



I WILL NOT LOSE HER.

FRACTURE ME

A SHATTER ME
NOVELLA

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FRACTURE ME

T A H E R E H M A F I

HARPER

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ONE

“Addie? Addie, wake up. *Addie*—”

I roll over with a groan and stretch, rubbing both eyes with the heel of my hand. It’s too early for this shit.

“Addie—”

Still half asleep, I grab James by the collar and yank him down, shoving his head under the blanket. He shouts and I laugh, wrapping him up in the sheets until he can’t get out.

“Stooooop iiiiiiit,” he whines, little fists pounding against the sheets. “Addie, let me out—”

“Hey—how many times have I told you to stop calling me that?”

James tries to punch me through the blanket. I pick him up and flip him over in my arms and he screams, his legs kicking wildly.

“You’re so mean,” he cries, wriggling around in my grip. “If Kenji were here, he would never let y—”

At that, I freeze, and James can feel it. He goes quiet in my arms, and I let him go. He untangles himself from my sheets, and we stare at each other.

James blinks. His bottom lip trembles and he bites down on it. “Do you know if he’s okay?”

I shake my head.

Kenji is still in the medical wing. No one knows for sure what happened yet, but people have been talking. Whispering.

I look toward the wall. James is still speaking, but I’m too distracted to pay attention.

It’s hard for me to believe Juliette could hurt anyone like that.

“Everyone says he’s gone,” James is saying now.

This, I catch.

“What?” I turn back, alarmed. “How?”

James shrugs. “I don’t know. They said he broke out of his room.”

“What are you talking about? How could he break out of his room—?”

James shrugs again. “I don’t think he wanted to be here anymore.”

“But—what?” I screw up my face, confused. “Does that mean he’s feeling better? Did someone tell you he was feeling better?”

James frowns. “Did you want him to feel better? I thought you didn’t like him.”

I sigh. Run a hand through the back of my hair. “Of course I like him. I know we don’t always get along, but it’s really close quarters in here, and he’s always got so many damn opinions—”

James shoots me a strange look. “So . . . you don’t want to kill him? You’re always saying you want to kill him.”

“I’m not serious when I say stuff like that.” I try not to roll my eyes. “He and I have been friends for a long time. I’m actually worried about him.”

“Okay,” James says carefully. “You’re weird, Addie.”

I can’t help but laugh a little. “Why am I weird? And hey, stop calling me Addie—you know how much I hate that—”

“Yeah, and I still don’t know why.” He cuts me off. “Mom always used to call you Addie—”

“Well Mom’s dead, isn’t she?” My voice has gone hard. My hands are clenched. And when I see the look on James’s face, I’m instantly sorry for being so harsh. I release my fists. Take a deep breath.

James swallows hard. “Sorry,” he says quietly.

I nod, look away. “Yeah. Me too.” I pull a shirt on over my head. “So Kenji’s gone then, huh? I can’t believe he’d just leave like that.”

“Why would Kenji be gone?” James asks. “I thought you said you didn’t even know if he w—”

"But I thought *you* said—"

We stop. Stare at each other.

James is the first to speak. "I said *Warner* is gone. Everyone is saying he escaped last night."

Just the sound of his name and I'm already pissed off. "Stay here," I say, pointing at James and grabbing my boots.

"But—"

"Don't move until I get back!" I shout before bolting out the door.

That bastard. I can't believe this.

I'm pounding on Castle's door when Ian spots me on his way down the hall.

"He's not in there," Ian says, still walking.

I catch his arm. "Is it true? Did Warner really get out?"

Ian sighs. Shoves his hands into his pockets. Finally, he nods.

I want to put my fist through the wall.

"I gotta go suit up," Ian says, breaking away. "And you should, too. We're heading out after breakfast."

"Are you serious?" I say. "We're still heading out to fight—even with all this shit going on?"

"Of course we are," Ian snaps at me. "You know we can't wait any longer. The supreme isn't going to reschedule his plans to launch an attack on the civilians. It's too late to back out now."

"But what about Warner?" I demand. "We're not going to try and find him?"

"Maybe." Ian shrugs. "See if you can find him on the battlefield."

"Jesus." I'm so filled with rage I can hardly see straight. "I could kill Castle for letting this happen—for being so goddamn soft with him—"

"Rein it in, man." Ian cuts me off. "We've got other problems. And hey"—he grabs my shoulder, looks me in the

eye—"you're not the only one who's pissed at Castle. But now's not the time."

I shake him off, shoot him a dark look, and charge back down the hall.

James has all sorts of questions when I get back, but I'm still so angry I'm not ready to deal with him. It doesn't seem to matter; James is stubborn as hell. I'm strapping on holsters and locking my weapons into place and he won't back down.

"But then what did he say?" James is asking. "After you said we should find Warner?"

I adjust my pants, tighten the laces on my boots.

James taps my arm. "Adam." He taps my arm again. "Did he know where Castle was?" Another tap. "Did he say what time you guys had to leave today?" More tapping. "Adam when are y—"

I pick him up and he squeaks; I place him in a far corner of the room.

"Addie—"

I throw a blanket over his head.

James shouts and struggles with the blanket until he manages to pull it off and throw it down. He's red in the face and his fists are clenched and he's finally mad.

I start laughing. I can't help it.

James is so frustrated he has to spit the words out when he speaks. "Kenji said that I have as much right to know what's happening down here as everyone else. Kenji never gets mad when I ask questions. He never ignores me. He's never mean to me, and you're being m-mean to me, and I don't like it when you l-laugh at me—"

James's voice breaks, and it's only then that I look up. I notice the tears streaked across his cheeks.

"Hey," I say, meeting him across the room. "Hey, hey." I grip his shoulders, drop to one knee. "What's going on? Why the tears? What happened?"

"You're leaving." James hiccups.

"Aw, c'mon," I sigh. "You knew I was leaving, remember? Remember when we talked about this?"

"You're going to die." Another hiccup.

I raise an eyebrow at him. "I didn't know you could tell the future."

"Addie—"

"Hey—"

"I don't call you Addie in front of anyone else!" James says, protesting before I have a chance to. "I don't know why it makes you so mad. You said you loved it when Mom called you Addie. Why can't I?"

I sigh again as I get to my feet, mussing his hair on my way up. James makes a strangled sound and jerks away. "What's the problem?" I ask. I pull up my pants leg to attach a semiautomatic to the holster underneath. "I've been a soldier for a long time now. You've always known the risks. What's different all of a sudden?"

James is quiet long enough for me to notice. I look up.

"I want to come with you," he says, wiping his nose with a shaky hand. "I want to fight, too."

My body goes rigid. "We're not having that conversation again."

"But Kenji said—"

"I don't give a rat's ass what Kenji said! You are a ten-year-old *child*," I say. "You are not fighting in any war. Not walking onto any battlefield. Do you understand me?"

James stares at me.

"I said, *Do you understand me?*" I walk right up to him, grab his arms.

James flinches a little. "Yes," he whispers.

"Yes, *what?*"

"Yes, sir," he says, staring at the ground now.

I'm breathing so hard my chest is heaving. "Never again," I say quietly now. "We are never having this conversation. Not ever again."

“Okay, Addie.”

I swallow hard.

“I’m sorry, Addie.”

“Get your shoes on.” I stare at the wall. “It’s time for breakfast.”

TWO

“Hi.”

Juliette is standing next to my table, staring at me like she might be nervous. Like we’ve never done this before.

“Hey,” I say.

Just seeing her face still makes my chest ache, but the truth is, I have no idea what’s going on between us anymore. I promised her I would find a way through this—and I’ve been training like hell, I really have—but after last night, I’m not gonna lie: I’m a little freaked out. Touching her is more serious than I ever thought it was.

She could’ve killed Kenji. I’m still not sure she hasn’t.

But even after all this, I still want a future with her. I want to know that one day we’ll be able to settle somewhere safe and be together in peace. I’m not ready to give up on that dream yet. I’m not ready to give up on us.

I nod at an empty seat. “You want to sit down?”

She does.

We sit in silence a little while, her poking at her food, me at mine. We usually eat the same thing every morning: a spoonful of rice, a bowl of vegetable broth, a chunk of rock-hard bread, and, on good days, a little cup of pudding. It’s not amazing, but it gets the job done, and we’re usually grateful for it. But today neither one of us seems to have an appetite.

Or a voice.

I sigh and look away. I don’t know why it’s so hard to talk to her this morning—maybe it’s the lack of Kenji—but things feel different between us lately. I want to be with her so badly, but being with her has never felt more dangerous than it does now. Every day we feel further apart. And

sometimes I think the harder I try to hold on, the more she tries to break away.

I wish James would hurry up and grab his breakfast. Having him here might make this easier. I sit up and look around the room, only to spot him talking with a group of his friends. I try to wave him over, but he's laughing at something and doesn't even notice me. The kid is kind of amazing. He's such a social guy—and so popular around here—that sometimes I wonder where he got it from. In many ways he's the exact opposite of me. He likes to let a lot of people in; I like to keep most people out.

Juliette's the only real exception to that rule.

I look back at her and notice the red rims around her eyes as they dart across the dining hall. She looks both wide awake and crazy tired and she can't seem to sit still; her foot is tapping fast under the table and her hands are trembling a little.

