't you?"

Ty looked down at his hands, expecting to see them still clad in the medieval wool and leather from Castle Life. "No, I can't."

Lana buried her face in her hands and started crying.

Ty wanted her gone.

"He asked for you, you know?" she sobbed. "Why didn't you at least come and say goodbye?"

Ty couldn't even begin to think about any of that, knew he'd lose all control the moment he gave in to remorse.

"He's a traitor and I can't associate myself with people like that," he said coldly.

She looked at him through her fingers, her eyes wide. "How can you say that. Rober is your best friend. He loves you."

All of that had to stay shut away. Forever.

"We can't see each other anymore either. Now go."

Lana wiped away her tears, still ogling him with her shocked eyes. "You are exactly like your mother. Cruel and dead inside. I never want to see you again."

His own fear, thrown at him by Lana's self-serving mouth, hurt more than any punch.

"I will make sure Rober is brought back!" Lana shouted and ran from the room.

Lana's conviction yanked something free in his mind. Something he always knew, but kept buried in the deepest, dustiest corner of the metal chest in his mind. He couldn't hide forever.

Things would only get worse if he did.

~

Eve sat alone at the large dining room table having breakfast. She pouted when Ty walked in. "You haven't been to see me at all again."

Ty sat down opposite her and waved the serving girl away impatiently as she tried to fill his plate with eggs. "I've been a bit busy. Where's Mom?"

Eve shrugged and started stuffing eggs into her mouth.

"Dr. Remarque wanted breakfast at four AM today," the serving girl answered instead.

Eve wore a sleeveless shirt. Her wrists were bare.

Ty leapt from his seat. "Where's your bracelet? I told you to wear it all the time!"

"Don't yell at me," Eve countered, her mouth full of eggs. "Mom asked me to let her borrow it."

Cold rising in his forehead threatened to drown out all sense. "You let her take it?"

Eve blinked a few times, like she was fighting back tears. "Of course I did. You told me to be nice to her. That's all you do lately anyway, give me orders."

What did his mother want the bracelet for? Did she know about Eve's power?

Eve's fork clanked against the plate. "You never come play with me. You don't even visit. Then when I do get to see you, you yell at me and order me around." She stood up and ran from the room, hiding her face in her hands.

"Wait, Eve. I didn't mean to...I'm sorry."

She was already gone.

It would all be alright as soon as he got the magic stopping pills for her. Then Ty could finally relax.

His phone buzzed. "I left some instructions for you with Martin, Ty," his mother said. "I won't be in the office for most of the day. But you should go there."

Ty would rather cut off his own hand than participate in Maya's testing.

When he arrived at the facility, he found Martin alone in the control room, poring over a screen, typing furiously with his metal clad hand.

Ty cleared his throat to get his attention. "My mother said you had work for me?"

Martin blinked at him a few times then pointed to a box on the table. "She wants you to take that to today's batch of testees and find out if it interferes with their gifts at all."

Cold sweat ran down Ty's back as he reached for the box. Inside it lay the grass and aquamarine bracelet he had given Eve. His chest constricted, like someone had placed a thousand pound weight on it and left it there. The box and the bracelet fell from his lifeless fingers.

Did she know about Eve? The idea was too unimaginable to consider. So he let it go.

"What's wrong?" Martin asked.

Ty picked up the box and rose, willing his hands to be still. "I'm a little clumsy today. Which exam rooms are active?"

"Four, six and eight," Martin answered after consulting a second screen. "Do you want me to call someone to help you?"

Ty left without answering. Maya would be in one of those rooms, Ty was sure. At least he would get one more chance to tell her to hide her gift. It was her only chance to end

the suffering.

Exam room four held an older woman whose gift was manipulating objects with her mind. Ty knew, because he was with the team that had collected her from a town in the Badlands. She explained all about her power to him excitedly on the way to the facility. She even demonstrated by tying a bow from a piece of string and making it fly across the room without touching it. Her eyes glistened in merriment then.

That was weeks ago.

Today she was strapped to a chair, her shaved head covered with sensors that would record all brain activity during her test. Her eyes looked dead.

Two helpers in white bodysuits were placing on the last few sensors as Ty entered. The woman tried to move away from him as he approached. He ignored her fear and tied the bracelet to her wrist.

"During your test today, try to see if this bracelet in any way influences your ability to use your gift," Ty directed. "Do you understand?"

The woman nodded and Ty left the room. In the adjacent room one of the helpers pushed a button. Inside the room, the bald woman screamed and tried to raise her arms to shield her face. But she was tied down, immobilized, reacting to some terrible setting only she could see, some stuff of her own nightmares his mother had devised to bring out her gift.

Ty stared at the floor beneath his feet, counting the tiny imperfections in the smooth white tiles. Years later, it seemed, the woman finally fell silent. Ty followed the helpers into the room and stayed by the door as they revived her.

"Ask your questions now, if you have any," one of the helpers said.

Ty pulled his tablet from his pocket, hit record and pointed the camera at the woman.

"Did the bracelet work in any way?" he asked.

The woman nodded. She was pale and looked like she would faint again at any moment.

"How?"

"I couldn't...I couldn't reach my power," she managed.

Ty turned off the camera.

He knelt beside her and began fiddling with the knot on the bracelet. "I'm sorry you couldn't defend yourself because you had this on."

The woman had already lost consciousness, didn't hear his apology.

In exam room six, the testing had already begun on a young boy no older than six. Ty turned on his heels and left.

His hands shook as he let himself into exam room eight. The helpers had already strapped Maya to a chair. She wore only a tight sleeveless shirt that left most of her chest bare. Her golden skin seemed to glow in the sterile white room. Helpers were attaching sensors across her chest and down her left arm. She sat there motionless, but her eyes were glowing coals shooting fire.

Ty approached, not daring to look her in the eyes. She jerked her arm away when he tried to attach the bracelet next to another she already wore.

"I have to tie this to your hand," Ty said.

"No," Maya said.

One of the helpers grabbed her wrist and held it still for Ty to attach the bracelet.

"These gems will stop your power from working."

"I don't want to stop my power!" she yelled. "I want to learn how to use it."

Ty told the helper to leave the room, then leaned in closer on the pretext of fixing the bracelet more securely. "Nothing you will see in the test is real. It's all like a VR game. Don't use your gift at all and this will be over soon."

"Then I can go home?" Maya whispered.

"Don't argue and do as I say, Maya. *Please.*"

Ty rushed from the room, unable to lie to her.

She gasped and flailed during her test, looked to be running away from something, but she didn't scream. She also stayed conscious.

"Did the bracelet do anything?" he asked once it was all over.

She shook her head, still out of breath. "It did block my gift, but then I was able to find a way through."

"Why?" Ty asked, panic tightening his chest.

"I had no choice. I had to make the tree grow."

Ty tore the bracelet from her wrist and rushed from the room. Ronia was alone in the control room, soundlessly sobbing into her hands.

"Tell me where to get the pills," Ty asked, ceasing all pretense. Maya had doomed herself by using her gift today. Eve could still be saved.

"The pills don't work. They're useless," Ronia's words appeared over her head.

"My mother said they were in the final trials," Ty insisted.

Ronia pointed at the wall screen in the next room, where exam rooms four, six and eight now stood empty. "I slipped two pills to Maya. She could use her power despite it."

Then the strangeness of the scene hit him. "Are you crying over Maya? Why?"

"Because she's my niece."

Martin burst into the room, knocking Ty aside. "Don't tell him that. Do you want us to get killed?"

Martin glared at Ty like he had just mortally wounded him. "She doesn't know what she's saying. Please don't repeat this to your mother."

Ty had no intention of doing so. "I won't if you give me the pills."

He knew how the trail worked. Some of the pills had to be placebos. Maybe that's what Ronia had given Maya. Ty had to cling to that hope. The pills could be Eve's last chance to keep her gift hidden.

"We can't," Martin protested.

