

Prologue

This gets just a little bit easier every time I do it. Not that I ever wanted to in the first place, but that moment when the needle punches through the seven layers of skin into something else, whether it's muscle, or a vein, or something entirely different, I feel it just a little bit less. I think that's the point. When they started the treatment, it was once a week, then once a month. Now it's every three months. They say I've taken to the treatment very well, and they like the results. I can't say I haven't noticed them, either.

"Almost there," Jovan says over his glasses. I look up at him, then back at the needle as he pushes the plunger in a bit more. He has to go slow, or it could rupture the vein, he says. It's just too much at once. I can feel it, like ice seeping

through me, creeping through my arm in both directions, towards my fingertips, towards my heart. He reaches the end of the liquid, then grabs a cotton swab for the tiny pinprick left as he pulls the needle back out. "All good?" He asks it as though it's a question, but it's more of a statement. You're fine. You're always fine. That's what he really wants to say.

He had volunteered for the program first. He saw a poster, and told me it was our ticket to something better, away from the crowded row houses in the desert. They were built to seem like a community, but ended up more like a prison. Shade was a commodity, and the poster boasted of palm trees and sparkling blue water, and a cozy little apartment for each volunteer. All you had to offer up was a vein and ten years of service. It sounded like a dream. We joined up, and Jovan got rejected. On the upside, now he knew he had an irregular heartbeat, and could take appropriate precautions. Still, it kept him out of the program. When they accepted me, I thought about backing out, just for his sake. But then somewhere, somehow, he convinced someone high up to let him stay. To let him study and help them with their research. He had always been the smart one anyway.

Now we're three years in, and what they said is true. They said the blood serum would make us stronger, faster, more agile. And it definitely has. I even grew another inch, which was an

anomaly. No one else grew. Two years ago they started the training, and it was about that time that Jovan met Sakura. She was beautiful, I had to admit, and just over year ago, Entara was born. Not one to take chances, Jovan immediately had her tested for everything, paying special attention to her heart. Gladly, she was completely healthy. Perfect, according to Jovan. I remember how wide he smiled as he said it. I had to admit, I was jealous, but I guess you can't have everything.

"You coming over tonight?" Jovan asks as he starts getting another dose ready for the next volunteer.

"What are we eating?"

"Sakura was thinking ribs. She just harvested some onions and wants to roast them, too."

"Perfect. See you then."

I slide myself out of the chair and roll my sleeve back down. Jovan gives me a slap on the back as the next volunteer comes in. He looks new. Still scared and scrawny, but I see hope in his eyes. Ten years is a long time, my friend.

The smell of barbeque sauce wafts through the air. Sakura invites me in with a smile and the faint smell of jasmine. How did Jovan get so lucky? While I was training, he was getting the girl. Seems like he might have gotten the better end of the deal.

Jovan pours a beer for each of us and we sit at the table. Entara sits in her high chair, smiling and gurgling as she slaps the little tray in front of her. Sakura brings the steaming tray of ribs and sets it on the table as she takes her seat next to Entara. She looks at Entara with an excited smile, that smile that looks like surprise as if sharing in the infant's constant discovery of the world. I feel something sharp in my arm, but when I look down, there's nothing there. Just a little spasm. I wince, and Jovan looks concerned.

"Are those pains still happening?" I nod as he shakes his head. "I've noticed it in some of the others as well. They say it will subside soon. Are they really painful? I could look into something to ease the pain, if you wanted."

"I'm fine. It hurts, but only for a moment. Then it's gone. Nothing I can't handle."

He looks sideways at me as he thunks some ribs onto my plate. "Just keep me informed. There's no medal for enduring pain. Remember that."

I nod and look over to Sakura, who is spooning food into Entara's waiting mouth. Jovan smiles with pride as he follows my gaze. "You know Entara's in the ninety-ninth percentile of her age group? She's only fourteen months old, and is already displaying heightened intelligence and is developing faster

physically than all the other kids. She's going to be someone special."

I reach out my hand to Entara and she grabs a finger.

"She's already special."

Jovan nods as he shovels meat into his mouth. Who knew he'd be such a proud papa. This is the same guy who couldn't remember to water the plants. Or maybe he just didn't want to water the plants. We had to lug it all the way from the reservoir, and in hundred-degree heat, that was quite a task. All the plants died before summer came, and we had to pull extra odd jobs just to make enough to buy our fruit that summer. Maybe that's why those melons all tasted so much better than I'd remember. Even today, in these concrete housing projects on The Strand, a melon is something to be cherished. The fact that Sakura managed to get onions out of her garden is nothing short of a miracle. Life is just one of her talents, I suppose.

I can't help but stuff myself. Back at the barracks, food is often something pre-packaged and unidentifiable. They say it's a specially formulated food packed with nutrients and minerals. Things that will help our treatment go smoothly. Whatever it is, it's pretty flavorless. It resembles the mush Entara eats, but I'm guessing her food is much tastier. Ribs and roasted onions are a special treat. And beer is almost unheard

of. I take another sip and feel it slide down my throat; a special refreshment that comes with the luxury of Jovan's job.

I grab my chest as I feel another twinge. Something tightening and releasing, and then it's gone as quickly as it came. Jovan looks concerned, but I wave him off.

"I'm going to mention it tomorrow to the Dr. Skillar," he says. I shake my head again, but he won't be deterred. "It could be something dangerous. A side effect or something. We have to know."

"Don't mention me. I don't want to be singled out. You know how they hate that."

"Fine. But this is something they should know about. I won't mention you. Swear." I have to take him at his word. He's always had my back before, but somehow I'm not sure he understands how much these guys mean business. I'm sure if they find out I drank a beer, there'll be hell to pay. Body as a temple and all that, you know. They take that stuff seriously. They also talk about us as 'investments', which always sends a chill up my spine.

"I should go. Lights out is in thirty minutes." I leave quickly with a wave to Sakura and a smile to Entara. Sometimes happy families are difficult to take.

The rain is coming down and soaking into the socks of my

boots. The Sargeant has had us out here for two hours, running up and down the course, hopping over that wall and crawling through the muck, periodically yelling and calling us names. This used to really bother me, but now it's just par for the course. It's what we do. It'll be over as soon as his voice gives out, which should be very soon. I can hear him straining over the sound of the raindrops hitting the ground. It's deafening actually. It's amazing we can hear him at all.

He stalks up to me and stares up into my face, his teeth grinding under his cheeks. I stare straight ahead, just over the top of his hat. "Dismissed!" My muscles let go and I start away. He grabs my arm. "Not you." I watch as the other volunteers head towards the open door to get lunch. I look at his face again, wondering how his teeth haven't been ground into dust yet.

"Sir?"

"Report to the infirmary. Immediately." I take another step and his grip on my arm tightens. "And Haffner?" I turn towards his question. "The food is one thing. I like meat, too. But stay out of the booze. That shit'll kill you." Something in his eyes says it's not a threat. It's not a reprimand. It's a warning. A chill pulses through my arm as his eyes pierce right through me.

"Yes, sir." His grip doesn't let up. He looks like he's about to say something else, but then he just releases me and

stalks away.

Inside the infirmary, the light is practically blinding after the gloom of the outdoors. I look around for Jovan, thinking he must have ratted me out. He's not there, but Dr. Skillar is, along with two others I've never seen before. Dr. Skillar smiles and walks towards me, his hand extended. I shake his hand as he peers into my face.

"Mr. Haffner, we've been waiting for you." He slaps me on the back. "How've you been?"

"Fine sir." We've never been close. Other than being there for the first treatment, I don't recall ever seeing him since. He puts his arm around my shoulder and gently guides me towards the others.

"This is Dr. Kinder and Dr. Tyrell. They helped me develop the serum for our volunteers. And as one of our earliest volunteers, we wanted to see how you were doing." He looks up at me with a satisfied grin that reminds me of a cat that has just eaten a bird.

"I'm fine, sir."

"Of course you are. We just want to take a look." He guides me to an exam room and asks me to sit in the chair. "Just relax. It's only a little physical."

He wheels a little table next to me and wraps a cuff around

my arm. He hits a button, and it starts buzzing as the cuff squeezes my arm. I turn my head to try to see the readout, and Dr. Kinder puts a hand on my shoulder.

"Just relax and sit back," he says. The pressure of his hand says he's not asking. Skillar pushes another button and the machine produces a printout that he hands to the others to examine. He goes through the rest of the physical, printing out the information coming from his computers and machines as Kinder and Tyrell nod and point at various figures on each page.

"What does it say?" I ask.

"You're doing great," says Skillar. "Now, have you had any adverse reactions? Side effects?"

Damn Jovan. I told him not to mention me. "Like what?"

"You know, pain, spasms, things like that."

"A little."

He marks a little box on his paper. "Dizziness? Nausea? Insomnia?" I shake my head, and he smiles. "Good. Anything else you'd like to mention?"

I shake my head, and he claps his hand on my shoulder. He looks satisfied. He makes another note on his papers and looks back at me.

"The pain and spasms should subside soon." He leans in closer. "And the beer definitely doesn't help. The serum doesn't

mix well with it."

I look down, wondering how he would know that I had a beer. Christ, it's not like I got drunk and went on a bender. It was one beer. As if he heard, he says, "It doesn't take much. Best to just steer clear of any toxins."

I nod, and he gets up. He motions to Dr. Kinder. "He's all yours."

Dr. Kinder smiles and holds open a door on the other side of the room. "This way, please."

I've been writhing in bed for a little over an hour, wondering what they did to me. I feel as though I'm being ripped open, from the top of my skull down the length of my torso. Dr. Kinder said I would experience some discomfort, but this is more than discomfort. Beads of sweat run down my face as I scrunch myself into the smallest ball I can.

"Hey man, you okay?" comes a whisper from a neighboring bunk. I'm gritting my teeth so hard against the pain, I can't even answer. This is a kind of sick I've never been. My senses are reaching the saturation point, and things start to sway and fade into the darkness. I hear another whisper, but can't make out the words. I feel a hand shake my shoulder, and see a light come on, but then it fades away. My senses have given up. I

can't think thoughts anymore, and my senses dull into a haze of gray, until everything in front of me feels just like a memory. I feel a pin prick in my arm, a faint voice, and then everything slides sideways into a dark hole.

"Hey, son, you up yet?" I open my eyes. I'm in the infirmary, and Dr. Kinder is standing over me. He smiles as his eyes meet mine, and then he shines a light into each one as my pupils dilate and shrink away from it. "You had a rough night."

I hold my head in my hands and nod. "You could say that."

"Well, the worst is over now. You're a strong one, so the dose had to be stronger than normal."

"That was just a treatment? I've never had a reaction like that before."

Kinder smiles. "You've reached the next phase. Congratulations." He sees the concerned look on my face and chuckles. "Oh, don't worry. The first one is the hardest. It should be smooth sailing after this." I sigh with relief as he continues. "Now is when your real training begins. Follow me."

He leads me down a long hallway to a dark room with a screen and projector in it. He switches it on and motions for me to sit. A slide comes up on the screen. It's a photo of Sakura and Entara.

"Mr. Haffner, you volunteered for this program. You were

selected to be part of an elite group of new soldiers, trained and engineered to be physically superior to normal humans. But we've learned that there are some faults in the program. It's difficult for a full grown body to accept the serum, and we're turning our sights to another phase of the program, where we can actually grow soldiers. And this is our first pilot."

I look back at him. "Grow soldiers?"

"It's very simple, really. We find those that are genetically predisposed and work with them from an early age. It's still in the beta phase, but if it works, we'll move on to an in utero program, and eventually have a whole race of soldiers. We'll be the most powerful nation on the planet."

My brain tries to process this information, and the words come slowly. "No more volunteers?" Kinder shakes his head.

"We have to get them earlier."

"But-" I feel like the words are there on the tip of my tongue, but they just won't jump off. "Choice-" I stammer.

He smiles like a cat. "You can help us."

"How?" Something deep in my stomach churns and I feel a weight on my shoulders.

"Entara. She's our first subject." I look at him again, wanting to protest, but the words won't come. He chuckles. "Your brother did the tests, so you already know. She's perfect. She's

strong and intelligent, and we need that. But with intelligence like that, she'll be lost to us later on. We have to get her now, before it's too late. We can't miss out on these formative years."

I look at the floor, which seems so far away. I feel a roar in my gut as it rumbles up through my chest and throat and into the room, filling it and bouncing off the walls, but I can't move. Kinder looks pleased.

"Good. It's working." I look at him again.

"Serum?"

He nods. "Just as we had hoped. Soldiers don't need a will of their own. They need someone else calling the shots. That's why they're soldiers." He claps me on the shoulders. "Now. Carry out your orders. Bring her to me." He opens the door, and I rush towards it and out, only to feel as if I've run into a cage.

Jovan opens the door, surprised to see me. I'm breathing heavily, but feel adrenaline moving through me, keeping me moving. I push him aside and lumber in. I grab Entara and cradle her gently in my arms. "What are you doing?" He demands. I look up at him, and he backs away. "Nico?" He reaches out to me, and I push him away. I feel as though a saw is tearing through me, grinding through everything one layer at a time, slowly and relentlessly. I go towards the door and Jovan grabs my arm. "Put

her down," he demands. I push him away again, and he stumbles backwards. I back through the door, slowly. My mouth can't form the words I want to say, and my body isn't listening. It's just going back to Kinder.

I take a deep breath, determined to tell Jovan what I'm thinking, what I'm doing, what I'm not doing. But I can only spit the two words before I stalk off into the night and back to Kinder's little lab.

"Bad...Blood."

Calafia

I stand still, even though I'm exhausted. They told me to stand, so I stand. There is another burst of photos, and flashes go off in my face. My vision is blotted with bright spots, but I still stand. My legs ache, and a bead of sweat curls its way down my back under the body armor and battle pack I'm wearing. It's not heavy, but it's also not very breathable. Luckily, I only have to wear the full gear for the pictures. Aside from the sweat rolling around under the high-tech suit, I'm motionless. I don't remember when I last blinked.

My eyes wander over to the men gathered behind the screen. There are three of them, counting Dr. Kinder, and all of them stare at the screen, brows furrowed, pointing at what they see. And what they see is me. Photos of me, standing like this, then

like that, looking at them, then away in the distance. Whatever poses they can think of, I do my best to carry out. I look down at them from my pedestal in a room that is nearly bare, save for the plain backdrop behind me, the carefully positioned lights, and the desk they currently lean on as they peer at a trio of screens and murmur among themselves.

The lights are hot, and my face is beaded with sweat, but they'll brush that all away in the shot they end up choosing. A tiny voice inside me asks if we are finished yet, and I tell it to wait. We're not done until Kinder says we are done. He points, murmurs, then points again as the man sitting in the middle, a man I don't recognize, moves his stylus across the screen to highlight or enhance the image they're all gazing at.

With the exception of Kinder, I've never seen any of these men before -- they're clearly from off-base. But they're specialists. Maybe they're Wards, the class of people that are entrusted with the technology of Pendleton City. They keep it all running so the rest of the city can go about their daily lives. Kinder says they're some of the most brilliant minds in the world. They look at one last photo and make the necessary adjustments. Dr. Kinder smiles, then walks over to me.

He's tall and lanky, emphasized by his ever-present white lab coat. His silver hair billows slightly as he walks, and he

tugs at his full beard as he nears me, a habit that he's developed over time. I know he's thinking through something when he does it, like he's solving a problem, or figuring out a puzzle. It's a gesture that I've grown to appreciate, as it makes him look both old and young at the same time.

"Great work, Calafia," he says, patting my shoulder. "The photos look great so far. This is going to be a great campaign."

I smile. He's satisfied. He likes it when I smile. I've known him long enough to almost be able to read his thoughts and know what he wants. That's why I'm standing here, posing for their campaign. I'm still not sure exactly what the campaign is for, but Kinder says it's vital in the fight against the rebels, and the stronger the campaign is, the less likely that things will turn into all out war. When he first told me about the campaign, he said it was for the people, and about the people. "With their support," he said, "we can win without destroying our city and everything we've built." I'm just glad to be of service. I'll do whatever he asks. Because it's my job, but also for him.

Kinder turns his back to me and faces the men behind the computer. "Do you have what you need?" he asks them. They nod, and he turns back to me, smiling wider. "Well done, Calafia. You may go."

I relax, and my entire body breathes again. Holding still is more difficult than drills, obstacle courses, and fitness tests put together. But after seventeen years of training, I can do it, if that's what they tell me to do.

I nod at Kinder and wait for the others to look up, but their eyes are glued to the screen, so I leave. I walk outside and take a deep breath, letting the hot, dry air fill my lungs. It feels good to breathe so deeply, and I stretch my arms above my head as I walk across the quad, back to the barracks. The base is sprawling and open, with buildings dotting the landscape in between drill areas. I reach the courtyard, and immediately quicken my pace. It's a beautiful place, surrounded by tiled stucco buildings, with a gurgling fountain gracing the center. It's peaceful here; the only place on base where people simply meet and talk. Like they are today. The other Betas sit on benches and at tables with parents and siblings, laughing and telling stories. I forgot it was visiting day. I'm the only Beta with no family.

Normally the courtyard is a place I enjoy, with its lush Canary Palms and Hyacinth, with the gurgle of fountains in the background, but not on Visiting Day. Seeing the others with their families stings. I don't feel many things, but I feel that. It's a sensation that lodges itself right in the back of

my throat and crushes it, making me gasp for breath. We have all been in the Program our entire lives, but I'm the only orphan. Dr. Kinder is the closest person I have to a father. When I was young, I would sit in his office for hours, and we would talk. He was always interested in everything I had to say, and always wanted to know how my training was going. How the other Betas were doing in their training. I would ask him about what he was working on, and he would always smile and say, "Aren't you the curious one?" Then he would muss my hair and most days, he would tell me a story about what Pendleton City was like when he was young. How the only thing he ever wanted was to make it the greatest city in the world, and with the help of the Betas, we would do just that. He once told me how he found me, abandoned in an alley, swaddled in newspaper. He had tears in his eyes as he told the story, and hoped he wouldn't ever see something like that again. He only ever mentioned it the one time, but it is burned into my brain, an indelible smudge that colors everything that I see and do. I'm glad that Kinder never brought it up again. I try to push it as far into the recesses of my memory as I can, so I can concentrate on here, today, and now.

From the corner of my eye, I see Gannon at a table with his parents. They look like the picture-perfect family, Gannon with his thick hair and rosy cheeks, his parents smiling proudly at

him. They're dressed in the clothes of the merchant class, as are most of the parents here today. Gannon told me his father is an accountant, and his mother is a nurse. He also has a sister that they sent to the Bay Cities for school, hopeful that she can join the Ward class once she is finished with her education.

Gannon's mother smiles at him and his father pats him on the back, pleased with what their son has become. A Beta. Pledged to serve and protect Pendleton City, and if necessary, the entire Legion of Cities. Not that any of us have been to any of the other cities in the Legion. Only this one.

As I come closer, Gannon looks up, but I look away before our eyes meet. I want to tell him about the photos and the campaign, but not in front of his parents. They'll ask me about myself; how I'm doing, what's new, and generally make polite small talk, but I know what they're thinking. Poor orphan girl. Good thing she found a home here. And that's all they'll ever see. Someone to pity. I don't need or want anyone's pity. I rush past Gannon with a slight nod of my head, and he nods back. Since we've known each other as long as we can remember, we've developed a way of speaking without words. It comes in handy during training, and will be even more important during combat, and I'm grateful for it now, too. Maybe we'll have time to talk later, before lights out. I have been so busy with this campaign

Kinder is putting together, lately that's been the only time we have together, anyway.

I get to my bunk and look at the clock as I shed the gear from the shoot. It feels good to peel it off and let my skin breathe again. I towel off the sweat that has gathered underneath, and do the math in my head -- there's just enough time for a run before evening line-up. I change into leggings and a tank top, looking forward to the chance to stretch my legs and get my muscles churning again. Let my brain shut off for a little while, where I don't have to think of what to say, or what to do. I can let my body take over. It's exactly what I need right now. Movement.

I take the long way to the trailhead, going around the courtyard. I'd rather not pass through again, and have all those eyes following me as I go; the lone Beta without visitors. I swing my arms wide to the sides as I go, stretching them slightly as I ready for the coming exertion. As I pass the sign marking the course, I move into a trot, then surge into a run as my muscles loosen up and embrace the motion. The course is flat at first, then slopes upwards, with obstacles peppered along the way. The pull-up bar, the rope wall, the ladder stairs. I know every inch of this course, and throw myself into each step. All I can hear is the crush of dirt under my feet, and I feel free.

My heart thumps in my chest and blood pumps all the way to my fingertips. This is where I feel alive.

I continue to the top of the pass and stop to catch my breath. This feels like the top of the world. I look out; the Camp stretches out on one side below, with Pendleton City on the other. The city is a jumble of buildings and palm trees, with the occasional faded billboard mixed in. They are a tattered reminder of a time long past, when things were easier and less dangerous. Other billboards shine brightly, even in the light of afternoon. These are the new electronic billboards that the city is gradually installing, and they'll be lit round the clock, with whatever messages they are programmed with. Kinder says they are a key component of the campaign for the city. Images and messaging about the importance of keeping order, and the role Betas play in ensuring that happens.

I spot a few landmarks as I look upon the city, which for me signify the different parts of town. The section of tall wooden fencing and bright green hedges where the Altas, the most important and privileged citizens live. It's the easiest to spot, as the houses are spaced further apart, and they emanate bright colors of tile and paint from each house. Further out, the fences and hedges recede to smaller houses that are more tightly packed together. The further away from the base they

get, the smaller and more tightly packed they become, until they look like they are practically on top of each other. Eventually, they give way to the grey, crumbling concrete of the Heights, an old district that used to be mostly warehouses and factories when the Wall was being built, and now are used by multitudes of families that can't afford to live in the regular houses closer to the base. In the middle of all of it, directly east of the base, down a street they call the Mainline, is the Lighthouse, a towering glass skyscraper that dwarfs the entire city. It's the only skyscraper standing anymore, and it's where the Security Council for the Legion of Cities is located. They meet regularly to make and update laws, solve problems, and generally govern. Kinder goes there often, but I have never been inside. From here, though, it's obvious how it got its name. The sun gleams off it sharply, and it shines so bright I can't look directly at it. It's as powerful as staring directly into the sun.

Beyond the buildings of the city, far in the distance, I see the stark white line of the Wall that encircles the city, keeping the entire city safe. Beyond the wall, there is nothing. Only the vast emptiness of dessert that once was farmland. Some of it still is, but life out there is hard, and there is no protection. The sun is relentless out there. At least here, we have the ocean breeze to cool the air, but out there, the sun

beats down mercilessly, and can easily kill anyone who was foolish enough to venture out unprepared. I've even heard of experienced travelers falling prey to the dangers of the dessert, whether it is from the elements, animals, or criminals. There are stories of raiders and thieves that live beyond the Wall, waiting for the chance to pounce on some hapless soul who is unable to defend himself. I've heard of the brutality and swiftness with which they attack, and they never leave anyone alive. They say the raiders wail at the top of their lungs when they kill, as if it were some sort of battle cry. It's supposed to sound like screeching eagles, but I've never heard it for myself. I've never heard an eagle, either, so I'm not sure I would know the difference anyway.

I may have never been beyond the Wall, but I've gone out into the city many times, roving around on training missions and learning our way around. I've seen what feels like every slice of Pendleton City, both good and bad, beautiful and ugly, but standing here, at the top of the trail, all seems so alien. It lacks the order and logic of the buildings on the base, and I am glad I don't have to live out in it. Coming up here, to the top of this trail, always reminds me of that. How lucky I am to be here. I know there is another way of life out there, but I don't want any part of it. I am not curious.

I rest my hands on my hips as I gather my breath and look as far as my eyes will allow, further than any other Beta could, and definitely further than any regular person. The men from behind the computer screen have said that once the campaign starts, I'll be going out into the city more often, and even travel to the other four cities in the Legion. That I'll see more of the world than I've ever seen. It's hard to imagine ever going beyond the Wall. There are so many things I don't know about my future, like how things will be on this campaign, how I will get from one city to the next, and if I will have to fight raiders. I'm not afraid of them. Using my training on them actually makes me smile a little, knowing I would be making the world better by killing them, like Kinder says. Thinking about it makes a spark run down my spine. I rub the goosebumps from my arms and shake the thought. I'll just do what they tell me. Because I'm a good soldier. The best.

I look at the sun as it continues to drop in the sky. I could stay up here much longer, soaking up the sun, letting the cool breeze ripple over my skin. But I'll have to go now if I'm going to be on time for evening line-up. Being late is not an option. I take one last deep breath and turn to go, when something catches my eye. I look out, then see it clearly. Out near the Wall, a ball of fire rises up; a spark in the middle of

shadowy concrete. A cloud of black smoke rises above it, big and billowy, before it thins out and starts to dissipate. My muscles tense instinctively. The hair on my neck stands up and I am still, waiting for more fire, more movement to come from the Wall. Nothing comes. The only movement is smoke and ashes rising slowly in a cloud. I look for other clouds of smoke and fire, near the wall, then closer in the city, where the houses are huddled together like frightened sheep, but there are no others. I exhale and shake my head, then look up again at the darkening sky. I run back down the hill, faster than before. Being late to line-up would be unacceptable.

Just as Sergeant Lamb blows the whistle, I take my place with the rest of the squad on the grass field that sprawls in the middle of the base, a flagpole at one end. I take a quick glance around at the uniforms that surround me. Gannon is nowhere in sight, but with all of us lined up, he could be anywhere. We normally line up together, but since I didn't get here sooner, I have to take the first spot I see. There are hundreds of us, all trained and ready to go. We line up in perfectly straight rows; the result of over a decade of lining up twice daily, ready for orders. I'm at the front corner, not far from where Lamb stands, whistle still in his mouth. We salute in near perfect unison, until Lamb gives the 'at-ease'

command. The squad moves as one. The sound of our movements echo off the surrounding buildings in one definitive pulse, then settle into silence again, except for the regular rattle of the flagpole chain flopping against the pole. We have worked together, trained together, and lived together for seventeen years; it sometimes feels as if our minds and bodies are connected.

Lamb paces slowly in front of the squad, but remains quiet, as if waiting for something. The whistle drops from his mouth and flops against his broad chest. I follow him with my eyes, not moving my head. He's tall and thickly built from years of building muscle and actually using it. His salt and pepper hair is neatly combed close to his head, accentuating the cut of his sharp jawline. He has the air of authority about him from years of giving orders that he knows will be carried out. He lumbers toward me, his muscular frame at odds with his sunken cheeks. He always looks like a man who is carrying an enormous weight on his broad shoulders. I can only imagine what he has been through, since he came up before the Beta program, at a time when there were fewer soldiers, and raiders in the Empire bled into the city on occasion.

After Dr. Kinder, Lamb is the only other person I have ever felt connected to. He trained us all, and even though he has

never said anything, he seems to understand how I feel about being the only Beta without a family. Every now and then, he'll put his hand on my shoulder, smile slightly, and sigh. I spent so many years coming to him for advice on how to be a better soldier, and he always just laughed softly. He told me I was already the best soldier anyone could be. I once asked him why he didn't run for a position in the Security Council, but he just laughed me off and said, "I'm not a mastermind. I'm just a soldier." I can relate.

He gets near and turns to me, just long enough for our eyes to lock, then he walks the other direction again, hands behind his back. He looks different than usual, without the confidence that usually oozes out of him. It's just a slight difference, but it's a bit unnerving. He looks...afraid. Goosebumps rise on my arms and neck. I've never seen him show one iota of fear, and I now know. That explosion has changed everything.

"Are we ready?" Dr. Kinder calls from the edge of the squad. He looks amused as he scrutinizes us. He still wears his lab coat, rubs his hands in anticipation, as if we are about to play some sort of game. Except Kinder doesn't play games.

He nods at Lamb, who turns to us, inhales sharply, then barks, "Ten-hut!"

We snap to attention and Lamb nods with satisfaction. He

turns to Kinder, then steps aside, essentially giving him the floor. Kinder steps forward and yells, his voice straining.

"Congratulations, Betas. All your training and dedication has led to this moment. You represent the best of the best, and now, our way of life is threatened. The peace, order, and happiness of this city and its citizens cannot last without your help. The rebels who would seek to threaten it grow bolder each day. Today, they set off a bomb and damaged the Wall. Tomorrow, they could attack this Camp. They could attack other citizens, who are powerless to defend themselves."

I think about the explosion I saw and wonder how bad the damage was. I wonder what else may have happened that I didn't see. I hope that no one is hurt. I grind my teeth together thinking about it. The rebels have been causing trouble for months now. It started with graffiti painted on walls out near the Heights, then escalated from there. There were stories of rebels throwing bottles at squads while they were out on patrol, but no one was hurt. They complain about fairness and never having enough, but if they stopped painting walls with hateful messages and got to work, they would have enough, and things would be more fair. Kinder thinks they don't know what they really want. If they did, they'd get jobs and be industrious. He takes a step in my direction, hands clasped behind his back, as

if deep in thought before turning abruptly towards us and raising his hand. He continues.

"But we will not let that happen, will we?"

As one, the squad answers. "Sir, no sir!"

He smiles. "It is up to you to protect and preserve this great city -- this great nation that we have built. Without you, our future is uncertain. So you must do everything you can to ensure that doesn't happen. You must send the message to those rebels that there are consequences for destroying the peace of this city." He spreads his arms wide and turns in a small circle, looking at the massive concrete military buildings that rise up around us. They are angular and stark, the sun shining between them as it sets. He turns back to us and lowers his arms. "Are you ready?"

"Sir, yes sir!"

Kinder looks at Lamb and nods his approval. Then, to us, "This fight will be dangerous. The rebels have shown us their firepower, and we know they have no qualms about killing innocent people. Some of you will make the ultimate sacrifice, but I know all of you, under the leadership of Sergeant Lamb, will fight bravely, putting your training to use, and Lamb will make sure as many of you as possible return. He's the best Master Sergeant we've got, and he's been with you from the

beginning. He'll be with you until the end, and together, we will stop the rebels once and for all."

Kinder looks at Lamb and does a sloppy civilian salute, which Lamb returns with his crisp, exact movement. Kinder claps him lightly on the shoulder and smiles. We stand motionless, waiting for the next order. A slight breeze wafts through the quad, making the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. In an elongated moment, I hear a faint whine and a thump, then a crack.

Blood spatters across Kinder's face as Lamb crumples to the ground with a single, precise puncture through his temple.

Nico

There is a lot of chatter among the other workers. Something happened. Something big. Normally they talk slowly, swaying and moving their arms, with smiles on their faces, but not today. Today they look sideways at each other and speak quickly, bent over their machines. Some of them look like they are practically spitting their words out, desperate to divulge them as quickly as possible. Whatever happened, it is spreading urgently across the factory floor. I keep my distance, not wanting to get pulled into something that doesn't concern me. My feet ache and my hands are stiff, and I don't want to know. In my experience, the less I know, the better. Hoshun looks up at me with his bottomless dark eyes, as if pleading with me to telepathically know what is being said, and I look back down at

my work, staring at every single thread that moves through my machine, trying to convince him that I am engrossed. But in this place, it's tough to convince people you're actually interested in the work.

Sure, we put out thousands of yards of some of the finest fabric Pendleton City has, but none of us really care. It's just a job, and one of the worst ones available at that. I've seen vibrantly colored silks, wools, linens, and cotton woven together here, then put on trucks and sent up to the shops where the tailors will buy it. It will end up on the back of some Alta woman, who thinks that starting a literacy program with her pampered girlfriends will actually do something to change the world. The Altas spend most of their time behind the walls and hedges and gates they have carefully built around their sprawling homes to keep out the things they do not want to see, do not want to know. They stay in their bright enclaves and talk about how to help the less fortunate, eat pastries and drink tea from fine china shipped in from Diego Island. What they don't know, or don't care to know, is that they can't change the world if the world already controls them. The world changed them into what it wanted, not the other way around. Besides, none of them really want to get their hands dirty anyway. The things it would take to help the less fortunate would require them to know

someone less fortunate, and they don't. They think of the Wards who power their homes and the Jornas who make their clothes as the less fortunate, but the bottom is much further down than that. They can't even conceive of how deep misfortune reaches.

So they put on their custom tailored silks and parade around town, bestowing their charity on the less fortunate by dropping coins in a bucket, or donating books to a school, then go home feeling like they did something that matters. But nothing matters anymore. And no one really gets a choice. Not even them. They're just the lucky ones who get to eat until they're full and have "spare time".

The noise from the machine whirs loudly in my ears. It's soothing, in its way. It makes it possible for me to have my own thoughts, and actually listen to them. No one can talk to me, or tell me what to do, and as long as the machines turn, I am a free man. My hands know the work, performing the same movements over and over again, while my brain has the chance to get lost in the rhythm and regularity that is never present anywhere else. Maybe that's why I ended up in this factory, with these machines. Freedom is elusive, and often deceptive. The Altas think they're free. So do the Wards and the Betas and everyone else. None of them are. The higher up the food chain they are, the less control they have.

Hoshun walks over to me and bumps me on the shoulder with his fist, as if we're sharing some kind of joke. I hate it when he does that. I smile, but I'm sure it looks more like a grimace. He leans in conspiratorially.

"There was an explosion by The Wall today," he says, after looking around to check if anyone is listening. As if anyone could, with the noise. I can barely hear him.

I sigh. "Was anyone hurt?"

He looks disappointed that I didn't ask something else, and his face falls. "No. But you can bet they're going to lock down the Heights tonight."

The Heights. How's that for irony? Worst neighborhood in all of Pendleton City, full of row houses, crime, and every vice possible, and it somehow ended up with that name. It's not even on a hill. It floods every time it rains, which isn't often, but still. I would say I live there, but I don't even have a home. When I left the base all those years ago, I knew what I was getting into. I have no papers, so regular jobs are out of the question, no matter what skills I have. Even if I did, they'd be looking for me. No one escapes the base. Once you're in, it's for life, whether you like it or not. Well, for everyone except Jovan and me. I've been running for nearly twenty years, from Kinder, from the serum, from my own thoughts. And it feels like

they are still with me every single day, haunting my thoughts when I'm awake, and my dreams when I'm asleep. I haven't had a moment of peace since I left, but I still have hope that one day, the serum will finally release its hold on my body and let me be. It's not as strong as it used to be, so I still have hope. Until then, The Heights is the closest thing I have to a home. Otherwise, I'd have nowhere to go.

I guess I just go there to spend time when I'm not here at the factory. Sit on the corner and pass the time. Every now and then, some poor bastard takes pity on me and lends me a floor for the night. If I'm lucky, I get a lumpy pillow. I just do my best to stay out of people's way, and out of sight of the authorities, who would drag me back to the base for reconditioning if they ever found me.

Hoshun gives me that concerned look he has, where he dips his head and leans in. I hate it when he gets into my space.

"Are you going to be okay?"

I scowl and lean away from him. "Sure. Why wouldn't I be?"

He shrugs and looks away. He knows I sleep on the street, but is too embarrassed to bring it up. Or maybe he's afraid I'll ask to stay with him. Not that I would. He turns back to me.

"It's just that...you never know when they're going to start asking for papers. Especially when things start to explode."

He looks at me a second longer, then walks away. He saunters casually, his long legs carrying him quickly back to his machine, where he bends his wiry frame over it and lets his long fingers expertly guide the threads to their destination. He blows a wisp of straight black hair out of his eyes, focused intensely on his work.

I try to shake him off, but I can't help but hear his words ringing in my ears. He's right. I haven't had papers in almost fifteen years, when I went off the grid. That's how I ended up in this rat-infested hellhole. No one asks for papers in the factory because no one would work there if they had another choice. Panhandling has a longer lifespan. That's why none of the workers are older than fifty. In this place, I'm practically a dinosaur.

I look up at the second floor office that overlooks the factory floor, and see Jessup standing at the window, sleeves rolled up, arms crossed over his generous belly. He's not like us. He deals with numbers and bosses and orders and keeps the whole place running. He's got a family somewhere that he goes home to every day, and he probably eats real food that is fresh and flavorful; not the rancid gruel the rest of us subsist on. I don't think he's a bad man or even a bad boss, but I know there is a wide chasm between our experiences that will forever

separate us.

I make sure not to look too long. I don't want him to notice me. Once he sees the forty-year old on the floor, he'll start making calls to his contacts in The Heights to find a ten-year-old anxious to help feed their family and take my place. I may not have a family to feed, but that doesn't mean I don't want to eat. So I try to be invisible.

I hunch back over my machine with renewed fake gusto, determined to make it through the rest of this day unnoticed. With explosions going off, it won't be long before the base starts sending their Betas out to shake us down and intimidate us into subservience. Little do they know, I've already been down that path, and stray back onto it from time to time. It's a horrifying place to be.

The bell rings with an earsplitting scream, and the machines slowly clack to a stop within a few minutes. Jessup comes out of his office, lumbering with too much weight pulling him forward, his face sweaty and hands gripping the thin handrails. He descends the stairs like a king bestowing gifts upon his kingdom, smiling at the obedience he is able to command. He's probably not a bad person, but he definitely doesn't dispel the stereotypes of the over-privileged merchant class. He's just a rung above the Jornas that clean the city,

sew the clothes, and raise the children, but you wouldn't know that by looking at him from a distance. You'd think he was dyed in the wool Alta. It's when you get closer, you realize that his shoes are scuffed from years of wear, and his shirts are faded from years of laundering. He doesn't buy things often, and probably loses sleep over how he's going to put his kids through school, so they won't have to work in a place like this.

He claps his hands a few times to get the attention of the workers, which he already has. Many of them sidle closer to where he stands on the steps, gathering so they can hear better. I stay where I am, not wanting to get trapped in a throng of workers. Whenever he comes out of his office in the middle of the day, there's a good chance something bad is about to happen. Jessup waits until the end of the day for good news. "Everyone, we have some very special visitors today."

He gestures toward the giant roll-up door, which is usually opened for the trucks to be loaded and sent off. The entire assembly looks in that direction and a smartly dressed woman walks in, her arm lightly tucked under her husband's arm. They are simply silhouettes framed by the bright afternoon sunlight, black figures of mystery that have the entire factory holding their breath in anticipation, suspense, and fear. The woman is short and shapely, while the man is tall and muscled, but not

like a soldier. Like a regular man. As they step into the gloom and away from the bright sun, their features come into sharper focus. They're both well dressed, but not quite to the gaudy and overdone style of the Altas.

I can't take my eyes off her. She steps into the factory as a woman who has never wanted for anything, who owns all that she sees. Her eyes are wide and black, with tiny streaks of silvery hair highlighting her otherwise dark hair that is swept up on her head in a tight knot, then slides down the side of her neck in a braid. She looks like an Alta, but something tells me she's not. She's something else. Her own category.

I can't help but stare. It's not often someone like this comes to the factory. They can't stand the noise, the dust, or the pleading eyes that remind them of their own waste and indulgence. But this woman is different. She doesn't have the porcelain skin of the others, or the sharp cheekbones, or the ostentatious jewelry announcing wealth. Her skin is bright and brown, her eyes deep and sparkling. Her clothes indicate that her taste isn't following the others. It is leading them.

Her dress is an iridescent blue and fits her perfectly. The tailoring is exquisite, and the design is unique, obviously created explicitly for every curve of her body, and no one else's. I've seen a lot of thread wind through these machines,

and that color doesn't come cheap. That she would wear something like that to this hellish place means one of two things. Either she's got much nicer clothes at home and doesn't care about this dress, or this is a special occasion.

I look over at Hoshun; he stands stock still, as if in a trance. In fact, most of the workers look too afraid to move a muscle. My own heart quickens, and my throat constricts as I do my best to breathe and look normal. I wipe my hands on my shirt as sweat forms a slick on the palms, but do my best not to move too much. I don't want to draw attention to myself, especially now. Simple misunderstandings easily mushroom into serious crimes whenever an Alta is involved, so we have learned to be careful. Nothing is left to chance. The couple walk slowly through the factory, and I finally tear my eyes away from her long enough to look at her husband.

My stomach shrinks into a single knot as my hands grip the bench. Tyrell. Older and slower to be sure, but it's him. I wouldn't forget his face in a million years. I'd know him anywhere, even after all this time. I haven't seen him since...

I push the thought away from my head; right now I just have to concentrate on my breathing. In. Out. In. Out. It gets harder with every step they take in my direction. I squeeze my eyes closed as my brain begins shutting down, giving way to the

adrenaline coursing through me. I can't help myself.

I see an open door in the back of the building, and my body takes over. Just like the old days, where my brain just rolls over and lets my muscles, blood, and nerves act without it. It's a betrayal, but my brain wasn't the first or the last to betray me, so I'm used to it. I bolt towards the door. My legs churn as quickly as the muscles will let them, past stunned faces, and all I can think of is escape. Jessup yells from his perch on the stairs, and footsteps of guards fall in behind me. I have to run faster. Somewhere, deep within me, my body finds a long-untapped reserve and I kick into the next gear. I surge forward, keeping my eyes focused on the white square of the sunlit door, thinking of nothing else. The open door is suddenly closer, but not quite close enough.

A guard quickly shoots me with the tranq gun, and my body goes limp. The drugs always did work quickly. I fall limply to the ground, scuffing my face on the concrete as my head hits it with a thud. I lie on my side, still focused on the door, my breath heaving from my chest desperately, as if I were still running. I watch helplessly as someone closes the door, shutting out the white light of hope I'd had only seconds ago. They roll me over onto my back as Tyrell approaches and stands over me, his face blank. He has never been one to give anything away.

He bends over closer to me and his eyes narrow. "Nico?" He shakes his head in disbelief. "I never thought I'd see you again. You shouldn't have run away." My brain takes over again as I struggle for breath. He looks so calm, so serene. Did he come here for me? Has Kinder finally found me after all these years? What will he say to me? What will he do? Panic grips my chest. Tyrell straightens back up as my vision blurs and the guards drag me off the floor of the factory. I fall away into nothingness.

Jovan

Sakura keeps bending over those plants, and somehow, she keeps them alive. I have no idea how. She's like Midas with the golden touch. I watch her tend to her small square of earth, knowing she'll get it to give us onions, peppers, herbs, and whatever else she whispers to it. I wish I could have done better for her. For everyone. But I can't think about that anymore. I just have to make sure I don't screw up again.

From the other side of the alley, Ryoko runs up to her, throwing her arms around Sakura's waist. Ryoko's chest heaves, her eyes wide, sweat matting her hair against her forehead. Sakura turns to me as Chasca comes into view, waving her arms. Sakura smiles and picks Ryoko up and rushes into the house, with

Chasca trailing behind. Chasca breathes hard, her ample frame leaning lightly against the wall.

"Mama, it was so much fire!" Ryoko says with excitement. Sakura and I exchange a look, then she looks back to Ryoko and pulls her sweaty hair off her forehead.

"What happened?" I ask, checking to make sure Ryoko doesn't have any cuts or scrapes. She buries her head in her mother's chest as Sakura tries to soothe her.

"It's a message," Chasca says. "Out by the Wall."

"What did you do?" I ask. "More importantly, why did you take my daughter with you?"

Chasca shrugs. "She wanted to come."

"It was amazing, Daddy," Ryoko adds. Her eyes are wide, and her chest still heaves from running. Sakura puts her down and gently tells her to wash up before dinner. Ryoko trots off, and Sakura turns to Chasca.

"We set some explosives by the Wall. No one was hurt; we were careful to clear the area first. But it sends a message. A clear one."

"Which is what?" Sakura asks.

"That we won't be silent anymore."

Sakura and I stare at Chasca, waiting for her next words. Chasca looks down the hall to where Ryoko just disappeared. We

can hear her humming happily in the bathroom, splashing water on her flushed cheeks.

"When were the rebels ever silent?" I ask. I can't help the annoyance in my voice. "And since when do you involve my daughter?"

"She wanted to come," Chasca repeats.

"You could have told her no," I say.

Chasca shrugs again. "You know how kids can be. Besides, I was watching her the whole time. Don't you think she should know what's going on in the world? That she should have an allegiance?"

My blood boils as Chasca straightens up to face me. She's only slightly older than me, but the lines on her face come from years of hardship, first as an Alta's housekeeper, then in the factories, and lately, on the streets. Until she joined Kato's ragtag rebel group, that is. Thanks to Kato, she eats on a regular basis, has clothes on her back, and a place to put her head at night. She has safety. Security. It's not hard to see why she's so loyal to him.