"Hey are you okay?" I ask.

"Yes, absolutely," she says too quickly. But she's shaking her head.

"Did you, um, get enough sleep last night?"

"Yes," she says, repeating the word a few times. She does that occasionally—repeats the same word over and over again. I'm not sure she's even aware of it.

"Did you sleep well?" she asks. Her fingers drum against the table, then against her arms. She keeps glancing around the room. She doesn't even wait for me to respond before she says, "Have you heard anything about Kenji yet?"

That's when I understand.

Of course she's not okay. Of course she didn't get any sleep last night. Last night she almost killed one of her closest friends. She'd just started trusting herself and not being afraid of herself; now she's back to where she started. Shit. I'm already sorry I even brought it up.

"No, not yet." I cringe. "But," I say, hoping to change the subject, "I have heard that people are pretty pissed at

Castle about what happened with Warner.” I clear my throat. “Did you hear about him breaking out of here?”

Juliette drops her spoon.

It clatters to the floor and she doesn’t seem to notice. “Yes,” she says quietly. She’s blinking at her water cup, holding her napkin in her hands, folding and refolding it. “People were talking about it in the halls. Do they know how he escaped?”

“I don’t think so.” I frown at her.

“Oh.” She says that a few times, too.

She sounds strange. Scared, even. Juliette has always been a little different from everyone else—she was like a crazed, skittish kitten when I first saw her in that cell—but she’d been getting a lot better over the last few months. Once she finally started trusting me, things changed. She evolved. She started talking (and eating) more and even got a little cocky. I loved seeing her come back to life. I loved being with her, watching her find herself.

I think this experience with Kenji really set her back.

I can tell she’s only halfway here, because her eyes are unfocused and her hands are moving mechanically. She does this a lot. It’s like sometimes she just disappears, retreats into a corner of her brain and stays there awhile, thinking about something she’ll never talk about. She’s acting a lot like her old self right now, and right now she’s eating the cold rice on her plate one grain at a time, counting each bite under her breath.

I’m about to try speaking to her again when James finally comes back to the table. I stand up immediately, grateful for the opportunity to shake off the awkward. “Hey buddy—why don’t we go have a proper good-bye?”

“Oh,” James says, sliding his tray onto the table. “Okay, sure.” He glances at me before glancing at Juliette, who’s now chewing a grain of rice very carefully.

“Hi,” he says to her.

Juliette blinks a few times, her face breaking into a wide smile the moment she notices him. It changes her, those smiles. And those are the moments that kill me a little.

“Hi,” she says, so happy so suddenly you’d think James had hung the moon for her. “How are you? Did you sleep well? Would you like to sit down? I was just having some rice; would you like some rice?”

James is already blushing. He’d probably eat his own hair if she asked him to. I roll my eyes and drag him away, telling Juliette we’ll be right back.

She nods. I look over my shoulder as we walk away and notice that she doesn’t seem to mind sitting alone for a little while. She stabs at something on her plate and misses, and that’s the last I see of her before we turn the corner.

THREE

“What’s going on? Why do we need to talk?” More questions from James. He’s a freaking question machine. “Is everything okay? Can you tell Juliette not to eat my breakfast?” He cranes his neck to catch a glimpse of her, still sitting at the table. “Sometimes she eats my pudding.”

“Hey,” I say, grabbing hold of his shoulders. “Look at me.”

James turns to face me. “What’s wrong, Addie?” He searches my eyes. “You’re not really going to die, are you?”

“I don’t know,” I tell him. “Maybe, maybe not.”

“Don’t say that,” he says quietly, dropping his gaze. “Don’t say that. It’s not nice to talk like that.”

“James.”

He looks up again, slowly this time.

I drop to my knees and pull him close, resting my forehead against his. I’m staring at the floor, and I know he is, too. I can hear our hearts racing in the silence.

“I love you,” I finally say to him. “You know that, right? You always come first. Everything I do is to take care of you. To protect you. To provide for you.”

James nods.

“It’s you first,” I say to him. “It’s always you first and everyone else second. And that’s never going to change. Okay?”

James nods again. A tear falls on the floor between us. “Okay, Addie.”

“Come here,” I whisper, tugging him into my arms. “We’re going to be okay.”

James clings to me, acting more like a child than he has in a long time, and I’m happy to see it. Sometimes I worry he’s growing up way too fast in this shitty world, and though I know I can’t protect him from everything, I still try. He’s

been the only constant in my life for as long as I can remember; I think it'd rip me apart if anything happened to him.

I'll never love anyone the way I love this kid.

FOUR

After breakfast, the dining hall is practically empty. James had to report to the Safe Room with the other kids—and the elderly—staying behind, and everyone else is getting ready to head out. Some families are still saying final good-byes. Juliette and I have been avoiding eye contact for a few minutes now. She's staring at her hands, studying her fingers like she's checking to make sure they're still there.

"Well damn. Who died?"

Holy hell. That voice. That face.

Impossible.

"Holy crap. Holy *shit*." I'm on my feet.

"Good to see you too, Kent." Kenji smiles wide and nods at me. He looks like hell. Tired eyes, pale face, hands shaking just a little as he holds on to the table. And what's worse is that he's already suited up—like he actually thinks he's heading out onto the battlefield. "You ready to kick some ass today?"

I'm still staring at him in amazement, trying to find a way to respond, when Juliette jumps up and practically tackles him. Just a hug, really, but yikes.

A little too soon for that, I think.

"*Whoa*—hey—thank you, yeah—that's—uh—" Kenji clears his throat. He tries to be nice about it, but it's clear he's trying to back away from Juliette, and yeah, she notices. Her face falls and she goes pale, her eyes wide. She hides her hands behind her back, even though she's wearing her gloves. There's really no obvious threat to Kenji right now, but I understand his hesitation.

The dude almost died. He tried to break up a fight at the same time Juliette did, and *bam*, he went down in an instant. It was scary as hell—and even though I know

Juliette didn't *mean* to do it, there's really no other explanation. It had to have been her.

"Yeah, um, maybe you should hold off on touching me for a little while, yeah?" Kenji is smiling—again, nice guy—but no one's buying it. "I'm not too steady on my feet just yet."

Juliette looks so mortified it breaks my heart. She's trying so hard to be okay—to make all this shit be okay—but sometimes it's like the world just won't let her. The hits keep coming, and she keeps hurting. I hate it.

I have to say something.

"It wasn't her," I say to Kenji. I shoot him a sharp look. *Leave her alone*, I mouth. "You know she didn't even touch you."

"I *don't* know that, actually," Kenji says, ignoring my more subtle hints to change the subject. "And it's not like I'm blaming her—I'm just saying maybe she's projecting and doesn't know it, okay? Because last I checked, I don't think we have any other explanations for what happened last night. It sure as hell wasn't you," he says to me, "and shit, for all we know, Warner being able to touch Juliette could just be a fluke. We don't know anything about him yet." A pause. "Right? Unless Warner pulled some kind of magical rabbit out of his ass while I was busy being dead last night?"

I frown. Look away.

"Right," Kenji says. "That's what I thought. So. I think it's best if, unless absolutely necessary, I stay away." He turns to Juliette. "Right? No offense, right? I mean I did nearly just die. I think you could cut me some slack."

"Yeah, of course," Juliette says quietly. She tries to laugh but it comes out all wrong. I wish I could reach for her; I wish I could wrap her up in my arms. I want to protect her—I want to be able to take care of her, but that seems impossible now.

"So *anyway*," Kenji says. "When are we leaving?"

That gets my attention.

"You're insane," I say to him. "You're not going anywhere."

"Bullshit I'm not."

"You can barely stand up on your own!"

"I'd rather die out there than sit in here like some kind of idiot."

"Kenji—," Juliette tries to say.

"Heeeeeeey, so I heard through the very loud grapevine that Warner got his ass the hell out of here last night." Kenji looks at us. "What's that about?"

"Yeah," I say, my mood darkening. "Who even knows. I never thought it was a good idea to keep him hostage here. It was an even stupider idea to trust him."

Kenji raises an eyebrow. "So first you insult my idea, and then you insult Castle's, huh?"

"They were bad calls," I say to him, refusing to back down. "Bad ideas. Now we have to pay for it." It was Kenji's idea to take Warner hostage, and Castle's idea to let him out of his room. And now we're all suffering. Sometimes I think this whole movement is led by a bunch of idiots.

"Well how was I supposed to know Anderson would be so willing to let his own son rot in hell?"

I wince involuntarily.

The reminder of my father and what he'd be willing to do to his own son is too much for me this morning. I swallow back the bile inching up my throat.

Kenji notices. "Oh, hey—I'm sorry man—I didn't mean to say it like that—"

"Forget it," I say to him. I'm glad Kenji's not dead, but sometimes all I really want to do is kick his ass. "Maybe you should get back to the medical wing. We're leaving soon."

"I'm not going anywhere but *out of here*."

"Kenji please—" Juliette again.

"Nope."

"You're being unreasonable. This isn't a joke," she says to him. "People are going to die today."