Behind him Ronia reached into her pocket and pulled out a clear bag full of tiny glass vials filled with purple pills. Ty rushed over and snatched it from her hand before Martin had time to react.

"Don't worry, I won't reveal your secret," Ty whispered and ran from the room.

~

Ty rushed straight back to his sister's room as soon as he got the pills. She wasn't there.

He sat by the window to wait for her. A thin white blanket was folded neatly atop one of the cushions on the sofa, Eve's tablet and VR console resting side by side on the coffee table. Eve liked her rooms neat. She tidied after herself obsessively.

One corner of the living room was devoted to her plants. Three rows of large clay pots filled with natural soil, obtained from uninhabited regions in the north where a few trees and shrubs still grew naturally, sprouted plants that Ty couldn't name. She'd told him what they were all called, of course, more than once. Whether the 6-foot high green plant with heart

shaped leaves the size of platters was a monstera or something else, he might never get to ask her again.

A sensor on one of the clay pots started flashing and beeping about an hour after he came in. It sounded like a bomb was about to explode; likely it meant the plant had to be watered.

Eve should be back by now.

She would have told someone to care for her plants while she was away. Eve was always obsessing about that too, whenever they went on holiday. Ty tried to silence the beeping device, but could not. He ignored the beeping, and stayed waiting for her until dinner time.

His mother was eating dinner alone, two servants hovering beside her. Ty sat down in his seat to her right.

"I glanced over your findings with the bracelet," his mother said, wiping her mouth on a cloth napkin and replacing it on her lap. "I must admit I expected a more thorough report. You never even tested the boy in six."

"He was already under when I got there. I didn't want to disturb the exam."

His mother took another bite of her venison and chewed slowly, never breaking eye contact. Ty looked away first.

"I want you to redo the tests tomorrow. More thoroughly this time, Ty," his mother said.

"Where's Eve?" Ty asked.

"I don't know. She's probably still cross with me for not returning her bracelet yet," his mother said in between bites. "Which is your fault, for not testing it properly."

Ty glared at her. "Why don't you ask Martin about it, he has a whole encyclopedia on gems."

His mother's smiling eyes gleamed with a playful light. "I would prefer some hands on data on the bracelet. From someone I can trust completely."

She threw her head back and laughed a throaty laugh. Whether at the joke on Martin's hands, or the known betrayal on Ty's part he couldn't be sure. All he knew was that he should get away from her or risk losing control. The freezing cold of his power was pulsing in his forehead.

Ty rose and replaced his chair under the table. "I'm sorry if I disappointed you. I'll do much better next time."

"You better make sure of that," she said still chuckling. "If there is one quality I lack it's forgiveness."

Lack of forgiveness was only the tip of the iceberg of qualities Violetta Remarque lacked.

~

Maya stumbled along, supported by the two men who had drugged her the day before. The doors of the corridor back to her cell swirled all around, leaving streaks of blue across her vision. Every few steps the corridor transformed into the sun scorched plain she found herself in during the exam. Her mouth was still as dry as the sand.

"It was just VR," she muttered to herself, and the desert would fade. Sand still crunched between her teeth.

The memories of her test grew more vivid once they lay her on the bed in her cell and the door hissed shut.

Alone in the dark room, it didn't matter whether she closed her eyes or kept them open, all she saw was the sun-scorched plain. A pack of lionesses drew nearer, approaching in a half circle. They growled, their fangs glistening in the bright sunshine, their cold eyes promising death. Large cats with sharp claws and sharper teeth were the only animal that scared Maya. Cats didn't need people like other animals did. To cats, people were prey.

Maya had nearly screamed when the first lioness lunged towards her in the test. She screamed now into her dark cell as she relived the moment.

"VR, not real. Just a game," she whispered to herself, but the sand crunched under her feet, the growls too near. The bracelet Ty had given her grew tighter and tighter against her wrist. She couldn't call a tree to rise from the sands, couldn't create a safe place for herself.

Giles' leather bracelet alongside it still worked to harness her power and contain it there. The two bracelets worked one against the other, one making her power stronger, the other taking it away. Together they formed a balance, canceled each other out.

Maya collected all her power in the translucent bubble inside her chest, made it all turn into the searing white heat. Once she was sure it contained no more of it, she sent it all into the ground, imagining the ancient oak tree she'd sit in so often back home. The tree burst from the ground, sending sand in all directions. It was the only safe place she could think of, likely because it was the first hiding place she had ever had as a child.

The lioness' jaws snapped shut, missing Maya's ankle by less than an inch as she climbed up.

Then the horrible desert flickered to black and the white light in the exam room blinded her.

*None of it was real. Just like Ty said. He hadn't lied.*

She wouldn't be learning anything here, she realized. She was being studied.

Maya relived the terror of her exam many more times before she finally passed into a dreamless sleep.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

After dinner Ty returned to Eve's rooms, which were still dark and empty. The beeping hadn't stopped yet. He walked over to the pot and grabbed the alarm. He let the freezing cold building in his forehead form a current down a vein-like channel running from the spot where the cold started and down his right arm. He fed the flow of the power all the fear and hatred he felt for his mother's ruthlessness.

Ty shut his eyes, closed his right hand into a fist over the buzzing alarm and released the cold current into it. When he opened his eyes again the alarm was gone, obliterated like it never existed. His power, his control of it was still perfect, drilled into him by years of secret practice with Salvio. It still flowed through the channel Salvio taught him to imagine running down his right arm, and still did exactly what he wanted it to, despite the fact that Ty had not used his power for almost eight years. Not since the day he accidentally used it to make Salvio disappear.

Perhaps Eve would be able to call the things he made disappear with her power. They'd never tried it, and likely never would.

*Once you learn how to control it fully, you must never use it,* Salvio's harsh instructions echoed in Ty's mind. Ty had disagreed, and used it behind Salvio's back every chance he got until Salvio made sure Ty stopped using it. He had Ty practice controlling his power while holding Salvio, who angered him to the breaking point. Ty lost control, and Salvio was gone. Disappeared like he never existed.

Ty lay on Eve's sofa staring at the bright lights in the thousands of windows on the tall buildings all around them. How lucky all those people were, that they hadn't been born into House Remarque.

~

Ty woke to the buzzing of two more of the alarms on Eve's plants. Her bed was empty, unslept in. Ty ran his fingers through his hair to straighten them out and went in search of his parents. He wanted answers. Their eleven year old daughter wouldn't go off on her own, without one of them knowing where she was.

The dining room was empty, save for the serving maid, who waited by the steaming pot of coffee and rushed to set a plate for Ty as soon as he entered.

He waved her away and ran to his father's study. It was empty too. He finally located the butler, who was eating his breakfast of eggs and warm bread rolls in the kitchen. He told him both his parents had left before dawn.

There was one other person in the house who might know where Eve was. Julian. His older brother who would never grow up.

Ty took a few deep, calming breaths before knocking on the doors to Julian's rooms. A kind faced woman with short, curly grey hair opened the door. Therese, their old nanny who had stayed on to watch over Julian.

"Ty? How nice to see you!" she exclaimed and pulled him into a hug. "Julian will be so happy to see you."

"No, I won't!" Julian shrieked from the sofa and ran to hide behind the long velvet

drapes that obscured the windows.

If the fear and anger in his brother's voice hadn't been so painful, Ty might even have laughed at the silly hiding place.

Therese released Ty. "Now really, Julian, is this any way to behave? Come out and say hello to your brother."

"No, I won't!"

Ty stayed by the door, considering turning around and leaving.

Therese approached the curtains. "Julian, you are being rude. Come out from there."

Julian held the curtains together tightly to prevent her from drawing them open. "I will after he leaves!"

"I'm sorry I haven't been to visit for such a long time," Ty said.

"For two whole months!" Julian yelled. "I counted!"

Had it been that long?

Ty walked over to the curtains and looked in from the side. "I'm here now."

Julian wrapped himself in the cloth. "I don't want to see you. Just like you don't want to see me."

"I do want to see you. It's why I'm here."