I step closer to her and point my finger in her face. "If you ever--"

Sakura intervenes, stepping between the two of us. "Thank you for keeping Ryoko safe, Chasca," she says mildly. "I just

wish we would have known. We'd like to have a say in what our daughter is doing, especially when it comes to blowing things up. She's only eight, after all."

As usual, Sakura knows exactly what to say. Chasca relaxes her jaw, and I let my clenched fists open. Chasca smiles a warm smile that she doesn't have too often anymore.

"You're right," she says. "I won't let her come with us anymore without your permission."

Sakura nods. "Thank you."

Sakura starts to turn back to her garden outside, when Chasca speaks up again.

"It's just that--"

We both turn sharply and look at her, expectant.

Chasca looks at the floor. "Kato wants to see you," she mumbles.

I roll my eyes. "Kato? For what?"

Chasca shrugs. I shouldn't take my anger out on her, but I'm so tired of this game. The rebels think I need to join up with them, only because I used to be on the inside. They think I have some special knowledge of how to defeat the Betas and bring some magic tonic of equality to our city. But that was a long time ago, and I've learned the risks first hand. I'm done. I just want to live a quiet life with Sakura and Ryoko, and they

can fight for whatever it is they think they're fighting for. I want no part of it. If anyone ever bothered to ask my opinion, I'd tell them it was a lost cause anyway. They can't fight the firepower and technology that Kinder has. And they definitely can't fight the mutant soldiers that Kinder has managed to grow over the last seventeen years. They're too big, too fast, and too smart. And they follow orders so blindly, they'd cut off their own arms if he told them to. That's what that serum does. It turns them into mindless zombies. Very powerful mindless zombies.

Sakura lightly touches my arm as Chasca looks back up at me. "Just hear him out. Then he'll leave us alone," Sakura says quietly.

"Kato can protect us," Chasca adds.

I scoff. Protection. I've seen what Betas can do. There's no protection from them. And Sakura and I decided long ago that we wouldn't go around killing Betas. The chance that Entara is still one of them is very real, and we won't take that chance. Even if she's our enemy, she's still our daughter. It's that thought that kills me every day. It's that thought that also gets me out of bed every day. That maybe, one day, I'll be able to find her, and she can be just our daughter again.

"Just listen to him," Chasca pleads. "Please."

I sigh and look at Sakura. She leans her head on my shoulder and sighs as well. We don't have much, but we have each other. Even Kato can't change that.

"Fine."

Chasca leads me through a labyrinth of concrete buildings, most of them crumbling from decades of emptiness and neglect. We're heading towards the Wall, and my nervousness grows with every step. The enormous buildings dwarf us, but I feel exposed. I'm not familiar with this neighborhood, and I wouldn't have any idea where to go if trouble showed up. And after that explosion, it's bound to show up at any minute. I always thought that these warehouses were empty, but as we pass, I see heads poking out from paneless window frames, just enough to make sure we're not headed in their direction. Or lobbing grenades. Or god knows what else.

These must be Kato's rebels. I have no idea where he gets them. It's not that difficult to tell the disenfranchised you can help them against the giant machine of government. He's got charisma, and knows just enough to be dangerous. His rebels are uneducated and desperate for something better. He tells them what they want to hear, and they eat it like candy, not knowing any better. It's how politics has worked for centuries, and Kato is no fool. Back before the military ran this city, when people

still clung to the idea of democracy, he might have been someone. Maybe even President. But that was ages ago. So long ago, I don't even know what that was like. Today, those ideas are all gone. The military runs things here, and they protect the Security Council. No one really seems to know who's on that council, but they run this city. They run all five of the cities in the Legion. From the Jornas all the way up to the Altas, the Security Council calls all the shots.

But in this part of town, calling the shots falls to Kato. If he'd been content to keep to his little neighborhood, they would probably leave him alone to run his little fiefdom. But now that he's making trouble, I doubt they'll be content to do that anymore. Running your own racquet is one thing, but flaunting their authority is quite another.

Chasca stops at a warehouse and I look around. This one looks like all the others, but she regards it with an air of reverence, as if it were a church of some kind. And then I see it, the graffiti that marks it as rebel. If you didn't know the sign, you would miss it, but I've been seeing more of it lately, as the movement grows. It's a simple white line, wavy and vertical, with two slanted lines drawn through the middle. It symbolizes the breaking of the Wall, and all the other things the rebels believe hold them back, or in, or whatever.

Kato stands leaning against the wall of a crumbling warehouse across from the symbol as the light of afternoon fades slowly into twilight. It's getting dark, and I hope he'll make this quick so that I can get back to Sakura and Ryoko. Kato clearly likes these old warehouses. Once upon a time, they were useful, but now they're just shelter from the sun. They held bricks and mortar and wheelbarrows and all manner of things necessary to build a massive wall around the city. They were integral to the security of the boundary of Pendleton City. I can only imagine all the bustling bodies that moved bricks from here to there, packing them on trucks, gathering workers into vans to drive out to where the Wall was being built. It must have been such a different time. A time when there was hope for a better future, and it came in the form of white bricks and propaganda masquerading as idealism and a better life. But now, there's nothing inside. Even the floor is just dirt. So much for a better life.

"Ryoko saw the explosion," I say to his back. "But I guess you already knew that."

He turns slowly, looking like the professor he probably could have been if he had been born into privilege. But he was born into this life instead, the same one as me, so here we are. He's tall and wiry, with dark hair and brown skin. People say he

is descended from the first people to populate this land, thousands of years ago. They say he's descended from the Kumeyaay, but the Altas just assume he's like me. To them, we all look the same. What a joke.

"I heard," he says quietly.

"Were you there?"

He raises an eyebrow, then shakes his head. "Can't be everywhere at once. I'm glad she was there, though. She should know what we're fighting for."

"And what is that?" I ask, sounding more bitter than I had intended.

"Freedom."

I scoff. "You're delusional."

He sighs, then turns back to the wall. He leans against it casually, but his look is fierce. "I want a life, Jovan. A life."

"By taking mine?"

"Yours was taken years ago, my friend. We both know that."

"You've got a lot of nerve -- "

He holds up his hand and relaxes his voice, as if trying to coax a wild animal to him. "I don't want to fight with you. But we need you. You're safer with us than on your own."

"Blowing things up is safer? You should really rethink your

strategy."

He pushes himself off the wall and squares his shoulders to me, the ferocity returning to his gaze.

"The Betas are going to come for us with or without explosions. They'll do whatever they're told, and we'll be stripped of the few rights we have in a city that doesn't care about us. I say we fight back. Not make it easy for them."

I narrow my eyes and look up at the wall, knowing it was supposed to be for protection, but now it is here to trap us.

He takes a step closer. "You know I'm right."

I hesitate. I don't want to help him, but I also don't want to make an enemy out of him. I have lived here since I left the base, and I care about the people in my neighborhood. It hasn't been easy for any of us. And Kato is a powerful man. He inspires people, and while I still don't think he has a chance in hell of fighting the Betas with any success, he can turn the people here against my family and I in a heartbeat. Then where would we go? He walks toward the back door of a nearby warehouse, motioning for me to follow him.

"I have something to show you."

I sigh, hoping he'll make it quick. Sakura and Ryoko are at home alone, and I'd like to get back to them. Time matters when you don't know how much of it is left. He leads the way down an

alley, then up a flight of stairs, then up a billboard ladder. It creaks as we climb up in the darkness. It looks like Kato does this often, judging by how quickly he scrambles up the rungs.

I follow behind him, without the speed and surety of each foot landing where it should. The billboards are at least fifty feet off the ground, with nothing more than a small ledge to stand on. The city is modernizing them into electronic displays, but this billboard still features the torn and faded image of a happy beachgoer, splashing in a swimsuit with the phrase "Water sparkles in Pendleton City" emblazoned at the top. I remember when these were new. When they really did seem to sparkle, and drew people in from hundreds of miles around. It seems so stupid now, but it worked on Nico and I. Just two young idiots thinking an advertisement would keep its promises.

I make it to the ledge and slide out, pressing my body flat against the billboard. There's nothing to hold on to, and I've never been a fan of heights. I would have made a terrible volunteer, back in the day. I know that now, but all those years ago, I thought I was invincible. Now I know that life is a paper thin miracle, and I don't plan on taking any risks.

Kato smiles slightly at my unease, but doesn't remark on it. At least he'll let me keep my dignity. He points west, out

by the ocean. The newer electronic billboards are out there, closer to the ocean. "See?"

I nod, then look back at him and shrug. "So?"

Kato shakes his head with annoyance.

"No, look at them. What do you see?"

I look closer. The billboards all have the same image of a woman, decked out in battle gear and all the weaponry a person could carry on their person. She looks tall, powerful, and utterly emotionless. Beta. No question. She moves from one pose to another with confidence that only comes with youth and brainwashing, her armor and weapons shown to their greatest advantage. She looks...deadly. I sigh, not understanding why Kato is pointing it out.

"So now they're advertising the Beta program? That's old news, isn't it?"

Kato shakes his head again, frustrated. "No. Look at her. Look."

I shrug and look again. Her black hair winds around her shoulders in a thick braid, her greenish eyes peering out into the night. She was given to them by someone who was desperate, no doubt. Some family that had one too many children, and couldn't afford to educate them all. The Beta program made promises of the best life for their children, and she jumped at

the chance. And there's no parent that doesn't want that for their child. The girl on the billboard looks straight out, then turns her head to look off in the distance. And then I see it. On her neck, just under her jawline, is a dark splotch that reaches back to her ear. It is the kind of birthmark that only a parent could remember.

"Entara."

As soon as her name is off my tongue, I feel sweat covering my face and back. Hot, dry air invades my gaping mouth, and I feel my lungs swell. And then I can't breathe. I close my eyes and lean hard into the billboard, trying to catch my breath. Kato grabs my arm to steady me from falling.

"Easy, Jovan. Breathe."

I pull my arm away from him and sink to sitting, the heels of my hands pressing into my eye sockets. I rub my eyes, then open them and look at the billboard again. And there she is. Her image turns and stares at me with such emptiness, it feels like her eyes are piercing right through me. I clutch my chest with the pain as my heart twists and falls in a sick dance.

Kato squats down and grabs my chin, pulling it to the side.

"Look at me, Jovan. Breathe."

It takes a minute, but gradually my breath slows and I regain some of my composure.

"How long have you known?" I ask him.

He rises back to standing as I clumsily pull myself up as well, doing my best to avoid looking at the billboard again.

"They started broadcasting it this morning." He takes a long pause to let it all sink in. "So you in?"

I narrow my eyes and glare at him. "Sakura needs to know."

I turn and do my best to get back down the rickety ladder, and once my feet hit solid ground, I walk away from Kato without looking back. As soon as I am out of his sight, I pick up my pace. I feel sick. And invigorated. Terrified. Hopeful. It's too many emotions going on at once, and my stomach can't keep up. I wretch in the dirt, then hurry on.

I'm sweating as I head back to the house. I haven't figured out yet what I'm going to say to Sakura. I still have no interest in joining up with Kato, but I also know he's the only chance we might have to get her back. I laugh at myself. Get her back. I've seen what they do to the Betas. She probably hasn't had a thought of her own since the last time she sat on our living room rug. Who knows if we would ever be able to rehabilitate her? And even if we could, would she ever be the happy giggling child I remember? I doubt Kato has the resources for that.

I'm angry now, knowing he can't help us, and that we are

powerless without him. He's just as manipulative as they are at the Camp. I burst into the house, and Sakura jumps up quickly with a finger to her lips for me to be quiet. Ryoko is in bed, and she doesn't want me to wake her. I sit, holding my head in my hands, trying to explain to her what I have seen. What I know. It comes in fits and starts, and my emotions overtake me more than once. But Sakura is nothing if not patient, and she lets me get it all out, waiting for me to make sense.

When I finish, I look at her, and her face hardens. Something in the back of my brain scratches, wondering if she already knew. How could she? She leans her forehead against mine and sighs. "I guess we have no choice, now," she says quietly.

"Don't we?" I ask. I desperately want her to fix this. Like she fixes everything.

She gets up and walks into the kitchen, switching on the light, then pours herself a glass of water. She appears in the doorway again, then leans against it and sips from the glass. "Kato's fight isn't our fight. You and I both know that. But this is our daughter. She's all that matters. If Kato's interests and ours intersect for a while, we may as well use the resources he has."

"But what do we do? What if they try to kill her? What if we capture her? Can we even trust Kato?"

Sakura comes to me quickly, quietly, in the way that she does, and shushes me gently. "One step at a time. One breath at a time." She pulls my face to hers, then kisses me softly on the forehead. "Look at me. It's just us." She kisses me on each cheek. "You and me. We have one more thing now than we had yesterday. And tomorrow we'll have one more thing. That's how we get through." She kisses me lightly on the lips, then looks into my eyes. I stare into hers, those beautiful dark pools that reveal everything and nothing at the same time.

I nod, then kiss her, spurred by our closeness and my churning emotions. She kisses me back, tenderly, then deeply, making my twisting heart melt into submission. This is how she breathes life into everything. One drop of hope at a time.

Calafia

I stand next to Kinder as he sleeps. His apartment is big for the base and minimally decorated; only what is absolutely necessary. It has a clinical feel to it, but the wide space of his bedroom feels good in comparison with the barracks, which houses dozens of Betas in the same space; everything they own in a locker at the foot of the bed. I watch him as his head lolls to the side. He looks peaceful, or at least as peaceful as the worry lines on his face will allow. I've never seen him sleep before. I'm usually in the barracks, but things are different now. He needs protection. With the assassination on Lamb, things are on high alert. It was inconceivable that someone would infiltrate the Camp for an attack, but that's exactly what happened. And the worst part is, we don't even know if Lamb was

the target. For all we know, it was actually Kinder, and the sniper simply missed their target. So now we have a twenty-four hour guard on him, to make sure he stays alive as we escalate our offensive on the rebels and stop them once and for all. Kinder mentioned that the Security Council will have an emergency meeting to coordinate efforts, but he's relying primarily on the strength and training of the Betas to prevail. When he said it, he looked angry. "If only I'd done it sooner," he'd said, "Lamb might still be alive."

I think of Lamb, his lifeless eyes looking straight out at me as the blood pooled around his head. He looked peaceful for the first time, and it hit me like a kick in the chest. I'd rushed to him, trying to staunch the flow of blood, but few people can survive a gunshot to the head, and this one was so precise, survival was impossible. This was the work of someone who knew what they were doing, which means the rebels are getting more and more sophisticated. I wish I had gotten one last chance to talk to him, to thank him for all that he's done for me. But it's too late. Now all I have is Kinder to guide me. But when my thoughts really still, in the darkness of night next to his bed, I know that I will not rest until I find Lamb's killer. It's an odd feeling that rumbles through me and makes my blood flow faster, and I do my best to quell it before it boils

over. Kinder calls the shots, and I'll do whatever he asks of me, whether it involves Lamb's death or not. But I secretly hope it will.

Several Betas were sent out into the streets last night to investigate the explosion, and things are tense as we all await news. My new Sergeant is a man named Kaleo, and he is not taking any chances. The Camp is under complete lockdown, with no one entering or leaving without express written permission, and the intelligence Betas bring back from the city is being heavily scrutinized as he and the other Sergeants formulate their next moves. Ultimately, he has to wait for Kinder to give the order, but he intends to be ready as soon as Kinder awakens, so we can put a stop to this uprising as soon as possible. Kinder's safety is paramount, so he stationed me here, to make sure nothing happens to him. And nothing will. At least, not while I'm breathing.

Kinder jerks as he sleeps; a nightmare, no doubt. I don't know if this is common for him, or if he's reliving Lamb's assassination, but it makes the blood surge through me faster every time he does it. I take a breath, then hear a faint footstep. I turn, gun drawn, to see Kaleo towering over me in the doorway. In the shadow of night, his skin is so dark I can barely see him. If it weren't for the white of his eyes and the

gleam of metal bars on his chest, I might have shot him. I'm not small, and he still dwarfs me. He's much younger than Lamb, but he isn't phased by his new position. He looks down at me as I lower my weapon and salute.

"At ease," he says softly in his deep voice. He looks over to Kinder and nods. "At oh-eight-hundred, I'm sending you out with your detachment. I'll rotate someone else in at this post."

I salute again.

"Any developments?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I'll brief you again in the morning and give you your orders. Until then, get some sleep. You'll need it." He looks over to Kinder, who flinches again in his sleep. "I'll take over here."

I nod and salute again, and he dismisses me. I breathe deep as I cross the base to the barracks, knowing that sleep is going to be difficult. Even under the best of circumstances I'm not much of a sleeper, but it's possible I might not have the opportunity again for some time. This is what we were all trained for, and the time has finally come. My blood is hot and my guard is up, and that combination isn't meant for anything except fighting. I'm sure there were those who believed we would never need our training, but I knew better. Kinder did, too. He knew we'd have to protect this city, that the shiftless rebels

would eventually attack the way of life of anyone who worked harder than they did, and now that has happened. Kinder always said the elites were more interested in relaxing than preparing, and he was absolutely right. He told the Security Council the rebels were dangerous, and they did nothing. But now that it has, they'll have to listen to him. They'll have to provide him with the resources to protect this city, and the entire Legion, or else be brought down by a rag-tag bunch of rebels with no respect for order or authority; who are just in it for themselves and don't care about the greater good.

I lay my head down for a few hours, but sleep doesn't come. I do my best to breathe deeply and let my brain and body rest, but with every noise, my eyes jerk open and my hands tighten around my blanket, ready to fight. I don't dream, but slowly my body sinks into a sort of restfulness that is just below wakefulness, but just above sleep. I've always called it combat sleep, and it suits me just fine.

Morning comes quickly, and I wait in the quad as the others approach. Gannon nods when he sees me, and we salute each other. The twins, Dmitri and Dante, saunter next to him, their movements echoing one another. They're twins, and it's obvious. Not just because they look exactly alike, but because they walk, talk, and act alike. Ever since the beginning of our training as

kids, it's been the four of us in or squad, and right now, I'm glad for the familiarity of it. None of us know what's coming, but we all know that we can trust each other to get the job done, no matter what.

"How's Kinder?" Gannon asks.

"As well as can be expected," I reply. "It's been a long night."

"For all of us," he says. I look at him, and his face is relaxed, but ready. Dmitri and Dante have similar expressions as they stand, hands on hips, waiting for Kaleo and our orders.

"Any news from the city?" I ask.

Dmitri speaks up. "I hear the hole they put in the Wall was big enough to drive a rover through. Luckily, no one was hurt."

"Not yet," Dante says through gritted teeth. He shakes his head, and his anger is palpable. He's always been the more emotional of the two of them, but Dmitri puts a hand on his shoulder.

"We wait for orders," he says, looking straight at Dante. "Don't forget that."

Dante kicks at the ground in frustration, but it's just what all of us are thinking. We want to get to the bottom of this quickly, before anyone gets hurt. No one wants to stop the rebels more than we do.

Kaleo emerges from the main housing building just before the clock hand hits perpendicular. I wonder if he stood watch over Kinder all night. As he nears, I look at his face. He doesn't even look tired. He's got energy in his step, and he's as alert as I've ever seen him.

We fall into line and salute him, ready for duty. He stands in front of us, radiating authority. "I'm sending out three rotations of detachments in ten hour shifts. You're the first. We didn't gather much intelligence yesterday, so I'm counting on you to learn what you can. Go out to the Wall and get what you can. It is preferred you bring them back here for questioning. Don't forget that the more inexperienced the rebel, the easier it is to extract information, so be mindful of young people when you're in the field. We're fairly certain the rebels are behind both the explosion and Lamb, and I want to get the sonofabitch that did this. Understood?"

"Sir, yes sir!"

He nods, then looks at me. "Kinder wants to see you before you go."

As Dante, Dmitri, and Gannon walk away to get a rover prepared to take out, I follow Kaleo to Kinder's apartment. Kinder looks up when I come in. He looks rested, his hair neatly combed, with a breakfast tray sitting next to him. He looks

content and relaxed, and I'm relieved to see it. My thoughts wander to the other three waiting for me with a rover, anxious to get started. Now that I see that Kinder is all right, I'm anxious to get going, too.

"Calafia, good morning," he says, as if this is a normal day. I nod, ready for him to continue. He reaches out and grabs my arm, pulling me close to the side of the bed. His grip is firm, not the grip of a weak old man. He looks directly at me; his eyes unwavering.

"Listen to me. What happened yesterday is unacceptable. Someone came into our camp and murdered Lamb. Our top Sergeant. He's been with us since before you were born, and is one of the most loyal and dedicated soldiers this base, this city, has ever seen. This didn't happen in the street, or at the Wall, or anywhere else. It happened in our home, to one of our own." He grits his teeth together and grips my arm tighter. "I want you to find whoever is responsible for this, and kill him. I don't care who it is. You are to kill the assassin." He lets go of my arm and peers into my face. "You understand?"

I nod.

"Good girl." He looks over at Kaleo, who is standing in the doorway. "You sending her out with Gannon?"

Kaleo nods. "Gannon and the twins."

Kinder nods his approval, then looks back to me. "You're a strong group. I know you'll succeed. Don't forget what I said, Calafia. Remember." He taps his finger against his temple, and the image of Lamb crumpling to the ground fills my head. I grit my teeth.

"I'll remember, Dr. Kinder."

Gannon drives the Rover out the front gate, and we head towards the Wall. Dante and Dmitri, sit in the back seat and look out onto the street as we drive. They sit casually, legs splayed, arms resting on the back seat, but their casual stance belies their watchfulness. Their eyes scan the street around us, taking in every detail, looking for anything that seems out of place. Nothing escapes their gaze. I watch the street ahead of us, hand resting lightly on a tranquilizer gun in my lap. Our mission isn't to kill, but to gather intelligence, and I want to be ready if we come upon a rebel that we can bring in for questioning. We're going to be in the vehicle for some time, as the Wall is almost an hour's drive from the Camp, so I settle in and keep a sharp eye out.

Just outside the Camp, the streets are wide, with palm trees lining the street. It's actually kind of pretty, and people walk down the street, some holding hands, enjoying the bright sun. Driving through the Alta neighborhoods, there's not

much to see. These houses are all obscured by tall hedges or bright white walls, and houses aren't visible from the road unless the gates are open. I take a deep breath and take in the fresh air; parrots squawk as they zip by overhead, and flowers line beds near the sidewalk.

As we continue on, we go through the neighborhoods of the merchant class, which are smaller houses, without the hedges, gates, and walls. There are more people walking around, and more traffic as we maneuver our way through. The Mainline is a busy street, but it's also the fastest way out to the wall. There are businesses mixed in with the houses; tailor's shops, furniture for sale, and so on. Occasionally, we pass a coffee shop with people lazily sipping coffee on a shop patio, watching us as we pass by.

As we approach the Lighthouse, the street widens into a large circle with the glass spire rising up in the middle. I crane my head back, and the very top of the building is barely visible among the clouds. There was a time when there were many buildings like this one, but the rest were demolished when the Diego Earthquake hit a couple hundred years ago. The buildings toppled over, and Diego Island was created by a chunk of earth breaking off into the ocean. Millions of people died, and they never built skyscrapers again. Except for the Lighthouse. It's

become a symbol of the resilience of the city, and our faith in the power of those in charge to protect us from the things we cannot see. The light in the darkness. At least, that's what Kinder tells me. This is a higher security area of the city, especially now, so there is little traffic and we are waved through quickly. The other soldiers salute us as we pass, and we return the gesture.

Once we're on the other side of the Lighthouse, the merchant houses and businesses give way to much smaller houses and apartment buildings. This is where the Jornas live; they work in the Alta sections of town, usually in some trade or as part of a household staff. This part of the city isn't as well-maintained as the parts closer to the Camp, but we're about halfway to the Wall now, so we forge ahead.

The street is wide, and Gannon does his best to avoid the bumps and potholes, but I grab the roll-bar from time to time when there are just too many of them. The buildings near Camp are big and well-kept, but the further from camp we get, the smaller they get, huddling close to one another in the blazing sun. The base, with its trees and open space, is paradise compared to this. My guard goes up as I watch people skitter across the street in front of us, doing their best not to be seen, even though it's broad daylight. People eyeball us as we

roll by, but not for long. They look away before there's a chance to make eye contact, as if they're afraid they might be recognized. I watch their sullen faces carefully, thinking that any one of them might have something to tell us, but waiting for the right moment, the right person, and the right opportunity. Everyone knows what happened, and they know why we are here. They don't need to be afraid. Not unless they are guilty, that is.

We keep driving through the area until we near the Heights, and the Wall is visible in the distance. Gannon slows the Rover down, doing his best to maneuver through the narrow, poorly maintained street. If I stuck my hand out of the vehicle, I'd probably end up hitting a person in the face. Not that there are many people on the street; most have managed to hurry inside before we came rambling down the street. With the military insignia emblazoned on the side of the rover, it's obvious who we are, and no one wants to get in our way. Still, I see the occasional face staring back at me, blank and questioning, and utterly piteous. Eventually, the road becomes too narrow and rough to continue in the rover; we could move more quickly on foot. Gannon parks near a sundries store and we get out, carrying our gear with us, ready for any kind of attack. Sweat beads around my collar, and I'm reminded of the photo shoot and

the campaign. At least this time, I'm moving and doing something productive. I'm in control, and I've never felt more alive.

I look around and grip my rifle with both hands, feeling eyes on us as we continue on foot. The people here keep their distance, shrinking into shadows of buildings, trying not to be seen. I've never seen a rebel before. I assumed I would know what they looked like, but right now, I'm not sure. No one looks friendly, but no one looks dangerous, either. Kinder has always said that danger always starts with something innocent, so we are on our guard.

Dmitri and Dante walk behind us slowly, like cats. They are nearly silent most of the time, and seem to move as one. If it weren't for Gannon and me, they would be the top Betas. Gannon stays close to me as we walk down the dusty street, close enough that we almost brush one another, but with enough awareness of one another that we don't. He's like the puzzle piece that complements me perfectly, and if we had the same family, no one would be surprised. Except everyone knows that we don't.

The thought of being related to Gannon catches in my throat for a moment and I hesitate. The rest of the team reacts instantly.

"All clear?" Gannon asks quietly.

I nod, and concentrate on a bead of sweat making its way

down the back of my neck, banishing thoughts of Gannon and his family from my head. A woman stands in a doorway, her face covered in shadow. She is short and stocky, and stands nearly still as we walk past. Her eyes follow us, but she doesn't turn her head, as if she's literally trying to look like a statue. As we continue up the street, fewer people are outside. Word has reached them that we are coming. I pause, suspicious.

Only the guilty run away.

The air is heavy and still, and I am keenly aware of the twins and Gannon breathing right next to me. They have stopped as well, alert and ready to strike. I raise my arm, waiting for my senses to tell me where to go. Find the rebel. Find who killed Lamb. The orders echo in my head as I look to the buildings to my right. They look hollow and lifeless, but I sense something else.

I survey the buildings around me, which are ugly and overbearing. The concrete is crumbling, and the window frames have no glass in them. A tattered piece of fabric billows silently in a few of them, but otherwise, there is no noise. No children playing, no chatter, not even the sound of a distant radio. As I take in the scene, I hear a distant whisper, and someone shushing a child. It's coming from the building to my right, which sits dark and ominous in a large patch of shade

from the larger building next to it.

I rush inside. Dmitri and Dante post up just outside, while Gannon follows me closely. The first room is empty, and I continue on to another room with several people huddled in the corner. There are a myriad of battered pillows on the ground, and an upturned produce crate with a burned candle wax all over the top of it. The rug in the middle of the room is dingy and bunched up. The people inside shrink as I approach, and for a second I wonder if they are afraid or hiding something, and then I see.

A small child, probably around seven or eight. The child is curled up in a ball in the corner, the large woman in front of her doing her best to hide her with her body. But she is not big enough, and it is too late. I lunge and push her out of the way, grabbing the child by the arm. She screams, flailing and kicking, but she is too small to fight against me. She's all gangly arms and legs, and doesn't have the strength or the weight to put up a fair fight. I drag her from the corner, knowing he is exactly the kind of witness Kaleo is looking to question. Her hair tangled and eyes full of fire as I look down at her, and she continues to twist wildly in my grip as the woman speaks to her in Spanish to calm down. The woman looks worried and looks up at me, her hands clasped together like

she's about to pray. "Please, take me instead. Leave the child. She's a good kid," the woman pleads. I shake my head as we back out of the room, Gannon training his rifle on them so they don't attack us from behind.

I pull the girl easily through the empty room facing the street, and signal to the twins to get the Rover. Dmitri runs off at full speed, and Gannon backs into the street, keeping the rest of the people inside the room. They protest feebly, knowing they cannot overpower us, and there is nothing they can do.

We emerge from the building and step into the sunlight, and the skin on my back crawls upward. Something isn't right. I look around, as Gannon steps around us, taking the forward attack position as a precaution. We make our way toward the rover, Dante and Gannon ahead, sweeping for potential attackers. The child still squirms at the end of her arm, but my grip has not let up, and I don't plan to let go of her until we are safely inside the gates of the Camp. I hear chatter now, echoing through the concrete rubble of the buildings, but I don't see anyone. The rover is just ahead, with Dmitri waiting patiently at the wheel, his face serene but tense. Dante has already climbed in, and we prepare to follow, when my spine shivers with anticipation.

I slow, and Gannon slows with me instinctively as I look

around for the threat my gut tells me is there. I look up and see it, but it is too late. The glass of a scope, trained squarely on us. I throw my arm around Gannon's chest and pull him sideways, but we are too late. A bullet rips through the air with a familiar whine and crack of the rifle being shot. It grazes my arm and pierces Gannon's flesh, just above his collarbone.

Dante yells, then fires back toward the sniper before he can get another shot off. Gannon winces and falls backward into me. I let go of the child, who quickly runs off, disappearing into one of the grey buildings around us, but all I can think about is Gannon. I must get him into the truck. My stomach turns into a knot as I pull him over my shoulder and carry him. The zip of bullets ping around us, with Dante and Dmitri firing back, slowing their attack. With any luck, they'll hit some of these rebels and take them out for good. A bullet hits my calf, and I fall to my knee, but my body takes over. Right now, the rover is all I see. Dante opens the door and helps me haul Gannon into the back seat, then Dmitri steps on the gas, and sand sprays from beneath the tires. Gannon lays back against the seat, his face twisted in pain. I tear open his shirt to examine the wound. Time slows as blood gushes out of the puncture wound, and Gannon groans, squeezing his eyes closed.

"You've been hit," Gannon says through gritted teeth.

"Not as bad as you."

Dante looks back at me, angry. "Why did you let the kid go?"

I press my hand over Gannon's wound, trying to slow the flow of blood, and look at Dante. "Gannon's been shot," is all I can say. Those are the only words my brain can put together right now. But Dante is right. I let the kid go. The only thing I was supposed to do was hold on to her, bring her in, and make some headway against the rebels, and I failed. I look back at Gannon, who puts his hand over mine and nods.

"You should have let me go."

I close my eyes tight, trying to push away whatever is building inside me. They are both right. I failed. I didn't stay on mission, which is not only inadvisable, it's impossible. I don't know what I'm going to tell Kaleo. Or Kinder. I don't know what happened. It's only tempered by the fact that if I had held on, Gannon would likely be bleeding out on the street, and I would have lost my only friend in the world.

Nico

I wake with a start. Light floods in, golden and soft. My entire body yawns, content for the first time in ages. I'm not outside. I'm not on a floor. I'm in a bed, with pillows and soft sheets. Softer than I've ever felt in my entire life. Sound is muffled and seems far away; I can't make out exactly what they are, or where they're coming from. I sit up; something isn't right. The room is real, with windows paned with glass, a real floor, and pictures on the wall. The room is spare, with nothing in it that doesn't feel absolutely necessary, but it's cozy and warm, and full of light. Inviting. I don't know where I am, or how I got here, but it's so incongruous to where I usually am, my nerves bounce to high alert.

It comes flooding back in an instant. Tyrell. The factory. Running toward the door. Hitting the floor with my face. I should be in a cell right now, or worse. But I'm not. I feel my cheek, which throbs lightly. It's covered in ointment, and has started to scab over, so I've been here for a little while. It's tender to the touch, but I've had worse.

This place seems nice. Comfortable. My blood quickens at the thought. Usually, when things seem to be at their safest, that's when they're about to go horribly wrong, and my skin crawls at what might be waiting for me. I look over to the window, but I don't see the ground. I see the roof of a building across the street, and the top of a tree. I must be on a second or maybe even third floor of a building, which means I'll need to leave by the door. Or at least try to. If things get bad enough, the windows will have to do. I jump as the door swings open.

I pounce into action, pressing my body against the wall, calculating how many steps to the window, how much force it will take to smash through it. If it's Tyrell, I'll kill him first. Even after all these years, the thought of him makes my teeth clench with rage. If it wasn't for him, I might have had a normal life. If I can't have mine, neither should he. I wish I'd have had the courage to kill him at the factory. But the lasting

effects of the serum turns me into an animal.

I clench my fists, ready to strike, when I see a glimpse of blue fabric crossing the threshold. It's her. It takes her a moment to find me as she scans the room, until she finds me crouched in the corner. She smiles. "I hope you slept well." Her voice is soft and soothing, without a hint of anger or malice. Confused, I stare at her for a moment.

Then I nod. "Where am I?"

"This is my home. I thought you could use a soft bed and some quiet. That factory is so loud." She stands and looks at me, as if waiting for an answer, but I have nothing to say. Never trust an Alta. They are only looking for ways to trap you. At least, that's been my experience.

"I'm Socorro." She takes a step in my direction, and I snap backward and grab a lamp, holding it like a club. Reflex. She stops. The look on her face is one of sheer disappointment. She sits on the end of the bed and stares up at me. "I'm not going to hurt you. I want to help you."

I scoff. "How are you gonna help me?"

She shrugs. "I already did, actually. I convinced Marcus to keep this quiet."

The blood drains from my face at the mention of his name. "Who are you? What are you going to do to me?" I spit the words

out, and look over at the window again, trying to gauge how far it is to the ground. Ten feet, maybe?

"Nico, I'm not going to --"

"How do you know my name?" I demand, holding the lamp higher. She raises her hands as a gesture of peace and shrinks back slightly.

"I know this is hard..." she starts.

"You have no idea," I say, straightening up and taking a step towards her. Towards the door.

"Nico, I..." she pauses, looking down at her hands. "I've been looking for you everywhere. I've gone to so many of those awful factories, asked everywhere. I knew you were alive. And now here you are."

She clasps her hands to her chest, her eyes glassy.

"I didn't want to be found. Especially by Marcus Tyrell. Unless I can kill him."

"Please, Nico. He's just a man. Like you, he's made mistakes. We all need a second chance, don't you think?" She stands and smooths her dress, and it falls obediently around her.

"Why?"

"You didn't do anything --"

"I did plenty."

She doesn't respond, but walks to the window and looks out. She's quiet for a long time before she speaks again. "I didn't always live like this. I got lucky. I don't see any reason to make someone else's life miserable."

I scoff. "I doubt your husband feels that way."

She shakes her head. Marcus isn't a bad person. He's actually more like you than you think. He came here looking for a better life, just like you. His story just ended up a little different.

"A little?" I can't help but be bitter, but she ignores me.

"Marcus tells me you have a brother."

"Had."

She turns to me, a slight smile on her lips. "No, have. Your family is always your family. Even when they are gone, they are still with you."

"If you say so." I think of Jovan. The memory that always comes to mind is the look on his face the last time I saw him. Confusion, despair, and utter heartbreak. After what I did to him and his family, I don't deserve forgiveness. And I definitely don't deserve a family. I'm sure I'd find a way to screw it up anyway.

"You know, my sisters and I, we didn't always get along, either."

Socorro doesn't seem to understand. This isn't just a little disagreement between Jovan and I. I literally destroyed his family. And myself, if I'm being honest. But still, down deep, in my heart of hearts, I can't help but blame him anyway. We wouldn't have even come here if he hadn't insisted. My grip on the lamp eases, and I set it back on the nightstand. I cross my arms and turn to her.

"My sister Martha, we didn't speak for years. But in the end, we reconnected. She made this dress, actually." Socorro smooths her dress against her body with pride.

"But if she made that --"

She nods. "You're right. She's Jorna. And she's one of the best seamstresses in all of Pendleton City before she left. But I live in this house because I married a man who ended up doing his service and getting his reward. There wasn't any magic to it. Just the way things ended up."

"What about the others?"

"Others?"

"You said you had sisters. What about the others?"

Socorro turns away, staring out the window again. "I had one other sister. Rocio." She looks back at me, peering deep into my eyes. "She died when you were born."

She stands still, her gaze unwavering, waiting for me to

catch up. She smiles and nods as my eyes widen with the realization. I step backwards. I have no reason to trust this woman. I can't deny that she looks a little bit like me, but a lot of people do. That could mean nothing. Why would I listen to her? I'm suspicious.

"How did you find me?"

She pauses before answering. "Ever since you deserted the Camp, we've been looking for you. I told Marcus we couldn't lose you. Or Jovan."

I scoff. "So where's Jovan?"

I expect her to be angry at my disrespect, but she isn't. She just sighs and looks out the window. "We think he lives near the Wall somewhere. He keeps a low profile, too."

"So he doesn't know about you?"

She shakes her head sadly.

I sit on the bed and put my head in my hands. "I didn't know my mother had sisters."

"We barely saw her after she married and moved out to the Empire. You were unprotected out there. We begged her to come back, but she loved your father too much for that. She thought he was so handsome, she would have followed him to the ends of the earth. Back then, the Empire really felt like it was the ends of the earth." She chuckled softly to herself. "We knew so

little back then. In the end, it wasn't highwaymen that came for her. It was just chance."

I grit my teeth and glare at her. She puts her hand on my shoulder, but I pull away.

"Mind you, it's not your fault. It's a tough world, and she was brave enough to bring you into it. Of the three of us, she was always the most courageous."

I look back at the floor as she sits next to me. "I never knew her."

"That's why you must find Jovan. He is your family. The two of you are connected." Thoughts of Jovan flood my head, swimming in my vision. Sitting down to dinner with his family, the trip to Pendleton City from the Empire. The way he would smile and shrug whenever he just wanted me to take his advice. The look on his face that night. I shake my head and the thoughts dissipate.

"He will never forgive me for what I did. I wouldn't."

She leans against the frame of the window and gazes out, looking at nothing in particular. "Forgiveness is tricky, sure. But hiding in the shadows, never trying, never making the effort to atone, wouldn't that be the bigger crime?"

She turns back to me and rests the side of her head on the wall, and she suddenly looks very tired. I look at the dark pools of her eyes, searching for a hint of doubt, of anger, but

there is none.

"And who knows," she continues, "Maybe the two of you will find a way to reclaim Calafia as well."

I shake my head and sneer. I know what they've done to her. She's gone, transformed into an automaton whose only purpose is to do someone else's bidding. "Impossible. I've been gone from the Camp for fifteen years, and I'm still not free. You think we'd have any luck with her? She'd kill us first." I stare out the window, finally close enough to see people walking on the street below, with the occasional car or bicycle rumbling by. Then, absently to myself, I add, "But that's the only way he would ever forgive me."

She pats me on the back lightly and smiles. "Well, then I guess you've got your work cut out for you." She springs to her feet and walks to the door.

"How am I supposed to do that?"

She pauses at the threshold and looks back to me. "You're Rocio's son. If you're half as clever as she was, you'll figure it out. Stay as long as you'd like. You're always welcome here. Marcus will do his best to stay out of your way."

Then she walks out, leaving nothing but the dark hallway behind her.

Jovan

We sit down to our meager dinner, and Sakura scoops a spoonful of rice and beans into Ryoko's bowl. Ryoko eyes it greedily, and I can't help but smile. Like her mother, she has a zest for life. Sakura then serves Chasca, then me, then herself. Our portions are smaller; we all make little sacrifices so Ryoko doesn't have to feel the sting of our circumstances quite so sharply. After our argument with Chasca, Sakura invited her over as a peace offering. The truth is, she's a wonderful friend, and helps us with Ryoko since her kids are either grown up or dead. She doesn't talk about them often, but I know at least two died at the hands of raiders in the Empire, one moved up to Bay Cities for an education, and one has joined Kato's little band of rebels. I know there's also at least one more who doesn't

speaking to her anymore over her involvement with the rebels. There may be more, but Chasca doesn't mention them, and it would be rude to ask. The father of her children died many years ago in a factory, leaving her to scratch a living out of nothing. She did her best, working as a seamstress or a housekeeper or a cook, but those jobs became more and more difficult to hang on to as she got older. Altas are notorious for not wanting to be reminded of their own mortality. They are obsessed with youth, and it shows in the products and procedures they are willing to try in order to look and feel like they are in the springtime of their lives. With her sagging body and back aches, Chasca made their imminent future all too real.

Ryoko shovels rice into her mouth, humming happily as she looks around at us, smiling. "Did you hear about the Camp rover today, Daddy?" She blurts out, rice flying from her lips.

Sakura gives her a look. "Chew, then swallow. Then talk," she admonishes.

Chasca fidgets in her seat as I fix my gaze at her. "A rover with Betas?" Ryoko nods as Chasca looks into her bowl, focusing on it intensely. I can't help but grit my teeth. I hate those robots. Sakura looks at me, that look that telepathically tells me to stay calm. Stop being so bitter. She can't seem to find the anger and resentment that I have. Or at least she hides

it better.

"What happened?" I ask, leaning forward on my elbows, my head turned to Chasca. She relays the story of the Betas with their guns and armor, doing their best to shake down the people of the Heights for information. Her rendition of the story is perfunctory at best, and I purse my lips, knowing she's not telling me everything.

"They almost took me!" Ryoko says, as if it were some grand adventure. She shrugs. "But I got away and ran fast."

Chasca swallows hard. Sakura and I exchange looks across the table. Ryoko seems to have no idea how close she was to danger. If they had dragged her back to Camp, it would have taken no time at all for them to find out who was behind the explosion. Or who her family is. I managed to leave peacefully, unlike Nico, who went AWOL in the middle of the night, but I still don't want anyone, especially Dr. Kinder or Dr. Skillar, to think it's time to rekindle our association. Or take another child away from me.

"How did she get away?" I ask. There's no way Ryoko could have outrun a Beta, and they wouldn't have just let her go, either.

Chasca takes a breath, measuring her words. "Sniper."

Sakura and I exchange a look, and my anger melts into fear.

"Someone killed a Beta?" Sakura hates killing, even killing our enemies. She only understands life. Chasca shakes her head.

"No, they're most likely still alive."

"Most likely?" Sakura's irritation grows. "How many were shot?"

"Just two. A male, near his shoulder, and a female, in the leg. Sakura, they were going to take your daughter," Chasca pleads. "We had to do something."

Sakura turns away. "Yes, and now they'll just come back. And there will be more of them. What do you think will happen to our children?"

Chasca sighs and I push my bowl away, my hunger retreating as my brain goes into overdrive. My thoughts race, trying to solve for the danger we are in. How can I protect my family? Would we be safer in the Empire? What if Ryoko had been caught? What else will the rebels do? I rub my eyes and look over to Ryoko, who scrapes the last bit of food out of her bowl and into her mouth. I smile at her. "Ryoko, why don't you get ready for bed."

Her face falls, but she nods and slides away from the table and pads down the hall in her bare feet. "Don't forget to brush your teeth," I call after her.

When she is out of sight, I glare at Chasca. She holds her

hands up defensively and shakes her head. "We didn't know they'd be there. It all happened so quickly. We were just going to the sundries store for a little snack, and then..." she trails off, staring into space.

"This is exactly why we didn't want her out at the Wall with the rebels. She shouldn't be involved in any of it. Not even as a witness."

Sakura nods in agreement, then reaches a hand across the table to Chasca, who looks up at her as Sakura folds her hand into Chasca's. Her eyes are glassy. "I wasn't trying to put her in danger."

"I know," Sakura answers.

I shake my head. "I still don't understand how Ryoko got away. Those Betas are so strong, and unless they were seriously injured, I can't imagine she'd be strong enough to get away."