Kenji laughs at her. "I'm sorry, are you trying to teach *me* about the realities of war?" He shakes his head. "Are you forgetting that I was a soldier in Warner's army? Do you have any idea how much crazy shit we've seen?" He gestures to me. "I know exactly what to expect today. Warner was *insane*. If Anderson is even twice as bad as his son, then we are diving right into a bloodbath. I can't leave you guys hanging like that."

Juliette is frozen, her lips just parted, her eyes wide and horrified. Her reaction feels a little exaggerated.

There's definitely something wrong with her today.

I know part of what she's feeling has to do with Kenji, but suddenly I'm not sure if there isn't something else. Something she's not telling me.

I can't read her clearly.

Then again, I feel like I haven't been able to read her clearly for a while now.

"Was he really that bad . . . ?" Juliette asks.

"Who?" Kenji and I ask at the same time.

"Warner," she says. "Was he really that ruthless?"

God, she's so obsessed with him. She has some weird fascination with his twisted life that I don't understand, and it makes me crazy. I can already feel myself getting angry, annoyed—*jealous*, even—which is ridiculous. Warner isn't even human; I shouldn't be comparing myself to him. Besides, she's not his type at all. He'd probably eat her alive.

Kenji, however, doesn't seem to have my problem. He's laughing so hard he's practically wheezing. "Ruthless? Juliette, the guy is sick. He's an animal. I don't think he even knows what it means to be human. If there's a hell out there, I'm guessing it was designed especially for him."

I catch a glimpse of Juliette's face just before I hear a rush of footsteps charging down the hall. We all glance at one another, but I look at Juliette for a second longer, wishing I could read her mind. I have no idea what she's thinking or

why she still looks so horrified. I want to talk to her in private—find out what’s going on—but then Kenji nods at me, and I know I have to clear my head.

It’s time to go.

We all get to our feet.

“Hey—so, does Castle know what you’re doing?” I ask Kenji. “I don’t think he’d be okay with you going out there today.”

“Castle wants me to be happy,” Kenji says. “And I won’t be happy if I stay here. I’ve got work to do. People to save. Ladies to impress. He’d respect that.”

“What about everyone else?” Juliette asks him. “Everyone was so worried about you—have you even seen them yet? To at least tell them you’re okay?”

“Nah,” Kenji says. “They’d probably shit a brick if they knew I was going up. I thought it’d be safer to keep it quiet. I don’t want to freak anyone out. And Sonya and Sara—poor kids—they’re passed the hell out. It’s my fault they’re so exhausted, and they’re still talking about heading out today. They want to fight even though they’re going to have a lot of work to do once we’re done with Anderson’s army. I’ve been trying to convince them to stay here, but they can be so damn stubborn. They need to save their strength,” he says, “and they’ve already wasted too much of it on me.”

“It’s not a *waste*—,” she says.

“Anywaaay,” Kenji says. “Can we please get going? I know you’re all about hunting down Anderson,” he says to me, “but personally? I would love to catch Warner. Put a bullet through that worthless piece of crap and be done with it.”

I’m about to laugh—finally, someone who agrees with me—when I see Juliette double over. She steadies herself quickly enough, but she’s blinking fast and breathing hard, eyes up at the ceiling.

“Hey—you okay?” I pull her to the side and study her face. She scares the shit out of me sometimes. I worry about her almost as much as I do about James.

“I’m okay,” she says too many times. Nodding and shaking her head over and over again. “I just didn’t get enough sleep last night, but I’ll be fine.”

I hesitate. “Are you sure?”

“I’m positive,” she says. And then she grabs my shirt, eyes wild. “Hey—just be careful out there, okay?”

I nod, more confused by the second. “Yeah. You too.”

“Let’s go let’s go let’s go!” Kenji interrupts us. “Today is our day to die, ladies.”

I relax and shove him a little. It’s nice to have him around to break up the monotony in this place.

Kenji punches me in the arm. “So now you’re abusing the crippled kid, huh?”

I laugh, flip him off.

“Save your angst for the battlefield, bro.” He grins. “You’re going to need it.”

FIVE

It's raining like hell.

It's cold and wet and muddy and shitty and I hate this. I scowl at Kenji and Juliette, jealous of their fancy suits. Those things are built to give them protection from this crazy winter weather. I should've asked for one.

I'm already freezing my ass off.

We're at the clearing, the barren stretch at the entrance of Omega Point, and most everyone else has scattered. Our only defense is guerrilla warfare, so we've been divided into groups. Me; an ill, barely-able-to-walk-straight Kenji; and Juliette (who's officially locked herself in her own head today)—*this* is our team.

Yeah, I'm definitely worried.

Anyway, at least Kenji is doing his thing: we're already invisible. But now it's time to find the action and join in. The sound of gunshots rings out loud and clear, so we've already got a direction to move in. No one speaks, but we already know the rules: we fight to protect the innocent, and we fight to survive. That's it.

The rain is really messing things up, though. It's falling harder and faster now, pelting me in the face and blurring my vision. I can hardly see straight. I try to wipe the water from my eyes but it's no use. There's too much.

I do know we're getting closer to the compounds, so at least there's that. The outline of the buildings comes into focus and I feel myself getting excited. I'm armed to the teeth and ready to fight—ready to do whatever is necessary to take down The Reestablishment—but I'm not gonna lie: I'm still a little worried we've got a handicap.

Juliette has never done this before.

If it were up to me, she'd be back on base with James where I know she'd be safe, but she wouldn't listen to me even if I asked her to. Kenji and Castle are always blowing smoke up her ass when they shouldn't, and honestly? It's dangerous. It's not good to make her think she can do this kind of thing when really, it'll probably get her killed. She's not a soldier; she doesn't know how to fight; and she has no idea how to use her powers, not really, which makes things even worse. It's basically like giving a toddler a stick of dynamite and telling him to walk into a fire.

So yeah, I'm worried. I'm really worried something is going to happen to her. And maybe to us, by extension.

But no one ever listens to me, so here we are.

I sigh and forge ahead, irritated, until I hear a piercing scream in the distance. High alert. Kenji squeezes my hand and I squeeze back to let him know I understand.

The compounds are straight ahead, and Kenji pulls us forward until we're standing flush against the back wall of a unit. There's just enough overhang from the roof to keep the rain off. It's just my shitty luck that we're doing this on a rainy day. My clothes are so wet I feel like I've pissed my pants.

Kenji elbows me, just a little, and I'm paying attention again. I hear the sound of a door slam open and I go rigid; I reach for my gun automatically. It feels like I've been through this a million times before, but it's never something I get used to.

"This is the last of them," a voice shouts. "She was hiding out over here."

A soldier is dragging a woman out of her home and she won't stop screaming. My heart speeds up, and I grip my gun more tightly. It's sick, the way some of the soldiers treat the civilians. I get that he's under orders—I really do—but the poor woman is begging for mercy and he's dragging her by the hair and shouting at her to shut up.

Kenji is barely breathing next to me. I glance Juliette's way before I realize we're still invisible, and as I turn my head, I catch a glimpse of another soldier. He jogs over from across the field and shoots the first guy a signal. Not the kind of signal I was hoping for.

Shit.

"Toss her in with everyone else," the other soldier is saying now. "And then we'll call this area clear." Suddenly he's gone, around the corner, and no one's left but us, one soldier, and the lady he's holding hostage. Other soldiers must've rounded up the remaining civilians before we got here.

Then the woman loses it. She's completely hysterical and doesn't seem to be in control of her body anymore. She's gone totally animal, screeching and clawing and flailing, tripping over her own feet. She's asking after her husband and her daughter and I almost have to close my eyes. It's hard to watch this stuff when I already know what's going to happen. War never gets easier when you don't agree with what's going on. Sometimes I let myself get excited about going to battle—I have to convince myself I'm doing something worthwhile—but fighting another soldier is way easier than dealing with some lady who's about to watch her daughter get shot in the head.

Juliette will probably puke.

The action is so close to us now that I instinctively press my back into the wall, forgetting again that we're invisible. The soldier grabs the lady and slams her body against the outside of the unit, and I feel the three of us collectively freak out for a second, calming down just in time to watch the soldier press the barrel of his gun to the lady's neck and say, "If you don't shut up I'll shoot you right now." What an asshole.

The lady faints.

The soldier doesn't seem to care. He pulls her out of sight—in the same direction his comrade went—and that's our

cue to follow. I can hear Kenji cursing under his breath. He's got a soft stomach, that guy. He was always soft when it came to this stuff. I met him for the first time on one of our rounds; when we came back, Kenji lost his shit. Just completely lost it. They put him in solitary confinement for a little while, and after that he kept his emotional breakdowns to a minimum. Most soldiers know better than to complain out loud. I should've known then that Kenji wasn't really one of us.

I shudder against the cold.

We're still following the soldier, but it's hard to stay too close to him in this weather. Visibility is shot, and the wind is blowing the rain around so hard it's almost like we're trapped in a hurricane. This is going to get ugly really quickly.

Then, a small voice: "What do you think is going on?"

Juliette.

Of course she has no idea what's happening—why would she?

The smart thing to do would be to hide her somewhere. Keep her safe. Out of danger. A weak link can bring everything down with it, and I don't think this is the time to be taking chances. But Kenji, as usual, doesn't seem to agree. Apparently he doesn't mind making time to give Juliette a tutorial on being at war in Sector 45.