Therese finally succeeded in prying the curtains from Julian. Bereft of his hiding place, he turned around and pouted out the window, his back to Ty. "First *you* stop coming. Then *Eve* stops coming and I'm all alone here, *all day*. Forgotten. Because no one loves me."

Julian's shoulders shook as he began to weep. They were of the same height, Ty and Julian, but otherwise looked nothing alike. His brother, like Eve, had their father's fair hair and brown eyes. His mother's too, before she changed her appearance to match Ty's.

Ty walked over and put his arm around Julian's shoulders, dreading the answer to his next question. "You know I love you. I have so many more duties now, though that's no excuse. I'll make time to visit more often from now on. What do you mean Eve hasn't been visiting?"

Julian stopped sobbing long enough to hold out his hand, two fingers extended. "She hasn't come for two days now. Two. I counted."

*Two days?*

Ty led him over to the table by the window, his legs rubbery.

"She's away, visiting a friend," Ty lied, hoping his brother noticed none of his terror.

Julian wiped his tears off on his sleeve. "Oh, good then. She should have told me."

"She should have," Ty repeated, his voice shaking.

Therese had brought over two cups of hot cocoa and some cookies and Julian dived right in. Then he pulled a pack of cards from the drawer in the table. "Want to play a game of Black Peter, Ty?"

It was a children's game from the time before the Ring, before the Badlands. Boring and childish, but his brother Julian couldn't handle any VR games whatsoever. No electronics either for that matter. A few years ago he went into a full seizure when Ty had showed him a video on his phone.

"Therese will play with you," Ty said, standing. "I should go to work."

Julian's bottom lip started shaking. "You can't play Black Peter with only two people."

Ty sat back down and took the deck from his hands. "Alright, only a few games."

He dropped half the deck when he tried to shuffle the cards.

"Clumsy you," Julian whined. "Give them here."

Ty obliged, and watched Julian try to shuffle. He bent more than one card before he finally started dealing.

There was a knock on the door and a moment later, Therese let in a bleary eyed Eve. Ty rushed over and picked her up before he even decided to. She stared at him blankly. "I was in the hospital. They told me I fell and hit my head."

*Hit her head? Why didn't Mom and Dad say so?*

Ty ignored the questions, too relieved to have her back safe, to worry. She was still herself. He hugged her tighter and then set her down. Julian was hiding behind the curtain again. Eve coaxed him out much faster than Ty did.

Eve got all excited about playing Black Peter, so Ty reshuffled the cards and dealt them out again. For the next hour, they were children again and Julian was childish because he was twelve years old, not because their mother had made sure he'd never use his power by making him stay a child forever.

Too soon, Ty remembered his mother's harsh laugh and hidden threats of the night before. He had her test to complete to her satisfaction or else.

While Therese was clearing away their lunch in the kitchen, Ty pulled out the bag of pills and handed Eve a vial containing a single purple pill. "Take one of these each day."

He hoped that was the correct dosage, but he'd check with Ronia after he left here.

Eve looked more closely at the pill. "I already have some of these. Mom gave them to me this morning when I left the hospital. She said to take one every two days though."

Ty felt an invisible hand choking him. "She gave you these exact pills? Look closely."

"Yes, these exact ones," Eve said. "I recognize the tiny vials with the black stoppers. And the white dots in the purple liquid inside them."

Ty peered at the pills. Eve was right about the white dots.

"And that's it? She just told you to keep taking them and let you go?"

Eve nodded.

Only then did Ty allow himself to breathe again. To really believe Eve was safe. What happened to Julian must have been some sort of terrible mistake. Despite her ruthlessness, Violetta Remarque loved her own children and she wouldn't hurt them intentionally.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Maya had barely finished her lunch of a clear vegetable soup when the two men clearly assigned to stop her from fighting against her imprisonment came to collect her.

*Not another exam!*

The terrible visions of yesterday's test had not yet completely faded from her mind. She still saw the cats, heard their growling, tasted her fear.

That VR had really messed up her mind. That's all it was, though, a VR immersion, and today's test would be no different.

Maya followed the guards, who led her into a circular room with dark tinted windows on all sides. A basin filled with fresh soil stood in the center of the room, with three baskets of seeds next to it.

It wouldn't be just an illusion today.

Maya's heart started racing. What if they brought real cats today too? She looked around the room frantically, searching for a cage with a lioness inside it somewhere.

Thankfully, the room only contained the basin.

One of the doctors told her to sit on the floor by the basin. She obeyed and they started attaching the sensors to her arms and chest, like they had yesterday. Maya fought the urge to cry. She wasn't ready yet. The animals might be in another room. They could bring them in any moment now.

She breathed in deeply, letting the smell of fresh earth fill her mind.

She might never get out of this place ever again. But she had her gift, her wonderful, warm ability to give life, and it truly was all that mattered. She reached out and grabbed a fistful of the soil, letting it cascade down her palm.

She dug her fingers into the soil. The room changed into a field that stretched all the way to the horizon. The afternoon sun was an orange ball falling from the sky. Ty's mother appeared, her long black hair swaying in the warm wind. Maya's breath caught in her throat. It was just an illusion. They weren't in a field and this woman was still her captor.

Maya looked away, didn't acknowledge the woman at all.

"Show us your plant growing abilities," the woman said. "Use the seeds set out for you. Talk us through what you are doing as you do it."

Maya closed her mouth tightly and grabbed a fistful of seeds from the first basket. She let the seeds trickle from her palm into the basin.

"Do you know what will grow from those seeds?"

What a dumb question! Of course Maya didn't know. How could she?

"Talk!" Dr. Remarque ordered.

Maya wouldn't give her the satisfaction, silently daring the woman to stop the test, or do her worst. Either way, Maya wasn't about to obey her commands. Maya knew she was never getting out of this school. Why hadn't she listened to Ty? He'd tried to warn her, tried to help her. He *could* have been more direct about it. None of it mattered now.

She concentrated on the seeds in her hands. From the shape they could be anything. She took a seed between her thumb and forefinger and looked at it closely.

*What do you want to grow up to be?*

She asked it pointlessly, tears starting in her throat as she remembered her home, her parents, herself as a girl who only wanted to heal.

*Wheat*, a small voice sang in her head.

Maya dropped the seed in her shock.

*I must be going insane. Or is this part of the test?*

Maya hastily dug a small hole in the soil and placed the seed inside it. She let the warmth of her gift build in her chest and sent it all into the seed, willing it to grow.

A perfectly formed, ripe stalk of wheat shot from the ground.

*Did it really tell me what it was?*

Maya wiped the soil from her hand and took a fistful of seeds from the second basket. She felt a little stupid when she asked it what it wanted to be.

*Bamboo*, a voice answered.

"Are you sure?" she asked aloud.

*Yes. But we will obey your wishes, grow into anything you want us to.*

Maya looked up and fixed her gaze on one of the black tinted windows. "Stop messing with my mind. I don't want to perform any more tests."

No one answered. The projection of Dr. Remarque had also disappeared from the exam room.

*What if it's true?*

Maya planted a few bamboo seeds, and willed them to grow into lilies. A few did, though most still became vivid green stalks of bamboo.

She plunged her hand into the third basket. *Peas*.

They would make beautiful flowers before ripening into pods.

The strangeness of it all unnerved her.

*How can I have the power to order seeds what plant to grow into?*

No, it must be all part of the test, the doctors were trying to unhinge her. She wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

Maya dug three rows in the basin, arranging the different seeds just so. Once she was satisfied, Maya let the warmth of her gift fill her chest completely before letting it trickle down her arm, collecting in her left palm. When she had all she could hold in her hand she released it, first into the bamboo seeds. Stalks shot up from the soil, transforming into straight plants that looked a few years old by the time they finished growing.

Next she fed her power into the wheat seeds, had it grow, golden and ripe.

Last, she fed the growth magic to the beans. Not enough to let them mature, only enough for the delicate white, purple and pink flowers to blossom. Then she braided it all around the bamboo, creating a wall of flowers and life.