"It was the girl," Chasca said. "She let go when the boy got shot. It was like she just forgot about Ryoko. She just let go." She shook her head as Sakura and I looked at each other. That was odd behavior for a Beta. They didn't have friends, or camaraderie. They had fellow soldiers, and they followed orders above all else. Always.

"What did she look like?" Sakura asked.

Chasca shrugged. "Like all of them. Big. Dark hair."

"Did she have green eyes?" I ask.

Chasca scoffs. "How should I know? I was too busy staring at the gun she was pointing at us."

I purse my lips. Chasca's right. She and Ryoko were lucky to escape with their lives; I can't expect her to memorize the face of every Beta she sees. Still, I can't help but wonder if it was Entara. There's a chance, and that's all I've wanted this entire time. I know she's alive, the billboards proved as much. A prickle starts on the back of my neck. Does Kinder know where we are? Would he use Entara as bait to draw me out? He has to know we could never overpower her, not without help, at least. Does he know about Ryoko? I'm sure he would snatch her up in a heartbeat if he could, knowing she has similar genetic makeup to Entara. It's a chilling thought, the possibility of losing a second child to his military machine.

I hold my head in my hands, and feel Sakura's hand on my arm. "Jovan," she says, "we have to get her back. If that was her today..."

She trails off, and we both know what she's thinking. If that was her today, we might have a chance. She let go of Ryoko to help another soldier, going against orders. And from what Chasca told us, she didn't think about it. It was a reflex. The drugs have left a sliver of her own free will inside her, to

care for someone else. And maybe that's all we need. I take a deep breath and hold it for a second, afraid of the words that are about to fall from my mouth.

"We just want our daughter back," I say. I stop there, before I can cause any more damage.

Calafia

I've been sick since I got back to the base. As soon as we arrived, Dmitri drove straight to the infirmary to drop Gannon and I off. After we got out, he left to make his report to Kaleo, which isn't going to look good for me. I know there will be questions, and I have no answers. The more I think about what happened, the less I understand it. But there's nothing I can do about it now.

Once we went inside, the nurses patched my leg up fairly quickly. The bullet didn't hit the bone, so they applied one of their quick-healing ointments and bandaged it up. They told me to rest for the night, and that it would be sore in the morning, but I should be ready for duty in no time. That's a relief. I don't want to be sidelined at a time like this. Plus, I have to

redeem myself and fix what went wrong.

Gannon's injury is going to take a bit longer than mine to heal, mostly because it went through a larger muscle. They gave him the same ointment and put his arm in a sling so he wouldn't move it, then sent him back to the barracks to rest. Before they let me go, though, they gave me a serum treatment. It's obvious there's a gap in my head somewhere, so I was glad for it to be patched up with serum. That way, nothing like this will ever happen again. Next time, everything will go according to the orders we were given.

I spent most of the day and night writhing on the bathroom floor, sweating, shaking, and retching, as if something was tearing me in half from the inside out. I kept seeing it in my mind; the sniper, Gannon, and the kid, wondering what it was that made me let go of her instead of dragging her to the truck. I follow orders. That's all I do. And I didn't do it. I did something else. I don't know where it came from. It was like a reflex, but it was the wrong one.

It's late, and I've been laying on the floor in the bathroom, waiting for my stomach to push more bile back up my throat. I take a deep breath and press my head against the cold tile, waiting for whatever is inside me to settle down. Gannon's feet appear in the doorway, but I'm too tired to pick my head up

off the floor to look at him. My vision is blurry as images swim in front of me, and my head is in a fog.

"The doctor says you'll be fine by morning," he says, squatting down and tilting his head sideways to look me in the face. "You okay?"

I nod feebly and sigh. Morning feels like it's so far away right now. Gannon pushes a stray hair out of my face and rests his hand on my shoulder. "Calafia, what happened today..." He trails off and I close my eyes.

"I don't know what happened. I didn't think." I replay the scene in my head for the millionth time, imagining the other way it should have been. Me, hanging on to the kid, letting Gannon fall to the pavement and leaving him there as we finish our mission and hoping he would manage on his own. I open my eyes and look at his face. He's smiling softly as he pats my shoulder.

"Well, we both know what should have happened, but for my own sake, I'm glad that didn't happen. I'm probably alive only because of you."

"You would have managed," I croak.

"Maybe." We both smile weakly, then mine fades.

"I let the kid go." Another wave of pain ripples through me as I say the words, and I curl up tighter as Gannon squeezes my

shoulder.

"We can go out again, you know. It isn't over." He looks at me again, and I see gratitude in his eyes. Maybe something else, too. "So, do you plan on spending the night in here?"

I smile slightly, knowing it's a joke, but I nod anyway. I could definitely make it to bed and be fine, but I just can't face the others in the barracks right now. The mission comes before everything else. Every good soldier knows that. I don't want to see the looks on their faces, the judgment. Knowing that I'm not really the top Beta. I'm going to have to win back their respect and work twice as hard as before. I swallow hard, pushing doubt away. I don't care about being the top Beta, but I do care about disappointing Kinder. Disappointing Gannon. Disappointing everyone. I remember Kinder's words. Find Lamb's killer. I repeat it in my head over and over until it settles in my body as a point of fact. This is what I'm going to do. And when I find that person, there will be no mercy.

Gannon stands up and walks out, only to return minutes later with my pillow and a blanket. "You might need these," he says with a smile. He places the pillow between my head and the tile, and carefully covers me with the blanket. It's odd to see him so gentle, his muscles moving gracefully under his skin without the strain I'm used to seeing during training. It's as

if I've never really seen him before, even though I've seen him every day for my entire life. I just never looked at him. He looks different when he's not a soldier, not a Beta. When he's just Gannon. He gives my shoulder a squeeze, then turns out the light. "See you in the morning."

He walks out and I close my eyes, feeling more relaxed with the thought of finding Lamb's killer. I wake up as the sun starts peeking over the horizon, just beginning to throw light across buildings. I haven't slept well, but I am feeling better. The night was filled with fragmented dreams, images that were cobbled together in my head. Kinder's smile at the quad, in his apartment, in the photography studio, morphing into Lamb locking eyes with me on the quad. The sound of the gunshots, hitting Gannon, then Lamb, then Gannon again, with me looking down to find a smoking rifle in my hands. I see blood pour over their faces like a fountain, and Kinder's voice: Find Lamb's killer. It plays on repeat all night, every time I toss to another position on the cold floor, my hip digging into the tile. As I sit up on the floor, I rub the night from my eyes and take a deep breath. I check under the bandage around my leg. It's sore, but the wound has closed up nearly all the way. I heave a sigh of relief, knowing they'll clear me for duty.

I'm due at the infirmary for another treatment, which

should be a lot easier than last night's. I'm definitely ready to get back out there. The humiliation of not completing my mission -- of not being able to follow simple instructions -- has sunk in to my core, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let that happen again. I have to redeem myself, not only to my fellow Betas, but to myself. I still have orders, still have a mission, and I'm still going to carry it out. Find Lamb's killer. No one else is going to do it for me. Not if I can help it.

I've been waiting at the infirmary for fifteen minutes by the time Kinder walks up. He's not nearly as punctual as he used to be. He looks tired.

"Did you get any sleep?" He asks.

"Some. Did you?"

He clenches his teeth and doesn't look at me, which is very unlike him. "Doesn't look like you did."

I shrug, not sure what to say. He knows me, and he's right. I'm just anxious to get this done so I can get back on the mission. Kaleo won't let me go anywhere unless he's sure I'm back at 100%, and he is a stickler for details. He'll know if I'm not feeling up to my best. Kinder claps his hand on my shoulder and smiles as he walks past me into an exam room.

I follow him into the small room. The light has a yellowish

tone to it, and it smells like plastic and antiseptic in here. He motions to the padded exam table, and I sit on it as the paper crinkles under me. I haven't been in one of these rooms for quite some time, and I can't help but feel like I'm in trouble. I should be, but no one has said anything to me since we got back to Camp. No one has reprimanded me, or so much as looked at me sideways. It makes me feel like what happened was that much worse because of the collective avoidance of it.

"You know," Kinder says, pulling a tray off the counter, "what you did yesterday was natural. A million other people would have done the exact same thing."

"I'm not a million other people," I mutter. I look at the floor as I sit on the exam table, knowing that doesn't matter. I roll up my sleeve and Kinder rubs it lightly with a cotton swab.

"No, you're not. Obviously, you're different. That's why you're the best. You're my best." He hooks his finger under my chin and I lift my eyes to meet his. "You know that for you, it wasn't natural. You know why?"

I shake my head.

"Because you're better than the rest. You are a soldier, and you have unwavering courage and integrity. Yesterday was one of those one in a million kinds of days, where if you had it all to do over again, it wouldn't have happened that way."

"Except it did." There is an edge in my voice that I can't control. Kinder seems to be making excuses, but I'm still angry at myself.

"Exactly. That's what made you sick. You see, Calafia, you're a good, loyal soldier. Getting the job done is the only thing you care about, because you're a patriot. Your body just doesn't know any other way, so..." he trails off for a moment, as if searching for the right words. "So when a reflex like that pops up, your body tries to get rid of it, get rid of the impulse. Do you understand?"

I nod.

"But with these couple of quick treatments, you'll be back to your old self. The Calafia that is the consummate example of what we are here in Pendleton City." He slides the needle into my arm as he speaks, pushing the plunger in, and I feel it seep into my veins like icy fingers. It tingles, but it will pass in a couple of hours. He pulls the needle out and presses a square of gauze against my arm, smiling over his glasses.

"There you go. Better than ever."

I nod as I slide off the table and walk to the door.

"Calafia --" he calls after me, as if a thought just entered his mind.

"Yes, sir?" I turn back, waiting.

"You remember the mission, right?" I purse my lips and nod.

"And what is it?"

I take a deep breath as I see Lamb's blood splattering on Kinder's face, the child slipping from my grasp, Gannon staggering backward, then open them wide to stare at him, my resolve renewed.

"I'm going to kill the son-of-a-bitch that shot Lamb."

A smile creeps slowly across his face as he dips his hands into his lab coat pockets.

"That's my girl."

Jovan

I wake up cold and sweating, trying to shake the image of the billboard from my head. It's persistent. Every time Calafia turns her head to face me, I see Ryoko's wide eyes, begging me to help her. To save her. My arms are lead, and I can't move, as if my feet are rooted to the ground. I can't shake the images from my head, even with my eyes open. Sakura turns over and sleepily puts a hand on my shoulder, lightly, like a butterfly. I breathe deeply, hoping my body will relax and let me go back to sleep, but I keep seeing it. The billboard, her face, the mark on her. They stole her from me nearly eighteen years ago, but there is no mistaking her. Entara. My lost child, intermingled in my brain with the child I'm terrified of losing.

After that night, Sakura and I went weeks without speaking

to one another. We didn't know what to say to each other. I knew I was responsible, and my complete faith in what was happening at the Camp had led us to ruin. We had welcomed Nico into our house, and he had taken the only thing we cared about from us. My own brother. Sakura never said she blamed me, but that's not her way. Besides, she didn't have to. The responsibility for what happened was completely on my shoulders, and I was too weak to fight with Nico. I'll never forget his eyes that night; bulging and white, a vein on his temple raised and throbbing. He looked scared and confused, but also angry. Even cradling Entara gently in one arm, I was no match for him. I think about those times often, thinking I should have known, I should have asked more questions. But I didn't.

"Go back to sleep," Sakura says, slurring her words before letting her hand fall from my shoulder and back to her side. I lay back, staring at the ceiling, watching as the light gradually creeps into the room. I drift off, but only enough to see her face again, then open them and stare at the ceiling again. I try not to move, hoping to at least give Sakura some peace until morning. At least one of us should be clear-headed.

I think about the last time I saw her, her face rimmed by dark curls, her eyes wide, curled up in Nico's arm as he pushed me away. Nico. I haven't seen him since that night. It's quite

possible he's dead. If he isn't, well, he better hope I never find him or he might be. A pang of guilt goes through me. We used to be close. There's still a piece of me that misses my brother, that yearns to laugh with him and make plans for the future together. He was all I had before Sakura. After Sakura, he took all I had. But somewhere, deep down, I can't bring myself to a place of complete hatred for him. I pity him. Neither of us knew what we were getting into, or what the serum was doing to him, and he suffered. I helped him suffer. The fact that I didn't know it at the time is irrelevant. It still haunts me. Coming to Pendleton City was my idea. If it wasn't for me, we could have lived out in the Empire, trying to squeeze life out of dusty farmland, fending for ourselves. If it weren't for those billboards.

I close my eyes tightly, trying to shut everything out. It's a wicked spiral, fate. No matter how I try to untwist it, it always points back to me. I did this. I contributed to my own pain. I sigh as I stare at the ceiling again. I'm going to have to get myself out. I wonder if I made a mistake aligning myself with Kato. Have I put my family in greater danger, or will he help protect them? The military rules this city, with the Security Council lording over all of it. They have no concern for us, only for maintaining their power. How can he fight

against heavily armed soldiers? It sounds so ridiculous; it may be a hopeless cause. With him, we are in danger. Without him, the danger is still there.

"Are you going to make coffee?" Sakura says softly as she rolls over and her eyes flutter open.

"I'll do it now."

When I come back with a mug and hand it to her, she's wide awake, sitting up in bed. I sit next to her, and she rests her head on my shoulder.

"Another nightmare?" she asks.

I nod. She must not have slept much. I probably kept her up all night.

I make a strong cup of coffee and bring it to her as she lounges in bed. She takes it with a smile and leans against the wall. "Did I do the right thing? Kato, I mean."

She sighs and blows on her coffee, causing the steam to swirl in circles in front of her nose. "I don't know. But we could definitely use his help. Plus, he needs you. Probably more than he knows."

"Why?" I ask, grumbling as she sips her coffee.

"You're the only one who has been inside. You've seen it first-hand."

"That was a long time ago. I'm sure it's changed since

then. Besides, I still don't trust him."

"I don't either," she answers, shaking her head, "But it's only a matter of time before they send the Betas out to fight, and we need to get to her before that. We're running short on time now. It won't be long before she gets killed. Or the rebels kill her."

She closes her eyes for a moment, then opens them and looks at me. She's right. She's always right.

"Hey," she says, nudging me, "I'll be here, too. You're not doing this alone."

"What about Ryoko? How do we keep her safe?"

"We'll manage. We can teach her."

"Teach her what?"

"To survive."

I catch my breath, knowing that's all we've been doing her entire life. She hasn't had any time to be a kid, and experience the joys of playing without a care in the world; she always had to keep an eye out for danger. Every minute of every day. We drilled it into her head: stay away from Altas, don't go anywhere alone, aim for the groin. We were teaching her to survive, so we could erase the mistakes of the past. And now the past is coming for us.

Calafia

I report for duty on the quad, feeling much better after the two treatments. I can feel the medicine rippling through me, feeding my muscles with that extra bit of energy and grit that I can put to good use out in the city. The other Betas are lining up as well, and I quickly find Gannon in the midst of them. He smiles and puts his hand on my shoulder. This feels normal. Almost like it did before things went wrong. I think of Lamb again, and realize nothing will ever be the same again.

"Feeling better?" He asks.

I nod. He looks relieved. "What is the assignment today?"

His face falls a bit and he looks at the other Betas, swirling in the quad. "We're on separate assignments," he says quietly.

A knot forms in my stomach. "What? Why?" We've never been separated during exercises. He's always been there to have my back. We're a team.

"Kaleo thinks --"

I don't even let him finish, but stalk off to find Kaleo. He's standing at the front of the quad, near the flagpole, still as a statue. I wonder how long he's been standing there.

"Sir, I hear I'm not teamed with Gannon today."

Kaleo takes his sunglasses off in one quick movement and peers at me narrowing his eyes as if he's trying to look through me to see something behind me. I can't help but look behind me just to be sure there isn't anything there.

"You're with me today. You have a problem with that?"

Without a thought, I pull my heels together and give a crisp salute. "Sir, no Sir." I say firmly.

He seems to relax a bit as he puts his sunglasses back on. "That's what I thought." He turns sharply on his heel and heads toward a rover parked nearby. He turns the ignition and I get in, then he drives away and out the gates, saluting the guards stationed there as we pass. He turns sharply to the right and my body heaves sideways. I was expecting him to go straight, in the direction of the Wall.

"We're not going to the Wall?"

He shakes his head as he picks up speed, turning onto a wide road. "We've got plenty of presence out there. You've been summoned for a special detail."

He doesn't turn to look at me, keeping his eyes on the road. I don't ask what the detail is; all I know is that I'm not out there. I'm not with the other Betas, and I can't help but feel like I'm being punished. I grit my teeth. I'm a loyal soldier, and I should be out at the Wall, getting to the bottom of things. Squashing those rebels and keeping the peace of this city.

A few minutes later, Kaleo turns up a road that winds up a small hill, to a set of tall wooden gates. There is a security guard at the gate, and as Kaleo pulls up, the guard nods to him and presses the button to lift the gate. Kaleo gives a short salute, the kind given to civilians, and continues up the road. I've never been to this part of town, where the Altas live. The streets are wide and empty, with hedges and walls twelve feet high all around us. The roads wind around, meandering through the neighborhood lazily. This is such stark contrast to the rest of the city, which is on an orderly grid. It would be easy to get lost in this area, if you weren't familiar with it. I'm already trying to memorize the turns Kaleo has made, but before too long they all melt together in my brain.

He pulls up to another gate and presses a button, which buzzes back at us as the gates slowly sweep open and Kaleo pulls forward and drives through it.

My eyes widen as we pull up to the biggest house I have ever seen, with a three tiered fountain in front of it, water cascading from the top tier down to the pool at the bottom. Kaleo stops the rover and gets out, but I sit for a moment, taking it all in. The landscaping is perfect and symmetrical, with colorful flowers edging the expansive porch that wraps around the house. I finally open the door and step out, looking up at the vast two-story house. Its red tiled roof stands out above the beige stucco, and large stained-glass windows pepper the front of the house.

Kaleo motions for me to follow him as he walks up the porch steps. Just as he gets to the front door, it opens and a woman in a maid's uniform stands to the side, motioning for us to come in. I look at her as we enter; her ample frame and brown skin an odd contrast to the opulence of the house. I wonder for a moment if we're here for her; I'm sure she lives out by the Wall. She looks away from my gaze, bowing her head and looking at the floor. I pause, but Kaleo continues and I follow.

He walks to the back of the house and out a back door, where I finally see Kinder sitting at a table, reading a stack

of papers while eating breakfast. He takes a sip of coffee, then looks up at us, smiling. "Ah, Calafia. You're looking like your old self again. Ready to get out there?"

I nod, then add, "the rest of my squad already left without me. I'd like to catch up to them asap."

He and Kaleo exchange a look, then Kinder looks out at the swimming pool in front of us. It's still and glassy, and I can't help but stare at it with him. I've never seen a swimming pool in person before, and I can't help but imagine what it's like to glide through such calm waters. I learned in the ocean with all the other Betas, so I'm a strong swimmer, but that was with tides and currents. This looks so much...quieter.

He turns back to me. "I have a different task for you today. I need protection, and I want you to be my security detail. Usually Kaleo is enough, but with the rebels escalating attacks, I don't want to take any chances, and you're the Beta I want if anything goes wrong."

A flutter goes through me as my face flushes. The message he's sending me is loud and clear. He trusts me. With his life. I nod and salute as he stands. He's dressed in tailored slacks, with a crisp white shirt and silky tie. He's usually not wearing such expensive clothing on the base, so this must be a special day.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"The Lighthouse. Security Council is meeting today, and I need to be there." He puts his hand on my arm. "I need you to be there, too."

"Yes, sir."

He smiles and walks back into the house, where the woman who answered the door hands him his suit jacket and he puts it on, barely slowing down as he walks to the front door. I eye the woman again, and she looks away, then walks down the hall away from us and out of sight.

When we get outside, Kinder pushes the button of a fob that he pulls from his pocket, and a garage door in the house opens to reveal a sleek vehicle, complete with windows and a roof. Definitely not like the rovers I'm used to. It's black and shiny, without a spec of dust on it. I've seen vehicles like this on occasion, usually ferrying ambassadors and other important officials around the city. I do my best to hide my surprise that Kinder owns one, and climb in the back seat next to Kinder as Kaleo takes the driver's seat. He starts the car, and it purrs quietly as he pulls it out of the garage, then eases it through the gate.

He heads to the guard station at the front of the neighborhood, and I again try to memorize the streets and

imagine how they fit together. I quietly try to predict where Kaleo will turn, and in which direction, all while keeping an eye out for any potential threats. It's not likely anyone would strike in this neighborhood, but you can never be too sure. Letting your guard down is when mistakes happen. And I've already made enough mistakes.

Just before he reaches the front gate, Kaleo takes a sharp right turn, down a narrow path between two hedges that tower over the car. Up ahead, a door rises, and the ground falls as we head down the ramp and into a small tunnel. It opens into a wider space, where Kaleo parks the vehicle and we climb out.

I'm doing my best to keep up with all the new things I'm experiencing today, and it's a bit overwhelming. The neighborhood, Kinder's house, the car, this underground space. I'm also on edge, waiting for something, anything, to jump out from a shadow and attack, but Kinder and Kaleo seem unbothered by the darkness. The only light comes from a fluorescent tube on the ceiling, which they follow to a small platform. A wide tunnel intersects with the platform, and I look in both direction, seeing nothing but a single rail on the ground and darkness.

Kinder pulls out his security badge and swipes it against a box on the wall, which beeps and turns green. He smiles at me as

he turns back to the tunnel. "This will only take a minute."

I look at Kaleo, who gives me a curt nod, his face revealing nothing. I can see that all of this is routine for him, but he still hasn't let down his guard for even a second. He takes his job just as seriously as I take mine, and I respect him for that. I see why he is Lamb's replacement. I look away, not wanting to think about Lamb.

Then I hear a whooshing sound, and from one end of the tunnel, I see a white light. Then I hear a high pitched wail, faint but distinct, as a capsule of chrome glides toward us in the empty space of the tunnel. It stops in front of us, and a door slides back, revealing a cabin with four executive seats and a divan along one wall, all upholstered in soft leather. We sit and the door closes, then the pod quietly continues through the tunnel, shrouded in soft light.

We're traveling quickly, my back pushed into the seat. It only takes a few minutes before the pod stops again, and this time, the platform it opens to is brightly lit, with mirrored walls and a blue carpet leading to glass double doors, an elevator on the other side. We get out, and Kaleo and I take up our positions on either side of Kinder. We walk through the doors, then Kinder swipes his security badge again, and the elevator dings as the doors open.

We enter, and without anyone pushing a button, the doors close and the elevator rises. When the doors open, light bursts into the car and we step out. I look out, and we are assaulted with floor-to-ceiling windows all the way around. We are high up, and I can see the city sprawling out from us. I'm at the top of the Lighthouse, I realize, and the view is spectacular. I've never seen anything like it. In the distance, the ocean sparkles in the sunlight, and for a moment, I'm in awe.

Kinder leads the way into a conference room, where he joins five other men who are already waiting. Kaleo and I post up, him near the door, and me by the windows. The other men are all dressed in suits like Kinder, but I've never seen any of them. The six of them sit at the table, and the man at the head of the table, a tanned man with dark hair and a mustache, opens a folder in front of him, then tents his hands under his chin. He looks around the room thoughtfully, then glances at Kaleo and I.

"Kinder, I'm glad you could join us today, but perhaps we should have your security detail wait outside."

Kinder stares at the man and shrugs. "I understand your concern, but these are two of my finest soldiers. I'd trust them with my life. And if we can't trust them, we're finished, don't you think?" He looks around at the other men, who avoid his gaze. "I'd like them both to stay."

The two men glare at each other through tight smiles for a tense moment, then the mustached man sighs and waves a hand.

"Fine. Let's get started."

They start their meeting, and Kaleo and I continue to stand watch throughout. I learn that the five men are the heads of each city in the Legion, and Kinder is their head of state security. This is the Security Council I've heard so much about all this time. The most important men in the entire Legion, all here, seated at this table. And they're concerned. The rebels have been growing bolder for weeks, and now they've got firepower. Everyone is concerned with what they'll do next, and Kinder has to come up with a strategy to keep things under control.

I observe the men as they talk, watching their faces, their movements, and memorizing them. Bo Chiu is the Secretary of Bay City, which is north of Pendleton City, near the coast. He's thin and pale, and he sits with a hunch, as if he sits at a desk often. Jacob Showalter is from Salt Lake City. He's dressed less extravagantly than the others, but he still commands attention with his large frame and serious face. Rudy Figueroa is from Underground, a city out in the desert, past Empire, where people live underground and raise crops through hydro culture. He is short and meaty, and of the men at the table, is the only one

with callouses on his hands. Given that much of the food in the Legion comes from Underground, he also manages to garner a sizable amount of respect from the others. The last two men, Loren Chen and Ardal Hart have a familiarity with one another the others don't; Hart is the Secretary of Pendleton City, and Chen the Secretary of Diego Island, which is just down the coast. They're the two closest cities in the Legion, so they see each other often. Diego Island is where the wealthiest citizens of the Legion live, and make even the Altas of Pendleton look average by comparison. It shows in Chen's clothes, and in his manner. He expects to be listened to, and it's clear the others defer to him, but not because they like or respect him. Hart, on the other hand, has their attention, and almost every single man glances at Kaleo or myself when they speak to him. He has the power of the military behind him, and they all know it.

Except for Kinder. Because he knows that we don't follow Hart. We follow him. I'm not sure Hart knows that, though, because he speaks with all the authority and pomp of someone who knows he will not be challenged. And no one does. He reminds everyone of the strength of the Betas, and gives them a warning look before giving Kinder the floor. Kinder smiles, slowly, not showing his teeth. He looks like he has a secret, and he most likely does. Because Kinder knows more than every single man in

this room, and he's very aware of it.

He points to Kaleo, then me as he speaks, giving the men an outline of the plan to squash the rebellion: gather intel, find the rebels, then dismantle their organization by whatever means necessary. He says it shouldn't take longer than a week, and they all nod their approval.

"But," he says, holding up a finger, "I'd like something in return."

They all look at each other, baffled. Hart moves a piece of paper in front of him, a slight grin on his lips. "We've already given you that beautiful house in the Oceanside District, plus the apartments on base. You claim a generous salary, and enjoy the benefits of your position. What else could you possibly need?"

"A seat at the table." He stabs the table with his finger. "This table." There is some muttering about precedent and procedure, but Kinder waves them off. "Look, I'm integral to the security of this city, and the four others in the Legion. I'm entitled to have a say in how it is governed."

Hart's face reddens as Kinder crosses his arms over his chest. He leans back in his chair, and an awkward silence settles over the men, not knowing how to take Kinder's ultimatum.

"Do you need to vote?" He asks. There is an edge of sarcasm in his voice as he adds, "I'll just step outside."

He gets up and walks to the door, straightening his suit jacket as he walks away. I follow, and we walk into the hallway with Kaleo closing the door behind us. Kinder looks at us and rubs his hands together in anticipation. I hear voices coming from inside the room, then chairs shuffling. Moments later, the door opens. Kinder swings around to see Hart, who gives a curt nod.

"When the rebellion is dismantled," he says. I look past him, and the others are standing awkwardly behind him, except for Figueroa, who stands looking out the window. I'm guessing he doesn't see sights like this too often.

"Well then, we'd better get to work," Kinder says jovially, and he walks away down the hall, back to the elevator.

Nico

I'm the most rested I've been in ages, even though I've only been here for a night and a day. It feels good, but I know it will only hurt me in the end. Eventually, I'll have to go back out into the world and fend for myself, and I'll be used to the feeling of a full belly and a peaceful night's rest. I've made the decision -- I'm leaving today, and I'm not coming back. I just have to figure out a way to tell Socorro. She has been good to me, and kept Tyrell away. Whenever I hear his footsteps, my heart thuds in my chest with such force, it feels like it might punch through my sternum and jump out the window on its own. But Socorro has a way about her, like a light breeze whispering and caressing things wherever she goes. I could leave without telling her, but that seems wrong somehow. I've been

running away from things my whole life; I don't want to run away from her, too. But as I sit in bed, staring up at the ceiling, I know I can't tell her. I have been able to hear my own thoughts without someone else's negating them all morning, and this is the one thing they are telling me: just get out. Leave and never look back. I rub my eyes with the heels of my hands and sigh, wishing there was another way.

After I've pulled myself together, I dress and open the door, turning the handle slowly so it doesn't make a sound. I leave the bedroom and look both ways down the hallway to make sure there is no one coming. As with the bedroom, it's tidy and sparsely decorated, with nothing more than a long rug in the hallway, and a table with a small vase on it at the end.

I know it's cowardly to sneak out like this, but I haven't been brave ever since I stopped trusting my own brain. Even I can't predict what I'm going to do, and when I do something, you can bet it's the wrong choice. It has been from the very beginning.

There's no one in the hallway, so I walk down the stairs as lightly as I can, hoping not to make too much noise. I get to the bottom of the stairs and reach for the doorknob.

"You're not leaving, are you?"

I look over and see Socorro leaning against the wall in the

hallway, looking more exhausted than relaxed. She wears a pink linen dress that hangs loosely around her hips and shoulders, her hair pulled into a simple braid at the back of her neck. I wonder how much stress I have put on her by being here. Not only have I made things tense between her and Tyrell, I'm sure I remind her of her lost sister. My mother that I never knew. I open the door, determined to not stop, but my feet don't cooperate, remaining rooted into the wooden floor as if they came from the same tree. I focus on overriding my brain, but it's not budging. As usual.

"I had hoped you would want to stay longer, Nico." She's not standing in my way, and her hands remain limp at her sides. She's not going to try to stop me. At least, not physically. If only that were the only thing that could keep me here.

"I should get back to my real life. I don't belong here." I stare at the floor, knowing that there's a good chance I won't have a choice in this. She shakes her head.

"Maybe you don't, but you definitely don't belong out there, either."

"I don't belong anywhere."

She sighs and reaches out to me, her eyes sad and watery. "I wish you wouldn't say that, Nico. Everyone belongs somewhere. Even you."

My lip curls into a sneer. She doesn't know anything, living in this house with all the things she would ever need, not knowing what trouble actually looks like. Her husband is one of them; I can't trust her, family or not. I've had to learn the hard way that loyalty isn't determined by blood, and I don't even know this woman. Not really. I turn to go, but she stops me with just the soft coo of her voice. "Don't go, Nico. Stay."

I stop. Dammit. I grit my teeth and force the question out. "Why?"

She puts her hand on my shoulder. "You're family. And family helps each other. Right?" She smiles softly, kindly, but I can sense desperation in her tone. "Come, sit." She walks into the front sitting room of the house and sits in a dainty wingback chair. My feet follow her and my body sits on the couch. I grit my teeth, feeling a tightness in my chest that makes me short of breath. I'm fighting with my brain the entire time, trying to wrestle control of my body back from it. It's not giving an inch.

Socorro doesn't move for a while, she just sits and looks at me. I look around the room, instinctively searching for the escape routes for the moment my brain gives my body back to me. The furniture is simple and worn, but soft and comfortable. The colors are bright and cheery, and somehow, the room feels just

like Socorro. Easy. Breezy.

Finally, she takes a breath. "Nico, you really should relax. No one is going to hurt you. Especially me."

I feel the springs in the couch groan ever so slightly as I ease into it, and do my best to take a deep breath. It's harder than it should be, so I stare straight ahead and concentrate on air coming in and going out. Socorro waits for me to relax, then continues.

"I need your help, Nico."

"With what? I can't imagine anything I have that you would need." I look at her and feel a twinge of something run through me. Sadness? Pity? Anger? I try to shake them all from my head and focus. "Why should I help you?"

"Because we're family."

"You already said that. I need more." She looks at me pleadingly, but we both know it would actually take a lot less. She doesn't need to give me a reason. Just a directive. Even a simple request would send me out into the street blindly. She continues, slowly, choosing her words with great care.

"I understand you've been through a lot. I think we can help you. But we need you to help us."

"Us?"

She nods and closes her eyes. "Marcus and me. We have a

son. He's with the rebellion. As I'm sure you can imagine, we can't just go in there. We're not really welcome among them, for reasons I'm sure you can understand. We need someone to talk to him for us. You're the only person that stands a chance of getting close to him without getting killed."

"Go in where? And what do you want to say to him?" Nico shook his head. It was impossible.

"Well, we don't really know where the rebels are. They move around. But I'm sure you could find them. You know a lot of people who are...down on their luck," she says diplomatically.

"And what if I did find him? What do you think you'll accomplish?"

Socorro wrings her hands in the first small sign of uneasiness I've seen from her in the entire time I've known her. She takes a deep breath and looks at a photo on the side table next to her. She holds it up to me. It's of the three of them, and I look away. Even the sight of Tyrell makes me uneasy.

"He's all we have. I don't want to lose him, Nico. And doing things like this, without help...it's only going to get him killed. Or worse." She puts the photo back and stares at me direct in the face. "I hate what's happened to you. I hate what's happened to the Betas. Kinder is a power-hungry monster, and he needs to be stopped. But he's taken too many lives

already. My husband is a shell of his former self. I won't let him take my son, too."

"That's crazy. You know what I am. You know what I might do. Or might not do. Surely there is someone else. You shouldn't rest hope for your son's life on me."

"I have faith in you. And it might be the eternal optimist in me, but I thought that if you go to the rebels, you might be able to find your brother. Make amends. Everybody wins." She spreads her hands in front of her, as if she's laid a great prize in front of me, but I can only feel fear.

"Jovan doesn't want to see me. He'll probably kill me if he sees me."

"Maybe, but I strongly doubt it."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Your brother isn't a killer. Neither of you are. Deep down, all you want, all this family has ever wanted, was to do something good." She leans forward and peers at me, her eyes wide. "And now you have the chance to do just that." She leans back again and sighs, and I again get the sense that she's exhausted. By what, I don't know.

"Are you telling me I have to do this for you?"

She winces slightly and shifts in the chair, then shakes her head. "No. This choice is all yours. But if you decide to do

it, we will do everything we can to help you."

I bury my head in my hands, trying to clear my head and think for a minute. I keep hearing her voice, echoing in my head. Family. I take a deep breath, then hear a footstep, and the air catches in my throat. I look up, and Tyrell is standing in the doorway, with the same exhausted look on his face. I stand with a start, gasping for breath. Socorro's hand is on my hip.

"Easy, Nico. You're safe here," she says softly.

Tyrell sits, doing what he can to seem unthreatening. But memory is really a bitch. Adrenaline pumps through my veins, and I automatically start looking for an escape route.

"Relax," Socorro says, more forcefully. "Sit."

I sit down again, doing my best to regain some composure. Tyrell folds his hands in his lap and smiles sadly.

"Nico," he says quietly, "I want to help you get back what you lost."

"Oh yeah? How're you going to do that? You got a time machine?"

He looks at the floor and shakes his head. "His name is Lance. He's working on a drug to reverse the process. An antidote, if you will. Find him, find your cure."

I scoff. "Why don't you find him yourself? This is all your

fault, anyway."

Tyrell looks away, out the window for a long time, then to himself, "I didn't know. I thought we were helping people."

He looks back at me, and his eyes are wet.

"I wish I would have seen it sooner, but I didn't. It's easy to believe what you want to. I didn't even know about your niece until after you left. Kinder told everyone he found her abandoned."

"I'm sure he did," I say, a definite edge in my voice. The thought of him makes my blood boil. "And I'm sure you left that same day, didn't you?"

He looks down in shame. I don't feel sorry for him. "I wish I had left sooner. But I had a family to provide for. And leaving the program just like that isn't as simple as you would think."

"Isn't it?"

He smiles and looks me in the eyes. "We can't all fall off the grid, Nico. To this day, they watch me. I guess neither of us ever really got free, did we?"

I sigh, knowing there's no point in arguing. We both lost the people we cared about most. There's nothing that can change that. I lay my head back on the couch and close my eyes, doing my best to listen to the voice in my head that sounds like my

own. There's so many of them, it's difficult to tell sometimes. Socorro, Tyrell, Jovan, Hoshun, all the people who have ever tried to guide me, mold me, or help me are in there, telling me what to do. I don't even remember what my own voice sounds like. I hear Jovan deep in the darkness, faint, but clear, echoing the last words he ever said to me. Give her to me.

"Bad blood," I whisper to nothing.

"What?" Tyrell asks.

I lift my head and look at him. "I'll do it."

Jovan

We step into the warehouse and let our eyes adjust to the dark. Ryoko clings to my hand, cowering behind me to peek at the strangers huddled inside. I squeeze her hand for reassurance as Kato turns to us and smiles. A chill settles over me, emanating from the concrete that surrounds us. It's gloomy in here, with nothing but a wide open space between us and Kato, with small piles of rubble dotting the pitted floor. There is just enough light streaming through the windows for us to see, but just barely.

"Is that Ryoko?" He crouches a bit and puts his hands on his knees, trying to coax her out. "It's nice to finally meet you." He gives a small wave, then straightens up and looks at me. "You finally ready to get serious about this?"

"I just want my daughter back," I answer.

He chuckles softly. "It all goes together. You get your daughter, we get justice. Everybody wins." He clasps his hands in front of him. "Come on. I'll show you."

He slides a heavy metal door at the back of the warehouse to the side, heaving his body into it with force. His muscles bulge under his black shirt, his feet gripping the floor. Still he makes the door look a lot easier to move than I think it is. I probably wouldn't be able to get it to budge.

We step into a room, and it is surprisingly bright, especially when compared to the musty grayness of the rest of the warehouse. It's a lab, immaculately clean, with more technical equipment than I've seen since my days at the Camp. There are glass beakers, Petri dishes, pipettes, racks full of test tubes, and a myriad of other machines and gadgets, causing my jaw to drop. It feels like I stepped straight into a lab at Camp, it's so well-stocked. He closes the door behind us, making sure the latch clicks into place. I wince as it snaps, feeling the finality of it as if it were the sound of a gun being cocked.

"This is Lance," Kato says. He's tall and well built, like an athlete, and wears a gleaming white lab coat and glasses. Lance smiles and holds his hand out for me to shake it. He has a

firm grip, and looks vaguely familiar. Something about his dark eyes and his long nose.

"Have we met?"

He shakes his head, then casts a glance in Kato's direction. Kato purses his lips and looks at the ground. "I get that a lot. I guess I have one of those faces." He smiles, but senses my impatience. He looks to Kato again. "Did you explain it to him?"

"I figured I'd let you do it," Kato says. "You know more about all this anyway."

"Well," Lance says as he turns back to the rest of his lab, "it's really not that different than what you already know about. This is how we win. We'll never be able to match their firepower or brute strength, so we have to do it this way." He taps his temple with his finger. "We have to be smarter. Through technology."

He opens a small refrigerator and pulls out vials of what looks to be some sort of medicine or serum. Each one is a slightly different color, ranging from light yellow to dark orange, and it coats each glass tube like oil as it sloshes around inside.

"If you're making Betas of your own, I'm out." I back away.

"We're trying to reverse the process," he says simply. My

ears perk up, and my feet are suddenly glued to the floor. I catch my breath, thinking that this is the answer I've been looking for. Fix what was wrong. My mind races as I imagine all the possibilities. Not just bringing down Kinder, but having my daughter back, having her normal again, without the brainwashing drugs. It squeezes my heart with both joy and dread to think about it.

"Reverse it?"

Lance shakes his head, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Well, that's what we're trying to do. But here's the tricky part." He smiles, pressing his lips together in a sort of grimace. "We're fresh out of Betas. So we don't know if it works." He shrugs helplessly and sighs, then looks wistfully at the vials in front of him.

Disappointment invades my body. I clench my fist, feeling like Kato tricked me. He knew full well that he had nothing, but he gave me hope that he did. I glare at him, but he stands still and stares back. "So what am I supposed to do about that? My Beta was stolen."

Lance looks at Kato. "You didn't tell me he was so funny."

Kato laughs and claps his hand on my shoulder. "A real joker, this one."

I push his hand off my shoulder. "I can't help you. Sorry I

wasted your time."

"But you can help us. We're going to do the hard part," Kato says.

"Which is?"

"We're going to get the Beta. You just help Lance in the lab. Once we know the drug works, we can take out the entire military force with nothing more harmful than tranq darts."

"And then what?"

"And then we're free."

"You really think it's that simple?"

Kato takes a deep breath, then sighs heavily. "Nothing is ever that simple, my friend. But it's better than where we are now. And if we go for the simplest path, maybe we'll actually get there. You never know."

"So how will you get this Beta?"

"We're working on it."

I shake my head. Kato doesn't have any idea what he's doing. "I shouldn't have come here. This is madness."

"If it's so crazy, why don't you help us? Help us make a plan that isn't madness."

I grit my teeth. He's baiting me, and I don't like it. I take a deep breath and do my best to control my voice before I spin out of control. Sakura puts her hand lightly on the small

of my back, and I instantly feel bolstered. "Even if you do capture a Beta and don't kill it, how are you going to hang on to it? And what if this antidote ends up killing that Beta? Or making things worse? And if, by some miracle, you do manage to get your antidote to work, and the Beta program is brought down, there's still the problem of firepower. They have all of it, and we have none. Do you really think you'll be free then?"

Kato shrugs. "When people find out what they've been doing to their children, we think they'll come to our side. The Betas will, too. Then it's just a matter of time."

I laugh out loud. It's so ridiculous. "You're going to gamble the lives of everyone here, plus the lives of Betas, one of which is my daughter, on the hope that people will see reason and want to fight Kinder and the Security Council?" I shake my head. "Impossible."

"Without you, we'll just keep going. It will take longer, and there will be more violence. More innocent people in our neighborhood being targeted or caught in the crossfire. And who knows what will happen then?"

"Are you threatening me?"

"Of course not. I'm just telling you how things are. We're doing this, with or without you. But we know we're stronger with you. I'd think you'd want to help us. Of everyone here, you have

the most important reason to want to find a way to reverse the process."

He's right. No one else here has lost a kid to the Betas. No one else here knows how the program works. He needs me more than he ever let on. I'm annoyed that he wasn't upfront with me from the beginning, but I also see that this means I'm in control. I have leverage here, and we both know it. Kato may be in charge, but I've got a certain power over him that he has been forced to acknowledge, and that's something.

Sakura puts her hand on my shoulder. "We'll think about it," she says, more forcefully than I would have expected. She takes Ryoko's hand, and we turn and walk out.

"We need to know soon," Kato calls after us.

#

"He's not interested in helping us, you know."

Sakura nods quietly, letting me finish my tirade. She's been listening to me go on and on about why we can't help Kato. It would put Ryoko in danger. It would put Entara in danger. It would put us in danger. And Kato is the only one who would actually get something out of it. He did a really good job of making it sound like the entire fate of Pendleton City and Calida Fornax rests on whether or not I help him, but I have my doubts. I listened to the promises of men before, and it didn't

get me much. Heartache. That's about it.

Sakura pats me gently on the shoulder, and I shrug her off. Even her reassurances aren't making me feel better now. Something about Kato's plan just feels wrong. It sounds like he's ready to build a utopia of equality and fairness for everyone, but if there's one thing I've seen in my lifetime, it's that no one really wants to be equal. They only want more than they have now.

"I'm not doing it."

Sakura closes her eyes and nods, which isn't her agreeing, it's her arguing.

"I'm going to tell Kato. We're not doing it." I try to say it with more strength than before, but I feel my voice waver as she looks at me and sighs. We lock eyes for a moment, and she looks away, out the window into nothing. There's not a view out that window, unless you count a concrete wall as a view. She's just looking away from me, silently putting forth her opinion.

"I'm going for a walk," I say as I heave myself off my chair and head outside. I slam the door, just in case Sakura wasn't sure that I'm upset. There is a pang of guilt in my stomach, knowing she doesn't deserve my anger, but I have nowhere else to direct it.

I kick the dust as I walk along the street, and jam my

fists into my pockets. It's hot out today, but there are few people out on the street. Normally, children play freely, and adults stand in the doorways of their homes and chat or trade stories with one another. It's one of the reasons I live here; I know everyone, and we take care of each other. The houses are practically on top of one another, and they are small and sparsely furnished. Very few have windows, since we can't really afford the glass anyway. But it's home. Or at least it was.