"They're herding them up," Kenji explains. "They're creating groups of people to kill all at once."

"The woman—," Juliette says.

"Yeah." Kenji cuts her off. "Yeah," Kenji says again. "She and whoever else they think might be connected to the protests," he says. "They don't just kill the inciters. They kill the friends and the family members, too. It's the best way to keep people in line. It never fails to scare the shit out of the few left alive."

I have to jump in before Juliette asks any more questions. Those soldiers aren't going to wait patiently for us to get

there—we have to make a move now, and we need a plan. “There has to be a way to get them out of there,” I say. “Maybe we can take out the soldiers in charge—”

“Yeah but listen, you guys know I’m going to have to let go of you, right?” Kenji asks. “I’m already kind of losing strength; my energy is fading faster than normal. So you’ll be visible. You’ll be a clearer target.”

“But what other choice do we have?” Juliette asks.

She’s like the second coming of James. I feel for my gun, flexing and unflexing my fingers around it. We need to get going.

We need to move *now*.

“We could try to take them out sniper-style,” Kenji says. “We don’t have to engage in direct combat. We have that option.” He pauses. “Juliette, you’ve never been in this kind of situation before. I want you to know I’d respect your decision to stay out of the direct line of fire. Not everyone can stomach what we might see if we follow those soldiers. There’s no shame or blame in that.”

Yes. Good. Let her stay behind where she won’t get hurt.

“I’ll be okay,” she says.

I swear under my breath.

“Just—all right—but don’t be afraid to use your abilities to defend yourself,” Kenji says. He seems a little nervous about her, too. “I know you’re all weird about not wanting to hurt people or whatever, but these guys aren’t messing around. They *will* try to kill you.”

“Right,” Juliette says. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

SIX

Juliette shouldn't have to see this.

Six soldiers have rounded up almost thirty civilians—a mix of men, women, and children—and they're going to kill them. It's basically a firing squad. They'll just go down the row, *pop pop pop*, and then drag the dead bodies away. Put them into an incinerator. Clean it up, nice and simple.

It's disgusting.

I'm not sure what the soldiers are waiting for, though. Maybe they need final approval from somewhere, but there's a slight delay as they talk amongst themselves. It's raining really freaking hard, so that might have something to do with it. Honestly, they might not even be able to see where they're shooting. We should be taking advantage of this opportunity. This weather might end up helping us out in the end.

I squint against the rain and take a closer look at the people, trying hard not to lose my head. They're not doing too well, and I'm not either, to be honest. Some are pretty hysterical, and it makes me wonder how I would do in a situation like that. Maybe I'd be like that guy in the middle, standing there with absolutely no expression on his face. He looks almost like he's accepted what's going to happen, and somehow, his certainty hits me even harder than the tears.

A shot rings out.

Dammit.

A guy on the far left falls to the ground and I'm shaking with anger. These people need our help. We can't just hang back and watch thirty unarmed, innocent people get killed when we could find a way to save them. We're supposed to be *doing something*, but we're standing here for some bullshit reason I can't understand because Juliette is scared

or Kenji is sick and I guess the truth is we're just a bunch of crappy teenagers, two of whom can barely stand up straight or fire a weapon, and it's unacceptable. I'm just about to say something—I'm about to yell something, actually—when Kenji lets go of my hand.

About goddamn time.

We charge straight ahead and my gun is already up and aimed. I spot the soldier who fired the first shot and I know I need to fire; there's no room for hesitation. I get lucky: he goes down instantly. Five more soldiers to take out—soldiers I'm hoping I won't recognize—and I'm doing my best, but it's not easy. It was pure luck that got me that first target; it's almost impossible to shoot well in this weather. I can barely see where I'm going, much less where I'm shooting, but I drop to the ground just in time to avoid a stray bullet. At least the rain is making it hard for them to take us out, too.

Kenji is making miracles happen today.

He's invisible now, and working fast. He's staying sharp despite being injured, and he's just a part of the wind, taking out three soldiers in one go. Two soldiers are left and they're distracted by Kenji's dance just long enough for me to take one down. One more left and I'm about to take him out, too, when I see Juliette shoot him from behind.

Not bad.

Kenji reappears just then and he starts bellowing for the civilians to follow us back to shelter, and Juliette and I join in, doing what we can to get them to safety as quickly as possible. There are a few compounds still standing, and they should be enough. The civilians can get inside and away from the battle—as well as the storm brewing in the sky. And even though their gratitude is touching, we can't stop long enough to talk to them. We have to settle them back into their homes, and then keep moving.

It's what I've always done.

Always keep moving.

I glance at Juliette as we run, wondering how she's holding up, and for a second I'm confused; I can't tell if she's crying or if it's just the rain streaking down her cheeks. I'm hoping she'll be okay, though. It kills me to see her deal with this. I wish she didn't have to.

We're running again, charging through the compounds now that we've gotten the civilians back into their homes. This was just a stop on the way to our final destination; we haven't even reached the battlefield yet, where Point men and women are already trying to keep Reestablishment soldiers from slaughtering innocent civilians. Things are about to get much, much worse.

Kenji is pulling us through the half-demolished landscape. I know we're getting closer to the action now because there's so much more devastation here: units falling apart and half on fire, their contents strewn everywhere. Ripped couches and broken lamps, clothes and shoes and fallen bodies to step over. The compounds feel like they could stretch on forever, and the farther we go, the uglier it gets.

"We're close!" I shout to Kenji.

He nods, and I'm surprised he even heard me.

I hear a familiar sound. "Tanks!" I call out to him. "You hear that?"

Kenji shoots me a bleak look and nods. "Let's move!" he says, making a motion with his hand. "We're not far now!"

It's a fight to get to the fight, the wind whistling hard in our ears and slapping sharply against our faces, angry raindrops pelting our skin, soaking our hair. I'm frozen to the bone but there's no time to be bothered by it. I've got adrenaline, and that'll have to be enough for now.

The earth shakes under our feet as a harsh, booming sound explodes in the sky. In an instant the horizon is lit on fire, flames roaring in the distance. Someone is dropping bombs, and that means we're already screwed. My heart is beating fast and hard, and I'd never admit it out loud, but I'm starting to get nervous.

I glance at Juliette again. I know she's probably scared, and I want to reassure her—to tell her everything is going to be okay—but she doesn't look my way. She's in another world, her eyes cold and sharp, focused on the fire in the distance. She looks different—a little scary, even. Somehow, that worries me even more.

I'm paying such close attention to her that I almost trip; the ground is slick underfoot and I'm up to my ankles in mud. I pull my legs free as we forge ahead, gun steady in my hands, and focus. This is it. This is where it's all about to get very serious, and I know enough about war to be honest with myself: I might walk onto that battlefield with a beating heart and be dragged off with a dead one.

I take a deep breath as we approach, three invisible kids walking through the compounds. We make our way over fallen units, broken glass from shattered windows; we sidestep the garbage strewn about and try not to hear the sound of people screaming. And I don't know about the rest of us, but I'm doing my best to fight the urge to turn around and run back to where we started.

Suddenly James is the only person on my mind.

SEVEN

Shit.

This is even worse than I was expecting. There are fallen bodies everywhere, collapsed and piled together and bleeding into one another. It's almost impossible to distinguish arms from legs, enemies from allies. Blood and rain are mixing together and flooding the ground, and suddenly my boots are slick with mud and the blood of someone else—dead or alive, I don't know.

It takes just a split second for enemy combatants to realize we're new to the battlefield; when they do, they don't hesitate. We're already under siege, and I glance back just in time to catch a glimpse of Juliette and Kenji still making their way forward before I feel something sharp slam into my back. I spin around, and one sharp crack later my soldier's got a broken jaw. He doubles over and reaches for his gun and I beat him to it. Now he's down and out, and I'm already moving on to the next one.

We're all so jam-packed together that hand-to-hand combat seems unavoidable; I duck to avoid a right hook and punch the opposing soldier in the gut on my way up, grabbing a knife from my belt to follow through. In, up, twist, and he's done. I yank my knife out of his chest as he falls. Someone charges at me from behind and I turn to meet him when suddenly he's coughing up blood and falling to his knees.

Kenji saved my ass.

He's on the move and moving well, still not letting his injury cripple him. We're fighting together, he and I, and I can feel his movements beside me. We shout warnings to each other, helping each other when we can, and we're actually doing okay, making our way through the madness,

when I hear Kenji shouting my name, his voice scared and urgent.

Suddenly I'm invisible and Kenji is screaming at me about Juliette and I don't know what's happening but I'm freaking out and I know now's not the time to ask questions. We fight our way back to the front and jet toward the road, Kenji's panicked voice telling me he saw Juliette go down and get dragged away, and that's all I need to hear. I'm one part furious and one part terrified, and the two are having a battle of their own in my mind.

I knew this would happen.

I knew she never should've come with us. I knew she should've stayed behind. She's not built for this—she's not strong enough to be on the battlefield. She would've been so much safer if she'd stayed behind. *Why does no one ever listen to me?*

Dammit.

I want to scream.

When we reach the road, Kenji pulls me back, and though we're out of breath and barely able to speak, we catch a glimpse of Juliette as she's loaded into the back of a tank, her body limp and heavy as they drag her inside.