With a flicker, the field disappeared. Yet the wall of flowers still stood before her, rising to the ceiling.

*I did it!*

From seed to full grown plants in minutes. If only she'd had more confidence in herself and her gift back home, she would not be locked up in this horrible place.

Her hands shook from the strain and she saw double from the effort of controlling the flow of her gift so precisely. All the people who oversaw her test gaped at what she had made, some clapping softly and smiling.

It was a beautiful thing, it truly was. Too bad she would never be able to recreate it

back home in the Badlands.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"Where have you been all day?" Violetta shouted at Ty the moment he entered the control room. "You were supposed to be testing the bracelet!"

"I've been to see Julian. It's been a while, so I couldn't leave right away," Ty retorted, studying her closely for a reaction. If she had any regret over what she'd done to Julian, none of it showed in her kind eyes today.

"Save your social visits for the afternoon from now on." She rose and walked to the exam monitoring room. "I gave the bracelet to the man in exam room five myself. Let's see how he performs today."

On the large wall screen, the man who could blast through walls huddled in a corner, covering his head. Ty sat down with Martin and Ronia, his back to the testing.

"Isn't she done with this poor man yet? Why hasn't he been put to sleep?" he whispered while his mother gave the final instructions to the team handling the examination.

"We still don't have enough readings on his power to recreate it and produce a gifter," Martin explained in defeat. "Probably won't after today either."

An image of himself huddled in that exam room flashed across Ty's mind. Would his mother let him off with only a regiment of pills if she ever found out what he could do? As far as military grade powers went, blasting holes through walls paled in comparison to the ability to make anything disappear. She never would know, though. And that was that.

Ronia nudged him and pointed at a screen shielded from view by her body. Maya was being led from the exam room, where she must have undergone her second testing. She left behind a bed of soil with a gorgeous flowering garden, a bouquet of sorts, inside it.

"She did that?" Ty asked.

Ronia nodded.

"What will happen to her? Her power looks very useful as well."

Martin reached over and turned off Ronia's screen. "We can grow all sorts of things in a matter of seconds. A power like this has no practical application in the Ring. She'll be put to sleep soon. Dr. Remarque hardly glanced at the results."

"A power like that, out in the Badlands, the world could be green again," Ty said.

"It's not in anyone's interest to make the Badlands habitable again," Martin said. "There's hardly enough resources left for the Ring to exist."

Resources for what? Extravagant skyscrapers, the top floors so high up you couldn't even see the ground below. Gardens manufactured in nanofabricators instead of letting them grow naturally. People taking pills instead of eating wholesome grown food. The panel making plans to leave the planet, instead of trying to fix it. And Maya, who had the power to heal the Earth put into a lifelong coma. The outrage fed the freezing cold building in his forehead, blinding him.

Ty shook his head and thought only of the large metal chest, its locks strong enough to let no emotion through. The vision of the box in his mind kept growing, containing so many unresolved hurts, and rages now. Already it filled half of his mind. What would happen when what it must contain and keep hidden made it too large to imagine?

The testee's scream pierced through Ty's panic. No. The box must never grow too large. He must never fail to keep his emotions under control.

Martin leapt up and adjusted some settings on a tablet on the other table. Ronia leaned closer and placed something in his hand.

"Read it," the tiny words flickered between them. "Not here."

She had given him a piece of paper, folded neatly into a square about an inch wide. Where did she even get paper to write on? Ty had only ever seen it in museums and history class in school.

He put the note into his pocket just as his mother burst back into the room.

"Tell me we got it all this time, Martin!" she screeched.

Behind her back, the man lay weeping in the rubble of one concrete wall. His mother hardly acknowledged Ty, excusing him for the day.

Maya had maybe a day more before she would be put to sleep, and his mother was very busy with the man who could destroy walls.

Getting to Maya's cell wasn't hard. Going in seemed impossible. It was Ty's fault she was there any way he looked at it. He'd brought her into the city, had failed to keep her out of the facility. She probably hated him. He was likely the last person she wanted to see. He should leave and forget it all. Not that it was possible, he knew he would never be able to forget her vast, sun filled eyes.

He pressed his tattoo against the panel by her door before he changed his mind again.

She was asleep on her narrow bed, one arm hanging off lifelessly. Her long dark hair covered her face, probably from tossing and turning in a nightmare.

Ty approached and reached out to brush the strands of hair from her eyes. They shot open. She jerked away from his hand.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you," Ty lied. He had wanted to speak to her more than he ever wanted any other thing.

"It's you," she said, blinking rapidly as her eyes adjusted to the harsh white light in the room.

"I saw the flowers you planted today. They were beautiful," Ty said lamely.

She drew her knees into her chest and hugged them. "Too bad they'll be the last I ever produce. The first and last. Well, except for the wheat..."

She let her voice trail off and fixed him with her glowing eyes, a rolling meadow at sundown stretching inside them. "You might have warned me about this place."

Ty looked at the floor. "I tried."

"I know."

"It was never my intention for you to get near this place. I had arranged for you to go back home that afternoon. You should have said you wanted to come here right away. I'd never have taken you along if you had. Wait...you know?"

"Yes, I know you tried to help me. You helped me a lot by telling me that first test was only VR. I don't know if I'd have gotten through it otherwise. Just tell me one thing, is Giles alright?"

"Yes. I sent him to his brothers after Lana brought you here," he whispered.

"I bet Lana's having a great laugh at my expense right now." Maya chuckled in a defeated sort of way.

Ty sat beside her and took hold of her hand. "Soon they will put you to sleep. I will do all I can to wake you and get you away from here. It could take years, but I will take over this

facility from my mother one day and I will free you."

She screwed up her face. "Years? You could take me away from here now."

Ty looked down at his hands. "I can't do that."

"Your mother is a scary person. I see that now. I understand why you don't want to cross her," Maya said, her tone level and cutting.

Ty squeezed her hand tighter. "My plan will work."

She tried to pull her hand away, but he didn't let go. "All I have, all I ever had was the now. And you're taking that away from me. I thought I saw something more in you, someone I could love."

She yanked her hand away and lay back down, her back to him.

"You did?" Ty asked, eager to keep talking. Her admission was a knife through his heart.

"Yes," Maya said and turned back to face him. "I was wrong."

Ty opened his mouth to say something more, assure her she was right about him before, wrong now, but found no words. His plan would work.

He didn't quite realize where he was until he was back in his apartment. Even then he felt like a part of him was still in Maya's cell, like it would stay there forever.

~

Ty's phone rang in the middle of the night.

"You visited that girl? Why did you do that?" his mother yelled once he answered.

There was every chance she'd find out, though she might have overlooked it.

"I wanted to question her about the test."

His mother laughed. "Liar. You are too soft, Ty. Too soft by far for the kind of work I do. I blame your father. I won't give up without a fight, however. Tomorrow your little friend will go through her final test. And you will watch."

Ty tossed the phone across the room.

He considered going to his father and pleading with him to spare Maya. It would be pointless, he knew. His father never interfered with his mother's work at the facility. He would not do so now for some random girl from the Badlands.

Ty got up and dressed hastily in hunting gear. He made up his mind to go on a hunt, forget it all, leave it all behind.

She couldn't make him watch Maya put to sleep.

He was on his way to collect Isis from her enclosure when he remembered the gift stopping pills he'd gotten for Eve. His mother must never find out he had them.

Ronia's letter fell out of his pocket when he pulled out the pills.

He unfolded the square piece of paper. Ronia had filled every available space of it in tiny writing:

*Ty, I trust you. I know you are not truly like your mother. You want the best for those you hold dear. Please read my words and think them through. I raised Maya's mother as my own daughter, helped her give birth to Maya deep in the Badlands. There is no doubt in my mind that Maya is my niece's child, not after seeing her perform in her test today.*

*After she was born, we laid her on the dry ground next to her mother. By morning a lush green oasis had sprung up around them. Martin and I had hoped they had both escaped after we were captured later that day. The oasis had grown to a copse by then, you see, and shielded them from view. Just as you want to protect those you hold dear I want to protect Maya. Please help us escape from the facility. There is a place, beyond the Ring, in the*

*wilderness on the West Coast where people with gifts are welcome and cared for. Please give me your answer tomorrow. Please help me.*

The ink was smudged in places, like Ronia had cried as she wrote it. Ty read the letter through two more times before all she told him finally sank in. A place that welcomed those with gifts. They could all be safe there.