Now that the Betas have come here, people are scared. They all know that Ryoko was almost taken in broad daylight, and they know it's only a matter of time before the Betas come back, in greater numbers, after their children. They might take them, but they might also do worse. Those who are able are joining Kato's band of rebels in droves, and those that aren't able speak in hushed voices about protection and support for the rebels. About fighting the machine that is coming to steamroll all of us.

I head towards the Wall, and walk in its shadow, hoping that somehow the relative darkness and white brick will inspire some sort of solution in me. I curse again. I've never been a planner. Even back when Nico and I came to Pendleton City, I didn't have a plan. I had seen the billboards that made promises, and I started packing. I didn't know what we would do when we got here, or what would happen if things didn't go the

way I thought they would. I just pointed my feet westward, and started walking, dragging Nico along with me. When we got to the Camp, I put my life in their hands. Nico's life, too. He was volunteering ten years of his life to military service and their new training programs, and I was along for the ride. When he deserted, I started getting suspicious looks, and needed to leave. I couldn't concentrate after Entara's kidnapping, and since then, my only desire has been to find her. We've been treading water ever since, just trying to get through each day, hoping for something to get better. But I want to do something, make a difference. I want to do it my own way. Kato isn't enlightened, or special. He just happens to be the guy that everyone listens to. Charisma. Kato has it. Nico had it, but I never did.

Nico. I bite my lip as my thoughts drift to him. Ever since that day, I've done my best to push him as far from my mind as possible, but every now and then, he drifts back in from the far recesses of my brain. He destroyed my family, but I did it first. I destroyed him, made him into what he was, and then left him to suffer without any help from me. If I had kept my stupid mouth shut, if I could have been content to live a life of quiet struggle in the dust of Empire, we would still be whole. Both of us. Who knew that this little drug would tear apart my entire

family? Nico's gone, Entara's gone, and now it's looking like I may lose Sakura if I don't do the right thing. Ryoko, too. I'm terrified of what that serum will do to my life if I get near it again.

I stop and lean against the wall for a moment. Even though the sun is on the other side of it, I can feel the heat radiating from it. It seeps into my back as I rest my head and close my eyes, trying to get to the end of this, see how this plays out. Is there really a possibility that we could get our daughter back alive? Would we be able to keep her? Would she ever be normal? Would Ryoko be safe? The answer to all these questions seems to be no. I just don't see how it would all come out okay. Someone will have to pay the price, possibly everyone. I take a deep breath and heave myself off the wall, then start walking again down the street up the slight hill towards the houses that have the glass windows. Those are where the merchants live, in relative comfort, above those of us in The Heights.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a woman who seems out of place. She's beautiful and composed, wearing clothes that are too tailored and too vibrant for her to be from this neighborhood. I can't help but stare at her, flipping through the memories of my brain, trying to remember if I'd seen her

once before. Then I see him, and our eyes meet. Nico.

He's thinner than I remember, but he still has the physique of an athlete. His clothes are ragged and worn, but he looks rested and alert. A knot forms in the pit of my stomach and I clench my teeth, remembering him pushing me away, then trudging off into darkness like a hulking pit bull of a person. We lock eyes for an emotionless moment, as time stops and I rewind fifteen years, twenty years, thirty years, and try to remember how we used to be.

There is only one thought I can conjure up in this moment. "I want my daughter back," I say to him as I take a step in his direction. His eyes dart sideways at the woman, who grabs his arm for just a moment before he pulls free of her and darts down the street. The woman reaches out her arms after him. She looks surprised and calls after him, then sighs and walks in the direction he fled.

I chase him, yelling after him. "Nico!" People watch as we run past, and he darts through alleys and around corners. Neither one of us is as young as we used to be, but it's obvious that Nico is in much better shape than I. He's quick and strong; stronger than most men his age, even given his thinness. He doesn't even stumble once, which is a feat considering the uneven pavement. The drug must still affect him to this day. I

stop and hunch over, my hands on my knees, grasping for breath. There's no way I can catch up to him. He's gone, just like always.

I remember that look in his eyes from fifteen years ago. It's a reflex, an instinct, not his brain actually thinking. This was a fight or flight, and I realize it isn't going to go away. Not ever. I did this to him, and he let me. Because he trusted me, because he wanted to make me happy. I was convinced our lives were getting better, and we both ended up being destroyed by that serum. I want to fix it, but what I just saw was terrifying. Nico's eyes contained nothing but fear, as if he were a passenger in his own body as it careened down the street. I think of Entara, her face on those billboards, and imagine her eyes filled with that same fear. That same inability to control her body, to make it obey her mind. And I know there are thousands of other teenagers exactly like her, being held hostage without even knowing it. I broke them, just like I broke Nico. I can't just stand by and let someone else put Nico or my daughter back together.

I turn and walk up the street towards Kato's warehouse, doing my best to catch my breath. When I get closer, I see Chasca, leaning against the warehouse. She smiles when she sees me; she's so much better at forgiving the past than I am. I nod

at her as I go inside. When I see Kato, he's smiling, as if he knew I were coming. I don't care.

"Jovan, what can I do for you?"

I grit my teeth and sigh. "I'm in, Kato."

Nico

By the time I come to, I'm hyperventilating and hunched over next to a row of garbage cans. I look up, and the world slides sideways. I brace myself on one of the cans for balance, close my eyes, and try to regain my breath. My chest hurts, and my legs shake as the adrenaline leaves them and fatigue sets in. I open my eyes again, slowly, and try to recognize my surroundings. I have no idea where I am, or how I got here. I'm still in The Heights, and there are a few people eyeing me suspiciously, but most people just go on with their business, not wanting to get involved. Interfering with people who run frantically through the streets is always a recipe for trouble.

My breath starts to slow, and I feel the world around me again. The sun is bright, and the smell of dust invades my

nostrils. I smell charred pork and hear the bell of a street vendor, and my mouth waters. I feel the weight of my clothes and a slick layer of sweat coating my back and neck. I am about to peel off my shirt, when I feel a hand on my shoulder. I jump, ready to run again, but then I hear her voice, soft and low.

"Nico, I'm here. Are you okay?"

Socorro is there, her eyes concerned, her touch gentle.

"Are you okay?" She asks again.

"How did you find me?" I ask.

She pats my back lightly and smiles with her eyes closed, like a mother whose child just told a silly joke. "I followed the stunned faces, Nico. It seems you leave a path behind you that is quite obvious. If I was a bit younger, I wouldn't have had to ask anyone if they saw you, but alas. Age makes you a little more resourceful. Luckily, you aren't forgettable."

I nod and swallow hard. I'm embarrassed. I agreed to help her, and the moment I saw Jovan, the old feelings came back, and all I could think was that I had to get away. I see his face in my head, his clenched jaw and angry eyes. I hear him echoing, "I want my daughter." I hear it as though I've been listening to it for the last fifteen years. It has been a mantra that I've heard in my sleep, on the street, and next to my machine at the factory. It never goes away.

"I can't do this," I say to her. She pats my shoulder and smiles.

"Yes, you can."

I shake my head. "How? You saw what happened. I ran. I didn't even know what I was doing. I wasn't thinking. That damned drug still runs through me, and all I could think was that I needed to get away. Nothing else. Only panic."

"I know. But you're strong, Nico."

"Not that strong."

She sighs slightly and looks at the ground. Then, with renewed energy, she straightens her shoulders and gives me one final pat. "Well, let's get you to the house and get a meal and some sleep in you. We can try again in the morning."

She turns and starts to walk away, but I am still. "No."

She stops and looks at me, surprised.

"I have to do this on my own. I'll only get you hurt. Or killed."

She comes back and stands directly in front of me, a hand on each of my arms. Her eyes well with tears, but none fall. "Nico, I have faith in you. I know your love for your brother, and your desire to make things right are much stronger than any drug. It's human nature."

"Is it?" I ask.

She nods. "We have all made mistakes in life. You have the chance to fix yours. That is a rare gift. I'm just trying to give that to you."

I nod, a lump forming in my throat. She pulls me closer, her arms wrapped around me in a hug. I'm unable to hug her back, conscious of my sweat and filth seeping onto her clothes, but she holds me tight for a long moment before letting go.

"If you need us, please don't hesitate to ask. You are always welcome at my home, no matter what."

I nod again and look away. "I should go," I say weakly. I don't have any idea where I'm going, but I need to get away from this. Kindness is a powerful kind of bribe. I start to walk away, but she grabs my hand lightly.

"I look forward to us all sitting down as a family. All of us."

She gives my hand a squeeze, then turns and walks away, towards the hill that leads back up to her house. I wait until she turns the corner before moving, and then take in the neighborhood to navigate back to the part of The Heights that is more familiar to me. I try to act like nothing happened, but people are still watching me, on edge. Some trot quickly towards their homes and close the door as soon as they are inside. They're obviously spooked, between the explosion, the fires, and

the Betas crawling around everywhere. Plus, I'm sure that word has spread that a crazed man has been running through the neighborhood, and they all recognize me in the description. I can't blame them. They want to stay under the radar, and an unhinged person like me is not going to stay invisible for long. I'm the new pariah, and they'll let me take the fall in order to save their families. I'd do the same, to be honest.

I move into a shaded area and press my back against the wall. Something isn't right. My breath slows as I watch people retreat from the street. Then I see a rover carrying four Betas, all armed to the teeth. My brain tries to put everything together: the explosion, Socorro and Tyrell coming to the factory, Jovan. This is a puzzle with so many pieces, but I can't seem to clear the fog that will put them together. There are gaps that don't make sense, but the one thing I am sure of is that these Betas are on a mission. I close my eyes. I wait for a minute as my head clears and a strange calm comes over me. I duck behind a building and watch as the rover goes by, then I follow in the shadows, keeping an eye out for other people on the street. There aren't many of them. Not Betas, or people from the neighborhood. A strange calm settles over everything, including me. The old instincts flow back to me, and I feel a tingling in my fingertips as my body waits for the next action.

It's familiar, and yet new, and I try to contain myself as it oozes through my veins.

Every nerve in my body is at attention, waiting. What I'm waiting for, I don't know. I only know that something has overtaken my body, and I am merely a passenger in it now. I hear Kinder's voice in my head, a voice that I haven't heard in a long time, echoing as if he were standing right next to me. "Bring her to me." I shake my head, trying to concentrate on the Betas in their rover.

They turn a corner down a long street that heads straight towards the Wall. It feels like a trap, and I move closer to try to spot the danger that I can feel coming. They take a few turns, and I follow at a distance. They're still heading in the direction of the Wall, but don't take the most direct route. Classic tactics to detect a tail. They've been taught well. And so have I.

"Bring her to me." It echoes again.

I feel a rumble in my gut, as fresh as it was that day. I take a deep breath as one of the Betas holds up his hand and the rover stops. They sense something, too. There are three of them in the rover, and the two in the front look exactly alike. They are blond and lanky, and their faces telegraph the tension in their bodies. The one in the back sits up straight, but looks

more relaxed. He holds a rifle under his arm and looks around methodically, missing nothing. I have the feeling he is poised to pounce at any moment, should the need arise. This is what I would have become, if I had stayed. It is what I was, and what my brain still tries to make me into on my worst days. I hate them, and I pity them. Worst of all, I'm drawn to them.

A woman peeks out from behind a door as the Betas get out of the rover and fan out, guns drawn. They signal to one another, and move forward slowly, as if they are one. They seem to be of one mind, and I follow as closely as I dare. I don't have any weapons, and they would not hesitate to shoot me in the street. But I cannot walk away. My feet carry me closely behind them, sticking to the shadows as I have been doing for the last fifteen years.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as they pause. A small boy runs across the street and down a narrow alley behind them, his feet hitting the dirt is the only sound in the street. I can't even hear my own breathing. The Betas jump into action and follow him, single file, down the alley. When they get to the corner of a building, they split up, two going around one direction, and one going the other. They stay low and alert, like the seasoned soldiers they are. I follow at a safe distance, with the exact same low-slung stance, and pause by the

rover. I see a knife inside, and grab it, just in case. I look in the glove box and in the back, but there is nothing else in it that is useful. I continue behind the Betas, zig-zagging from building to shadow to doorway to remain unseen. This is the old training, taking over as an instinct would.

The child is quick, and darts through the alley with cat-like precision, knowing every nook and corner, and disappears before the Betas can get to him. He's small, so he can easily hide and move without being seen, and he knows it. I catch a glimpse of his face as he pauses in a shadow near a group of trash cans, and he looks like he's grinning, as if this is a game. Maybe to him, it is. Maybe he doesn't know how dangerous they are. Or maybe he just thinks he can outwit them.

They kick in every door as they move from one building to the next, ensuring that they don't get trapped inside, and that there are no weapon wielding rebels laying in wait. They are thorough and efficient. They come to the end of the alley, which opens on a small street corner, with the Wall towering above them on one side.

The child stands next to the Wall, and turns to face them as they raise their weapons. My mouth falls open as if to scream, but my brain won't allow it. They are prepared to shoot at a child. He closes his eyes, bracing for whatever is about to

come, and presses himself against the Wall, arms out wide. I hold my breath, then there is a loud crack, and one of the Betas drops to his knees, followed by the other two. Two of them have blood spurting from their legs, and the third Beta is hit in the shoulder. Rebels stand on either side of the three Betas, guns drawn with laser focus. The Betas swivel to return fire, but they are at a distinct disadvantage from the ground, and they are severely outnumbered. Their shots miss, and ricochet off the Wall in bits of dust and white brick, and the rebels return fire. The Betas fall back to the ground, squirming from fresh wounds as the rebels rush in to seize their weapons.

The animal in me takes over, and I pounce into action. I run towards the Betas and stand in front of them, knife drawn, staying low as the rebels pause only slightly in their approach before swooping in again. One of the Betas looks up at me and his brow furrows, as if he's trying to remember where he's seen me before, and coming up with nothing. My arms and feet act on their own as I raise my knife and slice one of the rebels across the arm, and he falls back. This isn't what I planned. It isn't what I promised Socorro. Another one raises his gun and fires into my shoulder, and I drop the knife. It falls to the ground with a thud, and I take a breath as pain rattles through me, along with anger. I clench my fist and swing at the nearest

rebel with my good arm, and land a blow in a man's side. He grabs my arm and twists it, then punches me in the face. I fall to the ground, blood oozing from my nose as the world fades. The last thing I see before everything disappears is the face of the boy, smiling as he picks up my knife.

Calafia

My mind has been a blur since we left the Lighthouse. Kinder has opened my eyes to the bigger picture, and I know that he trusts me completely. I don't plan on failing him. We will keep the rebels in check, and put an end to the trouble they've been causing. This is about the security of Pendleton City, and the rest of the Legion. Kaleo and I climb into the rover in silence as he eases the vehicle away from Kinder's house. This is the third time I've been down these winding streets today, and I think I'm starting to finally know them. I can see a map in my head, and how they intersect. We get to the main gate, and it slides open slowly and quietly. I immediately notice that the guard tower is empty and Kaleo rolls to a stop. I look over at him, and see his jaw clench as he looks in the rearview mirror.

He puts the rover in park and we both get out. My hand goes to the pistol at my hip as the hairs on my neck stand on end. Something doesn't feel right. My blood slows as I take in everything I can see and hear. The gate slides closed again from behind the hedge, revealing the crude symbol of the rebellion painted on it, with the white wavy line and the third straight line intersecting it. It covers the gate from top to bottom. I unholster my gun and rush to the guard tower, with Kaleo covering me. I get to the door and see the guard slumped on the floor. I check for a pulse. He's alive, and I look to Kaleo.

"Let's get him in the rover. Take him in for questioning."

I nod and pull the man up, then over my shoulder. Kaleo helps me get him in the back seat of the rover, and we climb back in. I keep my gun trained on the guard as Kaleo heads back to the base. As we get further from Oceanside District, I see more rebel symbols painted on buildings, trees, and even cars. I also see flyers littering the ground that have the symbol on them with the word "Rise UP" in big letters. They're getting bold. Coming into the Alta neighborhoods with their propaganda in the middle of the day is the closest they've gotten to Camp so far. They still haven't walked right up to the gates and knocked, but they're not shying away, either.

When we get to Camp, it's immediately clear that things

have escalated. Kaleo pulls the rover up to the brig and we deposit the guard for questioning with the Betas stationed there. A Command Sergeant walks briskly up to Kaleo and salutes. Kaleo returns her gesture, and they speak in low voices to one another. Kaleo glances at me, then back at the Command Sergeant and nods. Just before she walks away, she looks at me for a moment. I salute, then she turns her back to me.

I want to ask, but it's not my place. I wait for instructions. He motions for me to follow him, and then heads to the massive HQ building and walks inside. The moment we are inside, I am struck by the cold and quiet within, especially when compared to the activity outside. Outside there are Betas running to their posts, carrying out orders as quickly and efficiently as possible. In here, the stone walls and tile floors seem to absorb all sounds, giving it the feeling of a sacred place where people automatically know to speak in hushed voices.

Kaleo goes to his office, which is small and sparsely decorated, with only a map of Pendleton City, a map of the Legion of Cities, and the flags of Pendleton and the Legion in each corner. There are no photos of family or friends, or even hobbies, which isn't surprising. He's a lot like me: devoted to the job.

He motions to the chair across from his desk, and I sit when he does. He folds his hands on the desk and looks at me. "It should go without saying, but I'm going to say it anyway. Everything you saw and heard today is strictly confidential. You don't repeat it to anyone."

I nod. He leans back in his chair and stares at me for a moment before he continues.

"Kinder has plans for you, Calafia. You're his best hope for stopping the violence that is growing in this city."

There is a knock at the door, and a soldier comes in and hands Kaleo a thin file. Kaleo flips it open and scans it while I stare at the maps on the wall behind him. I've never actually seen the maps; the city is imprinted on my mind as a tangle of streets I've bumped down in a rover, but seeing it, and the larger Legion is eye opening. It's enormous. I even see Diego Island floating near the southeast coast, a result of a giant earthquake generations ago. The rest of Pendleton City was devastated after that earthquake, leveling skyscrapers and killing tens of thousands of people. Eventually the city was rebuilt, but the Lighthouse is still the only skyscraper that was built after that. A new city after a devastating tragedy, and I know I will not allow more tragedy to come to my home.

"There have been more attacks," Kaleo says suddenly,

jerking my attention back to him. "The rebels set fire to a hedge in the northern Alta neighborhood of The Hills, which spread to the mountains and burned a couple of residences. They are getting dangerous. No one was hurt today, but it's only a matter of time before someone is."

"I'll reconnoiter with my squad and head out immediately," I say. He shakes his head.

"They went out without you. "

My chest constricts. They went out while I was at a meeting? I can't sit idly by while others do the work. I lean forward, waiting for Kaleo to continue. He taps slowly on the file with his index finger, then looks up at me.

"You don't need your squad. You're our top Beta, so I'm giving you a special assignment. I'm sending you out alone on a reconnaissance and rescue mission."

"Rescue?"

He nods solemnly. "Your squad was captured by rebels this morning. We believe they are still alive, but there's no telling how long that will be the case. Your mission is to find them. If you need back-up, you can call for it, but if you think you can handle it on your own, we'd like to recover everyone, dead or alive."

"Never leave a man down."

"Exactly. But don't put yourself in danger. You're smart, Calafia. I trust you to do whatever's necessary to recover your squad."

I nod as my grip tightens on the arm of my chair. My knuckles are white, and I'm waiting for Kaleo to dismiss me so I can get started. He stands, and I stand and salute him.

"And you remember the mission Kinder gave you, yes?"

"Find Lamb's killer."

He nods, then returns my salute. "Move out, then."

"With pleasure, Sir."

I turn and walk out, with more reason than ever to find the rebels and put a stop to their violence. When I'm almost to the door, Kaleo adds, "Might be a good idea to pick up a treatment before you leave. In case you need something in the field."

I walk to the infirmary to pick up those treatments, but I doubt I'll need them. Right now, all I can think about is my captured squad. Gannon.

Jovan

The lab makes me nervous. It brings back those memories that I banished from my mind long ago. And now I'm reliving it, up close and personal. Very personal. Lance walks in front of me, pointing out where all the equipment is kept: goggles, beakers, vials, test tubes. He talks quietly, but with purpose, as if the lab is his friend. As if he's been here all his life. I can't help but wonder where Kato found him, or how he convinced Lance to join his cause. He could be making a comfortable living as a Ward, coming up with new technology and new medicine, but instead he's here, in the dirt with the rest of us. I don't know if that means I should trust him more, or less. Obviously he's got something to hide. He points to a steel box and says, "Serum and antidote prototypes."

I stop short. "You keep serum in here?"

Lance turns only briefly and nods his head before continuing to the refrigerator where several vials of fluid are stored. "What we know so far, is that it's a similar to snakebite antivenin. You have to have a little bit of the original." He chuckles softly, then says, "Like the dog that bit you."

I grit my teeth at his joke. There's really no humor in this for me. "Where'd you get it?"

There is a long pause before he answers. "It was smuggled out of the base. But this is all we have, so we have to guard it carefully. Otherwise, we're sunk."

"That couldn't have been easy."

"What?"

"Smuggling it out. I remember what security was like there. I barely got out of there with my life. I can't imagine being able to take any of this with me." A thought occurs to me, and I gasp, "You have someone on the inside?"

He shakes his head and looks at the ground, as though deep in thought. "No, but getting it came with a steep price."

I can imagine. Nothing in Pendleton City comes without a price. I have to wonder what price Lance paid to end up here. He pulls some glassware off a shelf and sets it on the counter,

readying it to be sterilized. I watch him as he sets each piece down carefully. He's a tall man, his skin dark. I wonder how he didn't end up as a soldier. He's naturally athletic, and also seems very intelligent. He doesn't seem to be the kind of rebel that grew up in The Heights. He must have ended up here out of some belief that he picked up somewhere. Maybe his parents were Wards and he was lucky enough to get an education. Maybe that's how he ended up in a lab. Science background would make sense. But what still doesn't make sense is how he's here.

"Why are you here?" I ask. He doesn't look up from his glassware for even a moment.

"For the cause, of course."

"But you're not one of us. Why get involved?"

At that, he looks up. "Because it's the right thing to do."

I shrug. "Have you ever considered that you're no better than they are? That you're playing with people's lives, and you have no idea how it'll come out?"

He blinks at me, eyes wide. "How you figure?"

I motion toward the refrigerator, full of its vials.

"You're making drugs you plan to test on children. You don't even know if they work. What if it makes them worse?"

He sighs. "Don't think it hasn't crossed my mind."

"They're children." I say again. "Isn't there another way?"

"Like what? I'm open to suggestions if you got 'em." He stares straight at me, but I've got nothing. I bite my lip and look away. He's right, and I hate it. Just like Kato. He has good points, but when all is said and done, they're up against something they can't possibly understand. They're outmatched, physically and intellectually. They have to know that, too. Which means they have to have some kind of angle, and I'm trapped in the middle. My family is trapped.

"I just hate it. I've done this before, and it's a dirty business."

"Don't I know it."

"Do you?"

He shrugs again. "You aren't the only one who lost someone to the Camp."

I raise an eyebrow and look at him squarely. "Oh yeah? What'd you lose?"

He turns away and leans on a table with both hands. I watch as the metal bends slightly under his weight and he sighs. "A brother," he says quietly. Then, "and I can't get mine back."

A shiver runs down my spine. I want to console him, but I don't know anything about it. About his family, his loss, or him. As much as I hate it, at least now I feel like I can trust him. It shouldn't have to be this way. I put a hand on his

shoulder. "I lost my child. I can't lose her twice. She's alive right now," I pick up a beaker and gaze at it, "But what if we make a mistake? What if we kill her? What if they kill her just to keep us away from her? I can't go through that a second time." My voice is shaky, even though I'm doing my best to control it.

Lance puts his hand on my shoulder. "We're going to do our best to get her back in one piece."

"And the other kids?"

He nods. "Them, too."

I put the beaker back down and suddenly feel tired. I sit on a nearby stool and hold my head in my hands, doing everything I can to fight back tears, memories, and my conscience. I swore I would never do this again. I also think of Nico, staggering around in the street, living the life I left him with. Whatever kind of life that is. I have no idea.

My thoughts are interrupted by Kato coming in. "How are things coming along?" He asks, too cheerily.

"Putting together the prototype now," Lance answers. "Should be ready for testing in a few hours. You have any subjects?"

Kato nods. "For now. But these kids are strong. It's not exactly easy to restrain them or keep them calm. It's like

trying to hold on to a tiger." Kato glances at me, then ducks out of the room. Lance and I look at each other, and the gravity of the rebellion sinks in. This is insane. But as we look at each other, I understand that this is something we have to do. We have to stop the Betas, and stop Kinder. I only hope we can do it in time to save my daughter.

I reach for a beaker to help sterilize everything, and after a long silence, I tell him, "If one of them is Entara, test it on her last."

He looks up, pauses, then nods solemnly.

Calafia

I move through the city quickly, staying close to cover and altering my course in case anyone is following me. The more I can stay out of sight, the easier this will be. It's a big city, but I know Gannon's squad was going out to the Heights. I'm headed towards the area where the explosion happened, instead of The Hills. My gut tells me those fires were a distraction from other game plans. Besides, there are already plenty of Betas there to allay the fears of the Altas and assure their safety. I know the Heights is where the rebels have to be. That's where they hide, where they live, and where they plan their attacks. And I'm going to cut this down at the root.

This time, there are fewer people out in the street, even close to the camp. Those that are out move along quickly,

keeping their eyes straight ahead and not lingering as they go. The tension in the air is palpable. I try to act as casual as I can in this neighborhood; most of the people here are Wards and Merchants, and want to steer clear of the rebels as much as anyone. The rebels are ruining their businesses, and it's my job to get things back to normal. I hurry along, and as the buildings grow smaller and closer together, I slow my pace, keeping an eye out for anything that seems out of place. The only thing that is unchanging is the Lighthouse, standing guard over everything. I think back to yesterday, standing at the window and looking out. It was all so small then, but now that I'm down in it, nothing is. Everything matters, and details are important. It's quieter out here today, without the rumble of vehicles on the street, but there are also fewer people, and those that are out aren't wasting their time with idle chatter. As I look at their faces, I see fear in their eyes.

I turn down a street and see the tire tracks of the rover in the dirt. I'm getting closer. If I get lucky, maybe I'll even find the rover, but I doubt it. The rebels would have to be pretty stupid to just leave it out somewhere. A few blocks later, the tire tracks disappear altogether. Either a breeze shifted the dirt, or the rebels made a point to cover them up. Smart, if that's the case. I slow my pace; I have to be ready

for anything.

I see a door that isn't quite closed, and heave my shoulder into it. A woman huddles against the wall, and I grab her by the arm. "Where is the rover?"

She shakes her head, her eyes wide. I shake her and ask again, louder this time. Right now, I need answers, and I don't have time for this. I need to find Gannon before...

"I don't know!"

Not good enough. A surge of anger runs through me, and I slap her, then pull her close to my face. "Where is the rover!"

She shakes her head and starts to cry. I pull her out to the street and point to where the tracks end. "It had to have gone somewhere. Where did it go? How long ago was it here?"

She buckles in a heap on the floor, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I said I don't know. I don't know anything." She says it quietly, as if talking to a child. This is a waste of time.

Frustrated, I let go and storm out, throwing the door open. I hear one of the hinges creak as the door jamb splinters behind me. I stalk down the street; blood rising in my gut as the Wall looms on one side. I pass an alley where a man tries to dart away from me, but he's not fast enough. I grab him and shove him against the building.

"The Betas. Where are they?"

He shakes his head. Not this again. I don't have the patience. Someone knows something, and I'm going to find out who. I slam him against the wall again, and get some satisfaction at hearing his head hit the concrete.

"Where? Tell me!"

He looks over my shoulder, giving someone away. I hold him by the neck with one hand and turn to see another man behind me with a gun. He's close enough that I kick the gun out of his hand, then point my own gun at him, but I don't let go of the man against the wall. I'm not making the same mistake twice. No one is getting away from me this time. He takes a step toward the gun, and I shoot him in the knee. He falls with a yelp.

"Where are they?"

He looks up at me, grasping his knee as blood trickles between his fingers. I shoot the ground just next to his head, and he curls into a fetal position, hands covering his head.

"Stop!" The man against the wall croaks. I squeeze his neck harder, then throw him on the ground with the other man and point my gun at both of them. I unload another round, hitting him in the foot. He wails.

"The rebels," I saw in a low voice.

He squeezes his eyes shut and points up the street, toward

the Wall. I kick him in the gut for good measure and head in that direction. I don't even have to think anymore; my body knows what to do. I push on to the Wall, staying low for cover, moving quickly. I can sense that I'm close, and know that the two men I just left in the street will be sounding the alarm very soon. Even if they aren't part of the core group of rebels, they clearly are on the side of the rebels. And there are going to be more of them. Lots more.

I huddle for a moment in a shadow and inject one of the needles into my arm. It seeps through my arm, and I feel a burst of energy course through me. I'm ready. The mission quickly runs through my mind, renewing my resolve. Gannon. Lamb. I take a deep breath and head up the street, ready for anything. Further down the street is a cluster of warehouses, with one large one in the middle. It has a curved roof, with lighter areas where the plastic lets sunlight through, like giant skylights. There's no one around it, and it looks abandoned. I creep closer, keeping an eye out for more armed rebels, but no one comes. It's deathly quiet, and I'm sure I'm getting closer. I scan the ground for footprints or tire tracks, but there's nothing. That's even more suspicious. There should at least be footprints. I'm very close. I raise my rifle and continue slowly, my ears perked for the smallest of sounds. I wish I had

better cover, but out here, close to the Wall, things tend to be more open, and the warehouses offer few hiding spots. Bad for me, but bad for rebels, too. I look down and see a partial track in the dirt. The rover. It must be in one of these warehouses, along with the rebels. My gut tells me it's in the big one. I can't be too far from Gannon now. I hold my gun tightly as I head closer down the street, knowing this is it. It has to be; it's the one I would have chosen. I keep my eye on the largest warehouse and edge closer. I'm going to find these rebels, and get revenge for Lamb.

I carefully approach the building, posting up near a window. Slowly, I peer in the window; there are no signs that anyone is inside. It's dark, so visibility is low, but I can't sense any movement. They could be hiding. If they are, they're doing a very good job of it. I move toward the doorway and pause for a moment. I still hear nothing, and see no movement. I take a breath, then kick the door open and head in with my gun at the ready. Aside from the echo of the door slamming against the wall and my own footsteps, there is no sound, no reaction. The rover is parked in the far corner of the warehouse, covered with a ratty sheet. I carefully approach the rover, watching for anyone who might be hiding in the shadows, but there is nothing. No one. No sound, nothing. Other than the rover, the warehouse

appears to be completely empty.

I yank the sheet off of it to see if there are any hints inside. There's nothing, except for a small kit with vials of serum in it. I add it to my pack, thinking it will probably come in handy when I find Gannon. I have no idea what kind of shape he's going to be in when I find him, and these might be able to help. I catch my breath for a moment, hoping the serum will be enough. What if he needs serious medical attention? What if the twins do, too? I only know the basics, and the serum can only do so much. I don't know what I'll do then.

But one thing I do know, is that I'm going to find him.

#

I report back to base with the little bit of intel I was able to gather, and also let Kaleo know that the rebels are much more organized than we previously thought. They've got weapons, they watch each other, they know their terrain. He nods; he's been getting similar reports from other Betas stationed throughout the city. The Council has implemented a curfew at Kinder's urging, and the gates to the Alta neighborhoods have been closed and locked to keep them safe.

I briefly wonder if any Altas might be aiding the rebels; the weapons have to come from somewhere. But I have nothing to base that kind of suspicion on, so I keep it to myself. We'll have to gather more intel before we can really know who is in charge and how they are organized. Besides, that's not my mission. Gannon. Lamb. That's my mission. I'll leave the rest to someone else until I'm tasked with it. I'm not a mastermind, just a soldier who follows orders.

I tell Kaleo where he can find the rover, and he sends me to the barracks for some rest before I head out in the morning. I lay there, thinking of Gannon, the twins, and whoever went with them in my place. I wonder if I would have been able to prevent them from being captured if I had been there, or if I would have been captured, too. I failed the previous mission, so it's quite possible I would be captured, or worse, if I'd been there. Maybe I'm not able to save anyone.

I shake the thought from my head. There's no sense in going over it again. I can't change it. I have to keep going forward and finish the mission. Get Gannon back. And the twins. I have a feeling I'm going to need his help when it comes to Lamb's killer. So far all of this has been harder than I thought. The rebels are organized, armed, and on their own turf. And being out alone isn't something I'm used to; having the squad for

backup makes things a lot easier. We can work as a team. Solo is faster, but takes longer. And right now, it feels like this is dragging on. I want it to be over. I want to find Gannon. I want to go back to the awkwardness of Visiting Day and endless drills on the quad. And without Gannon, all of those things lose their appeal. It's difficult to imagine life without him. I think of the other night, his hand pushing my hair away from my face, him bringing me a pillow as I writhed in pain. But it's more than that. His smile, his touch. There's no one in this world that cares about me as much as he does, except for maybe Dr. Kinder.

In the morning, I meet Kaleo on the quad. There is a dreary cloud cover, lending a sense of dread to the drawn look on his face. He's tense, and as I look around at the other Betas getting ready to go out into the city, I see the same look everywhere. Faces tight, brows furrowed. Kaleo watches them, taking in every action. Every gun that is holstered, every piece of armor worn. He barks quick orders when he sees anything missing, and nothing escapes his eye. It's obvious he came up under Lamb; they have the same manner, looking for the same things in their soldiers.

"I've been hearing reports, you know," he says.

"Reports of what?"

He turns to me and looks straight in my eyes. "You."

I take a step back. I had hoped he had reports of rebels and their hiding place, or Gannon's whereabouts. When we could move out and what the plan of attack would be.

"Me?"

He nods and looks away. "I hear that you interrogated a couple of men down in The Heights. Neither of them came out of it without getting a little bloody first."

I shrug. "And?"

"And nothing. Just that you're gaining a reputation. It's going to be more difficult for you to be invisible."

"I'll just have to be more careful," I say, an edge in my voice.

"It's going to continue to get worse." He speaks low, as if to himself. She shakes his head slightly and looks at his hands, as if looking for some kind of answer there, then lifts his gaze to the horizon, focusing on nothing.

"What do you mean?"

"Kinder is spreading his message far and wide on the billboards. The pictures you took the other day. Your visit to the Security Council. Your notoriety is growing." Kaleo shakes his head slightly. "He thinks it will help instill confidence in those that are loyal, and fear in those that aren't. He's sending a message: watch out or Calafia will come for you." He

turns to me and puts his hand on my shoulder. "But it also means that you are going to be recognized by every rebel out there, and that capturing you would be..." he trails off as he looks out toward the ocean, the opposite way of the gate to the city. Then he seems to remember himself, and looks back at me. "What I'm saying is, be careful."

I nod, knowing that things are more complicated than before. I turn to go, but Kaleo still holds my arm. His grip is firm but gentle.

"Calafia, just remember the mission."

I nod, knowing that I have no other purpose for being right now. I salute, then turn to the gate, and head out into the city.

Nico

I've been bound to this chair for a while now, and honestly, that's just fine. It is a relief to not be able to do anything, for once. The ropes are thick, but I don't have any desire to move, or try to escape. I'm tired all the way down to my bones. My face throbs, and my jaw is sore. My shirt has been torn away from my shoulder and bandages applied to the bullet wound. A sharp pain shoots up my neck if I squirm too much, so I sit as still as I can, for now. I'm sure it will only be a matter of time until the thing inside me takes over again. Then there's no telling what it will make me do. I look around the room, a near perfect square of grey concrete walls. Pockmarks are cut out of the walls in spots, giving away the age and condition of the building. Definitely one of the old warehouses.

Rebel territory. The room is empty except for the chair I'm sitting, along with the three other Betas, who are also tied to chairs. They are still unconscious, though. They look so young and peaceful sitting there, the tension gone from their faces and adrenaline gone from their bodies. I think about the families that surrendered them to the program, and wonder if any of those parents have regrets. If they wish they could have a playful child back, full of emotions and vulnerabilities. Or if they are proud of their children, serving the Legion, doing their duty. Of course, all these kids were likely surrendered because they had the unfortunate luck of being born after someone else, an older sibling who would be the one to get the education, the good job, and the life. These poor kids are just lambs to the slaughter. Quite literally. The four of us in this room have had some bad luck. But I'm the only one who knows it. Time will tell if they ever figure it out.

I remember attacking the rebels when they attacked the Betas, and I shake my head, wondering how I could still be that loyal. Loyal. That's not even the right word. Blindly following orders, and old ones at that. That's more accurate. As I look at them, they're, tightly bound, relieved of all weapons and much of their body armor. Their wounds have been tended as well, by someone who knows how. Sakura? She was always good at that. She

likely taught others as well.

Two of these Betas are twins, both tall and lanky, with dark hair that is cut short in a buzzcut against their scalps. They're easily over six feet tall, possibly pushing seven. Even with their size, I'm guessing they move like stealthy cats whether they are stalking prey or not. They look like they're made entirely of right angles, from the cut of their jaws, all the way down to their legs resting in a tangle underneath them in a chair built for someone much smaller.

The other Beta looks a bit shorter, but still tall. I had forgotten how much the serum makes you grow. I only grew a bit, but these kids got it young, so it's practically part of their DNA. I'd be willing to bet all the Betas are gargantuan compared to a regular citizen. The third Beta isn't quite as thin as the other two, but his muscles bulge from his shoulders. He's powerful, and I wonder if the ropes can hold him. He looks like he has the strength of a weightlifter and the agility of an acrobat, doing flips all day without tiring. He's going to be pretty wound up when he wakes up, so I hope the rebels are prepared. His giant frame presents a stark contrast to his face, though, which is one of those baby-faces that seems perpetually young. I wonder how old he is. Fourteen? Sixteen? Older? His dark blonde hair is longer than the other two, long enough that

I can see a slight wave in it.

I feel nothing as I look at them. Not a sense of camaraderie, or sympathy, or even hatred. Absolutely nothing. A man appears in the doorway, wearing a white lab coat. I immediately tense. Those reflexes again. I don't understand the reactions I have to the memories of the treatments. The fear of the lab, but the unwavering devotion and loyalty to the program. None of that makes sense. I never wanted to be a Beta, and technically, I never was. I was a volunteer, coming to this city at Jovan's urging that things would be better for us here. That we could be somebody. And yet, here I am, same as them.

The three kids sitting in front of me were sacrificed by their families with the promise of a better life. I guess it's not that different, when I think about it. When their parents gave them up to the program, they had no way of knowing what would become of them. They didn't know that their precious children would grow into calculating killers with no moral compass or ability to question authority. They only know how to take orders, regardless of whether it was the 'right' thing to do.

If I could feel pity, I probably would. But I don't. I look over to the man again as he walks slowly toward me, as one would approach a cornered animal. I realize that's basically what I

am. Even I don't know what I'm about to do. As he steps into the light, I see his face. He's tall, and his skin is dark. He looks familiar somehow, but I know I would have remembered meeting him.

"How are you feeling?" He asks in a low voice. I don't answer, and he steps closer, pulling a small object out of his pocket and reaching for my face.

I shrink back from him, my heart racing. Pain rips through my shoulder.

"Relax. I'm not going to hurt you."

He waits as I eye him carefully, then reaches slowly toward my face and shines a small light in each of my eyes.

"Can you see okay?"

I shrug. It's all relative.

"How's the shoulder?"

"Who are you?" I ask.

He stands back up and towers over me. It hurts my shoulder to look up at him, so I just angle my head to see most of him. I don't need eye contact. Just need to keep an eye on him.

He turns away slightly, looking at the three Betas.

"Name's Lance."

My mind races as he says it, knowing I've heard that recently. Lance. It hits me like a bolt of lightning. Tyrell's

son. Socorro's son. I'm both pleased and revolted. He occupies an uncomfortable space in my consciousness, as both the son of my enemy and the hope for my future. If he can create a cure, maybe I can have a life. But when I see him, I can't help but see his father. His voice is soft, like his mother's, but his face is that of Tyrell. My stomach lurches and I purse my lips, willing myself not to throw up.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

He smiles slightly and shakes his head. "Just trying to make the world better, I guess."

"I've heard that before," I mutter, more to myself than to him.

"I bet you have. You've been through a lot."

I narrow my eyes and look at him hard. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He sighs. "Exactly what I said."

"What are you going to do with us?"

He looks back at the Betas and crosses his arms. "I haven't figured out what to do with you, yet. But we're hoping to save these three."

"Save them? From what?"

"Themselves. They've been drugged from the time they were little. We're working on reversing that process."

He stops and watches me as the words sink in.

"You found the cure?"

"Well, we're working on one. We're not sure if it works yet."

"So they're guinea pigs?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. But hopefully it will help them, and all the other Betas."

I scoff. I've heard this kind of song before. The idea that pumping a bunch of drugs into children will improve their lives. These kids are already screwed. I recognized it in their eyes as easily as I see it in my own every time I look in the mirror. There is no self. Who knows if they would even know what to do if they weren't following orders. That's all they have ever known.

"Give it to me, instead."

He purses his lips as though holding back a thought.

"What? You don't know what it'll do. You may as well test it on someone who's already had a life." I look at the Betas, then back at him. "I've got nothing to lose."

He pulls up a chair and sits in front of me, casually leaning his elbows on his knees. I remember a time when no one would have done this so close to me; they would have been too afraid. But that was a long time ago, and now I'm only a shadow

of that younger self. The self the Betas are right now.

"Nico, I appreciate the sacrifice you're willing to make. I do. But these kids have the stuff pumping through their veins with fresh doses. You only have the vestiges of it left in you." He pauses for a moment as he looks at my wounded shoulder. "As powerful as it sometimes still is."

"So?"

"The antidote that we're working on is meant for those who have had high dosage of the serum over a long period of time. Their body chemistry has been permanently altered, even as they are just now entering adulthood, it is still changing them every day, with every treatment. You were only treated as an adult, and even then, just for a couple of years. I worry that subjecting you to a drug that powerful might have unforeseen consequences."

I feel all of my energy seep out of me, and my eyes well with tears.

"But haven't I suffered enough? Don't I deserve to get my life back, too?"

Lance closes his eyes and lowers his head. "Of course you do. But I have to see if it works on them before I test it on you. Frankly, they're more dangerous than you are."

A single tear falls, and I know he's right. When these

Betas come to, they will stop at nothing to break free. I realize that they are most likely drugged with some kind of tranquilizer, and I'm not. A knot of heat forms in my stomach and rises up my throat, bursting into the air as a sustained yell. I hate that I have to be like this. And that I'm so close to a cure, and can't have it.

There's a knock on the door, and it opens slightly.

"You okay in there?"

Lance turns back and nods, but every nerve in my body is at attention.

"Jovan?" My voice wavers with both fear and anticipation. There is a moment where neither he or I makes a move, or even breathes, and then he steps into the light. I see his face as the light falls on it. He looks exactly the same, only older. I look from him to Lance and back again, and something switches on inside me. They're both wearing lab coats, and my thoughts drift to the obvious. I look at Jovan, my eyes narrowed. "You're back at it again, playing God with other people's bodies. They're kids, Jovan."

Blood pumps through my veins, giving me energy I didn't know was still there. All those treatments given to me by my own brother, my own blood. The only living family I had back then. And he has the nerve to stand there, looking as though he's the

victim in all this, that he had no part. I grit my teeth, hard.

He steps closer as Lance stands.

"Nico, it's not like that. I'm trying to help," he says.

"I remember hearing that from you before," I growl.

Adrenaline courses through me, and the pain in my shoulder melts away. I feel the rope binding me stretch and give; whoever tied me up never thought I would be a threat. But they underestimated the power of brotherly hatred.

Jovan takes a couple of quick steps toward me. "Relax, Nico."

His words are meaningless to me, and his quick movements only make me angrier. I pull against the ropes harder, and feel a trickle of blood spring from my bullet wound. The rope finally gives, and I spring from the chair. I grab Lance's chair and hurl it toward Jovan, but he ducks and it smashes against the wall. I turn to grab my chair as he and Lance quickly retreat from the room and barricade the door behind them. But my body is still screaming orders at me, and I pick up the chair and hurl it through a nearby window, then crawl through it and run into the street.