It's over in a matter of seconds. They're already driving away.

Juliette is gone.

My chest cracks open.

Kenji has a firm hand on my shoulder and I realize I'm saying "Oh God, oh God" over and over again when Kenji has the decency to shake some sense into me.

"Get your shit together," he says. "We need to go after her!"

My legs are unsteady, but I know he's right. "Where do you think they went?"

"They're probably carting her back to base—"

"Dammit. Of course! Warner—"

“Wants her back.” Kenji nods. “That was probably his team he sent to collect her.” He swears under his breath. “Only good thing about that is we know he doesn’t want her dead.”

I grit my teeth to keep from losing my mind. “All right then; let’s go.”

God, I can’t wait to get my hands on that psychopath. I’m going to enjoy killing him. Slowly. Carefully. Cutting him to pieces one finger at a time.

But Kenji hesitates, and I stare at him.

“What?” I ask.

“I can’t project, bro. My energy is shot.” He sighs. “I’m sorry. My body is seriously jacked up right now.”

Shit. “Contingency plan?”

“We can avoid the main roads,” he says. “Take the back route and head to base on our own. It’d be easier to track the tank, but if we do, you’ll be in plain sight. It’s your call.”

I frown. “Yeah, I vote for the plan that doesn’t get me killed instantly.”

Kenji grins. “Okay then. Let’s go get our girl back.”

“*My* girl,” I correct him. “She’s my girl.”

Kenji snorts as we head in the direction of the compounds. “Right. Minus the part where she’s not actually your girl. Not anymore.”

“Shut up.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Whatever.”

EIGHT

It takes us a while to get back to base, because we have to be hyperaware of my visibility. We're slower, more cautious, and careful to take our time hiding inside and around abandoned units every hundred yards or so, just to make sure the coast is clear around every corner. But when we're finally approaching base, shit kicks into high gear.

We weren't the only ones taking the back route.

Castle, Ian, Alia, and Lily flipped out when they saw us; they were hiding inside a unit we thought for sure was empty. They jumped out at us from behind a bed, which made me nearly piss my pants. We only had a moment to explain what had happened before Castle was sharing his own story.

They got Brendan and Winston back—broke them out of Sector 45 just as they'd originally planned—but the two of them were in bad shape when Castle found them.

"We think they'll be okay," Castle is saying, "but we have to get them to the girls as soon as possible. I'm hoping they'll be able to help."

"The girls are on the battlefield," Kenji says, eyes wide. "I have no idea where. They insisted on fighting today."

Castle's face falls, and though he doesn't say it out loud, it's clear he's suddenly very worried.

"Where are they now?" I ask. "Brendan and Winston?"

"Hiding," Castle says.

"What?" Kenji looks around. "Why? Why aren't you taking them back to Point?"

Castle goes pale.

It's Lily who speaks. "We heard whispers while we were on base breaking them out," she says. "Whispers of what the soldiers are going to do next."

“They’re mobilizing for an air assault,” Ian cuts in. “We just heard they’re going to bomb Omega Point. We were still trying to figure out what we should do when we heard someone coming, and jumped in here”—he nods around the unit—“to hide.”

“What?” Kenji panics. “But—how do you—”

“It’s definite,” Castle says. His eyes are deep and tortured. Terrified. “I heard the orders myself. They’re hoping that if they hit it with enough firepower, everything underground will just collapse in on itself.”

“But sir, no one knows the exact location of Omega Point, it’s not possible—”

“It is,” Alia says. I’ve never heard her speak before, and I’m surprised by the softness of her voice. “They tortured the information out of some of our own.”

“On the battlefield,” Ian says. “Just before killing them.”

Kenji looks like he might throw up. “We have to go right now,” he says, his voice high and sharp. “We have to get everyone out of there—all the ones we left behind—”

Only then does it hit me.

“James.”

I don’t recognize my own voice. The horror, the panic, the dread that floods my body is something I’ve never felt—never known before. Not like this. “We have to get James!” I’m shouting, and Kenji is trying to calm me down, but this time I can’t listen. I don’t care if I have to go alone; I’m getting my brother out of there. “Let’s go!” I bark at Kenji. “We have to get a tank and get back to base as soon as possible—”

“But what about Juliette?” Kenji asks. “Maybe we can split up—I can head back to Point with Castle and Alia; you can stay here with Ian and Lily—”

“No. I have to get James. I have to be there. I have to be the one to get him—”

“But Juliette—”

"You said yourself that Warner isn't going to kill her—she'll be okay there for a little while. But right now they're going to blow up Omega Point, and James—and everyone else—is going to die. We have to go *now*—"

"Maybe I can stay here and look for Juliette, and you guys can go—"

"Juliette will be fine. She's not in any immediate danger here—Warner isn't going to hurt her—"

"But—"

"Kenji, *please!*" I'm desperate now and I don't care. "We need as many people at Omega Point as possible. There are tons of people left behind, and they don't stand a chance if we don't get to them now."

Kenji stares at me for just a moment longer before he nods. "You guys go grab Brendan and Winston," he says to Castle and the three others. "Kent and I will commandeer a tank and meet you back here. We'll do everything we can to get back to Point as soon as possible."

The second everyone is gone, I grab Kenji by the arm. "If anything happens to James—"

"We're going to do everything we can, I promise—"

"That's not good enough for me—I need to go get him—I need to go right now—"

"You *can't* go right now," Kenji snaps. "Save your stupid for later, Kent. Now, more than ever, you need to stay in control. If you go crazy and head back to Point on foot with no regard for your own safety, you'll be dead before you even get there, and any chance of saving James will be lost. You want to keep your little brother alive? Make sure you don't kill yourself while you're trying to save him."

I feel like my throat is closing up. "He can't die," I say, my voice breaking. "I can't be the reason he dies, Kenji—I can't. . . ."

Kenji blinks fast, forcing back his own emotion. "I know, man. But I can't think like that right now. We have to keep moving. . . ."

Kenji is still talking, but I can hardly hear him.

James.

Oh God.

What have I done.

NINE

I have no idea how we all fit inside this tank. We're eight people jammed into cramped quarters, sitting on laps, and no one even cares. The tension is so thick it's practically its own person, taking up a seat we don't have to spare. I can barely think straight.

I'm trying to breathe, trying to stay calm, and I can't.

The planes are already overhead, and I feel sick in a way I don't know how to explain. It's deeper than my stomach. Bigger than my heart. More overwhelming than just my mind. It's like fear has become me; it wears my body like an old suit.

Fear is all I have left now.

I think we all feel it. Kenji is driving this tank, somehow still able to function in the face of all this, but no one else is moving. Not speaking. Not even breathing too loudly.

I feel so sick.

Oh God, oh God.

Drive faster, I want to say, but then, actually, I don't. I don't know if I want to hurry up or slow down. I don't know what will hurt more. I watched my own mother die, and, somehow, it didn't hurt as much as this.

I throw up then.

All over the floor mats.

The dead body of my ten-year-old brother.

I'm dry-heaving, wiping my mouth on my shirt.

Will it hurt when he dies? Will he feel it? Will he be killed instantly, or will he be impaled—injured, somehow—and die slowly? Will he bleed to death all alone? My ten-year-old brother?

I'm holding fast to the dashboard, trying to steady my heart, my breathing. It's impossible. The tears are falling

fast now, my shoulders shaking, my body breaking. The planes get louder as they come closer. I can hear it now. We all can.

We're not even there yet.

We hear the bombs explode far off in the distance, and that's when I feel it: the bones inside of me fracture, little earthquakes breaking me apart.

The tank stops.

There's no going forward anymore. There's no one and nothing to get to, and we all know it. The bombs keep falling and I hear the explosions echoing the sounds of my own sobs, loud and gasping in the silence. I have nothing left now.

Nothing left.

Nothing so precious as my own flesh and blood.

I've just dropped my head into my hands when a scream pierces the quiet.

"Kenji! Look!"

It's Alia, shrieking from the backseat as she throws the door open and jumps out. I follow her with my eyes and only then see what she saw, and it takes just seconds before I'm out the door and bolting past her, falling to my knees in front of the one person I never thought I'd see, not ever again.

TEN

I'm almost too overcome to speak.

James is standing in front of me, sobbing, and I don't know if I'm dreaming.

"James?" I hear Kenji say. I look back to see almost everyone has gotten out of the tank now. "Is that you, buddy?"

"Addie, I'm s-sorry," he hiccups. "I know you s-said—you s-said I wasn't supposed to fight, but I couldn't stay behind and I had to l-leave—"

I pull him into my arms, clutching him tight, hardly able to breathe.

"I wanted to f-fight with you," he stammers. "I didn't w-want to be a baby. I wanted t-to h-help—"

"Shhhh," I say to him. "It's okay, James. It's okay. We're okay. It's going to be okay."

"But Addie," he says, "you don't know what h-happened—I'd only been gone a little while and then I saw the p-planes —"

I shush him again and tell him it's okay. That we know what happened. That he's safe now.

"I'm sorry I couldn't h-help you," he says, pulling back to look me in the eye, his cheeks a splotchy red and streaked with tears. "I know you said I shouldn't, but I really w-wanted to h-help—"

I pick him up, cradling his body in my arms as I carry him back to the tank, and only then realize that the wet stain down the front of his pants isn't from the rain.