He concentrated hard on the anger he felt at his mother and let the cold surge of his power swallow the letter.

He could use his power to blast them all out of the facility. Make the whole building disappear if he got angry enough. He'd once made a whole abandoned town hall disappear, back when Salvio still drove him to test the limits of his powers.

Suddenly Salvio's words echoed in his mind, like the man was standing right next to him: *You must never reveal what you can do. No one would understand a power so destructive. All would run from you, or seek to destroy you, or worse yet, control you. Even in a world filled with other gifted ones, you would be an outcast, doomed to hide your ability from all.*

Ty had never before understood that command in its entirety. Now, it made perfect sense. Even Ronia's safe haven for the gifted was a dangerous place for him. Yet how could he go on pretending he wasn't hurting others like him to save himself, like he accused Martin and Ronia of doing? When would it stop?

~

Ty let himself in to Eve's room quietly and shook her awake.

"What is it?" she asked, rubbing her eyes. "Is something wrong?"

He smoothed her hair back gently. "No, I came to tell you I'm leaving for a while. I didn't want you to wonder where I was again."

She reached over and turned on the light. "It's four in the morning. Are you leaving in the middle of the night?"

"No, tomorrow," Ty said. "I wanted to ask you a favor."

Her whole face lit up in pride. "Ask then."

"I'll need someone to look in on Isis from time to time," he said, smiling. "Maybe take her for a walk once in a while. Can you do that?"

Her eyes widened in fear. "How long will you be gone?"

Ty patted her head again. "I don't know. Awhile. I'll be back."

She leapt toward him and put her skinny arms around his neck. "I don't want you to leave."

He hugged her back. "I don't want to either, but I have to. Don't tell Mom and Dad, though. It will be our secret."

"Like our gifts?" she whispered.

Ty hugged her tighter. "Yes, exactly like that."

He let her go and stood up. "Keep taking your pills and don't tell anyone about that either, alright?"

Tears streamed down her face. He wiped them away with his hand.

"It's only for a little while. Don't cry."

He regretted coming to tell her now. But he couldn't leave her without saying goodbye.

He sat back down on the bed. "I'll stay until you fall asleep again."

She wiped away her tears and fished a tattered storybook from the drawer in her

nightstand. A serene woman slept on the cover, a crystal crown nestled in her wavy blond hair. *Sleeping Beauty*.

Eve held out the book for Ty to take. "Read to me."

He opened to the first page, and started reading. Eve fell asleep by page three.

Ty closed the book, leaned back and closed his eyes, going over the plan. He needed to keep it simple, but Ty could think of no way to get Maya out of the facility without revealing he had a gift too.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Ty was the first in the breakfast room the next morning, dressed for the hunt. He chewed on a piece of buttered toast and drank some tea while he waited for the rest of his family. Eve came in not long after, still wearing her pajamas, her eyes watery when she smiled at him. He winked at her.

His parents came in soon after. Violetta sat down without looking at him at all, her mouth set in a thin line that screamed how very angry still she was. Somewhere between a snarl and a smile, that expression on his mother's face never boded well.

Ty chewed his bread slowly, trying to decide whether to break the silence. He was spared by his father.

"How do you feel today, Eve?" his father asked.

Eve brushed a strand of her back behind her ear. "I'm still so tired. It's funny, though, I don't even remember falling."

His mother replaced her cup with a clatter. "It is that way sometimes, with head injuries. I'm sure your memory will return. If not we'll give you another therapy at my facility."

She looked at Ty as she said the last words, her mouth still deciding between the smile and the snarl.

"Why didn't anyone tell me she was injured?" Ty asked.

"We didn't want to worry you," his mother replied sweetly. If the words came from his father, he would have believed them. His mother was lying.

A crash of fork against china, and a loud thump sounded to his left.

"What's wrong, Eve?" his father yelled, leaping to his feet so fast his chair crashed to the floor.

Ty reached Eve faster. Her eyes were rolling into the back of her head and her tiny body was twitching all over. A fine froth appeared on her lips and ran down her chin.

His mother pushed Ty aside harshly. "I will take care of this."

Ty lunged to shield Eve with his body and looked at his father. "Don't let her do this! She'll do the same to Eve as she did to Julian."

A frightened look, like that of a cornered animal, flashed in his father's eyes, but he quickly composed himself. "Move aside, Ty. Let your mother handle it."

"How can you say that? I won't let her do this!" Ty shouted and tried to pick Eve up. The froth was spilling from her mouth now, and her eyes had rolled all the way into the back of her head.

His father pulled him out of the way and held him back. His mother picked Eve up in her arms and left the room.

Ty struggled to get free, to save Eve. His father didn't let go. "Eve will be alright in your mother's hands."

"She won't and you know it. She's taking her to the facility!" Ty shouted. The cold building in his forehead made it hard to see. Any moment now, he could lose all control. Hurt his father, make him disappear.

Ty relaxed and willed his power to recede.

"Your mother knows what's best," his father said, not meeting Ty's gaze. "Can I let you go?"

Ty nodded and his father released him.

"Eve is your daughter too. You can stop this," Ty said, all his rage safely locked away.

The vein in his father's forehead was pulsing now, color rising up his neck to his cheeks. "You will not tell me what to do. Your only job is to obey me and your mother."

"Or what?"

Some of the color left his father's face. He righted his chair and slumped back into it. "Or you end up like your brother and Eve. I can't lose any more of my children."

Ty stared at him for a full minute or more before all the implications of what his father had said found the right place in his mind. "Why do you let her do this?"

His father looked down at his hands. "I can't stop her. She won't have anyone with a gift in her family."

Ty stared at him, unable to believe it. He'd thought his father wasn't as ruthless as his mother. Now he knew they were both the same.

Ty turned and ran from the room, with only a searing knowledge that the day had finally come. He had to leave. Or die in the attempt. He wouldn't be going alone.

Luckily Rober and Ty had made thousands of plans to escape over the years, the last one only a few days ago. The hovercraft, the maps, the plans and machines. This time, machines would be replaced by friends and family. And Ty had to do it all alone.

Rober would've helped him had Ty not sent him away like a coward. He couldn't think of that. Maybe one day he'd get the chance to apologize.

~

*Keep it simple.*

If Ty kept it simple today then all would be ready for their escape before anyone would be the wiser. He hoped his mother wouldn't harm Eve in the time it took him to arrange all the pieces of his plan.

Ty rushed to the Montague building, calling Adam once he reached it.

Adam didn't sound too happy about his call, but at least he picked up.

"How's Sage?" Ty asked hoping his father hadn't lied about her being harmed during questioning.

"She's under house arrest," Adam answered and left it at that.

Ty almost sighed in relief. Adam would never be willing to help if Sage had been mistreated by his mother.

"I thought we could go for a hunt later today," Ty suggested. "If you can get us a craft, that is."

"Tonight?" Adam asked. "I'm working until late and then—"

"Come on, it will be fun. We've been cooped up in the city for a week already. I might even be able to get us some night vision gifters fresh from the facility," Ty invented wildly.

"Won't be quite the same without Rober, now will it?" Adam said, a nasty edge to his voice. It wasn't unexpected. He did singlehandedly thwart their revolutionary plans.

"No, it won't," Ty agreed. "I'll make sure my father brings him back soon. I just need a little more time to convince him."

"I hope you succeed," Adam replied in a more friendly tone.

"So how about that hunt? Can you get the craft?"

"Sure, why not? Meet me at the HQ at six."

"Well, I have the whole day off. I thought I'd go get us some cool animals for tonight," Ty said. "How about you give me the craft now?"