I don't know at first where my feet are taking me, but once I start up the hill, I know exactly where I'm going. I want to stop, to find another way, but my body won't listen. I think of

Socorro, and how I've failed her twice now. My chest fills with regret and shame. As I reach the crest of the hill, the city pours out in front of me, a massive jumble of concrete and steel. Another surge of energy pumps through me, and my feet move even faster as I realize I'm headed back to the base, back to Kinder.

Calafia

I head in the direction of The Heights, keeping my head down and trying to stay out of sight. I look up, and see one of the billboards with my face on it. My image moves and faces me, and I recall Kinder telling me about how the Legion of Cities helped create these digital billboards that sense movement and play video. He referred to it as a tenuous alliance, but one that would ultimately make Pendleton City the hub of the nation, without anyone to challenge them. He said no one would dare challenge the Legion or Pendleton City when it was all said and done. He even thought they might be able to reclaim the Empire from lawlessness if things were successful enough. I only partially understood what he was talking about, but even then, I knew that I was part of something much bigger than myself. And

now, I see it, larger than life, looming above me.

Kaleo was right; the billboards may be part of a campaign to assure citizens and scare enemies, but right now, I wish they didn't exist. My face is everywhere, and everyone can see them. Not to mention that I will need to steer clear of them as much as possible, making sure my movements don't trigger the motion of the video.

I pass another billboard, and as the video starts and I stare down at myself, I realize there is no way for me to stay hidden with that kind of advertising everywhere. I hope that the other Betas are finding useful information, but I have to change my tactics. I find a corner in an alley and hunch down, knowing that the cover of night is my best hope for infiltrating the rebels unseen. I stare up at the billboard, trying to pinpoint exactly where the cameras are pointing, which is information that may come in handy later, when rebels are trying to hide from me. Every tool can be used as a weapon, if you think about it long enough. They're not easy to pick out, but I find six cameras along the bottom edge of the billboard, with the two at the end angled to catch a person's movement before they are in front of it, then follow them as they pass by. I look at the back of it, and don't find any additional cameras, which makes sense. There's no point in the image moving if it can't be seen.

So there's something. If I can slide behind them before I get into the frame of the angled cameras, I should be able to avoid triggering them. Still, knowing that I can be recognized fairly easily is unsettling, and I decide to wait until the sun sets a little further in the sky and the shadows fall further into the street.

I sit in my hiding place and think through the next steps. Judging by the small dilapidated houses in this neighborhood, the warehouse can't be far from here, but I made sure to bring some serum along to keep me strong. I check the pouch, and there are two doses, which I'm hoping is enough. I'm going to save it for now; I may need it later. Or Gannon might. Or the twins. I'll wait here until I can move more freely without being recognized, and then I'll make my way in that direction. I'm sure the rebels are camped out in one of the warehouses close to where I found the rover, and I just have to figure out which one. Being alone means I have to be extra careful, but it also means I can move quickly and immediately, which will be useful. When I find my fellow Beta, I'm hoping they'll be in good enough shape to fight and get us all out of there once they are free. If that's the case, it should be easy, and then we can come back with reinforcements and take this whole operation down once and for all. If they aren't in any shape to defend themselves,

well...my mind pushes that possibility away. I'll think of something.

The billboard above me flashes again as someone walks by, and I watch closely, memorizing the movement of the video, the turn of my own head and the gaze off into the distance. It doesn't seem like it could be me, larger than life, but there I am, a beacon for all of Pendleton City. I can't help but be a little bit proud, and hope that I bring solace to the people of Pendleton City. After all, that's what we are supposed to be doing. We protect the city and its inhabitants. And right now, my job is to protect Gannon and the twins. Wherever they are.

From my hiding spot, I can see the Wall, bright and white in the sunlight. Its shadow slowly lengthens, and I watch as people walk next to it, looking for patterns and suspicious activity. If I get lucky, I might see something or someone that will lead me to Gannon. I see the kid I let go for Gannon the other day. She walks close to her mother, who stares straight ahead as they walk. Something about her seems not quite right; other people occasionally look down or at other people, but this woman seems like she's in a trance. She's a small woman, and while the kid holds her mother's hand, the other hand hangs limply at her side, instead of swinging with her stride. I think this is worth investigating.

I follow her the best I can, staying out of sight. I maintain a large cushion between us; I won't have an easy place to dive if something goes sideways, and I'd rather not tip her off that I'm following her. She continues down the street, without changing her speed or odd way of walking. Her kid occasionally yanks on her arm, but she doesn't react. She doesn't lose her grip, either, which means she's alert. I decide it might be best to get out of sight. She may have already clocked me, but if she hasn't, I'd like to keep it that way.

I duck behind a building and head to the alley, which means I'm going to have to move faster to stay with her. I track her from the alley, which isn't easy, because she walks quickly. Even her daughter is having trouble keeping up with her, but she doesn't slow down or break her stride for even a moment. She rounds the corner near the warehouse where the rover is hidden and stops suddenly, only taking a moment before continuing on her way. She continues walking around the warehouse, and I wonder if I'm on a cold trail. She doesn't exactly look dangerous, but she doesn't exactly fit in with the nervous people that fill The Heights, either. She hasn't looked back once.

I pull back, waiting for her to do something that will give me more to go on. She walks to the outside corner of the

warehouse and stops, then turns to look behind her for the first time since I first noticed her. Did she see me? I crouch down further just in case, and wrap my hand around the grip of my gun. She looks around, but it doesn't look like she's looking for anything or anyone in particular. It's odd. It's almost like she's performing a predetermined motion, rather than trying to see anything. Then she looks down at the child and continues around the corner and out of my sight.

This has to be something. There is no way a woman walking like that, looking around like that, and just being completely out of place normal. She might be signaling to others, or following a protocol to get some sort of entrance to a secret hiding place, or even delivering some kind of message. As much as she's not what I would have thought a rebel would look like, I know that she's one of them. I wait for just a moment to see if anyone else is following, but it looks like the coast is clear. I move quickly, staying close to the shadows to maintain cover. I feel the blood coursing through me, and know in my heart that I'm close. I pause for a click to check behind me one more time, then round the corner of the warehouse.

Before I can even see what is around the corner, a fist hits me in the face, hard. I fall back and grab my knife with one movement and strike out in the direction the blow came from

while I try to get my bearings and my balance back. I blink quickly as my eyes lose the initial fuzz from being sucker-punched. My mind is racing. I didn't see it coming, but I'm still ready. I draw my gun with my other hand, then back away from the corner to get a better vantage point around the corner. A bullet whizzes by me and hits the wall of the warehouse, causing chunks of concrete to splinter like shrapnel. I shield my face, then peek around the corner again, and see three fully armed rebels standing about twenty feet down, guns drawn. I can't see the woman or the kid, but I don't have a full view. I dart across the way to take cover on the other side of the street, as bullets continue to whiz past. I get a couple of shots off before reach the other side and press my back against the building.

I pause, take a breath, then push off from the building for leverage and fire a couple more shots. Two of the rebels fall as I rush forward and a shot hits me from behind, in my hip. I stumble, then retreat into a doorway as I spot four more rebels in the street behind me, and two more on a nearby roof. I'm surrounded. I look down at my hip, expecting to see blood running down my leg, but instead, it's a metal tube sticking in the muscle. They mean to take me prisoner. Kaleo was right. Having my face on those billboards has made me a high value

target. If they capture me alive, they'll have a bargaining chip. I can't let that happen. I fire at them, and they fall back as I take the chance to duck into an alley where the cover is better.

Two more rebels wait for me there. One of them lashes out with a knife and slices my forearm, then cuts across my side, but my armor keeps the blade from my skin. I hear one of the rebels give a disapproving yell, and I'm fighting whatever was in that dart. My leg is starting to go numb, so I'm running low on time. I thrash the two in the alley with my knife, and they go down in growing puddles of blood.

I move low through the alley, knowing the rebels are behind me, and they could duck out from anywhere at any time. I'm on their turf; they have the advantage. And on top of all that, I'm now dragging my leg behind me, and can't feel anything from my hip to my toes. I stop for a moment to catch my breath, and see two rebels coming down the alley. I crouch in a doorway. When they come close, I shoot both of them, and they fall dead in the dirt. I shake my head; things are getting fuzzy, and I have to get out of here.

I am about to continue down the alley, when the door I'm leaning against opens behind me, causing me to lose my balance, which isn't easy, especially with one leg not responding to my

brain. The woman stands in front of me, and without pausing for even a moment, shoots me in the neck. I totter backwards as a trickle of blood oozes down my throat. I raise my gun to shoot her, but my arm grows heavy and I fall backwards. I continue struggling as she merely stands watching me, gun still drawn. I strain to lift my gun, and as I raise it a few inches, she shoots me again in the shoulder. I fall back down and look up at her, marveling at how easily she drew me into her trap. But her face doesn't show happiness, or any other emotion that I can recognize, and I wonder if she and I have more in common than I thought. I wonder about the kid for only a second before everything fades to white, then black.

Jovan

Words for what happened aren't easy to come by, but I see it over and over in my mind. Nico's eyes wide with fear and rage, his muscles bulging against the rope, blood trickling down his chest and arm. It makes my heart twist when I think about it, and I can't help but wish Kato hadn't roped me into any of this. I'm already responsible for so much pain and suffering, and it seems bottomless now. Especially for Nico. So far I am still making his life worse instead of better. And now, he's wandering around the city like a madman, while Betas are out patrolling like roaches. In his state, he's likely to become a quick target to soldiers only trained for violence. I'll never forgive myself if he ends up dead. It happened so quickly, and yet I'm able to relive it, frame by frame, in slow-motion.

Sakura pats me on the back as I describe it, but I don't feel like she truly understands the weight of it.

My own brother. Changed into a wild animal with just a few words. And I'm the one that did it to him. And now, because of him, that's what they've turned our daughter into. I can just see my sweet child, laughing and playing, morphing into a snarling monster, and it's like a knife right through my gut. I've been struggling more and more with this guilt, ever since I saw Nico on the street. For so long, I was able to push him out of my mind, pretend he was already dead, and now, here he is, larger than life, as he always was. I sink back into the couch, exhausted. The old springs inside give a small whine, as if they feel the same. Sakura squeezes my hand for reassurance.

"You should talk to Kato," Sakura says. There's no emotion in her voice. I don't know if she doesn't care, is too tired, or is masking some other emotion. Nico destroyed her life as much as mine, but she doesn't have to live with the guilt of what has become of him. She only has her anger to hang on to, and she channels it in much different ways than I do. She's like the leopard, pacing its cage, testing the bars for weakness, waiting for the exact right moment to pounce. Her rage is calculated. Nico's is indiscriminate. Mine wavers.

"What does Kato have to do with it?"

She shrugs and walks into the kitchen, puts a pot on to boil. She talks with her back turned to me. "He's anxious to start testing Lance's antidote. He's calling it Zeta Serum." She scoffs to herself at the ridiculousness of the term.

"Clever." I'm uneasy that Kato is so confident, so absolute in his belief of an untested drug. And that he's so comfortable testing it on children. Trained killers, but children nonetheless.

She turns back to me, exasperated. "I know you don't like working with him, but we're almost there. Without his help, Entara is lost to us. Without you, he would just hunt her down and kill her. You know that as well as I do."

"That doesn't make it right."

"I never said it did."

I look out the window and wonder how long we'll have to be in this place. This gap between living and dying, loving and fighting. I just want to have a family again. I want to smile at dinner, and create some good memories. I don't want to fight anyone.

"Besides," she says, hesitation in her voice, "It could make the difference. Soon."

Something in her voice signals that she's not telling me everything.

"What is it?"

She turns away from me again, which is unlike her. She's usually the one to face things head on, and right now she's deflecting. Something is wrong, and my gut adds another knot as I think of Ryoko. "Is Ryoko alright?" I ask.

"She's fine. You should talk to Kato. That's all." She pulls some potatoes from the cupboard and begins to scrub them, signaling that our conversation is over. I sigh, then leave, letting the door slam behind me as I go. I don't know how this rift formed between us. We both want the exact same thing. I hate Kato. I hate him for making me work with him, I hate him for his methods, and I hate him for pushing my own wife further away from me.

I feel him manipulating us from afar, pulling strings like some demented puppeteer. Lately I've been thinking more and more about Empire, leaving all this and heading back out to the place where everything was so much simpler. I keep thinking that I just need to get my family back, and then we can all go together, but more and more, I'm not exactly sure who my family is. Sakura? Nico? Entara? There are so many wedges between all of us, I don't know if we can ever come together as a complete unit.

I walk to the warehouse, but the rebels tell me Kato isn't

there. He's at another hideout deeper in The Heights. Laying low, they say. After the Betas were captured, he's concerned about everyone being in the same place. I have my doubts. I wonder if he might just be hiding, letting other people do his dirty work for him. He's not so much different than the people he's fighting against. At least, that's how it looks from where I stand.

I trudge down the street, down the small hill to the middle of The Heights. I'm wary as I walk; this section isn't exactly known for its hospitality. Kato definitely knows what he's doing. The people in this area don't trust just anyone, but if you're fighting against The Council and Camp Pendleton, they'll gladly shelter you. I'm not sure I'll be afforded the same courtesy, however. Most of the time, they assume everyone is their enemy.

I jam my hands into my pockets and do my best to look inconspicuous while searching to find the right building. Many of them are crumbling, with faded graffiti from decades ago signifying one from another. All of them bear the white-lined symbol of the rebellion. The street signs and numbers are missing, so it would be easy for an outsider to lose their way. I suppose that's probably the point. I follow the directions I was given, and after circling the block a few times out of sheer

confusion, I guess which building he's in. There's not much delineating one from another, so this is the best I can do.

It takes a minute for my eyes to adjust to the darkness as I walk in and hope that there's not a trigger-happy rebel waiting for me. I hear voices, and one of them belongs to Kato. I hear a child's voice, then another, and as my vision becomes clear, I can make out Kato standing among a group of children of varying ages. Most of them look to be in their early teens, but some of them look as young as seven or eight.

"Holding court?" I ask.

Kato looks up, and smiles, but doesn't look happy. He looks more like a wolf who just spotted a weak deer, and today, that deer is me. Or so he believes. I hate that he underestimates me. That he doesn't respect me. He turns back to the kids.

"Keep going with your partners. I'll be back in a minute."

He walks toward me, and the kids take up fighting stances and start sparring with each other. A chill runs through me as I realize what's going on. Kato is training children to fight his battles. I take a deep breath, trying to slow the blood that is starting to boil in my veins. He's really got some nerve, recruiting children. The hairs stand up on the back of my neck and he reaches out to shake my hand. I cross my arms.

"My wife said I should talk to you."

He chuckles softly. "About what?"

"You tell me. Sounds like there's something you haven't told me. Well? Here I am."

Kato looks back at the kids fighting, their yells piercing the air with every jab, every kick, every punch. He laughs again.

"You know, you and your wife should really talk more." He looks at the ground and laughs to himself again. I hate his veiled suggestion that my marriage is failing, even if it might be true. I don't want him knowing anything more about my life or my family than he already does. He looks back up at me, practically winking, as if something is funny. "Your daughter. Sakura brought her to me. Just be glad we got to her first. No telling what someone else might have done to her."

"What?"

"Calafia. She's in rough shape, but she's okay for now. It took about a dozen people to bring her down, and we even lost a few. Good thing Sakura was there, or we'd have lost a lot more. That wife of yours...well, she's pretty amazing."

"You have my daughter? Why didn't you tell me?"

In the distance, a voice yells above the rest of the kids yells. "Daddy!"

I look up and see Ryoko running toward me, out of breath

and smiling. I bend down and pick her up, hoisting her onto my hip. She beams from ear to ear.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"Kato is teaching us to fight!" She smiles proudly as I look over to Kato, who looks more like a prowling tiger than ever. I slowly put Ryoko down, and tell her to go play. She gives me a confused look, then trots off to the other kids. I straighten up and stare at Kato.

"Outside. Now."

We walk into the street, and I can't help but notice at least four other people following closely.

"You need security now?"

He scoffs. "There's strength in numbers."

I nod and grit my teeth. "We're done. I'm out. I'm taking Ryoko home."

"You think so?"

The tone of his voice unnerves me. He doesn't seem concerned at all. "I know so. You got me involved, but now you've got Ryoko and Sakura involved, too. I never agreed to that. I'm not sacrificing my entire family for you."

He claps his hand on my shoulder. "I never asked you to. You know as well as I do that Sakura can make her own choices.

"Ryoko is eight years old. She can't make that decision for

herself," I growl.

"She deserves to know how to defend herself. Besides, she's safer here than she is out on the streets or at home. You'd know that if you ever stopped to think about it," he says with a sneer. I still don't like it.

"They're all I have, Kato. I'm not ready to lose them to your cause," I say quietly. Sakura has made her decision without telling me, maybe because she thought I would say no. Which, of course, I would have done. But Kato's right. She has always been one to make her own choices, even when she was a child. "That's a sacrifice that's just too much."

He nods and puts his hand on my shoulder, looking straight into my eyes. "We're going to do everything we can to make sure that doesn't happen. But at some point, someone has to make a sacrifice."

"What sacrifice have you made?" I ask through gritted teeth. His face darkens and he steps closer to me, trying to be intimidating. Kato is a big man, but he should know better than to fight a man who has real skin in the game. He can say he's in it for whatever cause he wants, but I know he's just in it for glory and power. He doesn't care about real change. He doesn't have a family on the line.

"Watch yourself, Haffner, or else you will lose your entire

family, and not to the Betas. They'll simply turn on you like that." He snaps his fingers in my face.

"We'll see about that." I take a step toward the door to go into the warehouse. "I'm taking my daughter home now."

He holds his arm out to stop me, stepping sideways to block my path.

"Think carefully. You can only take one of them with you if you desert us."

The hairs on my neck stand up again. He's cool and calculated. I wonder if he's ever met Dr. Kinder, or any of Kinder's cronies. He has the same chill in his voice, the same unemotional flat tone that eats into a person's soul. I look at him, wondering where he's going with this. He clasps his hands together like a righteous preacher and looks me square in the eyes.

"Both of your daughters are with us. You take Ryoko, I test the drug on Calafia first." He gives me a matter-of-fact look, then examines his fingernails, digging dirt out from underneath one of them with a pocketknife.

"You son-of-a-bitch," I mutter.

"Oh, and you'll never see her alive again, either." He makes a clucking sound with his tongue, as if empathizing somehow.

"You would sacrifice my daughter?"

"She's the strongest of all the Betas. If we can get it to work on her, the rest will be easy." He takes a step to the side, as if daring me to test his word. I stand rooted, trying to figure out another option, but none come. "But, if you stay and work with us, and let Ryoko train, I'll do as I promised, and only give her the drug when we know it works. And you'll be there for all the tests, of course. No drugging your precious first born until you approve." He spreads his hands in front of him as if presenting a prize. "See? Everybody wins." He smiles wide, and I can't take any more.

I lunge towards him, one arm on his chest and the other across his throat, and slam him against the wall of the warehouse. "You have a lot of nerve, gambling with other people's lives. You're no better than they are. I see through you, and when this is over, I will kill you."

There is fear in his eyes for a moment, and his bodyguards lunge toward me, but after his surprise subsides, calm returns and he waves them off. "Is this your choice?" He asks with the little breath that he's able to draw. I peer into his eyes, trying to see a flicker of truth behind them, but they are opaque. I have no way of knowing if he's telling the truth, but he clearly has plenty of appetite for cruelty. I realize that I

have to go along with him, for now, and I relax my grip and step back, releasing him.

He rubs his neck and inhales deeply, then says, "Watch yourself, Jovan. You need me."

"Temporarily." I seethe. A flicker of concern crosses his face, but then is gone, and he smirks as he opens the door to go back inside.

"Right. We'll see you later. I'll keep you up to date on your daughter's progress. Both of them. I have a feeling Ryoko is going to be quite the little mercenary...Just like her big sister." He smiles again as he says the last words, knowing he's twisting the knife, and that there's nothing I can do if I want to see my daughters again.

Nico

I get to the gate, winded and shaking. My body carried me the entire way, as my brain, my self, the part of me that is actually me, was dragged along. I don't know how to stop it, and at this point, I'm too tired to. I lean on the pillar that holds the iron gates to catch my breath, waiting for something, someone, to take over for me. I don't have the strength to do it myself anymore.

I hear a shout from the top of the wall and look up to see a Beta pointing a rifle at me. I raise my arms and back away from the gate. "I'm here for Kinder."

No emotion registers on the Beta's face. "Identify yourself!" He barks.

"Tell him it's Nico Haffner."

Without taking his finger off the trigger, the Beta radios to someone else. I don't move a muscle, knowing his instructions are shoot to kill. And he won't miss. A piece of me wonders why I want to live so badly, when I don't even get to own my body, but something keeps propelling me toward life, whether I want it or not.

There is a buzz of electricity as the gates slowly open, and two Betas immediately rush out to take me by each arm. They're almost as tall as me, and definitely faster. I guess that's what happens when you start on the serum early in life. I wistfully recall a time when I was the biggest and the fastest. Those days are long gone.

They take me to the brig and shackle me tightly. I can barely move my arms and legs, and it makes sense. Unpredictability is my middle name now. Even I don't know what I'm capable of. Motivation isn't a thing I can describe, or understand, or predict. I'm no better than these robots Kinder has been growing for the last fifteen years. But at least I know I'm being controlled. These poor suckers have no idea.

I wait for hours in the cell, wondering if I've been forgotten. It wouldn't be that far fetched, to just leave me in here and let me waste away until I'm dead and gone. No one would ever know or care. That thought cuts to my core as I imagine

Jovan, going about his life as if I never existed. I do want to see him again, to explain this whole mess, and just be brothers again. The thought rolls over and over in my mind as a hulking man enters the holding area. He looks like he could snap a rover in two, and I shrink from him as much as I'm able.

"Who are you?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Sergeant Tyson Kaleo. But more importantly, who are you?"

I shrug. "I already told them at the gate. I want to see Kinder."

He nods and walks closer to the bars, resting his arms on them casually as he peers at me. "Yes, I know. But you're supposed to be dead."

"Sorry to disappoint."

"Actually, I'm kind of honored. You're a bit of a legend around here. First big Beta, started the current Beta program. If it wasn't for you --"

"I didn't start anything. I was just following orders."

"Exactly."

"Where's Kinder?"

"You'll see him eventually. But first, I have a little business to take care of."

I tilt my head, wondering what he could mean when he pulls

out a gun and points it at me. I cringe, waiting for him to shoot."

"Trust me," he says, a slight chuckle in his voice, "everything is going to be just fine."

He shoots me twice, once in the shoulder and once in the leg, and in mere seconds, the world melts into darkness.

#

When I come to, I'm strapped to a table, but feel more relaxed than I have been in a long time. My head is clear, without nagging thoughts to drag into the light. I sigh; the first peace I have known in a long time. The room is small, like an exam room, with a small sink and cabinets along one wall, and one of those rolling stools doctors always use. Not what I was expecting, but it could be worse. I could be in the morgue.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" Kaleo says from the corner. He's watching me intently, but with what I can only describe as scientific interest.

"What does?"

"Coming home. You're where you belong, Nico. This is where you've always belonged."

I try to turn my body and feel the searing pain in my leg and neck. "What did you do to me?"

"A treatment and a little painkiller. Just a warning

though, once that painkiller wears off, you're going to be in a world of hurt. Somebody really did a number on your shoulder. But we patched it up for you. Should heal up quite nicely." He brightens, then says, "Actually, the serum has been improved since you last has some, and now it has quick healing compounds in it. Speeds things up like that," he says, snapping his fingers. He seems genuinely pleased with the idea.

I close my eyes, and inexplicably think of the factory. The hum of the machines. The quiet. This feels like that. Like I'm not torn in two anymore.

"This feels different," I say.

Kaleo nods. "This is the good stuff, now. It'll still rip right through you if you resist, but man, it works."

"Did you ever resist?" I ask.

He shakes his head slowly, then rubs his hands together. "Naw, but one time, I had a few beers with a friend off base. They warn you about it, but you don't think it'll be that bad. I'm a soldier, I can take a stomach ache. But man, it was the worst pain I ever felt in my life. I can tell you, I'll never do that again."

All I can do is nod. It's definitely working inside me. I can feel everything, everyone melting away. Jovan, Socorro, Entara. Even Tyrell. I sigh and my body relaxes. Kaleo gets up,

and I realize again how immense he is. His giant frame blocks out the light, and I can see his face clearly. No emotion, no conflict. Just a man doing his job. I look away, knowing that would have been me.

"How long have you been a Beta?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I'm not a Beta. I'm a volunteer. I came in a year or so after you, I think." He pauses, trying to remember that far back. "Course, no one ever spoke of you for a long time. You were the black mark on the program. Kinder thought you were dead."

"I was."

Kaleo chuckles, then claps me on the leg. "Well, he's going to bring you back to life, my friend. And erase that black mark while he's at it." He smiles, and I'm sure that he believes this is actually the best place for me to be. He turns to go, and I can't help but agree with him. Here I can eat. I can have a bed. I close my eyes and settle into the thought, when the door opens wide and Kinder steps in.

Immediately, my heart leaps to my throat and chokes me. I struggle against the restraints as pain shoots through my neck. I feel my shoulder wound open up again as blood seeps out. I can't take my eyes off Kinder, as he just stands, arms crossed, shaking his head. He clucks his tongue against his teeth, the

way a disappointed parent would.

"Oh, Nico. Why can't you just relax? All the work we did to fix that shoulder, and you keep messing it up again." He sounds exasperated, then turns to Kaleo and nods. Kaleo leaves the room, closing the door behind him. I feel like any protection I may have had is now gone, even though I know that's not the case. Kaleo was protection for Kinder, not me. Kinder walks slowly toward me until he's standing next to the gurney, looking straight down at me. He looks the same as he did fifteen years ago, except with a few more lines on his face. He still has that cat-like quality to him, with his sly grin and quiet movements.

His silvery hair and beard reflect the florescent lights, giving him a cold glow. He wears glasses, and the reflection in them obscure his eyes. He sighs as he puts his hands in the pockets of his lab coat and he watches me squirm. Finally, he turns away from me to a nearby counter.

"You know, Nico, I'm glad to see you. I was worried about you." He turns back to me slightly, waiting for an answer, then continues. "But now that you're back, we can take care of you. And we will. You see, I'm a very forgiving man. But," He pauses and turns back to me, and I see a needle in his hand. "I need your help. Calafia got herself captured along with some of my other Betas." He sits on the rolling stool, so his face is close

to mine. "I practically raised her as my own, you know. She's special. And you abandoned her, so she didn't even have Uncle Nico there to show her the ropes."

He looks up, as if thinking about what he just said, then laughs. "That would have been something, don't you think? The two Haffners here, fighting on the same team? That would have been a sight to see. You're special too, Nico. Which is why I'm so glad to have you back."

"What are you going to do to me?" I ask.

He peers at me, as if trying to burn a thought into my brain. "I care about my Betas. I need them, like a family. And I need your help getting them back. Alive, if possible."

He swabs my arm with alcohol as I clench my jaw, waiting for the inevitable. He holds the needle just above my arm, then looks at me over his glasses, his eyes mocking me. "Now, I'm not going to lie. This is going to hurt."

He jabs the needle into my skin and pushes the plunger down. The serum runs through my veins like ice, and pain spreads immediately through my body as I do my best to stifle a howl of agony. Then Kinder pulls the needle out, flings it in the trash, and walks out, turning the light off as he goes.

I am in complete darkness, left to try to choose which force I want to fight: the serum, or my family.

Calafia

I open my eyes and stare at the ceiling, my muscles suddenly tense. This isn't where I'm supposed to be. I'm supposed to be at the base, or dead. But this is a small room of concrete walls and very little light streaming in from a high window. I can see dust motes swirling in the air above me, carrying the smell of heat and sweat with them. I pull against the restraints that hold me, but they are solid. I look around, and the woman sits in a chair, back completely straight, as if she has been watching me -- no, guarding me -- for hours. She doesn't move, but only blinks at me as I stare at her.

She's so small, probably a good six inches or so shorter than me, with a slim build and straight dark hair. A wave of humiliation rolls over me as I realize she's the one to brought

me down. I'm supposed to be the best, and all she had to do was outsmart me. And that didn't take much. I grit my teeth as I turn my face back to the ceiling, preparing myself for whatever torture is about to come. I may be a prisoner, but I'm a loyal soldier.

"Are you comfortable?" She asks. I don't answer, but continue to stare straight up, picking out the details of the ceiling above me that I'll want to concentrate on later. "Are you in pain?" She tries again. When I say nothing, she sighs, then gets up and walks slowly toward me. I look sideways at her, and she stops. "I'm not going to hurt you," she says softly. I pull against the restraints harder, and feel them creak under the pressure, but still hold fast. Dammit. I have to figure out how to get out of this. It was definitely not part of my plan, and who knows how long it will take Kinder to send more Betas after me and the others. If he does. After losing four soldiers, he might change his strategy.

She puts her hand lightly on my arm, and I flinch and pull away as much as I can. "No one is going to hurt you," she says again.

"Did you kill Lamb?" I blurt out. I wasn't expecting to say anything, but I'm glad I did. For all I know, she's Lamb's assassin, and she's going to kill me, too. Her brow furrows.

"Who?"

I scowl, realizing that even if she did, she's a good enough liar that she's not just going to tell me. Regardless, I will find out who it was. Even in shackles, I'm going to finish this mission. The memory of him crumpling and blood splattering zooms through me again, and I can feel adrenaline flooding my body. I must find his killer, even if it's the last thing I do.

"You should really try and relax," she says, as she turns and pulls some ointment and gauze from a drawer. "When you strain like this, it reopens your wounds. They'll never heal that way."

She removes a bandage from my arm carefully, and it is drenched in blood. "What do you care?" I ask. She doesn't respond, but tends to the wound, already neatly stitched back together. She applies the ointment, which dulls the throbbing sting. Then she applies the gauze, and grabs a bandage to wrap it up again, white and new.

"Who are you?" I ask.

She looks me square in the eyes, and I can tell that she's holding something back. Her eyes start to water, then she turns away. "No one...but I'm here to help you," she adds.

"If you wanted to help me, you'd take me to the other Betas."

She turns back to me, and walks back to the side of the makeshift gurney. "So you can do what? Kill everyone in The Heights?" There is an edge to her voice that I don't like. I test the restraints again, but she grabs my fist and pushes it back down. "Relax." She commands. "I don't want to change that bandage again. If we run out, it could get infected."

For the first time in my life, I realize that she is not afraid of me. I haven't met a lot of people off the base, but of the few I have met, all of them always spoke with a twinge of fear in their voices, eyes darting around for the nearest escape. And none of them dared to touch me, or tell me what to do. But coming from this slight little woman, I see that she is not like them. She is used to people listening to her. Maybe she is the leader of the rebels. Whoever she is, I must be wary of her.

There is a knock at the door, and it opens just enough for a small girl to poke her head in.

"Mama, I want to show you --"

"I'll be there in a while," she answers. The girl pauses, then looks at me. Her eyes widen and I stare at her face. She looks like a carbon copy of her mother, except her skin is a shade or two darker, and her eyes are green. Still, the resemblance is uncanny, and something about this girl makes my

gut twitch. I don't know why. "Out," the woman says finally. The girl continues to look at me, and I at her. My brain flips through a mental rolodex, looking for this child within it. I know she's the little girl who was with this woman when they lured me here to be ambushed, but there's something else, nagging at me. She closes the door, and the woman turns back to me abruptly.

"I need you to rest, Entara," the woman says, interrupting the cascade of thoughts falling through my mind.

"My name is Calafia," I object.

"Of course it is."

Again, I detect something rising in her voice that I can't quite pin down. Is she mocking me? I can't imagine she doesn't know my name, especially with the city plastered with those billboards, and she doesn't seem like someone who would ever forget anything. She walks to my other side and turns my arm over so my palm is facing up. Then, quickly, she ties a rubber cord around my upper arm and swabs the skin at my elbow. I struggle against her. This is how it begins.

She pushes my arm down with more strength than I expected her to have and flatly says, "Stop." Her eyes pierce into me, and I look back at her. Her eyes begin to water again, and then she sinks a needle into my skin so quickly, I suspect she's done

this many times. But as I look down, I see that she isn't injecting me with anything, she's drawing blood.

"Stop!" I yell at her. "What are you doing?" I cry out at the top of my lungs, not because I'm in pain, but because I'm hoping there is someone nearby who can hear me, who can help me. My mind races for some kind of answer of what to do. I don't understand what is happening. She shushes me, and before I know what is happening to me, I am howling and pulling against my restraints as I have never done in my life.

She pats my shoulder, and the young girl peeks her head in again. "You okay, Mama?" She asks quietly. I look at her, and my brain finally clicks on the image of the girl kicking and screaming, running away from me as I stooped to help Gannon. She was the kid that started this mess in the first place. She was the kid I was going to bring in.

I grit my teeth and yank on the restraints again, this time out of anger and frustration. If I'd succeeded in the first place, I'd have captured a high value target from the rebels, and we would have gotten everything we needed to take them down. Gannon, Dmitri, and Dante wouldn't have gotten captured, and neither would I. We'd probably be sitting down to dinner in the mess hall right about now, if only I hadn't let that kid go.

A flood of heat and adrenaline pours over me, and I don't

understand what's happening. My body is straining from the inside out, as if everything I'm about to explode. My brain rattles at me inside my head, and I let out a wail that causes the woman and her daughter to shrink away from me. The images rotate in fast succession: this woman, her daughter, and Gannon. I scream again as the frightened girl slams the door shut and disappears. The woman doesn't retreat, but continues patting my shoulder as she draws three small vials of blood from my arm, humming softly. I look up at her through a blur of tears as she smiles down at me and wipes the sweat from my forehead with a soft cloth, more gently than anyone has ever touched me, except for Gannon. The memory of him putting the pillow under my head sweeps through me and I shiver, goosebumps rising from my skin. My body feels like it is being wrung out, and I don't know how to get myself back together. I shouldn't be falling apart this easily. I should be stronger. I should be able to think of a way out of this, but right now, I just see all the images of my memory, taunting me and pushing my thoughts out of focus. I breathe heavily and close my eyes, and the image that keeps coming back, over and over again, is Gannon. It's the only thing that even slightly settles me.

"I want to see Gannon." I say. She smiles again, and pats my arm.

"Once we figure out which one that is, I'll see what I can do. But please, just try to rest for now. I'll come back to check on you in a little while." She pulls a blanket from a drawer and covers me with it, then turns off the lights as she leaves the room, glancing behind at me only once before pulling the door closed. Just before the door closes, I see her daughter run to her and hug her legs with both arms. I can't place a memory of anyone ever hugging me, or smiling at me the way this woman just did, but somewhere deep inside, I know that's how families actually function. I remember seeing it with Gannon and his family, and it always looked so comfortable and safe. And right now, that's all I want.

Jovan

When I come home, I find Sakura sitting on our tattered couch. She looks exhausted, which I can't remember ever seeing, except the few days after Nico took Entara. I'm still seething with rage at the blackmail Kato laid at my feet, and wonder how much of it Sakura already knew about. How much she allowed him to take from us. But once I see her, that rage melts and slides off my back. All I want is for her to hold me and tell me it's going to be alright, which is how I've gotten through the last fifteen years.

I sit next to her, and before I can put my head on her shoulder for reassurance, she curls up into a ball and falls against my chest, tears streaming down her cheeks. I put my hand on my shoulder and look down at her, pulling her hair back

behind her ear with my finger, wondering what she must be thinking. I have always depended on her to be the strong one for both of us, and I've never given a thought to her struggles.

"What is it?"

She doesn't answer, but closes her eyes as another tear falls down her nose. I kiss the top of her head and wonder how to break through the shell that she so carefully crafted around herself so I wouldn't ever have to feel her pain. I sigh and hold her tighter.

Ryoko bounds in, and her smile immediately falls from her face. "What's wrong, Mama?" She walks over to us and puts her hand on Sakura's leg. "You're okay, Mama. Everything is going to be okay."

I can't help but smile; she has the same natural tendency for encouraging life that her mother has. Sakura reaches up and smooths Ryoko's hair, smiling weakly. Ryoko looks into Sakura's tear-streaked face, as if trying to read her mind. "Is this because of the screaming lady?" Her tone is innocent, but I feel Sakura tense up in my lap immediately.

"Why don't you go play, Ryoko?" Sakura says softly. As soon as Ryoko is out of sight, Sakura sits up and looks at me, then puts her head on my shoulder. "I didn't know it would be so hard."

"What do you mean?"

"Seeing her." She picks her head up off my shoulder and sighs as she looks at me. "She's beautiful, Jovan. Strong and smart, too." She makes a snuffling sound, that is half laugh and half sob. "For a while, I wasn't sure we were going to be able to bring her in. I don't think she even knows how powerful she is. She's got your ambition and drive, that's for sure. But she has no idea who she is, or where she came from."

"Why would she?" I ask. "I guarantee you no one ever told her the truth. Who knows what kind of lies they told her all this time?"

She nods slightly. "She's fierce. Loyal to them completely. This isn't going to be easy."

I pull her close again and kiss the top of her head. "I know. We never thought it would be."

Sakura nods, but snuffles slightly. "She's injured. It's pure hell to see her in pain. To see her in shackles. I didn't think it would be this hard. I tried to prepare myself, but..." she trails off, and I squeeze her again, hoping that's reassuring. I have nothing to say that seems helpful. Sakura sniffs sharply one more time, then pushes her hair behind her ears and sits up. "You know, we should prepare ourselves for the possibility that we won't be able to get her back. That she'll

be a Beta forever."

She can't meet my eyes as she says it, and I'm stunned. Of anyone, I always felt Sakura was the one that had the most faith that this could come out our way. The possibility had always nagged me, but I shoved it away, choosing instead to believe that somehow, we could make everything right. My chest deflates as I sigh heavily. We sit in silence for a while, each lost in our thoughts of our daughter, possibly lost to us at the hands of Dr. Kinder and his callous experiment.

"I need to see her," I say finally. Sakura gives me a long stare before answering.

"Are you sure you want to? It's not easy to take in."

I look down at my hands, which tremble from the myriad of emotions running through me. I'm afraid of what I might find, and angry at where we are. At Sakura's deception in joining up with Kato. But I also have hope, which always seems to sit there in the corner of my mind, refusing to let me believe the worst. But I know it must be bad if Sakura is warning me against it. My need to see something that feels like progress is eating me alive, and I have to see her before Kato gets his dirty paws on her. I have to see what I helped create. What Nico would have become. She takes her hand in mine, and I nod.

"I have to."

#

"Will she be awake?" I ask. The darkness is a welcome cover for me, hiding the twist of my face as I continue to cycle through every emotion I could possibly have. The Wall towers over us like a gray nemesis, and a slight chill sweeps through me. Sakura has led me to the building where our daughter is being held, and with every step closer, I become more nervous. My stomach is churning with both excitement and dread. Other than the dead-eyed robot I saw on the billboard, I haven't seen her since that rainy night, when she was still a cheerful toddler, eyes wide with wonder every day. Sakura shushes me.

"Probably not. We gave her some painkillers and tranquilizers to help her sleep. Otherwise, she'd probably be thrashing around all night."

I try to imagine the thought of her awake, desperate to get out, serum coursing through her veins like shards of ice. I'm starting to grasp Sakura's pain at seeing her, at the surprise and shock after all these years, and I do my best to prepare myself for whatever I'm about to see.

Sakura takes us past a few guards, and I can't help but

remember Kato's threat. Whatever happens, he's going to claim at least one of my daughters. My guess is he's planning to take both of them, unless I can figure out how to stop him. With the heavily armed guards outside, I know it would be pointless to try to break her out. Besides, if she's as wild as Sakura says, she may kill me anyway, even if I set her free. We come around a corner, and see Chasca sitting next to a locked door, and I push the thoughts as far away as I can. Chasca holds a rifle on her lap, and she looks tired, but her jaw is set and determined. She looks like she's aged years since I saw her just a few days ago. She looks up at me, then at Sakura.

"We'd like to see her," Sakura says quietly. Chasca shakes her head.

"Kato said no one gets through this door."

Chasca raises her chin slightly, doing her best impression of looking resolute, but I know better. Chasca is a mother, too. She looks away from Sakura and refuses to meet my eyes as well. Sakura places a hand on Chasca's shoulder, and I see Chasca's toughness melt away instantly.

"Please," Sakura says. Chasca's eyes dart down the hall, then back to us.

"Make it quick," she says. I don't need to see anyone else die today." A chill shivers down my spine as she says it, and I

try not to think of the people who died so they could bring my daughter in alive.

"Thank you, Chasca," I say, and I mean it.

She unlocks the door, and Sakura slowly opens it and peeks her head inside. There is no sound or movement coming from inside, and I hold my breath, trying to see in the dark and hear what isn't there.

Sakura turns on a single light, just enough to see, but not enough to jolt her awake. I inhale sharply as I finally see her. She sleeps peacefully, but I can see the wear she has already put on the restraints. I can also see that the restraints have rubbed her wrists and ankles raw, and I look at Sakura with alarm. She closes her eyes and nods, then whispers, "I'm doing my best to get her to relax. Every time I rub salve on them, she undoes everything in just a few minutes. She can't heal if she doesn't stay still."

I sigh. Her arm is bandaged up, as is a leg, and her shoulder. She also has one on her neck, but the wound there looks much less severe. She is obviously strong -- the body of an athlete, just like her uncle -- but lying here, still, bandaged and strapped down, she looks frail and vulnerable.

"Why is her face so red?" I ask.

Sakura looks away. "She was very agitated today."

"About what?"

Sakura strokes Entara's hair softly, cautiously. "She was yelling about someone named Gannon, and Lamb. I'm guessing Gannon is one of the other Betas we captured. Obviously, she cares a lot about him."

"Lamb is one of the sergeants on the base. He's been there since the days Nico and I were there," I say. Sakura looks at me in surprise.

"Apparently, he's dead. She's been sent to find his killer."

I shrug. I never knew Lamb like Nico did, but he seemed like a decent man. At least, as decent as a man involved with Kinder could be. A career soldier, from before the volunteer program or the Beta program. I wonder if Kato had him killed. That seems like a higher level thing than Kato would do, but I wouldn't put anything past him.

"Ryoko also came in at one point," Sakura continues, "and that seemed to set her off quite a bit. She was screaming and crying like a madwoman." Sakura looks at me, tears in her eyes. "I didn't know what to do."

I put my arm around Sakura, doing my best to comfort her. Our daughter is here, lying before us, and yet she still feels out of our reach. I let Sakura's words sink in as I look down at

the child, our child, and wonder how we can get her back.

"She was crying?" I ask suddenly.

Sakura looks up at me and nods. "Why?"

I shrug. "It's just odd. The whole point of the serum is to eradicate anything that would cause a soldier to do anything other than follow orders. Emotions are unpredictable, so..." I trail off, unable to finish the thought. I wish I knew more about how the drug worked, about what it did, but I don't know anything. I only know what it was supposed to do, and what it did to Nico.

Sakura crosses her arms and purses her lips. "Well, she was all emotions this afternoon. Almost like a real teenager," she says, matter-of-factly. Then she adds, "A dangerous one, but a teenager all the same."

I scowl. That makes no sense. But one thing is clear. We have to test the antidote as soon as possible.

Nico

I've been writhing in pain for what seems like forever. In this darkened room, I can't tell how much time has passed. I can't hear any noise from outside, and I wonder exactly where I am. My body feels like it is trying to turn itself inside out, and I am covered in a thick layer of sweat. I breathe heavily, doing my best to catch my breath. I want to just give up. I want to let whatever this is take over and pull me apart, piece by piece, in this hellish state Kinder left me in.

But my body keeps fighting back. The feeling is familiar, from all those years ago. I remember how these treatments used to tear me up, but this...this is different. I can feel the serum oozing into every nook and cranny of my organs, up my spine and into my brain, like tiny, needle-like fingers,

pricking every nerve as they move along. Kaleo was right; Kinder has made improvements.