James must've been terrified. He must've been scared out of his mind and still, he snuck out of Omega Point because he wanted to help. Because he wanted to fight alongside us.

I could kill him for it.

But damn if he's not one of the bravest people I've ever known.

ELEVEN

Once we're back in the tank, we realize we have no idea what to do.

Nowhere to go.

The depth of what's happened has only begun to hit us. And just because I was able to salvage a bit of good news from the wreckage doesn't mean there isn't a lot left to grieve.

Castle is practically comatose.

Kenji is the only one who's still trying to keep us alive. He's the only one with any sense of self-preservation left, and I think it's *because* of Castle. Because no one is leading us anymore, and someone has to step up.

But even with Kenji doing his best to keep us focused, few of us are responding. The day has come to a close much more quickly than we could've expected, and the sun is setting fast, plunging us all into darkness.

We're tired, we're broken, and we can no longer function. Sleep, it seems, is the only thing that will come.

TWELVE

James stirs in my arms.

I'm awake in an instant, blinking fast and looking around to find everyone else still asleep. The sun slits open the horizon to let the light out, and the morning is so still, and so quiet, it seems impossible there's ever been anything wrong.

The truth, however, comes back too quickly.

It's bricks on my chest, pressure in my lungs, aches in my joints, and metal in my mouth—reminders of the long day, the longer night, and the boy curled up in my arms.

Death and destruction. Slivers of hope.

Kenji drove us to a remote location and used the last of his strength to make the tank invisible for most of the night; it was the only way we could wait out the battle and manage to sleep for a few hours. I'm still not sure how that guy is functioning. He's definitely way stronger than I've ever given him credit for.

The world around us is eerily calm. I shift a little and James is alert, up and asking questions the moment his mouth hinges open. His voice disturbs everyone, startling them awake. I use the back of my hand to rub at my eyes and adjust James in my lap, holding him close. I drop a kiss on the top of his head and tell him to be quiet.

"Why?" he asks.

I cover his mouth with my hand.

He slaps it away.

"Good morning, sunshine." Kenji blinks in our direction.

"Morning," I say back.

"I wasn't talking to you," he says, trying to smile. "I was talking to the sunshine."

I grin in response, not really sure where we're going with this. There's so much to talk about, and so much we don't want to talk about, that I don't know if we'll ever talk at all. I glance back at Castle and notice he's wide awake and staring out the window. I wave hello.

"Did you sleep all right?" I ask him.

Castle stares at me.

I glance at Kenji.

Kenji looks out the window, too.

I blow out a breath.

Everyone makes their way back to the present, slowly but surely. Once we're all in semiworking condition—Brendan and Winston included—Kenji doesn't waste any time.

"We have to figure out where we're going to go," he says. "We can't risk being on the road for too long, and I'm not sure how long or how well I'll be able to project. My energy is coming back, but slowly, and it's in and out. Not something I can rely on right now."

"We also need to think about food," Ian says groggily.

"Yeah, I'm pretty hungry," James adds.

I squeeze his shoulders. We're all starving.

"Right," Kenji says. "So does anyone have any ideas?"

Silence from all of us.

"Come on, guys," he says. "Think. Any hideouts, any secure spots—anywhere you've ever crashed that was once a safe space—"

"What about our old house?" James asks, looking around.

I sit up straighter, surprised I hadn't thought of it myself. "Right—of course," I say. "Good idea, James." I muss his hair. "That would work."

Kenji pounds his fist on the steering wheel. "Yes!" he says loudly. "Good. Excellent. Perfect. Thank God."

"But what if they come looking for us?" Lily asks. "Didn't Warner know about your old place?"

"Yeah," I tell her. "But if they think everyone from Omega Point is dead, they won't think to come search for me. Or

any of us.”

At that, the car goes dead quiet.

The elephant in the room has made an appearance, and now no one knows what to say. We all look to Castle for direction on how best to proceed, but he doesn't say a word. He's staring straight ahead at nothing at all, like he's been paralyzed from the inside.

“Let's go,” Alia says quietly. She's the only one who responds to me, and she offers me a kind smile as she does. I decide I like her for it. “We should secure shelter as soon as possible. And maybe find James something to eat.”

I beam at her. So touched that she would speak for James.

“Maybe we could find something all of us could eat,” Ian cuts in, grumpy. I frown, but I can't blame him. My stomach has made a few protests of its own.

“We should have plenty of food back at the house,” I say. “It's been paid for through the end of the year, so we'll have just about everything we need—water, electricity, a roof over our heads—but it'll be tight, and it'll be temporary. We'll have to come up with a more long-term solution soon.”

“Sounds good,” Kenji says to me. He turns back to look at everyone. “We all in agreement here?”

There's a murmur of consent and that's all we need, really, before we're off and heading back to my old place. Back to the beginning.

Relief floods through me.

I'm so grateful to be able to take James home. To let him sleep in his own bed. And though I know better than to ever say it out loud, a small part of me is happy that our time at Omega Point is officially over. There's a silver lining in all of this, and it's that Warner thinks we're all dead. And even though he's got Juliette now, he won't have her forever. She'll be safe until we can find a way to get her back, and until then, he won't come after us. We can find a way to live, away from all the violence and destruction.

Besides, I'm tired of fighting. I'm tired of being on the run and always having to risk my life and constantly worrying about James. I just want to go home. I want to take care of my brother. And I never, ever, *ever* want to feel what I felt last night.

I can't risk losing James, not ever again.

THIRTEEN

The roads are almost entirely abandoned. The sun is high and the wind is bitingly cold and though the rain has stopped, the air smells like snow, and I have a feeling it's going to be harsh. I wrap James more tightly in my arms, shivering against a chill coming from deep inside my body. He's fallen asleep again, his small face buried in the crook of my neck. I hug him closer to my chest.

With the opposition destroyed, there's no need to have many—if any—troops on the ground. They're probably clearing out the bodies now, cleaning up the mess and putting things back in order as soon as possible. It's what we always did.

Battle was necessary, but cleaning it up was just as crucial.

Warner used to drill that home: we were never to allow civilians time to grieve. We could never give them the opportunity to make martyrs of their loved ones. No, it was better for the deaths to seem as insignificant as possible.

Everyone had to go back to work right away.

So many times I was a part of those missions. I always hated Warner, hated The Reestablishment and all it stood for, but now I feel even more strongly about it all. Thinking I'd lost James did something to me last night, and the damage is irreparable. I thought I knew what it was like to lose someone close to me, but I didn't, not really. Losing a parent is excruciating, but somehow, the pain is so much different from losing a child. And James, to me, in many ways, feels like my own kid. I raised him. Took care of him. Protected him. Fed him and clothed him. Taught him most everything he knows. He's my only hope in all this

devastation—the one thing I've always lived for, always fought for. I'd be lost without him.

James gives my life purpose.

And I didn't realize this until last night.

What The Reestablishment does—separating parents from their children, separating spouses from each other, basically ripping families apart—they do it on purpose. And the cruelty of these actions hadn't really hit me until now.

I don't think I could ever be a part of something like that again.

FOURTEEN

We pull into the underground parking garage without a problem, and once we're inside, I can exhale. I know we'll be safe here.

The nine of us clamber out of the tank and stand around for a moment. Brendan and Winston are holding fast to each other, still recovering from their wounds. I'm not sure what happened to them, exactly, because no one is talking about it, but I don't think I want to know. Alia and Lily help Castle down from the tank, and Ian is close behind. Kenji is standing next to me. I'm still holding James in my arms, and I only put him down after he asks me to.

"You guys ready to go up?" I ask. "Shower? Eat some breakfast?"

"That sounds great, man," says Ian.

Everyone else agrees.

I lead the way, James clinging to my hand.

It's crazy—the last time we were here, we were on the run from Warner. Me and Juliette. It was the first time she met James, the first time it felt like we could really have a life together. And then Kenji showed up and redirected the course of everything. I shake my head, remembering. It feels like a million years ago, somehow. So much has changed. I was practically a different guy back then. I feel much older and harder and angrier now. Difficult to believe it was only a few months ago.

The front door is still messed up from when Warner and his guys busted it open, but we make do. I yank on the handle and then shove, hard, and the door swings inward.

Suddenly we're all crossing the threshold.

I'm looking around, amazed to see everything almost exactly the way we left it. A few things are knocked over

and the place needs a serious cleaning, but it'll work. It'll be a great, safe place to live for a while. I start flipping switches and the small rooms flicker to life, fluorescent lights humming steadily in the silence. James bolts toward his bedroom, and I check the cabinets for canned goods and nonperishable items; we've still got tons of Saran-wrapped packages for the Automat.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Who wants breakfast?" I ask, holding up a few packets.

Kenji falls to his knees, shouting, "Hallelujah!" in the process; Ian practically tackles me. James comes racing out of his room shouting, "ME ME ME I DO I DO," and Lily laughs her head off. Alia smiles and leans against the wall as Brendan and Winston collapse on the couch, groaning in relief. Castle is the only one who remains silent.