"Now? How do I explain that?" Adam asked.

Ty chuckled. "Do you really need to? I'm waiting at the entrance to your house. Let's go get it now."

Fifteen minutes later they reached the SF flight control, and ten minutes after that Ty had the craft at his disposal. Commander Klein who was on duty put on a semblance of a fight, but neither Ty nor Adam had yet been refused the use of an SF hovercraft for their hunting expeditions since they turned sixteen and came of age. Only today, Ty needed Adam to do the asking to keep his real intentions hidden.

"Meet back here at six, then?" Adam said.

Ty agreed and steered the craft out of the building.

Five minutes later, he parked it next the facility. All he needed now were the maps of the West Coast. The facility bordered the common university and its history department had all he needed.

He entered the library of the geography department, and used his tattoo to enter the restricted section. His work at the facility gave him the same level of clearance as professors had.

A simple search of the database in the room gave him more maps of the West Coast than he would ever need. These maps contained all the raw data for the more sophisticated maps the SFs used. Rober and he had figured that out years ago, while they were still making their plans to found their own city. Ty downloaded the maps to his phone and erased all trace of his presence there.

Now for the hardest part.

He returned to the facility and entered through the reception area on the 40<sup>th</sup> floor. An alarm sounded as soon as he neared the empty reception desk. A door behind it slid open and two green-clad security staff bounded towards him. He turned back to the exit, only to see it seal shut with thick titanium bars. He only had enough time to wonder whether his tattoo and high family clearance would still be sufficient to open it again when the two guards seized him, twisting his arms painfully against his back.

"What are you doing? Let me go!" Ty commanded.

"Your mother wants to speak with you. We are to take you down to the sleeping area."

His searing cold power woke inside his head, right between the eyes. Grew like an avalanche grows as it crashes down a mountain.

Ty pushed it back. If he let even a trickle of his power show here his mother would clear all the exam rooms to give him his test. Not that she would get far. He had enough anger and hurt stored up in that metal chest in his mind to erase this whole two hundred-story building like it never existed. But Maya was in the building, and possibly Eve. They both needed him to get them out.

~

Maya was woken harshly by her two guards. They hardly let her zip up her bodysuit before dragging her down the corridor to the exam room. Twice as many of the doctors as usual milled around the room that looked into the examination chamber. A few clapped her on the back as she passed.

The man with the steel hand had his arm around Ronia's shoulders. They both had

tears in their eyes. The words, "Good luck," appeared in the air, just as the man spoke them. Then Ronia wailed and hid her head in the man's chest, sobbing loudly. Maya fixed her eyes on the exam room and kept walking.

Inside, the garden she had planted the day before still blossomed and the baskets of seeds were still beside the basin. The garden was Maya's biggest achievement and the greatest sign of her failure. If only she'd been more confident in her gift back home.

She'd also truly believed yesterday's test was to be the last. Now Maya was equally certain today's would be the worst.

Still, it would give her one more chance to use her gift. One more sweet goodbye to all she could have done.

A few of the doctors came in and began attaching the sensors to her chest and even her forehead. She was given no VR goggles today. She settled near the small garden to wait. It would all be make believe anyway. None of it real.

Soon she was left alone. The room turned dark, and the ground beneath her feet shook. Then the room was propelled downwards with such force Maya dropped to her knees, clutching her stomach. She lost all sense of direction and her surroundings in the sickening movement.

The darkness receded and Maya stood alone in the dried up wasteland of the Badlands. The sun was a purple band on the horizon and the night winds were already picking up, threatening to knock her down.

Her bodysuit was still unzipped, and she could clearly see the sensors on her chest and arms. The cold wind beat her long hair around her head. From the distance a low growl reached her.

*No! Not more cats!*

She turned in a circle, looking for a place to hide. Only cracked earth stretched before her in all directions. Night was falling fast. A second growl joined the first.

Had they transported her to the Badlands?

She kneeled and brushed her hand along the brown, dried up soil. The earth still held some of the day's warmth.

A new growl sounded, closer than the last.

Maya stood up and started running away from it, out towards the dying light of the day.

There was no tree to hide in, no river to let her swim away to safety, no bush to conceal her.

She stopped, bent double from the painful stitch in her side. As her breathing slowed she clearly heard soft footsteps running towards her.

*A tree. I need a tree to hide in.*

She knelt on the ground and dug her fingers into the earth, looking frantically for a seed, a shoot, anything that she could grow into a hiding place.

The dry earth was so tightly packed her fingernails broke against the surface. All was dead here, no living thing for her to breathe life into.

She screamed when a growl sounded right by her ear. Four pairs of dead green eyes shone in the distance, reflecting the day's last light.

She scrambled away on all fours. And knocked over one of the baskets of seeds.

"Not the Badlands. Only an illusion," she repeated to herself over and over again. Some of the fixtures in the exam room flickered through the vision of the wasteland.

She grabbed a fistful of the spilt seeds and felt around for the basin of soil. The vision of the Badlands solidified again. She searched for the basin more frantically. Finally her knuckles collided painfully on its edge.

She dug a hole in the earth and dumped the seeds into it, covering it hastily.

*Be an oak*, she ordered them as she let all the searing white heat her chest would hold flow into them. *Be an oak!*

A few of the seeds sprouted wheat.

Tears streamed down her face as she sent more of her life giving power into the seeds still in the soil. *An oak, please. Or any tree. Any big, tall tree.*

More wheat erupted from the ground, fully formed.

A growl sounded a few feet away.

"Work, please work!" Maya screamed. "I don't want to die!"

The cats' footsteps were closer now, coming from all directions in a circle around her.

She grabbed another fistful of seeds from a basket, and begged them to turn into a tree before she plunged them into the earth.

Her whole body shook from the strain as she gathered yet more of the life-giving heat into her chest. This would be the last attempt. If she failed now, the cats would get her. It was the last of the power she could reach.

"Please!" she screamed, as she sent the jet of her power into the seeds.

A loud growl answered her plea. The nearest cat was only a foot away, its fangs bared, its shining green eyes anticipating a sure kill.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"Release me!" Ty yelled at his two guards again when they reached the elevator. They only gripped him tighter.

The ride to the sleeping area, located on the lowest levels of the facility, took only a minute or two. Ty was saving his real anger for his mother. She wouldn't dare put him to sleep, not behind his father's back. If Ty had learned anything from their conversation that morning it was that Caesar wasn't ready to let Ty go.

Ghostly white figures in identical stainless steel beds lay side by side in the rooms on either side of the narrow hallway, fifty per room. All had thick tubes attached to the veins in their arms, and each bed had a screen above it monitoring their vitals.

Young, old, middle aged, male, female, unrecognizable. All sleeping until they died. In the two years since he started helping his mother none of these poor people were ever woken. Their usefulness had ceased the moment they gave his mother all the information she needed about their special gifts. To her they were data so the fabricators could make things more lifelike, so that weapons could be improved and the experiences of the Citizens more intense, more real and less virtual.

His mother waited by the last room in the hallway. The windows of the room were draped and she smiled widely as the guards led Ty towards her, her eyes alive with happiness.

Such an unnatural lie the woman's eyes were.

"You have finally decided to come to work then?" she asked sweetly as soon as they were within earshot.

Ty looked side to side at his captors in answer, then glared into her smiling, lying eyes.

"I had to make sure you would come down here. Today your real training begins. I realized this morning that I had been too lenient with you. To do the work I do you must be hard. As hard as me."

"That's not going to happen!" One day becoming as ruthless as Violetta Remarque had always been Ty's worse fear.

"Keep a tight grip on him, I want him to get a good long look here," she told the guards then punched a code into the panel by the door. The windows turned clear.

Only a single stainless steel bed occupied this room, a tiny figure lying beneath a thin sheet in it. Ty's heart stopped.

*Eve.*

Small, kind Eve, a tube attached to her arm, a poisonous green liquid pumped into her veins. Asleep forever.