I am so exhausted, I can't think of anything outside this darkness. My skin is raw where the restraints have chafed it all these hours, and the serum doesn't seem to be slowing down at all. Another pang in my stomach, like a gut-punch from a heavyweight fighter, and I almost lose consciousness. I dry heave, sucking in air as fast and deep as I can.

A light flickers on, cold and sickening. My heart immediately beats faster, thumping against my ribs so hard I think they might break. The door opens, and Kinder enters, followed by two others in lab coats. I blink the sweat from my eyes and squint towards them, trying to make them out in the blinding light.

Kinder walks slowly, and I can smell the coffee and mint on his breath as he nears. The hairs on my arms and back of my neck stand straight up, and I feel as though every muscle in my body is pulsing with adrenaline. The straps strain as I pull against them, and I hear the metal they are connected to groan with pressure.

"Nico," Kinder admonishes, "You have to relax. Otherwise, you're only going to get hurt." I look up at him and grit my teeth. He only smiles. "I brought some old friends to see you."

He motions to the men behind him, and Skillar and Tyrell step into sight.

Skillar looks fascinated, and leans in further, looking closely at my face. I pull away as he lifts his bifocals to get an even closer look, and then he stands up again and looks to Kinder. "Really quite amazing, Jacob. I would never have guessed."

Kinder smiles, clearly pleased with himself. I search Tyrell's face for some hint of sympathy, of recognition, but he avoids my gaze completely.

"What about you, Marcus?" Kinder asks. "Not bad, eh?"

Tyrell gives a little sigh and shake his head. "I would never have expected this. Not in a million years. I thought you said he was dead?" He still avoids my gaze, but I see him swallow hard, and I see sweat on his neck, just under his jaw.

"I thought so, too. But wouldn't you know, he showed up at the gate yesterday. A little scrawnier than he left here, but more or less the same." Kinder taps the side of his head with his index finger and winks like he's telling a joke. "Just had to get him right up here."

He chuckles, and Skillar chuckles with him.

"What are we doing here, Kinder?" Tyrell asks, an edge of impatience in his voice.

Kinder claps him on the shoulder. "Well Marcus, I figured you'd want to see our old friend, for one thing." He turns to me and continues. "And help me bring him back into the fold. See how the new upgrades affect him, what with his age and history. It'll be quite the experiment, don't you think?"

He claps Tyrell on the shoulder again, but Tyrell scowls. "Are you sure about this? I mean, who knows what he's been putting into his body for the last fifteen years. The serum could kill him."

Kinder's smile falls just a bit, but he continues. "I already gave him one treatment. Two if you count the one Kaleo gave him with the morphine. He's fine." He slaps me on the leg for emphasis. "Aren't you, Nico?"

Without thinking, I nod my head. Tyrell's eyes widen as Kinder looks back at him triumphantly.

"See? What'd I tell you?"

"So now what?" Skillar asks.

"Well, we give him a mission and send him on out. Easy."

Both Skillar and Tyrell look unsure.

"You sure that's a good idea?" Skillar asks quietly. "The new Betas, he's not even close. If he tangles with any of them, they'll tear him apart."

Kinder puts up his hand to reassure the other doctors.

"He's not going to tangle with anyone. We're going to give him a very specific mission. One that only he can do."

Kinder looks back at me as Tyrell looks the other way in disgust. Kinder's lips slowly part into his cat-like smile as he looks at Tyrell. "Aw, come on, Marcus," he says, clapping him on the shoulder. "This is where it gets good, remember?" He puts his other hand on Skillar's shoulder. "It's just like old times, huh, fellas?"

Tyrell shifts and looks at his feet, while Skillar gazes at me like an animal at the zoo. "Is he ready then?" Skillar asks.

"Almost," Kinder answers, pulling a needle out of his lab coat. "Just one more little dose." He flicks his fingers against the side of it and squirts just a little out. "We took a blood sample while he was under to get this little concoction. Actually," he says, as if a thought just occurred to him, "It's thanks to you that we were able to do this, Dr. Tyrell. With just a little bit of customized DNA from our boy, here, we were able to do something special."

"How did I do that?" Tyrell asks.

"Well, analyzing the DNA of the Haffner clan was your idea. You had Jovan analyze his daughter to get her profile, and well, we already had Nico's. We got his blood sample from Jovan when he was the lab tech, and voila, we have a full genetic profile

for the whole family."

Tyrell looks at Kinder, confused, while my brain does its best to connect the dots, but the harder I think, the more twisted it becomes.

"For what?" Tyrell asks.

"The serum requires a blood sample to work, right?" Tyrell nods, and Kinder continues. "So we could make a dart that works on the whole family. Except for the wife, of course. But we have some of her DNA from Calafia. And seeing how this works on the entire family would yield a vast array of data."

"Why would you want to do that?" Skillar asks.

"Having an obedient populace would make life so much easier, don't you think?"

Tyrell's jaw drops open for a second, then he snaps it shut again and grits his teeth. He looks over at Skillar, who smiles in surprise. Kinder continues. "We've been developing this version for so long, and I've been waiting for the perfect opportunity to test it. And here he is. Smaller dose, more powerful, and self-replicating. One dose is all it will take from here on out, provided this works."

Kinder looks back at me and laughs, as if he just told some hilarious joke.

"But the girl, you've had her this whole time. Why didn't

you just test it on her?" Skillar asks.

Kinder looks at him in disgust. "Use an untested drug on my top Beta? Are you serious?" Skillar nods, and I realize what is in that needle. Fifteen years of my pain, and it's about to go back into me, to wreak havoc until the day I die. I grit my teeth as Kinder sticks the needle in my arm, then exhale sharply as soon as he empties it and puts the needle back in his pocket. He pats me on the shoulder as the serum runs through me, skittering through my veins like rabid rats, going in every direction at once.

The three of them wait for a few minutes, watching me writhe as the serum reaches into every nerve and muscle of my body. I see the veins in my arms raised against my skin, creating a blue spiderweb across my body. Then Kinder takes two steps forward and leans over me, looking into my face.

"Nico?"

I look up at him, and my brain hardens an image of his face in my memory. I nod.

"I have a very special assignment for you. You ready?" I nod again. He smiles slightly before continuing. "You will go to the rebels. You will find where they hide. You will find Calafia and the other Betas. You will find Jovan, his wife, and his other daughter. You will bring them to me. Alive."

I nod, and my stomach churns. "Again," is all I can say, and then I turn my head and wretch. He smiles and nods again, then turns to the others.

"I love the way the world works. Nico was my greatest achievement, then my greatest failure. Now he will be my greatest achievement again. Has a nice symmetry to it, don't you think?"

Skillar nods slightly, and they turn to go. Tyrell hangs back.

"You two go ahead," he says. "I want to see for myself."

Kinder pauses and his smile fades slightly. Then he nods, and he and Skillar walk out, Kinder patting him on the back triumphantly. Tyrell walks forward and puts his hand on my arm. I grit my teeth and look up at him.

"You happy now?" I ask. He shakes his head.

"Nico, you came here on your own. I didn't bring you here."

"You said you quit."

"I've been doing research at the hospital for the last ten years. Kinder called me in. You and I both know, he's not a man you say no to." He looks back to the door, then turns back to me. "I'm going to help you, Nico." Quickly, he pulls a syringe from his pocket and takes my arm, drawing three vials of blood and stashing them in his pocket. Then, he looks me in the eyes.

"You have a mission. I am giving you a counter mission."

I raise an eyebrow as my stomach gurgles again.

"You will find the rebels and tell Lance that I have his vials. You will let Lance test his antidote on you. And most importantly, you will stay alive, and stay hidden. You will not attack Calafia, or any Betas." He pauses, and peers into my eyes. "Do you hear me?"

I nod slowly.

"Do you understand?"

I nod again. He sighs slightly and grabs my hand, squeezing it tightly, then turns and walks out.

Calafia

I wake up and have a single moment of peace before everything floods back into me and I remember. I'm still lashed down, but I've been moved to a different place. I'm not in the tiny room with the single high window anymore. This is a large space within one of the warehouses, and the area is only broken up by posts holding up the roof. Sunlight streams through the translucent skylights, and by the angle of it, I'm guessing it's early morning. I'm shackled to a chair instead of the gurney, and while there's no one guarding me, the shackles are tight. There are people milling around at a distance. Most of them look to be at least my age or older, and a few children here and there. All of them are dressed in faded clothes, without the sharpness of fresh laundry. Some of them wear clothes riddled

with holes, threads barely being held together. This is my first good look at rebels, and I do my best to memorize the faces I see. This will be excellent information for when I get out of here. I search the area for Gannon, doing my best not to draw attention to myself. Even if I can't move, I can at least gather information. Finish the mission. The thought of it sharpens to a point in my brain, and suddenly all I can think of is Lamb. Who killed him? It has to be someone in this room. I already suspect the woman, and there are a few good candidates in here. My fists clench at the thought of finishing it all right here. Bringing one of these vile rebels down and getting revenge for Lamb.

Adrenaline runs through me and I strain against the shackles again, but they don't budge. There are about ten people in the room, which is large and cavernous, and dusty. I know I'm in one of the warehouses in The Heights. Most of them are abandoned, since they didn't take into account the water that collects in giant pools when it rains when they built them. At the time, Pendleton City was going through a devastating drought, and no one thought the rains would ever come back. Not that they ever became common, but it does rain sometimes. There are usually one or two good downpours every year, and all the water ends up right here, gathering into pools deep enough to come up to a person's knees. When the drought ended, they ended

up rebuilding the warehouses further in, near the textile factories, so they wouldn't have that problem. They just never got around to tearing these old ones down, and once the people moved into them, that was that. Typical. They just take over anything that isn't nailed down, as if it belongs to them. No thought to being of service to the city.

Like a spark, the thought that I was left out here to die as an infant zaps my brain, and my resolve to take them down doubles. It might even be one of these men, thinking they have me, thinking they're winning, that left me alone to die when I couldn't fend for myself. Well, I can now.

A tall, dark man comes in, his silhouette coming through the doorway and nearly taking up the entire space, blocking out the light, followed by a plump woman who looks like she might be old enough to be his mother. The other men and women already in the room quickly form a semi-circle facing him, as if they've been expecting him. They're followed by two other men, one with dark skin and a quiet manner, and another, small but familiar. They talk amongst themselves, and it's clear the tall man is in charge. He nods at the woman, and she slides a large door open. They all turn, and I follow their gaze to see the three other Betas, all tied to chairs, all unconscious. I peer in the dim light, and recognize the twins and Gannon. I do my best to

assess their condition and formulate a plan. The twins have significant bruising and bleeding around their wrists and ankles, where their shackles hold them, so obviously they've been trying to work their way free for a while. Both of them have bandages around one leg, and Dante has one on his upper arm as well. Dmitri's face looks pretty scratched up, as if he took a hard spill at some point. Gannon doesn't look much better, with his limbs bruised from the restraints, and his shoulder is wrapped tightly with a bandage, covering part of his neck as well. He must have taken a pretty good shot. At least it doesn't look like anything is broken. We can work with this.

A surge of energy forms in my chest as my body kicks into high gear. Something runs through me that feels a lot like adrenaline, but accompanied by a fluttery feeling in my neck and stomach. I blink my eyes quickly and shake my head trying to regain my bearings. Then without warning, a sob goes through me, making me jerk suddenly, and sending tingles all the way down to my fingers and toes. The heads of the three men turn in my direction, and I do my best to play possum, but it's too late. They know I'm awake. They walk toward me slowly, stopping a few feet away. I'm oddly gratified that they seem cautious. They know I'm dangerous, and they're afraid. Perhaps I can use that to my advantage.

The tall man bends slightly, resting his hands on his knees and looking into my face. "So this is the girl? She doesn't seem all that special."

He looks at the other two, as if they're going to disagree with him. He gestures to the dark skinned man at his side as he says, "This is Lance. He thinks he can turn you back into a person. A real girl," he says, his voice thick with sarcasm. I grit my teeth. I can't wait to kill him.

"And Jovan here," he says, gesturing to the other man with him, "he says he's your--"

Jovan grabs him by the arm, interrupting. "Don't you think we should get started, Kato?"

Kato looks at him, then finally nods. I look from one to the other; it's clear they are having an unspoken conversation, and neither is happy about something. Lance takes a cautious step forward and looks at me, then softly says, "It's going to be alright. I want to help you."

"You can start by undoing these shackles." He shakes his head. It was worth a shot. Kato turns to me, a smirk painted across his face.

"She's even got a sense of humor." He looks at Jovan. "Wonder where she gets that from."

"What are you going to do to me?" I ask. Maybe if I get a

sense of their plan, I can find my opportunity. Get them talking, let down their guard, then figure it out from there. My mind is racing with possible scenarios for escape. I badly want to finish this mission. For Lamb.

Kato turns to look at the other captured Betas, then back at me. "Nothing. We're going to do it to them." He points in their direction, and my stomach twists. "We'll come for you later." He smiles, then walks away. I wriggle against my bonds, but they are too strong, and I'm too weak. If only I wasn't injured. If only I could inject one of the treatments I brought.

They walk over to the Betas and stand over them, still unconscious. Kato rubs his chin, as if he's trying to make a decision. My mind races to see something, anything, that I can do to stop whatever is about to happen. He holds his hand out, and Lance pulls a syringe out of his pocket and gives it to him. Kato pulls the cap off with his teeth, then spits it out onto the ground.

"Gannon!" I yell. He jerks slightly and raises his head, still groggy. His lips move, but I can't hear him. Then Kato steps in front of him as a couple of rebels roll up Gannon's sleeve, and Kato injects the needle into Gannon's arm. "Stop it!" I scream.

Kato ignores me, but Jovan looks back at me. He stares at

me as I writhe and strain, but his face shows no emotion. I hate him. He could help me. If only he were loyal. But none of these people know how to be loyal. Kato hands the syringe back to Lance, then steps back, crosses his arms, and watches Gannon. I yell again. "What are you doing!" He turns partially around to look at me, but doesn't move his feet. I look him square in the eyes. "I'm going to kill you!" He raises an eyebrow, then turns back to Gannon.

"How long is this supposed to take?" He asks Lance. Lance shrugs.

"It's a prototype, so there's really no telling. We just have to observe and wait. I want to monitor his vitals, though. That'll give us an idea of his progress. Or lack thereof." Lance steps forward cautiously and puts his fingers on Gannon's neck, searching for his pulse. One of the other rebels hands Jovan a clipboard, and he starts taking notes, talking in a low voice to Lance. I strain to hear them, but can't make anything out.

Kato shakes his head, annoyed. Gannon's breathing has quickened, and my heart quickens with every breath he takes. What did they do to him?

"Is he supposed to sweat like that?" Kato asks. Lance shrugs again. "Dammit, do you know anything about this drug you created?"

Lance takes a step back and raises his hands. "It's the nature of the beast, Kato. You have to test it, and then make changes based on the results. It's not an instant fix. It's a process."

"Let's try it on the others," Kato says, motioning toward the twins.

"I'd rather wait and see how it affects this one first." Lance looks over at Jovan, who shrugs, then looks back at me. There's fear in his eyes. He should be afraid. They all should.

I scream again, and Kato turns back to me, angry. "Would you shut up?"

"I'm going to kill you!"

He laughs a low laugh that bounces off the concrete walls. A couple of the other rebels chuckle along with him, but Lance and Jovan don't. Kato mumbles something to Jovan, who comes over, stopping a few feet away from me. "We're trying to help," Jovan says.

"You could help me by untying me."

He bows his head and shakes it, almost imperceptibly. He takes a deep breath and clasps his hands behind his head, looking up at the ceiling. "What is it about the serum that makes it work?" He asks, more to himself than to me. I scoff, and he snaps his head to me.

"Do you know how it works?" he asks, incredulous.

"It's a serum, you idiot. You know what that means, don't you?" I laugh again as I see his brain search for meaning.

"You're all idiots, and you'll all be dead soon, you mark my words." Bile rises in my stomach and heats my blood as I laugh loudly and maniacally. "I'm going to kill you all! Before you know it!"

Kato nods to one of the other rebels, who walks to me, rifle in hand. I consider the possibility that they are going to shoot me, but I realize they need me for something. I don't know what, but they can't kill me. They can't kill any of us. And that is going to be the death of them all. I laugh even louder and look at the rebel, who hits me in the face with the butt of his rifle. Everything goes black, but I still hear the echo of my laughter bouncing against the walls.

Nico

Everything looks like a hyper-realistic version of itself. I move through the streets quickly, my brain taking in every detail of every person, every building, every crack in the sidewalk as I go. My eyes dart from place to place as things get catalogued in what is suddenly a vast vault of facts: a couple walking hand in hand. He's older than her, and she looks pale. Alta. Her shoes are new and hurt her feet. A crack in the sidewalk, the beginning of some plant bursting through to the sun. A child on an old bicycle that is missing the seat, so he pedals constantly, unable to rest, but chugging along easily. Judging by his height and weight, I'd guess he's around ten years old, and doesn't go to school. His calloused hands suggest that he works, or at least apprentices. Jorna class or lower.

I've never experienced this kind of clarity before. I feel calm. The persistent haze that has been around me for the last fifteen years has been lifted, and I feel like I'm seeing the sun for the first time. Like I'm new in the city that I've known for nearly half my life. It's invigorating, but also frightening. I know my brain is collecting data that I will use later, whether I want to or not. I haven't even given a thought to where I'm going; my feet just fall one after the other, constantly moving, like my mind.

Kinder gave me something that I don't even have the bandwidth to process, but I can definitely feel its effect. I move up the hill in the direction of The Heights, and I know that the mission is calling the shots. It's taking me to Calafia -- Entara -- Jovan's daughter. I can't even decide what to call her. She's been known to me in so many ways, and now I can't marry all those things together. Kinder wants them all. I understand the girl, but why Jovan and Sakura? And Ryoko? She's just a child. He said something about the family's genetic code to Skillar, but that doesn't make any sense. What good is that to him?

Searing pain rips through my gut as I double over and throw up in the gutter. A woman walks past, wrinkling her nose in disgust as her shoes clack on the concrete. They're expensive,

but not too expensive; the kind a Ward would wear on the way to their lab. Based on her ponytail and conservative clothing, I'm guessing a pharmaceutical company. She smells of soap and baby powder. Must have a young child at home. I blink hard from the information overload, hoping to see the haze, familiar and soft, descend upon me again, but the sun blazes down on me, showing me my biggest fear.

I am about to repeat my mistake. The mistake that ruined everything, that haunts me, Jovan, and Sakura. That will eventually haunt Calafia, if she ever learns the truth. Another jolt goes through my head. She'll never learn the truth. That is the mission. The mission is to keep her whole, even if it means tearing everyone else apart. Including me.

I stagger and lean against a building, gasping for breath. Pain courses through me, but my feet keep plodding forward. Right, left, right, left, stopping for nothing. I near the crest of the hill and look around, searching for anything to pull me out of this. And then I see.

The house. Tyrell's house. Socorro. I force my feet sideways and push against a wall, getting my body to curve into a detour toward the house. It's in front of me, if I can just keep the momentum going. Sunlight glints off the glass of the windows, and I say a silent prayer that I'll be able to make it.

I stagger up to it like a drunkard, causing people to cross the street in front of me, away from my path.

I'm sweating and gasping for breath when I reach the house, but I'm there. I slap the front door with my hand and sink to my knees, closing my eyes to the gut wrenching pain that only continues to grow inside me, groaning low as I imagine it tearing my intestines to shreds. I hit the door again and moan louder, inhaling dust and heat and sputtering it back out in a pathetic cough.

The door opens a crack, and Socorro lets out a short gasp before throwing the door open wide and bending down to me.

"Nico? What's wrong with you?"

"Kinder," is all I can get out. I'm suddenly weak, and I can't feel my legs. My body is refusing to go in any direction that isn't the mission. I fall forward across the threshold, and she grabs my arms and drags me the rest of the way in, using all the strength she has within her. She shuts the door, and thankfully, the sunlight dims along with it. I roll over and gasp for another breath through gritted teeth, like a doomed fish on a boat deck.

Her feet patter into the kitchen, then come back quickly as she places a cool wet towel on my forehead. I look up at her, and her brow is furrowed with both worry and aggravation.

"Kinder," I say again.

"I'm so sorry, Nico. I didn't know it was you." She strokes my hair softly, and her voice coos as beautifully as a bird.

"What?"

"Kinder called Marcus. Said he'd had a breakthrough. We never imagined --" she closes her eyes and shakes her head. "How did Kinder find you?"

By reflex, I laugh quietly. "He didn't. I ran to him."

She pulls back for a second and looks at me sideways.

"What?"

I nod. "I had a fight with Jovan, and it brought everything back. Seeing him in a lab coat, and Lance -- it was as if I was back in the lab with Tyrell. Only this time I could do something about it. So I ran."

"So you went to Kinder?"

I close my eyes. "It's a powerful drug."

She nods and strokes my hair again. Her eyes become glassy, and I close my eyes, letting exhaustion take over. She holds a glass of water to my lips, and I sloppily drink. My head lolls back, and she continues to coo at me and rock my body gently, as if I'm no bigger than a newborn in her arms. Within minutes, I feel my body shrink back into itself, then relax into sleep. When I wake, I'm back in the same bed as before, watching

sunlight stream through the windows. How long have I been here? I hear footsteps downstairs; the soft shoes of Socorro, but also someone else. Tyrell? My chest tightens as I sit up in bed. The footsteps click up the stairs and the door opens. Socorro shuffles in, carrying a tray with soup. She's dressed in a bright green linen dress that seems to float around her lightly in the summer heat.

She sets the tray down on the nightstand and sits on the bed, feeling my forehead.

"How are you feeling?"

I look around, still trying to figure out how long I've been here, feeling the drive to get somewhere as fast as possible. To the Betas. To Tyrell. To anywhere. The voices argue with one another in my head, and I suddenly ache for the blare of the machines in the textile mill and Hoshun standing next to me. I shake my head, and Socorro's hand is on my arm. She smiles that warm smile of hers as I stare into the deep, dark pools of her eyes.

"Marcus gave you a blood thinner after you passed out. He's hoping it will lessen the power of the serum. It's going to be alright. You're safe here. "

"Am I?" I open my eyes to see her wrapping a rubber strap around my bicep. I pull my arm away. "What are you doing?"

She pats my forearm lightly. "It's okay." Her voice is so sweet, so quiet. It cools my blood and causes my muscles to slacken. Something about her, her voice, the way she is. It feels like home. I sigh, and she inserts a needle into my arm.

"Why? Why more blood?"

She shushes me gently, as if I were a colicky baby. "It's going to be fine, she whispers. Lance can compare these to the ones Marcus took from you earlier. Maybe see something that will help them."

She removes the strap from my arm draws three vials of blood quickly, as if she has done this a million times before.

"Who are you?" I ask, gazing into her face. She smiles, but doesn't look at me. She places the vials on the nightstand and presses a cotton ball to the pinprick the needle left in my arm.

"You'll see. It's all for the best."

I sigh, wishing I were smarter. Wishing I could know more than I do. I feel like I'm standing on the edge of understanding, blocked by a giant black curtain of nothing.

"I don't understand," I say simply.

She cups my cheek with her hand. "You will." She sighs as she looks down as she folds her hands in her lap. "Someday soon, if all goes well, we'll all be a family again."

"Family."

She nods. "It's all I've ever wanted. Haven't you?"

I lay my head back against the headboard of the bed. "Just Jovan."

Socorro takes my hand in hers and squeezes it gently. "Not just Jovan. The whole family. Jovan, you, me, Martha. All of us."

"Martha?"

She sighs deeply, then looks out the window into the sun. She nods.

"Who is Martha?" I ask.

She looks down at her hand intertwined in mine, tracing a finger down the life line of my palm.

"My sister."

Silence drifts down as she gazes out the window again, lost in thought.

"My aunt. I thought there were only two of you." I mumble. She nods. "Tell me about her?"

She pauses for a long while, then takes a deep breath. "She could sew like no one else I ever met. She had a natural talent for it; more than your mother or I. And she loved it."

"She was a Jorna?"

Socorro nods again. "She was really the smartest of us. Rocio and I put our faith in men, but Martha put her faith in

herself. She carved out her own living making the finest clothes for Altas all over the city."

I smile. It's nice to think that someone in the family has some sort of talent. God knows I don't. "Where is she now?"

Socorro shrugs. "I don't know. The last I heard, she was on Diego Island, making custom clothes for the richest people in Pendleton City."

"What happened?"

Socorro smiles weakly and looks straight at me. "Let's just say you and Nico aren't the only ones in the family with baggage. But I've been trying to find her for months, going to all the textile factories, talking to the foremen that used to sell her fabric. No one has seen her. Or at least, no one will admit they've seen her."

"Why find her now? What changed?"

She sighs and strokes my hair away from my face. "Sometimes you just want to tie up loose ends. Make peace before...before time apart becomes forever." She stares into nothingness, lost in thought, and a chill comes over me. I squeeze her hand and smile.

"We'll find her. Once this is all over, we'll find her."

Socorro chuckles softly and looks at me again. "You're sweet, Nico. But I'm afraid she's gone. I don't think she's in

the city anymore."

"Where else would she be?"

"She could be anywhere."

"You mean in the Empire?"

"Maybe. But if I were a betting woman, I'd bet on Salt Lake."

"But that's like a thousand miles from here, isn't it?"

She nods. "She always hated the heat. And the ocean." She laughs as she says the words, as if it is some sort of joke that only she knows.

I close my eyes and rest my head. My body feels weak, and then I have a thought. "Why did I come here?"

Socorro shrugs. Footsteps echo downstairs, and I jump from the bed, my heart suddenly pounding. Socorro gets up and holds her arm out to me, as if trying to soothe a wild animal. I feel like I might be one, with my mind racing and looking for the nearest escape route -- the fight or flight that takes over as soon as adrenaline courses through me.

"Who is that?" My chest heaves and I look around for anything that could be a weapon against whoever is downstairs.

"It's just Lance. He's here to help."

My heart races faster. The image of Tyrell's face flashes in my mind, watching as Kinder dosed me at the base. "I don't

know why I came here. This was a mistake." I hold my head in my hands, trying to think.

"No, you did the right thing, Nico. We can help you." Lance's footsteps are shuffling up the stairs. I have to think. Faster. "Nico, you have to calm down. We're not going to hurt you."

"Stop talking!" I shout. Lance's steps quicken up the last few stairs and he flings the door open and steps protectively in front of Socorro. "I'm only here because of you. Your husband made me into this. You made me go to Jovan, where everything spun out of control." I step closer to them, gritting my teeth. "And Tyrell was there today. Watching as Kinder used me as a lab rat."

Lance holds his arm out protectively, trying to anticipate my next move. He speaks low and quietly. "It's not what you think, Nico. He was trying to help."

"I don't need that kind of help. I need out of here. Now." I lurch forward a couple of steps, and they scuffle backwards. They're blocking the doorway, but I have to get out. I step forward again and am blinded by a ray of sunlight glinting off the glass of a window. I shift sideways and look at the window, then at Lance and Socorro. "You stay away from me." I run to the window and jump through the glass, sailing through the air

momentarily before I start to arc downward. My heart is pounding, and my mind is racing, taking in everything on the street. It's almost as if everything is in slow motion, as if I have ages to prepare to land. I see the shards of broken glass all around me, reflecting the light in a hail of glitter, and I feel invincible. When I finally reach the ground, I tuck and roll, then spring up and run away from the house faster than I have ever run before. So fast, that I only hear Socorro yell one time, "Nico!"

Jovan

"This isn't right."

Sakura nods, then sighs. "What are we supposed to do?"

She's right. I feel trapped. I always thought that all I ever wanted was to see my daughter again, but I was unprepared for this. I don't know why I thought it would be easy. In retrospect, it was stupid and naive. How did I think I would get her back after all those years of drugs and brainwashing? Does she even know she has a family at all? Where does she think she came from? I wish I could ask her, but there's no way she would ever tell me. And those other kids...I shake the image of them from my head, and Sakura puts her hand on my arm.

"We shouldn't be doing this. Any of it," I say.

She rests her head on my shoulder. "We don't have a choice

anymore." Her voice is devoid of emotion, speaking volumes about how exhausted she is. I look down at her, annoyed.

"We always have a choice," I spit. "I just don't like any of them. They all end up with my family being torn apart more than it already has been." She turns her face up to me, and the hurt in her eyes burns me to my core. I've made plenty of choices before this, and those are the choices that got us here. I've painted myself into a terrible corner with my choices, and now I'm taking it out on her, which isn't fair.

I stare out the window of the ratty makeshift office in the warehouse, watching the rebels as they pace around, waiting for something to happen. They've been anxious since this morning, when Kato tried our antidote out on the Beta -- Gannon. They're ready to get to fighting, tired of sitting in the warehouse, training and waiting for something to happen. Waiting for progress. The Beta Kato dosed has shown no signs of improving or changing, and Entara is back in the exam room, strapped to a table. The memory of her maniacal laughter, and her bloody face is now burned into my brain forever. My girl is no longer my girl. I'm not sure what she is now.

Kato comes in, heaving the door all the way open, as if he's in a hurry. Or trying to catch me doing something. It bounces on its hinges, and Sakura and I both look up at him,

surprised. He stands and looks at us each in turn, as if trying to hear our thoughts. "I need ideas," he says quietly.

"You need an exit strategy. This," is say, motioning to the other side of the window, "is clearly not working."

"Don't get smart with me, Haffner. You still need me whether you like it or not."

I sigh, knowing I'm the only one in this scenario that has something to lose right now. I know that won't be the case forever, but for now I have to play his game. "Where's Lance? He's supposed to be the expert in all this, isn't he?"

Kato shrugs. "He left. Something about his mother being ill."

I throw my hands up. "Great."

"Speaking of people missing, where's Nico?" He purses his lips and tilts his head back, then his eyes dart sideways to me. "Seems kind of suspicious, don't you think?"

"Suspicious how?"

"Your brother, captured, then suddenly gone. One might guess you let him go. That wouldn't be good for you. Or the girl."

"I don't know where he is," I say through gritted teeth. Sakura's grip tightens on my arm, as if in warning. Nico could be anywhere, and we both know it.

"Well, either way, I'm sure we'll find him and bring him in...dead or alive." He smiles politely and turns to head out of the room.

"What are you going to do with the Betas?" I ask sharply. He stops in his tracks and thinks for a moment before turning to me.

"Not sure. What do you think we should do with them?"

I pause. I'm not sure if he's actually asking for my opinion, or if he's just being an asshole. He takes a few steps closer, until he's right in my face. "I'm sure you have ideas. I'd like to hear them."

A bead of sweat trickles down my back. When it reaches my waistband, I gather my breath. "Maybe we should let her see them. Let her talk to them."

Kato scowls. "What for? So they can make a plan and kill us all?"

I shrug and turn to face the window again. "She was raving about a murderer when she came in. I'm sure it's part of her programming. Maybe if they were all together, we could figure out what they're up to."

Kato laughs. "We already know what they're up to. They're up to killing us."

"Maybe. But the whole point of the drug is to make them

follow orders. Don't you think an order like 'kill the rebels' is a bit simplistic? Especially for someone like Kinder. If I know him, he's got something bigger in mind."

"Like what?" He asks.

I shrug. "No idea. But Kinder isn't the kind of guy who's happy with the status quo. He always wants more."

Kato looks up, trying to find the fault in my logic. Finding none, he looks me square in the eyes and nods. "You might be right. But to be safe, let's dose one of them with sodium pentathol first. The boy. I worry that she's too strong." He shakes his head and chuckles. "And possibly crazy."

"That's our daughter you're talking about," Sakura says, her voice flinty. Kato takes a step back and nods deferentially at her, acknowledging his insensitivity. I realize suddenly that he's at least a little bit afraid of Sakura, that there's something going on that I don't know about. He turns and leaves the room, and I do my best to push the thought from my mind.

Calafia

I wake up to my eye sockets throbbing. I feel my veins pumping blood all the way into my skull, to my brain, then back down to my heart. Everything is blurry, and I concentrate on trying to bring the world back into focus and so I can figure out where I am. I remember the haze of the warehouse, watching the rebels stumble around like idiots and not knowing what the hell they were doing. Gannon.

My nose throbs and my head aches, but right now I don't care about that. I lift my head off the floor and see Gannon and the twins nearby, still bound to their chairs. Gannon's head lists to the side, and my breath catches in my throat as my eyes well with tears. I shake my head and do my best to focus, to push the fuzz to the edges of my vision. I take a deep breath

and concentrate. See him clearly.

"Gannon."

He doesn't move, and my heart seizes for a moment as I consider the possibility that he is dead. He twitches, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Gannon."

I watch him, but he moves slowly, in a daze. I look around the room. We're both bound, and the room is fairly small, with a single, heavy door. My hands and feet are still tied, so I sit up and slide over to him. When I'm close, I place my head on his knee.

"Gannon."

His eyes flutter a few times, then rest on mine, but are only half open. I smile. It feels good to see him, to make contact. He pulls against his restraints, then relaxes again.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

He gives me a blank look, then nods slightly. "My mission," he mumbles softly.

I nod, a flutter of hope banging inside my chest. "We can still do this. It's not too late."

"My mission," he says again. He closes his eyes, and his head lolls back. I look over at the twins, and neither of them moves, still completely out. I turn back to him, and nudge his

chair with my knees.

"Gannon, no, look at me," I plead. I don't understand what's wrong with him. He's stronger than this. I look around the room, searching for something that might be able to help me. It's useless. There's nothing in this room. "Gannon, it's me. Calafia. Our mission, we can still complete it. We have to get free, first though." He picks his head up and opens his eyes lazily, raising his eyebrows in confusion.

"We?"

He's clearly disoriented. I don't know if he understands who I am. "Yes, you and me. Gannon and Calafia."

"The twins."

"Yes, them too. We'll do it together."

"The mission."

This is taking too long. I need him to focus, and this isn't like him. "Gannon, what's wrong with you?"

"My mission."

"Our mission." I look him in the eyes, hoping he'll snap out of it. I need him here with me. A knot forms in my throat, and I have to catch my breath. "Find Lamb's killer."

His head jerks back a bit and he blinks hard. "Lamb." He shakes his head and lets out a sharp breath.

I sigh with relief. He's coming back. "Yes, Lamb. Remember?"

Find Lamb's killer and kill him. We can do this, if we work together."

He winces, then shakes his head.

I can't lose him. He feels so close to coming out of his haze. I roll forward onto my knees, trying to keep my balance with my limited mobility. "Yes, yes we can. Find Lamb's killer." I rock back on my haunches and stand up. "Look at me, Gannon." His body is tense as he strains against his bonds. I hear his chair creaking, and hope that he'll break it. Then we might have a chance of getting out of here.

He's so close to breaking through. Sweat beads on his face, which is screwed up in pain. "Gannon, look at me," I plead again. He lets out a yell that seems to shake the room, and I smile with relief. I think he's finally with me. "Yes, Gannon. For Lamb."

"Lamb is dead!" He yells.

I pause. Of course Lamb is dead. We all know this; I'm not sure why he's telling me that. But I can sense he's close to his old self, close to the partner I've always had, so I keep prodding him. "Yes, and we have to find his killer. Take them down. For Kinder."

"Kinder."

"Yes, and for all the other Betas. And most of all, for

Lamb. Help me, Gannon. Let's do it together."

"My mission," he snarls.

"Yes," I'm almost out of patience, but I don't have the option to go it alone. "Finish the mission."

"Kill the scientist and bring his family in."

I shuffle backwards, nearly tripping over my bound feet. I look over at the twins again, and see a slight twitch in Dmitri's face. Dante is still motionless, but maybe they're going to regain consciousness soon as well. That would be helpful if we all want to get out of here. I waver for a moment, trying to stay upright, then look back at him, squatting so I can look him in the face. So he can look me in the eyes.

"Gannon, no, it's Lamb. Lamb's the mission."

"Lamb's killer."

"Yes!"

"It's me. My mission."

A wave of silence spreads through the tiny room as I stare at him, my muscles tense. My skin feels cold as it constricts into me. "What's your mission, Gannon?"

"Kill Lamb. Kill the scientist. Bring in the wife and daughter." He grits his teeth and heaves his breath in and out several times. My cheek twitches as heat rolls from the top of my head, down the back of my neck, and all the way down to my

toes. I hold my breath and close my eyes, taking a second to rewind the clock, the tape, and my memory.

My throat is dry, and I croak, "You killed Lamb?"

He pauses, then looks up at me finally, his eyes wide open. He nods. "My mission."

I grit my teeth and twist my head slowly to the side, causing my neck to crack. His words leach into my skull, taking their time to sink in and poison every nerve in my body. My insides churn wildly and I double over in pain. I inhale sharply, feeling like I'm being ripped in two. I turn away from Gannon and puke, then wipe my mouth on my shoulder. My mind is racing so quickly I can't sort my thoughts. Lamb. Mission. Kill. Gannon. Over and over. I grit my teeth as my body takes control. I turn back to Gannon and shuffle closer, then roll onto my back and kick his chair over backwards. He lands on his back with a thud as the wood hits the concrete floor.

I roll forward to my feet again, then jump onto his chest, my knees on either side of his head. He gasps for air as his eyes bulge and he looks up at me. "Calafia," he croaks.

"You killed Lamb," is all I can say as I glare at him. I twist my body, trying to wrench my arms free of their bindings, but it's no use. I lean back and grab him by the groin, and he howls with pain. I squeeze harder.

He closes his eyes and breathes quickly, then looks at me.

"Calafia."

My heart hurts. I look at his face, at the blood rushing to his cheeks, the veins rising in his forehead, and I remember his hand on my head, resting on a pillow. I feel the blanket around my shoulders. Pain rips through my gut again, and I scream, convinced that I am being ripped in two. I can't breathe. I gasp, then roll off of him and stare at the ceiling. I kick him in the shoulder, sending him sliding across the floor. Tears stream from my eyes and I scream again. I don't know what's happening to me. I see him so clearly, sitting in the courtyard with his family, stealing a glance in my direction. I squeeze my eyes tighter as my stomach shrinks into a fist and I curl up in pain like I've never felt before. I'm crying now, and I roll over to my side, and see him, still bound to the chair, on his back, his face red and covered with sweat.

His eyes are closed in concentration. He's blurry through my tears, but seeing him here, next to me, is somehow calming. I take a deep breath and let the tears fall freely, blinking them away until his image sharpens.

"Gannon," I whisper.

He doesn't respond, but seems to be lost inside himself. I'm lost too, feeling betrayed by the only person who ever cared

about me, and I can't seem to reach through and find him. Not the Gannon I know, anyway. This is someone else.

"Gannon," I say again, choking back a sob.

He exhales slowly, then opens his eyes and looks up at the ceiling. He looks calm. It's not much, but it gives me hope. I call his name again, and his eyes wander sideways, and he turns his head only slightly.

"You killed Lamb?" I ask. It comes out in a choking cry. I don't want to hear his answer, because I already know it. But I have to ask. I have to hear it from his mouth.

He nods.

"Say it."

He turns his head slightly in my direction, as if awaking from a long sleep. "I killed Lamb." He turns his face back to the ceiling and closes his eyes. "Kinder's orders."

I inhale deeply, and let everything out. Emotion washes over me like a tsunami, with the energy of all my years behind it, drowning me in grief. Everything I ever knew, everyone I ever loved, is gone. And none of them are coming back. I'm more alone than I have every felt in my entire life, and it weighs on me heavily. I cry until I have no energy left, and I succumb to sleep in a damp pool of tears, sweat, and dust.

When I wake up, neither of us have moved, but the twins are

gone. Gannon lays on his back with his eyes closed, and I'm still curled up on my side in a pile of dirt and concrete, my arms and legs bound. I don't know how long I have been asleep, or even if anyone has come in to check on us. Other than the twins being gone, it seems like everything is exactly the same. My body throbs, and I feel heavy.

"Gannon," I whisper. His eyes open and he turns his head to me. I smile weakly, but his face remains blank, without the familiar light behind his eyes. I almost don't recognize him. "I'm sorry," is all I say.

His forehead wrinkles, and he sighs. "Your mission."

I nod my head and close my eyes in shame. "Kill Lamb's killer. I didn't know it would be you." My eyes well with tears again, but hang in the corner of my eye, waiting for it to fill all the way up. He turns his head back to the ceiling, his face still wooden.

"You failed."

I catch my breath. I'm dizzy. He's right, and he's actually disappointed in me. I search through my entire insides to find the feeling of shame, of guilt, of desire to finish my mission, and I come up with nothing. I only find the sense of relief that I'm here, with Gannon, and he's still alive. Confusion seeps in. I should not feel this way. Kinder gave me one job -- to kill

Lamb's killer.

I failed.

Worse, I don't want to kill Gannon at all. I want to hold him in my arms tightly and remember the way things used to be, before we left the base. With every bit of muscle I command, that's all I want to do. We lay there in silence for a long time, not moving. He closes his eyes, and I study his face. He seems untroubled and relaxed, and I feel like I'm seeing him for the first time. It makes me uneasy, and my stomach flips back and forth as I notice the curve of his jaw, a sprig of his hair flipping upward at his ear, a trio of tiny moles on the side of his neck. How did I never see these things before? What else have I missed?

I turn my head and look around at the room. It's the same as it was before; it's not different like Gannon is. My stomach flips again, then sends a ripple through my chest. It almost tickles, and I shudder slightly.

There is a thud at the door, and it slides open slowly, scraping against the floor. Gannon shoots to life and begins struggling against the bindings, and I'm suddenly glad that he can't move. I roll over to see the woman, small, but fearless, standing in the partially open doorway.

"What did you do?" She asks.

Her voice is soft and round, and my eyes fill with tears as I inhale and hold my breath, waiting for words to come. None do, and the tears fall freely as she steps over me with a needle in her hand. She looks down at Gannon, then in one swift movement, empties the syringe into his neck.

"No, don't," I sob softly. She steps back as Gannon's struggling subsides and he finally sighs into unconsciousness. She looks down at me, and I'm sure she's going to do the same thing to me. Instead, she puts the needle back into her coat pocket, then reaches down and pulls me gently up to sitting.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

She holds my shoulders tightly, though, letting me know she's not letting her guard down. I'm still bound, but we both know I could hurt her if I wanted to. But right now, I feel empty, as if I'm stuck in a weightless void of nothing. My eyes glaze over as they fill with tears again.

"Are you alright?" She asks. There is real concern in her voice, peppered with tenderness and caution, an odd mix of tones in my ear.

I look at Gannon again, at the moles on his neck, and the tiny puncture she just added. I should be angry, but what I'm feeling isn't that. It's something else. I look at her as more tears fall.

"I don't know."

My voice doesn't even sound like it's coming from me. It sounds far away, like a mouse skittering across the floor, like dust picked up by the wind. I look down, not wanting to meet her eyes as they search my face. She moves quickly, putting her arms around me, pulling me close. My shoulders tense for a moment, thinking it may be an attack, but when she doesn't move further, I ease into her arms as she steadies me. It's like she was with the little girl. No one has ever touched me like this, and it feels warm. It feels safe. I can feel her breath on my neck, smell her silky hair, and the comfort of her hands on my back, holding me up. I sigh, and my entire body gives over to sobs as she continues to hang on, patting my back and letting all the things inside me come flowing out until I have nothing left.

Nico

Socorro's voice rings in my ears as I run from shadow to shadow, sweat dripping off my body. The further I get, the heavier my legs become, and I stumble into a wall and lean on it with all my weight. I catch my breath, trying to sort my thoughts. Wondering which thoughts are even mine. Kinder's words mix with Tyrell's into a soup of gibberish, and I double over, sliding down to the pavement with my head in my hands. Nothing makes sense anymore. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to push the words away, but they are still there, hammering away inside my head.

A hand rests on my shoulder, then shakes me. I curl up tighter, hoping to disappear. The hand shakes me harder and calls my name, but it sounds so far away, like it's at the end

of a tunnel. It shakes me again, and the voice is louder. I lift my head and open my eyes slowly. Hoshun kneels, looking into my face. His deep, dark eyes bore into mine, his raised eyebrows full of concern.

"Nico, you okay?"

I shake my head, trying to focus on his eyes. He smiles and pulls me to my feet, holding me steady. He guides me down the sidewalk, his arm around me for balance. I lean heavily on him, and wonder how he found me. He takes me to his flat, where I sit on the floor, waiting for my head to clear and my body to gain its strength back. He sits and watches me, quietly sipping hot tea. It's not like him to be quiet, but there he sits, with the patience of a monk, as calm and still as I've ever seen him.