"All right, everyone," Kenji says. "Adam and I will get the food going, and the rest of you can take turns washing up. Also, I hate to be super obvious here, but there's only one bathroom, and we all have to share, so let's please be aware of that. Adam's got some supplies, but not too much, so let's be frugal, okay? Let's remember we're living on rations now. Consideration is crucial."

There's general consent and lots of nodding, and everyone busies themselves with a different kind of preparation. Everyone except Castle, who sits down in the single armchair and doesn't move. He seems to be doing worse than Brendan and Winston, who happen to be in actual physical pain.

I'm still staring at the two of them when Ian slips away from the group to ask me if I have anything to help patch up Brendan and Winston. I assure him that I'll use whatever supplies I've got to fix them up as best I can. I always have a little medical kit at home, but it's not extensive, and I'm not a medic. But I know enough. I think I'll be able to help. This cheers up Ian significantly.

It's only once Kenji and I are busy preparing food in the kitchen that he brings up the most pressing issue. The one I'm still not sure how to resolve.

"So what are we going to do about Juliette?" Kenji asks, tossing an Automat packet into a bowl. "I'm already worried we waited this long to go after her."

I feel myself pale. I don't know how to tell him I had no immediate plans to go back out there. Certainly not to fight—not after what happened to James. "I don't know," I say. "I'm not sure what we can do."

Kenji stares at me, confused. "What do you mean? We have to get her out of there. Which means we have to *break* her out of there, which means we've got to plan another rescue mission." He shoots me a look. "I thought that was obvious."

I clear my throat. "But what about James? And Brendan and Winston? And Castle? We're not doing too well over here. Is it okay to just leave them here and—"

"Dude, what the hell are you talking about? Aren't you in love with this girl? Where's the fire under your ass? I thought you would be dying to get to her right now—"

"I am," I say urgently. "Of course I am. I'm just worried—it's so soon after they bombed Point that I just—"

"The longer we wait, the worse it's going to get." Kenji shakes his head. "We have to go as soon as possible. If we don't, she'll be stuck there forever, and Warner will use her as his torture monster. He'll probably kill her in the process without even meaning to."

I grip the edge of the counter and stare into the sink.

Shit.

Shit shit shit.

I spin around at the sound of James's voice, listen for a moment as he laughs at something Alia said. My heart constricts just *thinking* about walking away from him again. But I know I have a responsibility to Juliette. What would she do if I weren't there to help her? She needs me.

“Okay,” I sigh. “Of course. What do we have to do?”

FIFTEEN

After breakfast, which was actually closer to lunch, I tend to Brendan and Winston for a bit, and set them up on the floor so they can get some proper rest. James and I had collected a decent stash of ratty blankets and pillows over the years, so there's just enough to go around, and thank God for that, because it's cold as hell. We even wrapped a blanket around Castle's shoulders. He's still barely moving, but we forced him to eat, so at least he's got a little color in his cheeks now.

With Brendan and Winston settled, Ian and Alia and Lily fed and comfortable, James safe and sound, and Castle resting, Kenji and I are finally ready to initiate some new plans.

"I'm going to go out," Kenji says. "Get on base and get nosy. Listen for rumors and whispers of what's going on—maybe even find Juliette, give her a heads-up that we're coming for her soon."

I nod. "That's a great start."

"Once I know more about what's going on, we can make a firm plan, scoop her up, and bring her home."

"So as soon as she's back," I say, "we'll have to move again."

"Probably, yeah."

I nod a few times. "Okay. All right." I swallow hard. "I'll wait here until you get back."

"Sounds good." Kenji grins, and then he's gone. Disappeared. The front door is yanked open and yanked closed, and I'm staring at the wall and trying not to freak out too much about what's going to happen next.

Another mission. Which means another chance to screw everything up and get ourselves killed. And then, if we're

successful, we're rewarded with more running, more instability, more chaos.

I close my eyes.

I love Juliette. I really do. I want to help her and support her and be there for her. I want us to have a future together. But sometimes I wonder if it's ever going to happen.

This isn't easy to admit, but part of me doesn't want to put James at risk again—on the run again—for a girl who broke up with me. A girl who walked away from us.

I don't know what the right thing is anymore.

I don't know if my allegiance is to James or Juliette.

SIXTEEN

Kenji is back after only a couple of hours. His face ashen, his hands trembling. He's breathing hard and his eyes are unfocused and he sits down on the couch without a word and I'm already panicking.

"What happened?" I ask.

"What's going on?" Lily says.

"You okay, bro?" This from Ian.

We pepper him with questions and he doesn't answer. He stares, unblinking, a replica of Castle, who's sitting in a chair across from him.

Finally, after a long moment of silence, he speaks.

Three words.

"Juliette is dead."

Chaos.

Questions are flying and screams are muffled and everyone is shocked, horrified, freaking out.

I'm stunned.

My brain feels paralyzed, unwilling to process or digest this information. *Why?* I want to ask. *How?* How? How is it possible?

But I can't speak. I'm frozen in horror. Grief.

"It wasn't Warner who came after her," Kenji is saying, tears falling fast down his face. "It was Anderson. Those were Anderson's men. They made the announcement just a couple hours ago," he says, choking on the words. "They said they bombed Omega Point, captured Juliette, and killed her just this morning. The supreme has already headed back to the capital."

"No," I gasp.

"We should've gone after her," Kenji is saying. "I should've stayed behind—I should've tried to find her—it's

my fault," he says, hands in his hair, fighting back tears. "It's my fault she's dead. I should've gone after her—"

"It's not your fault," Ian says to him, rushing over and grabbing his arms. "Don't you dare put that on yourself."

"We lost a lot of people," Lily says. "People dear to us that we couldn't save. This is not your fault. I promise. We did our best."

Everyone is consoling Kenji now, trying to reassure him that there's no guilt necessary. No person to blame for all this.

But I can't agree.

I trip backward until I hit the wall, leaning against it for support. I know who to blame. I know where the fault lies.

Juliette is dead because of me.

EXCERPT FROM *IGNITE ME*

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ONE

I am an hourglass.

My seventeen years have collapsed and buried me from the inside out. My legs feel full of sand and stapled together, my mind overflowing with grains of indecision, choices unmade and impatient as time runs out of my body. The small hand of a clock taps me at one and two, three and four, whispering hello, get up, stand up, it's time to

wake up

wake up

"Wake up," he whispers.

A sharp intake of breath and I'm awake but not up, surprised but not scared, somehow staring into the very desperately green eyes that seem to know too much, too well. Aaron Warner Anderson is bent over me, his worried eyes inspecting me, his hand caught in the air like he might've been about to touch me.

He jerks back.

He stares, unblinking, chest rising and falling.

"Good morning," I assume. I'm unsure of my voice, of the hour and this day, of these words leaving my lips and this body that contains me.

I notice he's wearing a white button-down, half untucked into his curiously unrumpled black slacks. His shirtsleeves are folded, pushed up past his elbows.

His smile looks like it hurts.

I pull myself into a seated position and Warner shifts to accommodate me. I have to close my eyes to steady the sudden dizziness, but I force myself to remain still until the feeling passes.

I'm tired and weak from hunger, but other than a few general aches, I seem to be fine. I'm alive. I'm breathing

and blinking and feeling human and I know exactly why.

I meet his eyes. "You saved my life."

I was shot in the chest.

Warner's father put a bullet in my body and I can still feel the echoes of it. If I focus, I can relive the exact moment it happened; the pain: so intense, so excruciating; I'll never be able to forget it.

I suck in a startled breath.

I'm finally aware of the familiar foreignness of this room and I'm quickly seized by a panic that screams I did not wake up where I fell asleep. My heart is racing and I'm inching away from him, hitting my back against the headboard, clutching at these sheets, trying not to stare at the chandelier I remember all too well— "It's okay—" Warner is saying. "It's all right—"

"What am I doing here?" Panic, panic; terror clouds my consciousness. "Why did you bring me here again—?"

"Juliette, please, I'm not going to hurt you—"

"Then why did you bring me here?" My voice is starting to break and I'm struggling to keep it steady. "Why bring me back to this *hellhole*—"

"I had to hide you." He exhales, looks up at the wall.

"What? Why?"

"No one knows you're alive." He turns to look at me. "I had to get back to base. I needed to pretend everything was back to normal and I was running out of time."

I force myself to lock away the fear.

I study his face and analyze his patient, earnest tone. I remember him last night—it must've been last night—I remember his face, remember him lying next to me in the dark. He was tender and kind and gentle and he saved me, saved my life. Probably carried me into bed. Tucked me in beside him. It must've been him.

But when I glance down at my body I realize I'm wearing clean clothes, no blood or holes or anything anywhere and I

wonder who washed me, wonder who changed me, and worry that might've been Warner, too.

"Did you . . ." I hesitate, touching the hem of the shirt I'm wearing. "Did—I mean—my clothes—"

He smiles. He stares until I'm blushing and I decide I hate him a little and then he shakes his head. Looks into his palms. "No," he says. "The girls took care of that. I just carried you to bed."

"The girls," I whisper, dazed.

The girls.

Sonya and Sara. They were there too, the healer twins, they helped Warner. They helped him save me because he's the only one who can touch me now, the only person in the world who'd have been able to transfer their healing power safely into my body.