Ty could not form a coherent thought beyond that.

"This is your doing, Tyberious. Never forget that. I have known that Eve has a gift for a while now. I was certain you knew it as well. I was waiting for you to tell me so we could deal with her together."

"Tell you?" Ty spat. "After what you did to Julian? Never."

His mother smiled even more sweetly. "Yes, I realized that was your plan a few weeks

ago. So I gave you your last chance with the bracelet. Did you actually think you could hide someone with a gift from me, stupid boy? I've examined thousands of these people. I can tell when a person has a special gift practically just by looking at them."

*You're the stupid one. You have no idea about what kind of power I have.*

"Alright, you've made your point. Can you release Eve now and keep giving her the pills so that she can never use her power again?" Ty said.

His mother's laugh echoed down the corridor. "Of course not. She will serve as a lasting reminder to you so you never cross me again. You will begin working here full time now. And the next time you betray me, Eve will die."

Ty struggled harder against his guards' grip. "You wouldn't kill your own daughter!"

"She is as good as dead to me. I would never experiment on my own children, but I can't let them walk around with special powers either."

"Why?" Ty demanded. "Eve never hurt anyone."

"She is a freak, an anomaly. As are all the rest here." His mother swept her arms to point out the entire corridor. "People with such skills can't be allowed to procreate. Where would the world be then?"

"A step higher on the evolutionary ladder?" Ty spat.

"Where did you hear that nonsense? These people are nothing more than evolutionary mistakes, the dangerous side effects of clumsy DNA engineering done in the last century. They must all be weeded out!" She turned to the guards. "Take him up to exam room four now."

"Wake Eve! I've learned my lesson," Ty protested.

"Oh, no, you haven't. I have yet another lesson for you to witness. "You don't think I've forgotten about your little friend from the Badlands? I doubt there will be enough left of her today to put to sleep."

Ty's stomach turned at her words.

"Do you even *have* a heart?" Ty raged as the guards dragged him backwards towards the elevator.

His mother laughed again. "I must, because it beats. But I don't ever feel anything else there."

~

*This is the end.*

Maya tore her eyes from her own death reflected in the big cats' eyes. She laid her hand over the last seeds she planted, but no power came through. She had used it all. In vain. Wasted it. The world spun around her.

"I'm sorry!" she yelled into the sky willing all the dry earth to hear her. "I could have done so much more!"

She closed her eyes and imagined sitting in the old, dried up oak tree in her home town.

Life-giving warmth she never felt building in her chest exploded from her hands and into the dry earth.

With a loud crack, like stone breaking, the earth parted. The whoosh as the tree burst from the earth knocked her back.

The oak tree she loved, her favorite hiding place, rose from the ground, fully formed, forcing the growling, snarling cats back.

The trunk groaned as thick, healthy branches sprang from it and hissed as the leaves

appeared.

A loud crash was followed by the sound of falling things.

The wasteland disappeared. Maya was knocked back, lying by the garden she'd made the day before. Only now, a massive oak tree grew from it, extending through the ceiling. Concrete and steel rained down from floors above through where the thick branches pierced it. The branches shattered most of the windows lining the exam room. Shouts came from the adjacent room where lights flickered wildly and alarms blared.

*I've done it. I've destroyed her horrible school.*

Maya yanked the sensors from her body. She shielded her head from the debris still falling through from the ruined ceiling and stumbled out of the exam room.

With a groan the ceiling gave way as she reached the doorway to the exam control room. Its beams held against the rain of steel and plaster, glass and falling hospital beds. Several of the doctors in the control room were buried beneath the rubble.

She tried to locate the silent woman, but she couldn't see. There was too much dust, too many flashing lights.

No one tried to stop her as she stumbled through the room towards the exit.

A steel pipe hit her head and grazed her arm. Hot blood spilled down her forehead and into her eyes. Her knees collided painfully with the floor. Maya tried to rise, but her damaged legs couldn't hold her weight.

*So close.*

She crawled towards the door, the room turning dark around her, the beeping and screaming growing distant. Until all went silent, and she saw nothing at all.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The freezing cold of his power that started building in the sleeping area grew colder as the elevator rose. Trickle of it had already escaped down the channel in his right arm. Ty let them. He'd need all he could hold to get Maya and Eve safely out of the facility. In front of him, his mother still chuckled a little from her nasty joke.

A loud crash sounded just as the elevator hissed open on the examination floor. Alarms went off almost instantly.

"What's this?" his mother screamed and ran forward towards the source of the noise.

Ty twisted his arm and grabbed the guard who held his right hand. A cold current of his power seared through the channel. The man vanished.

The other man looked at him, his wide eyes full of terror. Ty punched him in the throat before he could let out his scream. The man released him as he toppled to the ground, clutching his throat. Ty kicked him in the temple to knock him out. He was two steps away when he realized he couldn't let him live. Not after he had seen Ty use his power.

He knelt beside him, sweat rising on his forehead, his right hand shaking. There was no other way. He grabbed the man's arm and willed the cold current to flow through his hand. It did, like it always had. His knuckles collided with the floor when the man disappeared.

"No use regretting it," Ty muttered to himself, ignoring the sense of sweet relief from having used his power. The man was innocent, only following his mother's orders.

Ty reached the door to the exam room where the commotion started to see his mother knocked down by a falling bed from the holding cells one floor above.

A majestic oak tree grew from the exam room, piercing the ceiling with its thick branches.

Had Maya done this?

"Ty, help me!" Martin yelled. With one hand he was holding Ronia upright, with the stump of the other he tried to rouse Maya.

Ty rushed to her side, lifting her up. Thick blood gushed from a cut on her scalp, matting her hair.

"We have to get her out of here. Please help me," Martin pleaded.

Ty picked Maya up and slung her across his shoulder. A hand gripped his ankle, its owner buried under a heap of metal and plaster. Ty kicked his foot free and rushed from the room.

Once inside the elevator, Ty punched in the code for the sleeping area.

"No, we need to get out of this building!" Martin shouted and pulled his hand away.

"I'm not leaving without my sister!" Ty protested.

Ronia took hold of his hand gently. Blood flowed from a cut above her eye. She typed furiously with her free hand.

"Waking your sister now would make her go into cardiac arrest. She is safer where she is."

"No, you're lying! I'm not leaving Eve!"

"She's telling the truth," Martin insisted. "Once they've been put to sleep they must be

woken gradually. The process can take weeks. We can return for her later."

Ty shook his head. It couldn't be true.

"We have always been honest with you," Martin insisted. "Can you risk not believing us now?"

Ty halted the elevator and looked from one to the other. "She'll kill her if I don't save her."

"I doubt it. She knows you might one day come back to get her," Martin said.

They were right. He couldn't risk not believing them. Ty entered the code for the exit.

No one tried to stop them as they rushed through the reception area where the alarms blared too. The door that led to the parking area stood wide open. As he expected, the emergency protocol kicked in when the ceiling collapsed and opened all the main exits.

"Where now?" Martin asked.

"I have a craft." Ty led the way to the craft he'd parked in the public parking space.

He let Martin take Maya and went to the cockpit. He kicked in the panel beneath the controls and ripped out a small black box that could feed all information about the craft to the SF command room and tossed it out.

The parking area was still deserted. Likely all the guards were handling the crisis upstairs. Maya's tree had broken right through the floor where the other subjects were locked in their cells.

Ty ran back to the cockpit and entered the coordinates to Rober's secret doorway.

His mother's bruised and bloody face appeared on the screen moments after takeoff.

"Where are you going, Ty? There is no way out. Not a single gate will let you through. They are sealing the shield as I speak. Come back now and I'll forgive you."

"You're not capable of forgiveness!" Ty yelled and turned off the screen.

He hoped Rober's exit really was as good as he had claimed, that it wouldn't be affected by the sealing.

He flew the craft as fast as he dared, staying low near the ground where there was less traffic and fewer control points.