Eventually, he says, "Haven't seen you for a few days. I was worried about you. After what happened at the factory..." He trails off, and my brain finishes his sentence for him. That was where Tyrell found me. And Socorro. She must have been in on it from the beginning. She knew what he was going to do to me. I grit my teeth, thinking of the sob story she told me about wanting to get the family back together. I should have known better. No one would ever want to help me unless they could get something out of it.

I look back at Hoshun. "Why are you helping me?"

He smiles slightly and looks down at the tea in his mug.

"You should see yourself, Nico. You're a mess. All I did was get you out of the street."

I look around the room. It's small and gray, the only light coming from a small window that faces the street. There's a small table with an old hot plate on it and a cot, but other than a few tattered floor cushions, the place is empty.

"This is where you live?"

He nods and smiles, his shoulders drooping as the tension flows out of them. "It ain't much, but it's home. You want some tea?" He holds his cup up for emphasis. I consider it for a moment, then nod. He puts a kettle on the hot plate and switches it on. We listen to the water swirl inside until it whistles with steam. He pours it into a small mug, then sets it down beside me. "It's going to be really hot, so be careful."

I pick it up and cradle the mug in my hands, then blow on the steam gently. I look deep into the liquid, and finally feel as if my brain has slowed down enough to start putting thoughts back together.

"What were you doing in the street?" He asks.

I shrug. "Getting away."

He tilts his head with confusion, but doesn't prod. "Well, you can stay here as long as you want. It's nice to have company

sometimes." He holds his mug out and clinks it against mine, smiling warmly. A dinging sound comes from his pants pocket, and he reaches inside and pulls out a phone. My eyes widen in surprise.

"Where did you get that?"

He chuckles as he pushes a button and the dinging stops. I haven't seen a phone in ages. Only the Altas have them, and even at that, they are still expensive and difficult to come by.

"I have family up north in the Bay Cities. They sent it to me." He leans closer and lowers his voice. "Up there, everyone has a phone. It's required."

"Required?"

He nods gravely, as if he's imparted some important secret upon me. Then he shrugs and his smile returns. "I don't really use it, but sometimes they'll send me a message to tell me how they are. They keep telling me to move back, but I'd rather stay here. Things are...simpler."

I look around the room again, thinking I'll find some piece of luxury that I missed before. His eyes follow mine, and he gleans what I'm thinking.

"I know, it isn't much, but here, I can just be myself. It's better than the other options, even with the military crawling all over everything. If we actually get invaded like

some people say we will, at least we'll be safe, right?" He laughs loudly, but all I can do is stare.

"Don't be so sure," I say finally. His smile falls a bit, and he nods.

"You're right. I guess there isn't really any place that is truly safe. Not yet, anyway." He takes another sip of his tea, and stares into the bottom of the cup. I finish the rest of mine, then stand up slowly, testing my balance once I'm fully upright. My equilibrium seems to have returned, and the sun is getting low.

"I should go."

"Go where?"

I shrug. "I just have to go." It's not worth trying to explain. It's best not to get him mixed up in this anyway. I don't want to get him into trouble, or worse. He looks disappointed, but it's better this way. "I'll see you later," I say.

He holds his hand up with a slight wave. "Be careful, Nico. I'm here if you need anything. You're always welcome here."

"I'll call you," I say. The words sound strange in my mouth, but I laugh as he smiles and nods. "Thanks."

I heave myself out the door and into the street. The shadows have grown longer, and there's not much daylight left.

That will be better, since it allows me to move around without so many people around. It's also better for hiding, in case Tyrell or Kinder come after me. I'm headed to the rebel warehouse, but I don't know what I'm going to do when I get there. I have missions from both men, and I can feel in my gut that I'm going to follow one of them, but my brain hasn't opened the window to which one yet. It's easier this way, just like it's easier to keep Hoshun in the dark. Not knowing keeps my feet moving and the pain of resistance at bay, so for now, I'll just continue on.

I head to The Heights, walking near the Wall as the sun dips under the horizon and the neighborhood is cast in near darkness, except for the light from the billboards that flicker endlessly. I look up and see her, and wonder what she was like growing up. I wonder what she would have been, if it weren't for me. The thought makes me shudder, and I shake it out of my head and continue on.

Heat emanates from the white brick of the Wall and seeps into my hand every time I touch it. People disappear into their flats, and small lights emanate from windows like little stationary fireflies. I imagine the faces they light, families gathered together around whatever food they have managed to gather. I envy them, and think about Jovan. I'm afraid of what

is going to happen when I see him, but there's nowhere else for me to go. I forge ahead until the rebel warehouse looms in front of me, a giant hulking beast, dark against the sky.

I slow my pace, keeping an eye out for anyone who might want to take me out. My last departure wasn't exactly graceful, so they may be on the lookout for me now. I wonder if they know where I've been. I take a breath and hope for the best. There's no turning back.

I slink next to the wall toward the side door, keeping an eye out for anyone watching for me. The night is still, and my footfalls are silent. I feel the serum coursing through me, bringing back the training of all those years ago. Even my heart feels still and quiet, and every muscle is tense and ready for whatever might happen.

I get to the door, then ease it open slowly, knowing there are at least two rebels on the other side. Maybe more. I put a foot inside, then lean in, looking for them, ready to be attacked. From the darkness, a hand grabs me by the shoulder with a laugh. "Nico? You scared the shit out of me!"

Kato. I turn to him and smile, relieved that he's going to invite me in. That will make this easier, whatever it is.

"Where've you been?" He asks.

I stare blankly at him, still on guard. "At a friend's

house. I had some things to sort out."

He nods. "I bet." He gives my shoulder a friendly shake, pulling me closer and putting his arm around me as we walk into the warehouse. My eyes adjust, and I look around for Jovan or Lance, waiting for the next move my body is going to make. Then I'll know the mission. I'll know what the serum has decided.

Kato and I walk to the back of the building, to a small office where he takes out a bottle of rare tequila from a desk drawer. He takes a gulp and wipes his mouth, then holds it out to me. I wave it off. I once had a beer after taking serum treatments, and I spent the entire night doubled up in pain and cold sweats. That's what it does to you. It makes you into someone you're not. Someone you don't want to be.

"Once you try a gulp of this, you'll never want anything else. It's magic," he says, holding the bottle closer. I hesitate, then take the bottle. He turns and sits, and when he turns back to me, I wipe my mouth and smile. Hopefully I'm convincing. He doesn't seem to notice either way. I put the bottle back on the desk and he takes another swig, then sets it on the desk, along with one of his booted heels. I wonder why he has it. Tequila -- any kind of alcohol, really, isn't cheap or easy to come by. The label is yellowed and peeling just a little bit, and I'm guessing he's been saving it for some kind of

celebration for a long time. Something must have happened. Something big.

He leans back in his chair and laces his hands behind his head, staring at me like a fox.

"What's up?" I'm trying to be casual, but I'm waiting for my body to take over. "Where's the lab rats?"

"Jovan and Lance? They're around," he says, waving his hand in the air casually. "Where've you been? You kind of disappeared on us." His chair rocks a little under his weight, like he's just an old man discussing the weather. But his eyes are trained on me, waiting for my answer.

"I...was visiting a friend," I stammer.

"Yes, you said that. It must be a good friend to take as long as you did. Especially since you ran out of here as abruptly as you did," He raises an eyebrow and smirks at me; he's not talking about a platonic kind of friend. My ears and cheeks burn as they redden. I shrug. "Well," he says sharply, sitting upright again as he takes his foot off the desk, "you really missed a lot while you were out there having fun."

I purse my lips at the idea that what I've gone through since the last time I was here was fun, but I try to maintain my cool. "What'd I miss?"

He laughs and grabs the tequila bottle, taking one last

triumphant gulp before stowing it back in its drawer. "You'll see." He gets up pushes the door of the office open, motioning for me to go first. I can't help but feel like I'm in the grip of a boa constrictor. Struggling will only make it worse, so I follow him, knowing that as soon as my body takes over, it won't matter what his plan is anymore.

Kato leads me to another warehouse, this one closer to the Wall. It looks abandoned, as if no one has been near it for years. But this is the Heights, and nothing goes to waste here, so I know he's using it for something. He leans into the metal door with his shoulder, and it creaks open. As my eyes adjust to the dim light, shapes of children come into view. There is a single light hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the vast open space, creating a makeshift sparring ring. Two children fight each other under the light, taking jabs at one another, then dodging the next punch. They move quickly; this is not new for them. I look at Kato, my eyes wide.

"Great, isn't it? We can build an army, just like Kinder." He looks at me, pleased with himself. I can't find any words. I look back at the crowd of children. Some are watching the sparring match, bobbing and weaving along with the kids in the ring. Others spar off to the side, practicing moves with one another with such focus, they don't even notice Kato and I

standing among them.

"Where did they all come from?" I ask finally. Kato shrugs.

"The neighborhood. Nothing else for them to do. But before too long, they'll be just as lethal as those Betas, if not more so."

I wince. "You didn't..." I trail off, unable to finish the thought. It's too awful to consider. Kato looks at me, offended.

"Of course not. I'm trying to find an antidote, not spread the disease."

I cross my arms over my chest and scowl. Something doesn't add up. "Then how would they be able to match a Beta?"

Kato claps his hand on my shoulder. "Lance is going to re-engineer the drug. We'll take out that crap that turns them into robots, but leave the stuff that makes them so strong." My brain puts it all together. So this is what Tyrell is doing. Helping his son engineer poor kids from The Heights into soldiers. I've seen where this kind of thinking leads, and it's nowhere good.

Kato looks back to the kids in the ring, then searches the group until he sees one and motions for her to come to him. She trots over and smiles up at him, and he tousles her hair playfully. "See? Everyone's getting in on the action. Show him your moves."

He takes a step back, and she moves through several

fighting moves, complete with acrobatics until she vanquishes her imaginary adversary. My stomach twists with each punch and kick. I shake Kato's hand off my shoulder.

"Be careful," I say. "Or you'll have these kids' deaths on your hands. And your conscience." I look at him, then spit on the ground. "If you have one, that is."

The smile falls from his lips, and he glares at me hard. My blood pumps through me quickly, and I'm ready for him to come at me, but he just stands there, unmoving. It occurs to me that he might be afraid of me, but only because he's close enough for me to take him down before he could shoot me. Then he shrugs, the tension gone from his face.

"If everything goes according to plan, we won't even need these kids. But at the very least, they'll be able to defend themselves. We need you, Nico. Don't run away from me now."

He steps closer and holds his hand out.

"You still want to take down Kinder?" He asks.

My stomach twists into another knot, and the mission floods back into me.

I take his hand and squeeze it hard.

"More than anything."

Calafia

I've been sitting in a small room for what feels like hours. There is a long window along one side, but it is too high for me to see through. No light comes through it, so I don't even know if it is day or night. I try to calculate how long I've been here. Three days? Longer? I wonder how long it will take for Kinder to send more Betas out after us. Probably not much longer, I'd guess. If he sends them out at all. In between my calculations, I try to understand his. Why would he have Gannon kill Lamb? And why would he send me after Lamb's killer? He knew we would carry out our missions. I'm guessing he thought that I might corner the wrong person and kill them for Lamb's death, but that doesn't explain killing Lamb in the first place. I'm exhausted, and the thoughts rumble through my head like

thunder, echoing softer and softer each time.

When they put me in this room, they untied me, so I can move freely again. My joints are stiff from being restricted, but my wounds are healing quickly. The woman changed my bandages before they left me in here. Just before she closed the door, she told me her name was Sakura. Then she smiled and pulled the door shut with an echoing thud. She smiled slightly as she said it, and I can't get it out of my head. This is the same woman who shot me, and now she's tending my wounds and being so gentle. It doesn't make any sense. I'm sure there's an endgame, but I have no idea what it is.

I wonder what they're doing with Gannon. My chest aches as I think of him, laying on his back, staring at the ceiling as if he didn't know me at all. I put my arms over my head and breathe deeply, trying to loosen the tightness in my heart, hoping it's just stiffness. My stomach has also been churning constantly, with sharp pains running through me from time to time. It has to be the mission. I failed in yet another mission. The feeling in my stomach is similar to the time before, but now there are no more treatments available to me to get rid of the feeling. I kick the walls lightly as I pace, systematically testing for any weak spots, but they are thick concrete.

In the back of my brain, behind a little black door, a

voice tells me the treatments are bad. I push it back and close the door, wishing I could feel normal again. I want to get Gannon back. My stomach twists again. I'm supposed to kill him, but I know I can't. Something won't let me, and I know there's just no fighting it. Whatever is stopping me is stronger than anything I've ever felt before, and it feels better than anything I've ever experienced. I wonder why Gannon doesn't feel it too. Maybe he will, with a little more time. I always was just a little bit ahead of all the other Betas.

There is a thud at the door, and it slides open slowly. Kato stands, tall and foreboding, with a wide grin on his face. I sigh and lean against the opposite wall. For the first time since I've been here, I have no desire to fight. I'm just exhausted. He is pointing a gun at me, but I know that if I wanted to, I could take him out without much effort.

He steps slowly, and then I see movement behind him. Another man, slightly smaller than Kato, but tightly wound, as if he's ready to spring if just the right trigger gives him a reason. His skin is light brown and tight against his muscles, and a small bead of sweat forms just under his nose. His dark eyes pierce through me as he steps forward, and he eyes me carefully, as if memorizing every detail of me. I stare back, unafraid.

"I don't want any trouble," Kato says, as if he's some kind of police officer trying to keep the peace. I roll my eyes.

"You're the one making it," I shoot back. He purses his lips, then smirks again. He looks at the man next to him. "See, Nico. Told you she was feisty."

Nico looks at him, and I think I see him shake his head, ever so slightly, as if he disagrees with something going on here.

"What do you want?" I ask.

Kato holds a pair of handcuffs out to Nico, who takes them and steps toward me slowly, never breaking eye contact. "We're going to take a little walk."

I scoff. "A little walk? Sounds a bit trite for you. Don't you have some things to blow up?"

Nico takes my wrist and clicks it into a cuff, then does the same with the other wrist. I can't help but notice that he's not rough, and leaves the cuffs slightly loose. It might be just enough for me to break free, once I get my bearings and can put together a strategy. I look at him, and he takes my elbow to start guiding me out of the room. "Okay?" He asks me. His voice is soft and low, a sharp contrast to his constantly straining muscles.

I nod slightly, puzzled that he would be so gentle. I look

at his arms, and notice the raw marks on his wrists. Looks like I'm not the only one that has been tied up lately.

"What happened to you?" I blurt, before I can shut myself up. His head snaps to me, and I look at Kato, as if the words were meant for him in the first place. Kato's face hardens and holds the door wider. I feel Nico relax slightly next to me, and register that he's feeling threatened by both me and Kato in this scenario. I might be able to use that.

"What happened with your little Beta friend?" Kato asks with a taunting edge in his voice. "I hear you attacked him, then started crying. He leans over me, so close I can smell his breath as Nico's grip on my elbow tightens vaguely. "Seems a little odd, don't you think?" I don't answer, and he looks back at Nico. "Watch out for this one. Course, I guess I don't have to tell you twice. You know exactly what she is, don't you?"

Nico nods and starts to walk forward. Kato peers at me, then at Nico. "What's wrong?" Nico asks him.

"Does she even know?" Kato's voice has a new edge, one that I haven't heard before. Nico catches his breath, and I wonder what is coming. Kato might just shoot me. It's not like a pair of handcuffs are going to stop me if I really wanted to fight.

Nico shakes his head and his hand tightens around my arm. "Don't." Kato tilts his head to the door and steps aside. We

walk through the doorway as Kato follows behind us, chuckling to himself.

I look at Nico, then back at Kato. "What?" I ask.

"It's all family, right, Nico?"

"Kato, stop," Nico shoots back. Kato laughs, then puts his hand on my shoulder. I shake him off.

"Leave her alone, Kato," Nico warns.

Kato's eyebrows shoot up in mock surprise. "Or else what, Uncle Nico?" Nico pulls me forward and walks faster. "Just wait till Papa shows up. Then I'll really be in trouble, right?" Kato laughs loudly. Nico spins on his heels and steps close to Kato.

"Stop it."

Kato looks sideways at me with a look that is half smirk, half snarl. "Nice to be around your family, isn't it? I love a good family reunion."

He claps his hands and rubs them together as I look at him through narrowed eyes. "I have no family." I say quietly.

"Wrong again!" He shouts. "Nico here is your uncle. Jovan is your dad, and Sakura is your mom. You have a sister running around here like a holy terror somewhere, too."

I stop in my tracks and jerk away from Nico as time slows down to nothing and I step sideways. Nico looks at the ground, but I can see his eyes are watching me, waiting for something.

I look from Kato to Nico as my stomach churns. I can barely breathe. Nico takes my arm and pulls me forward, and I stumble. My feet are heavy as cement, but Nico catches me and pulls me back up. I look into his eyes. "Is it true?"

He pauses, then nods almost imperceptibly. My heart leaps to my throat and I gasp for air, then swallow hard and push it back down to where it came from.

I grit my teeth. "Liar." Kato stands with his arms crossed, clearly enjoying himself. I shake my head. "I was abandoned. Kinder found me wrapped in a newspaper and adopted me. Raised me as his own."

Kato howls with laughter, the sharp sound echoing off the concrete. He jabs Nico in the ribs. "That's some story, isn't it?"

Nico sighs, then looks at me. "You weren't abandoned," Kato says. Nico shakes his head and looks away, his eyes glassy. Kato claps his hand on Nico's shoulder and Nico winces.

"This one kidnapped you. Took you back to Kinder because Kinder told him to. How's that for a story?" He laughs again, low and sinister. I look at Nico, my head swimming. "Nico was the first guinea pig for those treatments you inject like addicts and makes you into robots. Poor sucker never had a chance against that serum," Kato continues. He sighs as if

enjoying a wonderful joke, and Nico stands motionless, his mouth pursed into a thin line. My entire life is turning upside down and inside out, and I'm desperately trying to keep up. None of this makes sense. Nico grimaces as I lean closer to him, trying to get him to look at me.

"Is it true?" It comes out as a whimper, and my voice cracks as I choke back a sob. Nico closes his eyes and nods.

I stagger back, my mouth hanging open. The hallway elongates and slides sideways as Nico and Kato shrink away from me. I'm dizzy. I fall against the wall and rest my head against the cool concrete, waiting for breath to come. Waiting for thoughts to come. Nothing.

Nico squeezes my elbow gently. "Calafia?" It sounds so far away. I stare straight ahead and say nothing. "Calafia?" He says louder. My eyes find his, and he holds my gaze with both fear and hope.

"Is that my real name?" I whisper.

He pauses in the silence for a moment. "Entara."

"Entara." The word falls through my lips as if it were a completely different language. It feels strange, and doesn't belong. I shake my head, but it rattles through me. My name is Entara. I have a family. Thoughts now flood through me in a rush of tears and sobs. All those days in the courtyard, watching the

other Betas have something I would never have; wondering what it must be like. Kinder stole all of that from me, and pretended to care about me. It doesn't make sense.

"Why me?" I ask.

"Well," Nico says, "Because you're special. In every way. Smarter, faster, quicker. All of it. Even before the drugs."

"What's in the serum?" I ask. I have been taking something my entire life, and never even thought about what it was doing to me. What it had already done. I thought it made me stronger. It only took away my life. And Nico's, I realize.

Nico shrugs and shakes his head.

"That's what we're trying to find out," Kato says, matter-of-factly. I look over at him, and for the first time since I've met him, he doesn't look at me like an adversary. He looks at me like an ally. I breathe deeply, finding something new in the pit of my stomach. I grit my teeth as hot blood pumps through my veins.

I spit the words low and toxic. "I'm going to kill Kinder."

Jovan

When they come into the lab, Entara's eyes are bulging and a vein on the side of her neck throbs. Her nostrils flare, and I can't help but take a step back. Nothing about this situation looks right. Nico just stares at the floor, and Kato looks much too pleased with himself for anything good to have just happened. Without taking my eyes off them, I reach back and tap Lance on the arm. He looks up from the vials he's messing with, and he sees it, too.

"Nico?" I say, hoping he'll fill in the blanks for me. He looks at me, then Lance, and his breath quickens. He squeezes his eyes shut, and I know something is raging inside him, but can only guess what. His grip on Entara's arm tightens, and she winces slightly and pulls away enough for him to ease up, but

not let go. Kato steps forward.

"She's finally come around," he says casually. I look at her, and she doesn't seem to have heard him. She stands like a statue, her muscles tense. She looks calm, but ready to jump at the slightest provocation. I wish Sakura were here. She would know what to do.

"Kato," Lance steps forward, "I don't think she should be in here. It's not safe."

"Nonsense. She just wants to see her friend. The other Beta. What's his name again?"

Lance raises his voice. "That's really not a good idea. She tried to kill him last time they were together." From the corner of my eye, I see Lance put the vials into his pocket.

"It's fine," Kato says with a smile. As he says it, he claps his hand on Entara's shoulder, and she whips around to grab his hand and twist his arm until he's bent over in pain. Even in handcuffs, she's obviously lethal. She could break his arm right now, but she just stands there, holding him still, without a word. I'm only a little ashamed that seeing him weak like this is satisfying. That's what he gets for teaching my little girl to fight. For blackmailing me into putting my family in danger.

"Don't ever touch me," she says in a low voice. She pulls

his arm just a little tighter, making him wince. He nods his agreement to her, and she lets him go. He stands upright again, and takes a slow step away from her. Even Kato knows when he's outmatched. She had him whimpering, and she's handcuffed. If she were free, she could break his neck in a nanosecond. The realization washes over me that she could make quick work of all of us. Even Nico. I slide backwards again, knowing Lance is right behind me, but hoping he sees this, too, and is ready for a quick escape, should we need one.

"You have to help us," Nico says through gritted teeth. "Kinder..." he trails off as his face twists in pain. He looks over at Entara as if she is going to finish his sentence. She doesn't.

"We are helping you," Lance says. "We're trying to find the antidote. We need more information; what we have isn't working." Lance shrugs. "I don't know what else to do."

Entara steps forward. "Have you taken samples from the others? That's how the antidote would work."

We look at her, trying to connect the dots between her words. She's impatient.

"It's a serum, for God's sake. Which means it's made from my own blood. From all our own blood. The only way to fight blood is with the same blood."

Lance makes a clicking sound with his tongue and pulls the vials from his pocket, peering at them in the light. He's figured it out. He grabs my arm and smiles heartily. "We can do this. We just take a blood sample from each of them, then add the countermeasures, and it should kill the original poison." He chuckles and shakes his head, as if he's just solved a crossword puzzle.

"Will it neutralize the other factors? The growth hormones?" Kato asks.

Lance shrugs. "There's no way to tell until we try it. Possibly."

Kato shakes his head. "Can't you just take out that one piece? We need the rest of it."

All eyes turn to Kato. He looks at me, and I simply stare back. He's been too free with his words for a long time now, and he's finally feeling the burn. No one here cares about the hormones. Lance waves him off.

"One thing at a time, Kato. The first thing we need to do is get these kids back to what they should be."

"What about her?" Kato asks, pointing at Entara. "She didn't have an antidote. She just...woke up."

Lance is at a loss for words as he shakes his head. "No idea. But we'll figure that out later." He holds the vials up.

"Let's start with these."

"What's that?" Kato asks.

"My father took these from Nico when he was at the base. These are samples of dosed blood before it got fully metabolized. We can start with this to find the correct countermeasures that will bring him back to himself."

At the sight of the vials, Nico starts breathing faster. His eyes go wide. "The samples?" He says, more to himself than anyone else. "You got them?"

Lance nods and hands them to me. "My dad came by after you ran out. He wasn't happy about that window, but honestly, he was more worried about you. Those vials might just be your salvation, Nico."

Nico looks around wildly and sweat beads on his forehead.

"Nico?" I ask. "You okay?"

His eyes dart to me and he grits his teeth. "You always say that!" He says, rushing toward me. "Right before you put poison inside me!" He reaches out and grabs me by the neck, wrapping his fingers tightly around my throat. Kato and Lance rush to grab him, but he's driven by the serum. It's stronger than he is, and he's not fighting it. I drop the vials and tug at his fingers, and he pulls his face close to mine. I can feel the heat coming from him; the anger and sheer rage. It's terrifying.

"Nico, stop," I croak, but his hands close tighter. I can feel the breath pushed out of me, and I know this is the end. I spot Entara, standing behind him, not moving, but with an expression on her face I can't quite read. "Nico," I whisper. The room starts to fade, and I see Entara move into action. She reaches around Nico's back, grabs him, and pulls his arms backward and away from my neck. She throws him and he sprawls on the floor, tumbling into a table and stools as glass beakers fall from the top of it and shatter around him. He covers his head with his arms as the shards fall.

Entara looks at her handcuffs, then with one quick movement, breaks through the thin metal chain that holds them together. She's officially free. Nico gets up and dives at her, but she's faster than he is, and she's ready. She intercepts him and puts him in a headlock, squeezing tighter and tighter. It would be easy for her to simply snap his neck, but something stops her. I marvel at the economy of her movements, at her efficiency as Nico's body goes limp and he slides to the floor in a lump, among the broken vials and spilled blood. She stands and looks at us, wide-eyed with surprise.

She is different than before. I don't know how, and I don't know why, but she is. She's as calm as a soldier would be, but there is life in her eyes and purpose in her breath. She looks

over at Lance and I.

"If I get the serum for you, will you cure Gannon and the twins?" She asks.

Lance, still agape, nods.

"And the other Betas?"

"As many as possible," he says.

She gives a curt nod. "I'm ready to go as soon as he wakes up," she says, motioning toward Nico. She turns and walks to the door, but pauses when she gets there. "But whatever happens, Kinder is mine."

Nico

When I come to, I'm propped up against a row of cabinets in the lab. There are still smears of blood on the floor, but the glass has been cleaned up. Jovan sits nearby, just out of swinging range. He leans forward with his elbows on his knees and looks at me. I close my eyes and rest my head against the cabinet and sigh.

"What do you want?" I ask. He doesn't answer, and I pull my head away from the cabinet and look at him, then at the bloody smears on the concrete. "You missed a spot."

He snickers lightly and leans back in his chair. "You always did like jokes."

I nod and smile, feeling the warmth of brotherhood that I haven't felt in nearly twenty years. I wish we could go back to

that time, when we lived in the dusty Empire, and things were simpler. Before we thought life could be more than what it was. Now I know - it can't be. There's always going to be something missing, something we'll never have, never be. I see the memory in his face, too, and then he sighs and it drops, replaced by the mask of someone I barely know anymore.

"We're close, Nico. Close to a cure."

I narrow my eyes and scoff. "And then what? We'll all go live our happy little lives like none of this ever happened? Get real, Jovan."

He shakes his head and leans forward again, then buries his face in his hands, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. When he pulls them away, his eyes are red and bleary. "You don't know how many nights I've laid awake..." he trails off and stares into space, then focuses back on me. "What would I have done if I knew? How did I not know? If Dad were still alive..."

"So you lay awake and feel sorry for yourself? All these years, that's what you've been doing? You have a wife and a daughter that are right by your side. What do I have?" The heat rises in my chest as I talk, and there is clanging in my ears. I clench my fists, willing them to stay by my side.

"Nothing," Jovan says quietly. "And I can't give it back." He looks down at his hands, turning them over, then over again,

as if he's looking for something. "You know," he says quietly, more to himself than to me, "I always thought you had it all. Stronger, smarter...better looking. Even Dad liked you better. I wanted to be just like you, my little brother. Imagine that," he says, looking up at me. "I was supposed to be the leader, but all I could do was follow in your footsteps. And when they took you as a volunteer and not me, I thought my world was over. I would never be anything. Then Tyrell gave me a chance in the lab, and I jumped at it. I felt so smart in that lab coat, surrounded by doctors and machines. But I didn't know anything. I was following orders, and there's not a day that goes by that I don't wonder what I could have done differently."

"Everything," I say. I expect Jovan to snap back, but he just nods his head.

"Everything," he repeats.

His words are so quiet, they are almost a whisper. He clears his throat and continues.

"Then I met Sakura, then Entara came along. I couldn't help but feel lucky. You were out running drills and training all the time, and I got to go home to them. It was perfect; I had everything."

"Yeah, you did," I blurt. "You were a pain in the ass about it, too. Inviting me over for Sakura's cooking, playing with

Entara, then sending me back to the barracks and that gruel they made us eat."

"It was supposed to be nutritious," Jovan says with a sneer. "Specially engineered to deliver everything a body needed."

"It was disgusting. And to go to your house, see your family? Practically torture."

He nods, then our eyes meet. My memory cracks back to that night, the rain, his face twisted in confusion. Sure, I had been jealous, but I didn't want to tear his family apart. But I did, and now here we are. I tear away from his gaze.

"I wish I could take it back," I mumble.

"Look what we did," Jovan says, shaking his head in disbelief. "We. We did this."

My throat catches a sob as I can only nod.

"We have to fix it."

"Fix it?" I sputter. "How? How are you gonna fix this?"

"We'll find the antidote. No more Calafia. No more Betas. Just Entara and a bunch of normal kids."

I shake my head. No way is he that naive. I look at him, and in his eyes I see that he isn't. He knows this is bigger than just a bunch of kids.

"What about you? What do you want?" He asks.

I don't remember the last time anyone asked me that. My mind goes blank at the thought. I remember the last twenty years in a flash of noise, doing what everyone else wanted. Kinder, Tyrell, Socorro, even Jovan. I take in a sharp breath and let it out slowly. "To be invisible again. Like we were in the Empire. At least back then, I could do what I wanted."

He nods and slaps his hands together. "Well, then I guess we're in agreement." He stands up and I look at him, confused.

"What did we agree on?"

"We have to fix this. So I can have my family back, and you can do...whatever it is you do."

"Will you ever forgive me?" I blurt out. I hadn't seen the question coming, but now I realize it has been on my tongue for years.

"Will you forgive me?" He responds. He holds his hand out to me. I shrug and take it, and he pulls me up. My stomach flips as we stand eye to eye, and I feel a twinge of rage return. I look away and swallow it deep, knowing I have to keep it at bay for now. We're both trying to leave the past where it belongs.

"They're leaving soon, so you'll want to get ready," he says, then walks out of the room, leaving a trail of bloody footprints behind him. My blood.

I stare at the footprints. Whatever controls me, whatever

it is we're after, is in those footprints. And they lead
straight to Kinder.

Jovan

We sit around the table, with a single overhead light shining down. It's not dark outside yet, but it will be soon. As we sit, I can't help but stare at Entara. Her body is hard and rigid, her face set. Her eyes pierce everything they set upon, and I can't help but feel a mix of pride and fear. She could kill all of us right here, but something stops her. She's someone different from the girl who snarled at us not that long ago. I look over at Sakura, and see the same piercing gaze and intensity, but Sakura has softer edges. I smile slightly, and I can't wait for us to have this behind us so we can start over and move forward as a complete family. I just have to figure out what to do with Nico.

He's my brother, but I can't help him without an antidote.

He told me about his competing missions, and still isn't sure which one his body is going to carry out. I had him lie down and rest; he looked like he's been operating at 110% for a while now, with deep circles under his eyes and his jaw constantly set. He's always been a walking bundle of nerves, but this is different. He's exhausted, and he's fighting the serum. I mentioned to Lance that he may be able to contribute to us finding the antidote, since he's had so much experience fighting it, and might be able to give us insights as to how it affects his brain and body. He's never talked about it before, but I feel like he and I had a breakthrough, and he's ready to move forward. I know I am. I've wanted nothing else for the last fifteen years. The thought of getting my brother back sends chills down my spine and raises gooseflesh on my arms.

"Jovan, did you get that?" Kato asks. I look over at him, his eyebrows raised. I stare at him, and he shakes his head in frustration. "Again. This is going to be a small, tactical team. Me, Sakura, and Entara will provide the cover, and you and Lance will get to the lab for the formula. If there's time, we'll analyze it there. If not, we bring it back here. Either way, every sample we don't use gets destroyed before we're outta there. Under no circumstances can we leave it behind. One way or another, the Beta program ends tonight."

He points his index finger into the table for emphasis
looks around at us solemnly.

"Everybody got that? No samples can survive."

Everyone at the table nods as there is a knock at the door
and Chasca steps inside. She looks nervous and agitated, but
sits down next to Kato. Kato nods at her, then looks back at the
rest of us. "Chasca is in charge back here until we return.
She's got a complete strategic plan for fighting the Betas if we
fail and they invade The Heights, but I hope it doesn't come to
that. Lots of our recruits aren't ready yet. He looks at Sakura
and I, and I know he's talking about all the children he's been
recruiting. He's been giving those kids lessons in confidence,
pushing their fears down in order to fight, and that won't save
them from a Beta. All those kids will be slaughtered if the
Betas invade. I hope Chasca's strategy involves plenty of hiding
spots and a plan for leaving the city if it comes to that.

Silence falls around us as everyone takes in Kato's words.
We can't fail. This has to work, or else it could mean not just
our lives, but the lives of our families, friends, and
neighbors. The echo of footsteps in the hallway reaches us, and
Entara springs into fight mode, ready to pounce. Nico approaches
in the darkness.

"I'm going, too," he says. Kato sits up on his stool in

defiance.

"No you ain't."

Nico pulls a stool to the table and sits. "You'll need another person on the team that knows the base and can fight."

Kato shakes his head. "We can't trust you. What happens if you run back to Kinder again? Or try to kill one of us?"

"Then shoot me," Nico says. There is resolve in his voice, and I know he's not going to back down from this. Nico levels his gaze at Kato as they stare at each other for a long moment, the tension in the air thick. Finally, Kato shrugs.

"Alright. You all heard him. He acts even a little bit funny, you shoot him where he stands. And I mean shoot to kill. Got it?"

I feel a knot in my stomach as the others nod in agreement. I should protest, but I'm outnumbered. Kato may be a cold-hearted monster, but he's right. Nico can't be trusted, and I'm not willing to gamble the lives of my family on a maybe. So it is. Nico may not come back. For that matter, there's a strong possibility none of us will come back.

Calafia

I stand just outside the warehouse door, looking up at the sun. Tomorrow, it will look different. Everything will be different. I track its course through the sky and wait for night. I think of Gannon, inside, tied up like an animal. I shudder at the thought. I wonder what he'll be like, once he's truly alive again, and not the mindless robot he's been his entire life. The robot I was. I think about his parents. I wonder if they know what he is. I wonder if anyone's parents knew. Suddenly I feel lucky. In the span of twenty-four hours, the world has taken on a completely new sheen, with the colors springing out, even if almost everything out here is grey. My senses have been taking everything in; the warmth of the sun on my face, a cool breeze on the back of my neck, the smell of

something cooking, making my mouth water. My emotions have also been roiling through me, which is a new sensation. Where I only had vast emptiness inside me before, now there is a constantly shifting flutter that Sakura says is normal for someone my age. It's somewhat disorienting and overwhelming at times, but she's sure I'll get used to it. She told me to concentrate on my breathing if it starts to be too much.

Out of the corner of my eye, a shadow moves, and my muscles tense, waiting for anything. Sakura steps out and smiles faintly. I relax, leaning against the warm wall of the warehouse. "You ready?" She asks.

I nod. "Can't wait."

She takes a few more steps to me until she's right next to me, then leans her shoulder against the wall. She pushes her hands into her pockets and looks down. "It's not going to be easy, you know."

I nod again.

"I'm not talking about the fighting. I'm talking about Kinder."

I look at her sharply. "What do you mean?"

She sighs and looks up at me. "We have a mission. A purpose. And it's not to kill Kinder."

"So?"

"You think you can stay on course?" She peers at me with intensity I've never seen from her before. "Because we -- all of us -- we need to stick together. We don't have time for your rage or your revenge."

I turn to her, my blood rising. "You don't have time? Or your don't have the guts?" I grit my teeth as I look down at her, this tiny woman, my mother. Her eyes don't waver from mine.

"Killing him isn't going to make you feel better. It's not going to make anyone's life better."

"How do you know?" I ask, annoyed.

She shrugs and kicks the dirt before leaning on the wall next to me. "You're just going to have to trust me on this one. The thrill of vengeance dies quickly. Besides, if you really try, I doubt you can come up with any reasoning that objectively proves his death would make anyone's life better."

"How about all the Betas he lied to and enslaved their entire lives? Their lives will be better."

Sakura shakes her head. "Their lives will be better when we have an antidote. That's the mission."

"I know what the mission is, and I'm going to kill Kinder. And anyone else who gets in my way," I snap at her.

"Killing Kinder won't make you whole." She says, raising her voice. She steps closer to me and we're face to face. "Every

time you kill, it eats a little piece of you. Maybe you haven't felt it before, but you will now. Now it's your choice. You have to decide if you have enough humanity inside you to show mercy, to think about the greater good, or if you'll sink into the depths of revenge that is so blind, you may as well still have that serum running through you. Rage is just as much of a drug."

She steps back as I clench my fists. "I'm going to kill Kinder. He doesn't deserve to live."

Sakura takes a step back and shrugs. "Maybe not, but you do. Just remember that when we're out there. Everything you do matters now. No one told you to do it, and you're going to have to decide who you are. Are you a killer? Whatever your choice is, you're the one that's going to have to live with it."

She turns and walks back inside as my anger boils over. I jam my fist into the side of the building, leaving a small crack in the concrete. Her words echo in my brain, but all I can think about is Kinder, watching him breathe his last, knowing he's gone forever. I shake my head, but the image remains.

Nico

The sun sinks behind the Wall, and shadows resolve into the approaching darkness. My muscles twitch in anticipation as we gather to gear up. Kato opens a padlocked door, revealing a store of weapons larger than I could have imagined. A stockpile this size would ensure he never saw daylight again if the authorities ever found out, and I wonder how he was able to keep something like this a secret. I look at the others, and they appear to be just as surprised as I am. This rebellion of his isn't a new idea. This must have taken years to amass.

"How long have you been stockpiling?" I ask.

He smiles and shakes his head.

"Rebellions take time and preparation, Haffner." He slaps his hand on my shoulder, as if we're headed to a picnic. His

ease with the situation is unsettling, and I can't shake the feeling that his goals are as altruistic as he lets on. He looks over the weapons and smiles like a proud father, "And I'm dedicated." He walks into the room and picks up various weapons -- guns, knives, ammunition, holstering them or shoving them into his pockets. Once he's loaded up, he looks at me. "You still in?"

I take a breath and walk into the room. The guns are cold and heavy in my hands, but somehow feel like they belong in my hands. My fingers curl around the grip and my heart skips a beat with a soft flutter. I look at Kato and he smiles.

"I knew it would come back to you. Like riding a bike." He pauses, then holds his finger up in front of my face. "Don't think I won't shoot you in a second, though." As he walks out of the room, he calls over his shoulder, "You're with me, Haffner. So shake a leg."

The others come in the room, and I watch Entara pick up what she deems necessary. Her movements are swift and sure; a soldier out on a mission. Her face is emotionless and calm, the epitome of clear thinking, only taking what she needs and holstering every weapon exactly where she needs it for quick use later.

Sakura has a similar ease about her, but takes fewer

weapons than Kato and Entara, a minimalism that comes from a desire to end things quickly and get out. Still, she handles the weapons with confidence, and I can't help but wonder where that comes from. I don't remember her ever talking about a time when she was a fighter or soldier of any kind, and I suddenly realize I know so little about this woman. I've never asked, and she never volunteered. I look at Jovan, and looks at her sideways, as if this is a new facet of the woman he has known for twenty years that he has never seen. I'm not sure if he's afraid or proud. Maybe both.

Jovan picks up a single knife and a pistol, leaving the rest. Sakura pulls a bullet-proof vest out of a cabinet and hands it to him, then hands one to Lance. Jovan looks at her, a million questions in his eyes. "What about you?" He asks. She just shakes her head.

"I'll be fine. I'm just here to cover the two of you, who need to stay alive. Without you, none of this matters," her words have a finality to them that no one argues with, and she walks out of the room. Lance and Jovan exchange a look, then strap the vests on.

"You'd think Kato would have gotten more than a couple of these," Jovan mutters angrily. He looks up at me, his eyes wide. "Seems to me he wasn't worried about body count," he says

quietly. I press my lips together, knowing he's probably right. Kato is proving that he's just as much a warmonger as Kinder, and Jovan and I already know that's going to create more problems for us at some point. The only question is when.

I finish gearing up, anxious to leave the cramped room before the walls close in on me. I'm already sweating in the stifled air, and I try to slow my thoughts so I don't spin out of control. Keep it together, Nico. Keep it together. That is the only way I stay alive today. I breathe in a rush of air as I step outside the warehouse and let my lungs fill with dark, hot air. Kato eyes me carefully as a streetlight flickers on, glinting off his face and making him look sharp and angular. It finally looks like he is taking this seriously, knowing that some of us may not come back alive. The confidence in his face says he doesn't think it will be him. That's comforting.

"You sure you're ready for this? Last chance to turn back. I'll just say it one more time. You know I have no problem shooting you if I have to."

I nod and set my jaw. That sentiment goes both ways, whether he knows it or not. He looks back as the others emerge from the building, then nods to the group and motions to them as he leads the way. We creep along the edges of buildings, headed in the direction of the base. We stay low, avoiding the light

that pours from the billboards overhead. As we near them, Entara pulls even with Kato and pulls him back. They exchange low, quick words, and he falls back to let Entara lead the way. I can't help but feel proud of my niece, unafraid to take charge and show us the safest and most strategic route. Following after her, we maneuver under and around the billboards, preventing the motion sensors from starting their video. The images remain static, and I marvel at her attention to detail.

Sakura and Kato wedge Jovan and Lance between them as we move along quickly, making sure they are protected at all times. By the time we get to the base, it's going to be late, after lights out. We won't have a ton of time once we get there to carry out the mission before the Betas are on top of us, but that might give us a few precious extra minutes as they dress and gear up for battle. For a moment I wonder if we're doing the right thing. Is this even possible? I take another deep breath to slow my heart and thoughts. Keep it together, Nico.

We reach the top of a hill and the rest of the city unfolds beneath us, all the way down to the ocean, which sparkles under the light of the moon. Silhouettes of palm trees sway in the breeze, and the Lighthouse stands tall and massive, like a ghost as light twinkles off the glass surfaces. No lights are on inside. Down by the coast, the base is lit up around its

perimeter, and the blood heats up in my arms, pumping my heart a little bit faster. Kinder's toothy white smile flashes in my brain, the echo of his laugh, the sound my name on his lips. I think of the last time I saw him, while I was strapped to a gurney and he had a needle in my arm, knowing what kind of pain he was inflicting on my entire family. Taking everything I ever cared about away from me, without so much as a second thought. His voice echoes in my head, "Bring them to me."

Is that what I'm doing? Am I carrying out my mission? I stop and shake my head, trying to rid myself of him.

"You gonna make it?" Kato asks. His hand is on his holster, finger hovering over the safety in case he needs to release it quickly.

I look into his eyes and nod, and focus on the breath in my lungs, moving in and out. I think of the bloody footprints in the lab. My blood. I can do this. I will do this. I look back at the base again and grit my teeth. Keep it together, Nico.

"Let's go." I say, striding down the hill.

Calafia

Once we get to the base, I lead the team along the perimeter wall to the corner, where it transitions from a formidable stone wall to a chain link fence. It's further to get to the lab from here, but there are fewer lights, and less of a chance we'll be seen before we get to it. I look back at the rest of this bunch of rebels and wonder what I'm leading them to. I'm used to leading trained soldiers, and this group is rag tag at best. I have no idea if any of them can even fight, despite the weapons they may have. I silently hope I'm not leading them straight to their deaths, and I'm going to do all I can to make sure that doesn't happen, which means I have to stay focused. I take a breath to pull my thoughts back to the present. I watch the lights as they move from side to side. I

cut the side of the fence and peel it back, then wait for the main spotlight to sweep past. I hold the chain link as wide as possible as the others squeeze through.