My thoughts are on fire.

Where are the girls what happened to the girls and where is Anderson and the war and oh God what's happened to Adam and Kenji and Castle and I have to get up I have to get up I have to get up and get out of bed and get going
but

I try to move and Warner catches me. I'm off-balance, unsteady; I still feel as though my legs are anchored to this bed and I'm suddenly unable to breathe, seeing spots and feeling faint. Need up. Need out.

Can't.

"Warner." My eyes are frantic on his face. "What happened? What's happening with the battle—?"

"Please," he says, gripping my shoulders. "You need to start slowly; you should eat something—"

"Tell me—"

"Don't you want to eat first? Or shower?"

"No," I hear myself say. "I have to know now."

One moment. Two and three.

Warner takes a deep breath. A million more. Right hand over left, spinning the jade ring on his pinkie finger over and

over and over and over “It’s over,” he says.

“What?”

I say the word but my lips make no sound. I’m numb, somehow. Blinking and seeing nothing.

“It’s over,” he says again.

“No.”

I exhale the word, exhale the impossibility.

He nods. He’s disagreeing with me.

“No.”

“Juliette.”

“No,” I say. “No. No. Don’t be stupid,” I say to him. “Don’t be ridiculous,” I say to him. “*Don’t lie to me goddamn you,*” but now my voice is high and broken and shaking and “No,” I gasp, “no, no, *no—*”

I actually stand up this time. My eyes are filling fast with tears and I blink and blink but the world is a mess and I want to laugh because all I can think is how horrible and beautiful it is, that our eyes blur the truth when we can’t bear to see it.

The ground is hard.

I know this to be an actual fact because it’s suddenly pressed against my face and Warner is trying to touch me but I think I scream and slap his hands away because I already know the answer. I must already know the answer because I can feel the revulsion bubbling up and unsettling my insides but I ask anyway. I’m horizontal and somehow still tipping over and the holes in my head are tearing open and I’m staring at a spot on the carpet not ten feet away and I’m not sure I’m even alive but I have to hear him say it.

“Why?” I ask.

It’s just a word, stupid and simple.

“Why is the battle over?” I ask. I’m not breathing anymore, not really speaking at all; just expelling letters through my lips.

Warner is not looking at me.

He's looking at the wall and at the floor and at the bedsheets and at the way his knuckles look when he clenches his fists but no not at me he won't look at me and his next words are so, so soft.

"Because they're dead, love. They're all dead."

TWO

My body locks.

My bones, my blood, my brain freeze in place, seizing in some kind of sudden, uncontrollable paralysis that spreads through me so quickly I can't seem to breathe. I'm wheezing in deep, strained inhalations, and the walls won't stop swaying in front of me.

Warner pulls me into his arms.

"Let go of me," I scream, but, oh, only in my imagination because my lips are finished working and my heart has just expired and my mind has gone to hell for the day and my eyes my eyes I think they're bleeding. Warner is whispering words of comfort I can't hear and his arms are wrapped entirely around me, trying to keep me together through sheer physical force but it's no use.

I feel nothing.

Warner is shushing me, rocking me back and forth, and it's only then that I realize I'm making the most excruciating, earsplitting sound, agony ripping through me. I want to speak, to protest, to accuse Warner, to blame him, to call him a liar, but I can say nothing, can form nothing but sounds so pitiful I'm almost ashamed of myself. I break free of his arms, gasping and doubling over, clutching my stomach.

"Adam." I choke on his name.

"Juliette, please—"

"Kenji." I'm hyperventilating into the carpet now.

"Please, love, let me help you—"

"What about James?" I hear myself say. "He was left at Omega Point—he wasn't a-allowed to c-come—"

"It's all been destroyed," Warner says slowly, quietly. "Everything. They tortured some of your members into

giving away the exact location of Omega Point. Then they bombed the entire thing.”

“Oh, *God*,” I cover my mouth with one hand and stare, unblinking, at the ceiling.

“I’m so sorry,” he says. “You have no idea how sorry I am.”

“Liar,” I whisper, venom in my voice. I’m angry and mean and I can’t be bothered to care. “You’re not sorry at all.”

I glance at Warner just long enough to see the hurt flash in and out of his eyes. He clears his throat.

“I am sorry,” he says again, quiet but firm. He picks up his jacket from where it was hanging on a nearby rack; shrugs it on without a word.

“Where are you going?” I ask, guilty in an instant.

“You need time to process this and you clearly have no use for my company. I will attend to a few tasks until you’re ready to talk.”

“Please tell me you’re wrong.” My voice breaks. My breath catches. “Tell me there’s a chance you could be wrong—”

Warner stares at me for what feels like a long time. “If there were even the slightest chance I could spare you this pain,” he finally says, “I would’ve taken it. You must know I wouldn’t have said it if it weren’t absolutely true.”

And it’s *this*—his sincerity—that finally snaps me in half.

Because the truth is so unbearable I wish he’d spare me a lie.

I don’t remember when Warner left.

I don’t remember how he left or what he said. All I know is that I’ve been lying here curled up on the floor long enough. Long enough for the tears to turn to salt, long enough for my throat to dry up and my lips to chap and my head to pound as hard as my heart.

I sit up slowly, feel my brain twist somewhere in my skull. I manage to climb onto the bed and sit there, still numb but less so, and pull my knees to my chest.

Life without Adam.

Life without Kenji, without James and Castle and Sonya and Sara and Brendan and Winston and all of Omega Point. My friends, all destroyed with the flick of a switch.

Life without Adam.

I hold on tight, pray the pain will pass.

It doesn't.

Adam is gone.

My first love. My first friend. My only friend when I had none and now he's gone and I don't know how I feel. Strange, mostly. Delirious, too. I feel empty and broken and cheated and guilty and angry and desperately, desperately sad.

We'd been growing apart since escaping to Omega Point, but that was my fault. He wanted more from me, but I wanted him to live a long life. I wanted to protect him from the pain I would cause him. I tried to forget him, to move on without him, to prepare myself for a future separate and apart from him.

I thought staying away would keep him alive.

Stupid girl.

The tears are fresh and falling fast now, traveling quietly down my cheeks and into my open, gasping mouth. My shoulders won't stop shaking and my fists keep clenching and my body is cramping and my knees are knocking and old habits are crawling out of my skin and I'm counting cracks and colors and sounds and shudders and rocking back and forth and back and forth and back and forth and I have to let him go I have to let him go I have to I have to

I close my eyes

and *breathe*.

Harsh, hard, rasping breaths.

In.

Out.

Count them.

I've been here before, I tell myself. I've been lonelier than this, more hopeless than this, more desperate than this. I've been here before and I survived. I can get through this.

But never have I been so thoroughly robbed. Love and possibility, friendships and futures: gone. I have to start over now; face the world alone again. I have to make one final choice: give up or go on.

So I get to my feet.

My head is spinning, thoughts knocking into one another, but I swallow back the tears. I clench my fists and try not to scream and I tuck my friends in my heart and *revenge*

I think

has never looked so sweet.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TAHEREH MAFI is a girl. She was born in a small city somewhere in Connecticut and currently resides in Orange County, California, where the weather is just a little too perfect for her taste. When unable to find a book, she can be found reading candy wrappers, coupons, and old receipts. You can visit Tahereh online at www.taherehbooks.com.

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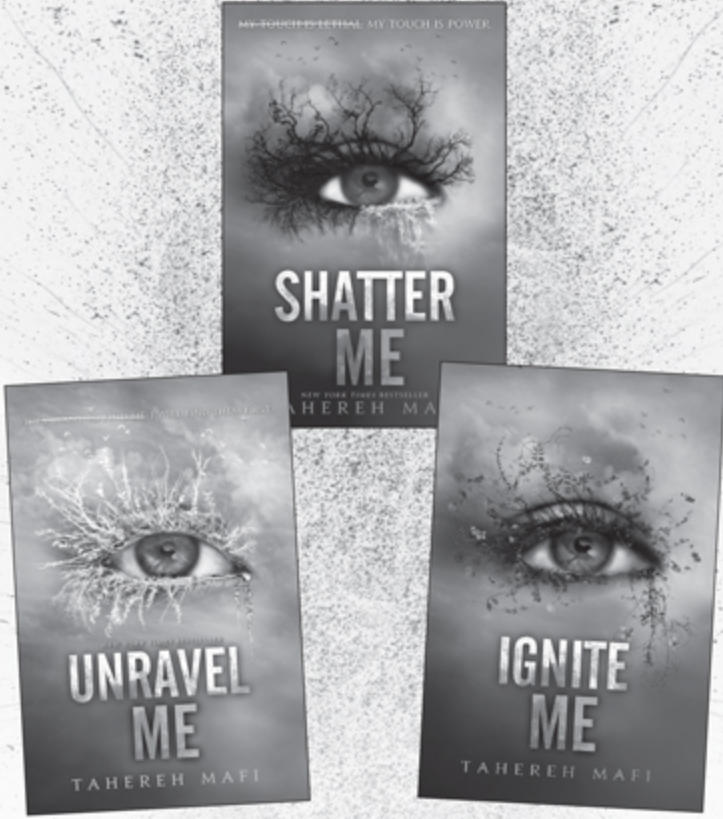
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