The pure white skyscrapers of the warehouse district rose before them. They were almost at the shield. The screen flickered back to life. His father's scarlet face filled it, the thick vein in his forehead pulsing. "Turn around and come back right now!"

The shield glimmered in the soft morning light.

"Never. You better make sure Eve survives!" Ty yelled back. He was through taking orders from either of his parents.

"You leave me no choice then. I will never trust you after this!" his father said and turned to someone standing on his left. "Do it."

A row of red lights flashed across the control panel, wiping away all the buttons used to steer the craft. Ty felt the craft pass from his control.

How was he doing this? It shouldn't be possible, not after he removed the black control box.

~

Ronia pointed for Maya to sit down in one of the seats in the command room. The craft was identical to the one in which she was brought to the city.

Maya clutched her injured left arm to her chest and sat down.

Ronia returned with a small red box.

"That was an amazing tree." The woman's words appeared in the air.

She opened the box and took out a piece of gauze which she used to clean the wound on Maya's scalp. The stinging brought the room into clearer focus.

"Where are we going?" Maya asked while Ronia applied a cool cream to her wound. The pain disappeared.

"A safe place. The Sanctuary." She pried away Maya's arm. A few moments later, Maya watched the gash on her shoulder seal itself shut when Ronia applied the cool cream to it as well.

Ty had helped her after all. She never thought he would. That panic of his, which filled the room each time he visited her at the hospital, was sickening and had a definite source. His mother. How long could he remain sane while in the presence of it? She had to try and make him see, had to try and get him to face it.

Then a cold fear gripped her. "Are we leaving the city?"

Ronia typed, "Yes."

"What about my friend Giles? Is he here?" Maya asked.

Ronia blinked up at her in confusion. "It's only me, Martin, Ty and you here."

Maya leapt to her feet. "No. We have to go get him as well. I can't leave him behind."

The hovercraft lurched to a sudden stop, making her stumble.

Ronia looked at her, fear widening her eyes.

"What is it? What's happening?" Maya asked.

~

They'd reached the shield, but the craft stopped dead.

Ty adjusted the settings frantically, even rebooted the whole panel; he had no control of the craft anymore.

"Come back home, Tyberious," his father said calmly.

"Let me leave," Ty said. "I don't want anything from you anymore."

His father laughed. "You are such a child still. I don't know what possessed me to confirm you as my heir."

Ty was well past caring whether his father considered him childish. "Let me go and you'll be free to choose a new heir."

"Fine," his father said. The control panel flickered back to life. "I'm going to leave the decision to return up to you. If you ever want to enjoy the privileges of our house again, you will not leave the city today. I will also let you earn my forgiveness if you return now. I fear your mother never will."

There he went again, using Ty as a weapon against Violetta. Ty was well past caring about that too.

He broke the communication line and seized control of the craft, angled it vertically. It shot up and stopped at the coordinates for Rober's gate, right at the point where the domed ceiling of the shield started.

The red lights disappeared from the control screen. Only the word PASSCODE blinked across the otherwise black screen. Ty pressed his tattoo against the screen and held his breath. Heat erupted in a single line on his tattoo as the machine read the code.

The word ACCEPTED flickered across the screen. The buttons reappeared on the control screen and Ty let the craft squeeze through the shield and into the Badlands.

No one called after that.

The screen told him there was no pursuit either. With any luck, the SFs didn't even notice them leaving the city. Rober hadn't exaggerated. His exit was perfect.

Ty flew the craft himself for the fifty miles through the no man's land between Neo York and Dakota. He loaded the maps into the control panel and chose one that showed the land areas in detail all the way to the Pacific Ocean.

Then he called Ronia and Martin.

"Can you show me where the sanctuary for the gifted you spoke of is on this map?" Ty asked Ronia.

Martin looked at her sharply, but she nodded and pointed to a location almost in the ocean.

Ty read off the coordinates and punched them into the autopilot, making sure they would fly nowhere near any of the other cities and their shields. Martin volunteered to mind the controls.

"Thank you for saving me from that place," Maya said when he and Ronia entered the command room.

"It was my fault you were there in the first place. It was the least I could do," Ty replied and moved to walk past her.

She took his hand and held him back. "Please tell me, will Giles be safe in the city?"

Ty ignored the pang of jealousy. "I told him never to look for me. If he does that, he should be fine."

"Can we contact him?" Maya pleaded.

Ty looked to Ronia, who was eyeing them both with a thoughtful expression on her face. He pointed at her. "I don't even know where we're going. Ask her if you can contact anyone once we get there."

"We can." Ronia's words appeared in the air.

Ty tried again to pull his hand free, but Maya wouldn't let go. "I know how much you risked getting me out. You have given me my life back and I will always be grateful for that."

Ty clasped his free hand over hers. "That tree you made had more to do with saving you than me. Besides it was time for me to leave too. Past time, really."

Her deep brown eyes lit up in happiness, her lips slightly parted.

Ty placed his hand on her cheek, enjoying the warmth of her skin passing into his. Then he leaned over and kissed her.

She might have pulled away, or wanted nothing of the sort. But she leaned in and returned the kiss.

Ty let it all go. Lost himself in the warmth of her life, her sun, her soft lips pressed against his.

A few moments later, he reluctantly pulled away. "Now I have one last thing to do."

She let him go, looking startled and pleased at the same time.

Ty walked over to the weapons locker by the wall screen.

He pulled out a hunting knife and sat down on the floor. He rolled up his left sleeve and stared down at his shiny tiger tattoo. The mark of his family, House Remarque, the most powerful family in the city of Neo York.

He winced as his first cut went too deep.

"What are you doing? Stop it!" Maya shouted. Ronia held her back when she tried to rush to him.

Ty looked up and smiled at her. "Don't worry. I've seen my mother do this a few times to family members who displeased her. I have to get the cuts just right."

He bit hard into his lower lip as he made shallow, half-inch incisions along the

perimeter of his tattoo.

"Please stop," Maya whispered, but Ronia still held her back.

"Almost got it now," Ty muttered. He made one last incision, longer than the rest, along the top of the tattoo. He gripped the skin between his thumb and the blade of the knife. "Done."

He gasped in pain as he yanked the skin back, evenly and firmly ripping the tattoo, along with the layers of skin that contained it.

He nearly passed out, willing himself to surrender to the sharp, burning pain.

Finally the piece of skin with the hard lines that made up the tiger hung from his trembling fingers. He tossed the vile thing on the floor, and broke the hard lines with the handle of the knife then leaned back against the wall, panting.

"There. Now I'm no longer a member of House Remarque. Long have I waited for this day," Ty said, affecting the best Castle Life accent he could muster.

Ronia finally let Maya go. She rushed towards, him, examining his arm. "We must wrap this up."

Ty pulled his arm back and cradled it. Thick drops of blood were appearing through the thin layer of bright red skin on his arm. "No, not yet. I think I'll let it bleed for a while first."

Maya went to get the medicine box.

"Nonsense," she said as she knelt beside him. "This can get infected."

She took his arm and gently placed it against her thighs. In a few moments she had it neatly wrapped up in white gauze.

Drops of blood seeped through the bandage.

She sat beside him and cradled his head against her chest. The rise and fall as she breathed was the sweetest lullaby he'd ever heard.

"You know, if you'd applied the healing cream first, it'd be mended by now," Ty muttered.

Her sharp gasp jolted his head. "I'm sorry. Here I'll do it."

He laughed and placed his uninjured arm around her shoulders. "No leave it for now. I don't feel any pain at all."

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed my book as much as I enjoyed writing it. I am already working on the next instalment of the Progeny of Time series and am aiming to release it this fall.

In the meantime...

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### About the Author:



Vanna Smythe is the author of Protector, the first book in the Anniversary of the Veil fantasy series. She has been writing creatively since her early teens, though one could say her creative writing efforts started long before than. While still in kindergarten, she once tore up a library book to make alphabet soup, and has been fascinated with what words can do, the pictures and worlds they can create, ever since. Book two of the Anniversary of the Veil series, Decision Maker, is already available.

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