Once everyone is through, I pull it back into place so the Betas on patrol won't immediately see the hole. It won't throw them off completely, but it might just take a little longer for them to grow suspicious. And we need all the time we can get. I jog back up to the front and draw a handgun, staying low and moving as quickly as I can without leaving the group behind. They're so much slower than I am, I feel like I'm moving in slow motion. I had originally intended to make a beeline to the lab, but with the extra time it's taking, we'll never make it before the lights sweep over us again. I decide to take a longer route, using the buildings as cover.

I head to the courtyard, knowing it will be empty, and no one will be patrolling it. As soon as we enter, I stop to wait. I look back, and the team is behind me, but they're winded. Nico's face is covered with sweat, but he's breathing almost normally. I understand where his stress is coming from, and I give him a reassuring nod, hoping that will ease his tension.

"Let's pause a minute," Kato says quietly, trying to hide his deep breath. I look up at the spotlight as it passes over the courtyard, moving toward the barracks.

I nod sharply. "Make it quick. We don't have much time here, and we can't see anyone coming without exposing our position."

I wish Gannon were here. He would be able to keep up, and we could get this mission finished with just the two of us. We could get in and out, and no one would ever know. I know exactly how dangerous this is, what we're doing, but I don't think anyone else does. Betas are deadly. They've trained their whole lives for war. They're vicious, ruthless creatures that don't care about their own lives. By reflex, I catch my breath as the memory of moving without my own purpose runs through me. It wasn't that long ago -- I can feel it now, that cold, icy resolve of moving as if in a dream. At least now, I'm doing this because I want to, not because I have to. I can only hope that someday soon, Gannon will feel it as well.

I push the breath out evenly, and the ice along with it. I'm moving my own feet with my own wants now, and it feels good. I feel the warmth in my heart in let it radiate through my chest. I pull in another breath and look over at the others. "You ready? The spotlight is about to pass again, and that's when we go. The lab is a short sprint straight ahead, so we have to be quick. Got it?"

Kato nods, and the spotlight passes, sending us out again,

the lab directly in front of us.

Jovan

As we run, hunkered down as much as possible while trying to keep up with Entara, I spot a figure moving quickly towards us in the dark. The hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention, and a knot forms in my stomach. I look over at Lance, then nod in the direction of the figure. He looks, then smiles and straightens up a bit, slinking closer to the figure.

"Glad you made it, Dad," he says in a low whisper.

They grab each others' forearms in a burly sort of handshake. "Tyrell?" They both look my direction, and I finally recognize my former colleague. I swallow hard. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to help," he says. We all continue to the building, where we press ourselves as flat against it as

possible, trying to get our breath under control. I'm definitely winded; I wasn't prepared for this. I see that now, as my heart races and my hands shake. Too late to turn back now. I'm going to see this through to the end, wherever that may put me.

Tyrell pulls a card out of his pocket and holds it up.
"Hopefully this will buy you a little more time."

I eye Lance, who nods as Tyrell swipes his card at the door, unlocking it with a metallic thud. He pulls the door open and strides hurriedly down the hall, the rest of us following at a safe distance. I turn and see Kato and Nico bringing up the rear as Entara and Sakura hug the edges of the hallway, pointing their guns down side hallways in case of ambush. I catch Nico's eyes, and they are wide like an animal's. The whites of his eyes are clearly visible, and sweat beads on his forehead and neck. He grips his gun so tightly I pray that he doesn't accidentally fire it.

I pause.

"Breathe, Nico. Breathe deep," I say, doing my best to reassure him. I'm going to do everything I can to make sure he doesn't get himself shot tonight. His eyes dart to mine, and I do my best to look relaxed. I see concern in Kato's face as he curls his finger around the trigger of his gun.

"Think of Empire, Nico. Wide open spaces, quiet all

around."

He closes his eyes for a second as he walks, takes a long, deep breath, then opens his eyes again as he exhales.

"That's it. Keep breathing."

I jog a little faster to catch up with Lance and Tyrell. "Nico's on edge. Let's try not to provoke him. The deeper into this place he gets, the more unpredictable he's going to be," I say.

Tyrell nods and quickens his pace. He swipes us through several sets of doors, and so far, there have been no alarms. No one seems to know we are here. So far, so good. We come to another set of doors, and he holds his card up, but the light doesn't change from red to green. He lets out a halting breath and takes a step back and turns to Lance.

"Kinder must have changed the security protocols. I can't get you any further than this." He points at the doors.

"Everything is in this wing."

"What do we do?" Lance asks.

"We're going to have to break through," Kato says from the back. "It's our only choice." He pulls two grenades from his belt and holds them up. "We can use these."

Sakura shakes her head. "We'll never get out if we raise the alarm before we get in."

"What choice do we have?" Kato retorts.

Sakura grits her teeth, and I can see the wheels turning in her brain, looking for any other solution. We all stand waiting for what seems like forever, and then she shrugs and looks at each one of us in turn.

"Fine. Entara and I will give cover to Lance and Jovan. You and Nico post up outside."

Kato takes a step forward, towering over Sakura. "Since when do you give the orders around here?"

Without hesitating, Sakura fires back. "Since Entara knows this place like the back of her hand, and that's my husband in there. I know I'll fight to the death to save my family, but I'm not so sure about you."

Her words fall at his feet and he takes a step back. He shrugs, then nods and hands her the grenades. "Have it your way." He looks at Lance and I, then points a finger at us. "Get everything you can. And leave nothing behind, even if you have to destroy this entire building. We're putting a stop to the Beta program right here and now." He turns and strides down the hall, gun raised and ready, with Nico following behind. I exhale, only now realizing that I've been holding my breath. The tension releases from my shoulders. I'm grateful to have Sakura at my back, and relieved to get Nico away from the lab.

Tyrell grabs Lance in a tight hug. "Be careful, son. Don't stay too long; the Betas are quick. They may be kids, but don't underestimate them. They are killers to their core." He glances fleetingly at Entara, then back to Lance, then without another word, hustles down the hallway after Nico and Kato.

Sakura walks to the doors and looks back at us. "These will definitely set off an alarm, so you'll have to work quickly. We'll hold them off as long as we can, but it probably won't buy you much time -- minutes at the most."

We nod and hustle to a nearby hallway to take cover. Sakura pulls the pins, tosses the grenades down, and hurries over to us, making it around the corner just as they explode. Debris comes down in small chunks and dust, and the blare of the alarm rises to an earsplitting scream. In the distance, other alarms sound.

Lance and I sprint through the doors, our arms over our mouths, trying not to inhale the dust as it settles. It's cold inside the lab, and Lance hurries to the computer while I head to the nearby refrigerators. I peer inside, looking for samples of the serum. I find them in their tubes, laid out neatly in plastic containers, like eggs ready for shipping. Each vial is labeled with a number, and I know every number is a Beta we can save. I carefully pull out one container, then another, and

stack them into the bags we brought. I open another refrigerator and pause. It is filled with similar tubes, but these aren't serum. I peer at them closer, and they are each labeled with a number, a name, and a date. I look at another shelf, and find the same. I go through several more, and one after another, there are more and more names, dates, and numbers. These are blood samples. I go to another refrigerator and find the same. I see a walk-in refrigerator and yank it open. As a frosty cloud billows out, I see rows and rows of shelves, full of blood samples. This is more samples than there are Betas on the base. This is enough samples for all of Pendleton City, if not more. My gut twists and I swallow hard to keep from vomiting.

"Lance!" I call. I hurry over to him, and find him staring at the screen, the blue text reflecting off his eyes. "What is all this?" I ask.

He looks up, confused. "What do you mean?"

"There's a giant fridge full of blood samples back there. Enough to be samples from the entire population of the city. This is bigger than the Beta program. This is something else completely."

The skin on my neck turns clammy with cold sweat as Lance turns back to the computer. "Destroy it," he says.

"We'll have to burn the place down to get everything. You

almost done?"

He shakes his head. "I'm hitting a firewall. Kinder must have changed the security on the computer, too."

"Can you get anything at all?" I ask.

"Some. Give me two minutes to see what I can do. You get some samples and serum, and get this place ready to burn."

I nod, hoping he knows what he's doing. There's a pit growing in my stomach as I try to fathom the depth of Kinder's plan. I don't know what he would need with all those samples, but I do know it can't be good. I fill the bags with serum and several trays of samples, careful to stack them evenly so they won't break.

"You ready?" I call to Lance.

"I don't have time to get everything," he answers. "I'm going to download what I can and wipe the drive."

I go back into the walk-in cooler where the samples wait and grab a rack of shelves. I pull it down as hard as I can, and glass tubes shatter, spilling blood all over the floor. I pull another down, and another, until the entire cooler is in shambles. I pull a grenade from my belt, pull out the pin and toss it down, then shut the giant metal door behind me. The blast thrusts the door from its hinges, but I hold it in place with my body, then open it up to give the fire air to burn.

"Let's go," I say, as I pull out another grenade. I walk to the door, but Lance doesn't move. He simply stands, staring at the computer screen, his eyes scanning the lines of data scrolling by. "Lance, let's go!" I say, louder this time.

He shakes his head. I walk back and grab his arm. "We gotta move, man." He shakes his head again, and points at the screen. I look at it, and see numbers, names, and dates scrolling down the screen, along with another set of numbers that weren't on the samples.

"Something's up with this. I think these are coordinates," he says. He looks at me, eyes wide.

"Coordinates?"

He blinks at me, then turns his gaze back to the screen. "If this is what I think it is, Kinder knows where every single person is in the city. Maybe the entire Legion. And they definitely correspond to all those samples you just destroyed. Maybe he's tracking people via their sample, or there's some new form of serum. Whatever it is, it's big. And very bad news."

My throat tightens. "Is that even possible?"

Lance shrugs. "I don't know. But these coordinates have to mean something. At least he won't have the samples now."

I nod, but his words aren't terribly comforting. "How long until you're done copying it?"

"Thirty seconds. Maybe sixty."

I nod. "I'm going to finish destroying this place, but you get that data. If I have to, I'll cover you." I pull a handgun from my belt and unlatch the safety clumsily. I haven't held a gun in my hand in over twenty years, and it feels awkward and heavy in my hand. Still, I'll do what I have to in order to stop Kinder. Lance nods and turns back to the computer as I continue pulling samples from their shelves, blood oozing across the cold floor.

Calafia

The alarm is loud, but Sakura and I move together smoothly, slinking down the hall with our weapons drawn. We've wedged the side entrances shut, so the only way in is through the front door. My muscles tense with every step forward, twitching every time we hear voices shouting outside. I breathe softly, ready for what's coming. I look over to Sakura, and she looks focused, as if she has done this a million times. I see myself in her, and I'm proud she's my mother. I find myself wondering where she came from for a nanosecond, and then my mind turns back to the voices. By my count, there are at least six of them. They're spreading out, going to the other entrances to see if they can cut us off or split us up. I'm a step ahead of them, though. If they want in, they're going to have to fight us head on.

We reach the lobby of the building, and Sakura carefully peers around a corner through a window, doing her best to keep out of sight. "Eight," she whispers. She holds up four fingers, then points to the right, four fingers, points to the left. I nod and we each take a side, waiting for the soldiers to come in.

I take a deep breath. I've never had a problem carrying out my orders, even if that meant taking a life. But these are the people I've known my entire life. I've trained next to them every day. Is it the same if you know them? The first two burst through the door, and Sakura shoots them in the knees, then sidles up and hits them in the head with the butt of her rifle. They fall to the floor, unconscious.

Two more enter, but seeing the two on the floor, enter with their rifles up, training them on Sakura. I shoot one in the hip, and the other in the thigh, and they go down, writhing in pain. I lurch forward and grab one by the leg and drag him out of the doorway. I'm about to grab the other one, when two more Betas spring through the door. Moving quickly, one of them moves to hit me, but I dodge the punch, grab his arm, and twist it behind his back, then smash it enough to pull it out of the shoulder socket. He wails in pain, and I stomp on the other Beta's instep, and I feel it crunch under my boot. As he falls,

I elbow him in the face, and hear his nose break as blood gushes from it.

"We gotta move," Sakura says quickly. "Fall back and regroup." She stands over the unconscious bodies of the Betas, having bound their arms and feet and disarmed them. She shoves a Beta's knife into her belt and hands me another knife. "Just in case."

I take the knife, and as I do, the last two Betas rush through the door. One lands a kick to the back of my knee, and I go to the ground. Instinctively, I lash out with the knife, plunging it into his gut all the way down to the hilt. I twist the knife, then slash the groin of the other Beta. My body is moving faster than my brain, moving on reflexes, and I watch them both start to bleed out, a dark red bloom growing next to their bodies. I look at Sakura, who looks back at me, wide-eyed. "I didn't mean to," is all I can think to say. The two Betas writhe and gasp as they bleed, and one by one, I snap their necks. They lay still on the floor, the blood continuing to ooze from them like a silent oil slick.

My chest tightens and I squeeze my eyes shut and put my hands on my knees, trying to breathe. Sakura pulls me up and tells me to inhale, to relax, but this is new. I took two lives that I never intended to take. It's real and in full color, like

it has never been before, and it's overwhelming. Tears escape from the corner of my eyes, and I catch my breath in choking gasps as Sakura pulls me away from the fallen Betas. Another minute, and I've regained my composure, but things are still whirling just a bit. These feelings are what I was missing my entire life, and all I can think is that Kinder took this away from me. He took it away from Gannon, the twins, and even those eight Betas in the lobby. He has to pay.

Nico

I don't know how much longer I can last, but every time I feel like I'm about to lose it, I look at the gun in Kato's hand. I have to maintain, somehow. Keep it together, Nico. Breathe. I remember Jovan's words, and I pull myself together. For the first time in almost twenty years, I realize that I don't want to die. Whatever it takes to live, that's what I have to do. And right now, keeping myself under control is what that's going to take. Kato eyes me suspiciously as his grip tightens around the gun.

"I'm fine," I say, doing my best to not let my voice waver. I pull in a deep breath, hold it, then let it out slowly.

"We gotta find a way out. Entara and Sakura are defending the front, but the longer that alarm sounds, the more Betas are

going to rush through there. Does the lab have a back entrance?"

I shrug. "No idea."

"Well, let's find one pronto."

Kato and I are on the opposite side of the building from the main entrance, crouched under a hedge of thorny bushes. I look over to where the barracks are, and see more bodies emerging from them every second, like bees from a hive, swarming angrily. My chest tightens as I inch forward, looking up and down the brick wall of the building.

"There's got to be some sort of emergency route, right?" I say. Kato nods. I hear the muffled sounds of gunshots, then silence.

"You go that way, and I'll go this way," Kato says, pointing down the lengths of the building.

"What if there's no escape route to get Lance and Jovan out?"

He shrugs. "Then we'll have to blast our way through." I nod as we hear shouts, then a loud whistle. More lights come on, flooding the base with blinding white light. I hear footsteps running in our direction, and I feel my skin trying to turn itself inside out. My mind goes blank, and I can't breathe.

Kato grabs my shirt with both hands and shakes me, then slaps my face. "Come on, Nico. Don't go down now. We have to do

this!"

He slaps me again and I open my eyes and inhale sharply. The world is slipping away from me, between the blinding floodlights, the ear-splitting alarms, and the bodies running around shouting. I'm surrounded by chaos. "I can't do it. Just shoot me." I squeeze my eyes closed as my muscles constrict, every fiber of me responding to the lights, the footsteps, the whistles, and the alarm. It's all calling to me from ages ago. "Shoot me," I plead. I don't want to die, but I don't want anyone else to either, and right now, I'm a liability. I can't help them. It may already be too late.

Kato growls and lets me go, then jams his fist into his pocket. He pulls out a needle and jabs it into my neck, pushing the plunger down as we lock eyes, my hands gripping his arms. I fall backward, and his weight is upon me. I'm frozen for a moment, realizing he just sent a dose of serum through me. I feel it flow through me, into my muscles, spreading rapidly, as if filling gaps that were already cleared for it. I gasp for air as the ice glides through my veins, chilling me to my core, turning me into a mindless drone again. I glance around at the chaos, and my brain absorbs it with a sense of calm that is both familiar and horrifying. Kato grabs my face and turns it so I'm looking directly at him. There is fire in his eyes.

"Listen to me, Nico. I'm going to get us through this wall so Lance and Jovan will have a way out. Your job is to kill anyone who comes near us. Defend this position at all costs. You understand? At all costs!" He's yelling into my ear, and I feel it echo in my belly. I nod, then take a deep breath. My mind calms to a flat black, my heart slows, and my fingers curl around the rifle action. Kato peers at me, then grins like a fox and gives my shoulder a quick shake. He moves away from me in a low crouch along the wall. He looks back at me once, but I'm focused on the lights and the footsteps, my body taking over where my brain leaves off.

Jovan

"Are you done yet?" I yell over at Lance. "We gotta get outta here!" Lance stands mesmerized by the screen, standing as if in a trance as the numbers and letters scroll by. He shakes his head in disbelief and horror. "Lance!"

He looks up at me, then hunches his shoulders and points at the screen. "I can't get it all. There's so much more that I thought." He sounds frenzied, and I know I do. I know it's only a matter of time before we are trapped in here, and we have very little backup compared to the countless Betas that would love nothing better than to put a bullet in my brain. Lance's, too.

"Finish it, now." I say. He doesn't move. "Now!" He flinches as if startled from sleep, then hits some keys on the keyboard with frantic speed. He swears under his breath at the

computer as he hits the eject key over and over. It makes a whirring sound, then ejects the disk, a small black cube that falls into his hand softly. He grips it tightly, then goes back to pecking at the keys.

"I want to make sure I wipe the drive. Nothing left."

I'm pacing, the knot in the pit of my stomach growing bigger with every passing second. "We don't have time. Just burn it."

"I'm not taking any chances." He hits a few keystrokes, then steps back to watch the computer clear its memory. He smiles slightly, then a look of disbelief moves over his face and he lunges back to the keyboard, pounding frantically on the keys. "No, no, no, no, no!"

I run over. "What is it?"

"The data. It's being downloaded remotely." His voice is just below a squeal, soaked in desperation.

"To where?" A chill runs down my spine to my toes.

He pounds a key several times and shakes his head, then finally gives up and looks at me. "No idea."

I feel a blast go through the building and crouch slightly as particles of dust fall from the ceiling and the furniture rattles. "Figure it out later. Let's move." I try to pull him away, but in one swift movement, he rips the cover off the

server tower and yanks the circuit boards out, tossing them across the room. The computer screen thins to a single blue line, then goes dark with a final blip. He shoves the data drive into his pocket and we start for the door. A dark shadow appears, and we stop in our tracks. Kinder emerges from a shadow on the other side of the doorway, and I see his perfectly white teeth shining in the darkness.

"How did you get past.." I trail off, trying to remember the exits of the building. Surely he didn't fight his way past Sakura and Entara. The thought grows in my head and I feel queasy. I say a silent prayer that they are both still alive. Kinder smiles that cat-like grin of his, and I know he hasn't seen them. My heart sighs inwardly with relief.

"Come on, Jovan. You, of all people, should know that I always have a back-up plan. Or a back-up exit." He looks at Lance. "Or a back-up drive."

He holds his hand out. "Drop the samples, and give me the disk."

"No," Lance says, his voice ringing clear.

Kinder lifts a handgun. "I respect my fellow academics, but I won't let anyone steal my research." He shrugs. "You know how it is. Credit and all."

Lance spits in disgust. "You'll have to shoot us." Lance

takes a defiant step forward. "Or do you just have your Betas do your dirty work?" Kinder's grin falls slightly for just a moment, then he turns to me, eyes alight.

"Jovan, you have to know. It's over. You're terribly outnumbered. You won't get out of here alive. Just give up now and we can get this over with quickly. The two of you can't get through the Betas."

"Except it's not just us. You forgot about Entara."

Kinder's brow furrows; he obviously doesn't know who or what I'm talking about, but he will in three...two...one.

Calafia

I barrel into the room, screaming like a banshee. Kinder turns and yells at me to stop, but I don't so much as slow down. His voice sounds far away, almost like an echo, behind the thrumming of blood behind my eyes. Lance and Jovan take a step backward as I shove lab tables and chairs out of my way, sending them clanging to the floor.

Another blast hits the exterior wall from the outside, and I see a mass of bricks fall, then another blast sprays more of them into the room. Lance and Jovan cover their heads as Kato kicks the bricks out of his path. Kinder's arms are covering his head as dust and shards of brick spray, and my pace doesn't slow. I'm zeroed in on him, and I'm not stopping for anything.

"Run!" I yell to Lance and Jovan. They make a quick exit,

and it's just Kinder and I now. He points his gun at me, and I hesitate, wondering if he would actually shoot me. Would he shoot to kill? Or just hurt me bad enough to take me prisoner? I wonder if he has ever killed anyone. I doubt it. He has a coward's face.

I raise my gun slowly, leveling it at his head, and he fires, but misses. I'm sure he missed on purpose. He can't kill me. I look at him through the sight of my rifle, and feel a quiver in my gut. Sweat forms on the back of my neck. Can I kill the man that raised me? My eyes begin to water and my hands shake. Kinder sees my hesitation and smirks.

"You see? That's why we have to take your emotions away from you. It makes you weak."

"You lied to me. I had a family, and you stole them from me. Why?"

He shrugs. "I saved you. You would have grown up poor and nameless, nothing but another face in the crowd. I made you into something. Someone important. Someone with a purpose."

I'm trembling now. I take a step forward as my throat grips the air inside it. "You took away my choices!" I spit.

"I made you into the best soldier this base has ever seen. You could have been a hero for your country." His face twists in disgust. "But now you'll be nothing more than a body we count at

the end. And the end is coming soon. Believe me."

"But my life --"

"Doesn't matter. The whole is greater than it's parts. Synergy. The Legion of Cities is more important than any person, any Beta. "

"More important than you? Is that why you live in a beautiful home and eat food none of us have ever even tasted?"

"Well, I just get certain...perks."

My grip tightens around the trigger, and I zero in on his face. Before I can pull the trigger, Sakura rushes in, out of breath.

"Run! Three behind!" I turn as she skids across the top of a table to the other side, then crouches down as three Betas run in after her. "We gotta move. Now!"

She runs to the blasted hole in the wall, and beckons me to follow her, but my feet won't move. Kinder takes advantage of my indecision and Sakura's distraction, and runs the other way, back into the shadows. In a split second, I'm after him.

"Entara no! Let him go!"

Sakura runs after me, clashing with the Betas. I stop in my tracks and take a step back toward her. She shoots one of them in the chest, and he falls to the floor. She brandishes her knife at the other two, leaving them to dodge her quick thrusts.

I hear Kinder's feet on the tile as he runs out, and the pull of vengeance is too strong. My rage bubbles up inside me, and I run after him.

"Entara!"

I hear her footsteps behind me, and I run faster. I glance back and see another Beta fall, leaving only one, which she can easily handle. She'll catch up. I turn again to follow Kinder. Then she screams and falls to the floor with a thud. I can't hear as I scream, my rage full and complete in my voice. I watch myself as if in a dream, running back, slashing the remaining Beta with my knife, faster than I have ever moved before. I slit him down the front, letting his insides spill out, but still my rage boils. If anything it burns stronger than before; vengeance breeds satisfaction.

I run to Sakura and turn her over, looking for the bullet wound. She looks up at me and touches her hand to my hair, running it along the length of my braid before falling at her side. She smiles softly at me as I press my hand to the wound in her chest, trying to stanch the bleeding. Blood flows over my fingers, warm and slippery, and my eyes water. This can't be happening. I still have so many questions. So many things I want to say. She can't leave me yet.

"Stay with me," I say, patting her cheek. "Don't go. I'm

not ready for you to go." My tears fall freely as I try to wipe them away, smearing blood across my face. "Please."

She takes one last breath, then gasps as her body sinks in my arms. My mind goes blank as my senses give out. I can't hear or see anything, and time has slowed to a standstill. I see nothing but Kinder's face and that stupid grin. I hate him. More than I've ever hated anything in my life. More than I ever thought possible.

My scream bounces off the metal furniture and is absorbed by the brick walls as my fury winnows its way into the cracks in between. I lay Sakura on the floor and push her eyes closed, then sprint down the hallway after Kinder, my body renewed with the fuel only vengeance can provide.

Jovan

We emerge from the building amidst smoke and dust. Kato grabs my arm to help me over the jumble of bricks at our feet, then reaches for Lance. As the view clears, I see Nico hunched in the bushes. He pulls me down to my knees as the samples and serum I took clink in the bags beside me. "Stay down," he says. His eyes are wide. I look at Kato and we lock eyes for a moment, then he looks away.

"What did you do?" I ask Kato.

He clamps his teeth together tightly and refuses to meet my gaze. "I didn't shoot him."

My skin goes cold as I realize the choice he made. Turn Nico into an animal rather than put him down. Not much of a choice. At least we'll still have the chance to make him well.

Maybe.

"How are we going to get out?" Lance asks. "There's too many of them." We peer through the hedge as what seems like hundreds of pairs of boots trot past us in perfect formation. The alarms are still raging, and it feels like chaos. Nico points in the direction of a low building ahead of us and to the right.

"Over there."

"The barracks?" I shake my head. "Too many Betas. It's impossible."

He ignores me. "We'll make a run for it as soon as the light sweeps over us again. The Betas are all up and reporting to their battle posts. Barracks will be empty since there's nothing there to defend. Then we sweep behind and down the hill, and the fence isn't far off. That's how we'll make our escape."

We sit in silence as we each consider his plan. I wonder at how clear-headed he is under the influence of the serum. If he had never taken it in the first place, would he have this kind of strategic thinking? So calm and level? There's a pinch in my chest thinking about it. Maybe Kato did the right thing, and it's going to save us all. Except for Nico, that is. His fate is still to be determined.

"Everybody ready," Kato says. "Three...two...one..." the

light sweeps over us, and we chase after it, hustling in the darkness it leaves behind. I try to steady my cargo to keep the noise down, praying the vials inside don't shatter. I'm moving my legs as fast as they will go, but I'm still loaded down with the extra baggage. Kato and Lance run ahead while Nico follows me, covering my back.

Kato reaches the building and presses against it as he rounds the corner out of sight, and Lance is about to round the corner when he stops suddenly.

"Dad!"

I squint in the darkness and see Tyrell hunched over against the wall of a nearby windowless building. Lance hurries over to where Tyrell huddles, despite Kato calling to him to keep his cover. Without hesitation, Nico sprints after Lance, and Kato beckons me to keep coming. We hunker down under the eave of the building, lost in complete shadow. We watch as Nico throws Tyrell over his shoulder, then runs back toward us with Lance behind. He deposits Tyrell on the ground next to us, who groans softly as Lance kneels beside him.

"Dad, look at me," Lance says as he softly pats his cheek. Blood spills from Tyrell's lips and he looks at Lance in a daze. The side of his dark shirt is shiny with blood, and I see a bullet hole in the abdomen. It looks like he's lost a lot of

blood, and the wound is deep. I bite my lip, knowing there's no way we'll be able to save him under these circumstances.

"Cut the lights," Tyrell whispers.

Lance nods. "Don't talk. Relax. We got you." Lance rips off his shirt and presses it against the wound, and Tyrell winces. I look over to Nico, but he's gone. I look up, searching for him, and he's running back to the building where he found Tyrell. He heaves himself against a metal door. It doesn't budge, and he hurls a grenade at it. The blast sparks, and he runs inside. Moments later, the lights fall to blackness, and the entire base is shrouded in pitch black. Shouts come from Betas as they assess the situation, and I will Nico to get back to us before the Betas swarm the electrical building and find him there. They will kill him in an instant.

Tyrell sighs with relief and nods as Lance looks up at us. His eyes are wet. "We have to get him out of here." Kato shakes his head.

"We can't."

"I'll only get you all killed," Tyrell says softly as he covers Lance's hand with his own. He looks at Lance and smiles weakly, then tears form in his eyes. "Can you ever forgive me?" His eyes wander to me, then to Nico as he rejoins us. "Can any of you?" He squeezes his eyes shut in anguish and sobs silently.

"Dad, no. We have to get you out of here." Lance adjusts his weight to pick Tyrell up, but Tyrell pushes him away.

"Leave me here. Save yourselves. Save the Betas." He looks at Nico and I. "Save Entara. You'll need her to beat Kinder and the Council."

A shudder runs down my spine as I look over to Nico. Nico's face is hard and opaque, but I can see his eyes working, processing. Tyrell has been one of his greatest enemies, right after Kinder and I. And now he's watching one of them die. Instead of being relieved, he looks anguished. He is still fighting the serum, and I'm incredibly proud of my brother, no matter what happens next. He's strong and resilient, and we'd all be dead if it weren't for him. He lays a hand on Lance's shoulder.

"We have to go," he says quietly. Lance squeezes his eyes shut and pounds a fist against the hard earth.

Tyrell nods in agreement. "Hurry. Before it's too late."

Lance releases his grip on Tyrell and eases him back on the ground until he is laying down. He slides his hand across his face, smearing tears away. Then he stands, and we continue to hurry down the hill toward the edge of the base.

Calafia

I run after Kinder, knowing that I have to catch him before he gets back to his office. Once there, he'll be surrounded by Betas and I won't be able to get near him. I hear his footsteps clacking in the hallway ahead of me in the dark, running as fast as he can manage without light. He knows the tunnel, but his footsteps hesitate as he feels his way. I do my best to move quietly, hoping to take him by surprise so he can't call out for help. I try to map where we are in my head. We're somewhere under the lab in a basement tunnel, but I don't know if the end of the tunnel comes out at the exterior wall of the building, or if it goes further than that. For all I know, he may have a maze of hidden tunnels underground here. My gut tells me this tunnel goes all the way to HQ, so it's just him and I until he gets

there. If he gets there.

I come to another hallway and pause, listening for his feet. They are faint, but still tell me which passageway he chose. It sounds like he's slowing down. My eyes have started adjusting to the dark, and I can make out the faint edges of corners in the wall. I make mental notes of them in case I have to backtrack, but I know he's up ahead. I can hear his breath as he heaves, unused to the panic or the running. Either he's getting lost, or he thinks he lost me. Either way, I'll find him soon. I shuffle down the hall quickly as I hear him pull a heavy door open. It screams on its hinges, giving me the chance to run faster and catch him without hearing me coming. I'm going to have to if I want to get to him before he closes the door on me.

I will my legs to go faster, and burst forward down the hallway, just in time to catch a glimpse of the metal door as it starts to close. I reach it just before it slams shut and curl my fingers around the edge, then pull it backwards with all my might, flinging the door wide open. Kinder fires a shot, but it ricochets off the wall and down the hallway.

I surge forward and kick him in the belly, and he stumbles backward and falls, losing his grip on the gun as it slides across the floor away from him.

"Calafia, no!" He shouts. His voice cracks in fear, and a

surge of satisfaction rolls through me.

"My name is Entara," I say as I kick him in the side. "And I'm here to kill you."

He rolls away from me, then cackles with laughter. "Good girl. Always following orders."

I stop in my tracks as the hairs on my neck rise. "Not anymore."

"Oh yes, you are," he says matter-of-factly. "I told you to kill Lamb's killer. I'm assuming you killed Gannon, but he told you I ordered it, so now you're killing me. I have to say, the serum works better than I ever imagined."

"Why Lamb? He was on your side. You started all this just to see how well your serum worked?"

He laughs again. "God, no, my dear Beta. I killed Lamb because I needed an army. He had one, so I took it."

"The Betas?"

He nods. "Thousands of trained killers, all waiting for me to say the word. So I did. Don't you hear them out there? All mobilizing for me."

"Why do you need an army?"

"For my place at the table. The Legion of Cities, Calaf-- Entara. I deserve to be one of them. And with an army behind me, they wouldn't deny me. You were there. You saw what a sorry

bunch of weaklings they are. Afraid to wield their own power. They need a firm hand to lead them. Just like you do."

I feel hot tears on my cheeks. "What about the foreign powers you always talked about? Or the East Country? I thought we were training to fight them."

He scoffs in a way that makes my blood boil. "That was the point. Between the serum and the propaganda, I was able to brainwash a generation of soldiers. I was spreading it to the rest of the city, and it was working. Nice job on all those photos, by the way. The people of Pendleton City love you and hope that you're found alive soon. Too bad that won't happen."

He lunges for his gun and fires it. I dodge and fire back, and his bullet catches me in the arm. My bullet hits him in the leg and he howls in pain. Hearing his voice bounce off the walls fills me with gratification, and I move in closer, shooting him in the arm. Something to match the pain in my arm, I think. It's only fair. He drops his gun and I kick it away. I stare him in the face, my lips curling into a snarl.

I raise my gun, but then a flash of Sakura's face sweeps across my memory and my grip loosens. I catch my breath and step back as heat rises in my face. I want to kill him. It would be so easy. But her voice fills my head. She wanted me to be human. Not a killer. I think of the Betas I already killed today and

wonder if one more, if Kinder, would even matter. How could it? He deserves to die, if anyone ever did. Still, I can't bring myself to squeeze the trigger. I've never hesitated before. I'm bewildered.

Kinder grins. "Come back to me. We can do this together. Clean slate. You'll be the most powerful Beta in the entire Legion, right by my side."

He seems to be holding his breath, then his eyes dart to where his gun lies on the other side of the room. My gun still in my hand, I hit him across the face with it, then again. Blood oozes from his nose and split lip. He holds his arms up around his head. "Calafia, stop. That's an order."

I grab him by the chest of his shirt and haul him up to my face. "I don't follow orders from you anymore. I don't follow orders from anyone."

He peers at me through his arms, his eyes wide and incredulous. "How--"

I punch him in the face again, then toss him against the wall. I pounce on him as he curls into the fetal position, pummeling him with my fists. I scream with the delight of each fist sinking into his soft flesh, revel in the sound of his cries. I take a deep breath for one last blow, and he whimpers. I catch myself and stand up, giving him one last kick. I hear a

bone crack, and he howls again, grabbing for his leg. I bind him with zip ties to make sure he won't be running back to HQ anytime soon. I step back and think of Sakura. She wouldn't have liked that I did this to him, but he's still alive. That's all I can give her right now. I pick up his gun, walk out, and slam the door behind me.

Nico

I thought I would feel different. I thought I would feel like I won something. But as I stand here, watching the sun creep over the Wall, dust motes dancing in the beams, I feel empty. I feel lost. I close my eyes and hear nothing but shuffling inside the warehouse and low voices. My body shakes continuously, still raging against the serum inside me. I hear all the voices in my head: Tyrell, Kinder, Kato, Socorro, and I shake my head, trying to find the one that sounds like mine. I miss the factory. The hum of the machines, the mindless work. If only I hadn't run that day, I think to myself. I could have stayed where I was. But somewhere deep inside, I know that I wanted this. I wanted to find my family, and I wanted to make a difference. That's why I came to Pendleton City in the first

place. It just took me twenty years to do something worthwhile. Kato emerges from a doorway, lights a cigarette and walks over to me.

"Good work, soldier." He claps me on the shoulder and I shrug him off.

"I'm not your soldier. I'm done here."

I take a few steps away from him, but he calls after me. "You're part of the resistance now, whether you like it or not. You're a marked man. Where are you gonna go?" He scoffs with disdain. "Home?" He leans against a wall and takes a long drag on his cigarette. "Besides, we unleashed hell. Those Betas are going to spill out into the city as soon as they figure out what the hell happened, and they're headed straight for us. And anyone else who gets in their way."

"What's your plan now?" I ask, my words full of venom.

"Now, we fight. We've been preparing for this for years. I've got a safe house for Lance to compile the data he and your brother collected, and he's going to keep working for an antidote. He thinks we'll have something in a month or two. We just have to hang on until then. Everyone in The Heights is ready for this."

I grit my teeth as his words roll through my brain. I don't want to fight anymore. I don't want to be here. But he's right;

I can't go back to the droll factory and Hoshun's stories. I can't stay here with the rebels. I can't go to the base. I look at him and nod. "Yeah, I think I will go home."

His face drops as I walk past him and down the street. A couple of quick blocks later, I stand in the doorway of Jovan's house. He looks up, his face red and puffy. Entara stands over him protectively as he cradles Ryoko in his arms. He sniffs and wipes his face with his arm.

"Any progress yet?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Lance is working on it, but some of the files are corrupted. It's going to take time for him to piece it together. Kato is confident, though."

He scoffs. "Of course he is."

I sit next to him and put my hand on his shoulder. "But we did it. You did it. No more serum. No more samples." I look at Entara. Her face is impassive. "Very soon, there will be no more Betas."

"What about Gannon?" She asks. The hope in her voice tears at my heart, and I know she's found a way past the serum, deep into her own emotions. I ache for her and the pain of seeing someone she loves in pain. She's found the power in her emotions, and now she's finding the pain as well.

Jovan looks up at her and takes her hand in his. "It's

going to take time. Either the drug wears off, or Lance finds the antidote. You were simply an anomaly."

"How is that possible? Why did the serum stop working?" She asks.

"We don't know. Lance has theories," Jovan shakes his head, then continues to stroke Ryoko's hair as she sleeps, the sleep that came after she cried until her insides were wrung out.

Entara raises an eyebrow. "Like what?"

Jovan takes a deep breath delving into the past for the millionth time, trying to find a different outcome, and finding none. But this time is different. He has his daughter back, and he can finally move forward. "When you were a baby, you were perfect. In every way. That also means your physiology. Lance thinks that your extreme intelligence, plus the hormonal imbalance of your teenage years, plus your feelings for Gannon, gave your brain the ammunition it needed to fight the drug off. Like it was making antibodies or something."

I look at her. She presses her lips into a thin line and she looks at the floor, her cheeks reddening slightly.

"That's why he wants to take a few blood samples from you," Jovan continues softly. "He might find something there that can help him with the antidote."

She nods. "But what about Gannon? He should be able to beat

it, too."

"We don't know. Maybe his brain just doesn't defend itself like yours does."

Silence falls in the room, and I hear the city outside, humming nervously, waiting for the imminent Beta invasion. She shifts her feet and leans against a wall.

"We have to leave," I say quietly to Jovan. "Before the Betas come." He looks up at me and shakes his head.

"But my family--"

"For your family. We have to leave the city. As soon as possible. Before--"

Kato's tall frame darkens the doorway as he quickly knocks and opens the door. Entara pushes away from the wall, ready to strike. He holds his hands up defensively and smiles.

"I come in peace," he says jokingly. "I wanted to check on everyone. And lay out next steps. We're in this together, you know." He looks around at each one of us, but Jovan shakes his head.

"I'm out, Kato. My wife is dead, Entara and Nico risked their lives, and Ryoko is devastated. My family has given all it can. Find someone else."

"I still have three Betas I'd like to cure. Surely someone here wants to see that happen as well." He gazes pointedly at

Entara, and she clenches her fists.

"Lance is going to need Calaf-- Entara's help." She steps forward, interested.

"Help how?" She asks.

"Lance needs a hacker. No one here knows enough to hack the files he took."

Her shoulders fall with disappointment. "I'm not a hacker," she says.

"No, we need you to find one. There are plenty up in the Bay Cities."

A look of panic enters her eyes, and she says, "I've never been to the Bay Cities. I don't even know how to get there."

I step forward and put my hand on her shoulder. "I have a friend with relatives in Bay City up north. They can help you find one. I'll help you get there." I turn back to Kato, leveling my glare at him. "On one condition. You let my brother and Ryoko go. They've given up enough."

Entara nods in agreement, her face the picture of resolve. Kato regards both of us for a few moments, then nods his agreement. Jovan stands to object. I shake my head. "It's the only way, Jovan. She knows how to defend herself, and we can't very well send an army. It's a solo mission. And she's our best. This is the way out."

"I won't have my oldest--"

"I'll do it," she interrupts. "When do I leave?"

"Now," Kato says. She nods, then walks out, in the direction of the rebel warehouse.

Jovan's face is red with anger. "You have to leave, too," I tell him. "It's not safe here for you. Or for Ryoko."

He looks at me as Kato follows Entara out the door. I step closer to him. "You really want Kato close to your daughter? The best thing for both of them is to get them as far away from him as possible. I've seen it in his eyes. You've seen it, too. His thirst for power. Same look Kinder always had."

Jovan sighs and tears form again in his eyes, a mixture of pain, frustration, anger, and fear rolling through them. "I have nowhere to go. I can't protect her. What kind of a father am I?"

I put my hand on his shoulder. "You won't be alone, brother. I'll come back to live with you. We know how to survive in the Empire, and that's what we're going to do. Before Kato can destroy anything else we love."

He looks back at Ryoko, who sleeps lightly on the couch, then back at me. He nods with defeat and I pull him into a hug. "We're going to keep her safe. I promise. But we have to go now."

I release him, and he steps back, then disappears into

another room. I hear him gathering up his things, and I watch Ryoko sleep. I envy her quietude, and hope that I can have that same peace for myself one day.

Calafia

When I get to the warehouse, I'm exhausted, but my mind is racing. Kinder's face fills my head whenever I close my eyes. I see him trembling, full of fear and anger. I hold the memory close, knowing it will never fade, and that I need it as much as everything else I've pulled into my body since this began to remind me of the choice that I made. The choice I was free to make for myself. I look down at my hands. I'm trembling too, but from something different. For the first time in my life, I can feel the blood moving through my veins, and I know what it is. Who and where it came from.

Kato leans against the wall, just inside the door. He gazes up at the ceiling, watching the light stream through the translucent skylights, lost in thought, smiling to himself.

"I want to see him," I say.

"I don't think that's a good idea." He says it weakly, as if he knows I'm not going to back down on this.

I clench my jaw, realizing that my thoughts are now my own. My actions come from me. "He's a victim, too," I say. Kato shakes his head and looks at the ground, then back at me.

"Make it quick," he says quietly. "You have to get out of the city as soon as possible."

He leads the way to Gannon's cell, where he is still sedated. I stop at the door briefly, just to look at him. He looks almost peaceful, his face relaxed in sleep, without the rage and contempt from before. This is how I want to remember him, at least for now. A flutter rises in my stomach as tears sting my eyes. My fingers ache and my toes curl in my shoes, as if gripping this moment in time between them. I exhale as tears start to fall. I close my eyes and remember him sitting with his parents in the courtyard, his eyes drifting to me as I walk by. I replay it over and over again, hoping that some day soon, I'll see the same recognition in his eyes, the same slight nod of camaraderie. I desperately want to feel his hand on my face, and wish he could comfort me now. But now it's my turn to take care of him, however I can. I open my eyes and brush the wetness from my cheeks. Kato stands nearby quietly, but says nothing.

I walk over to Gannon and push my hand through his hair, away from his face. It's soft, and his skin is cool as I cradle his cheek in my palm. I inhale deeply as my thoughts race from one end of my skull to another. I bite my lip and turn back to Kato. He moves backward as Nico steps into the doorway. He looks old and young at the same time, and I realize he is the only one who truly knows what it feels like to be inside my head, two halves of me, constantly battling one another.

I wipe my eyes and shake my head. "I can't think."

He looks to the floor, then says, "That's not what we've been missing. It's this." He lightly pats his chest with his fist, and then wipes tears from his own eyes before looking at me again. "You'll get used to it, but it'll never lose its strength." He rubs his eyes again, then snuffles and says quickly, "We gotta go."

He walks out, leaving the open door behind him. I turn back to Gannon and lean down to him. I press my cheek against his, and wrap my arms around him, feeling the warmth of his body against mine. I wish I could stay here forever, but in the back of my mind, I can hear the clock ticking. I have to fix this. I have to fix Gannon. I squeeze him tighter, then kiss him on the cheek. I straighten up, then wipe my eyes as I close the door behind me, ready to find the answer to Gannon's disease. The

next time I see him, I plan for him to be able to return my
embrace.

Epilogue - Jovan

The heat is stifling, but I let it fill my lungs to the brim. The dust clings to my sweaty skin, and I throw my head back and absorb the sunlight. It's different, on the other side of the Wall. I'm different. Ryoko cries from time to time, missing her friends and her mother. In her sleep, I sometimes hear her murmur for Sakura, and I have to squeeze my heart shut so it won't explode. I feel ripped with guilt, taking her away from everything she knows. Some days I feel like I'm no better than Kinder, stealing her childhood for the sake of some greater good. She should be laughing and playing, not mourning the loss of her mother and the absence of a sister she barely knows.

I see so much of Entara in her. The bright eyes, always taking in everything and processing information so quickly she

surprises me at every turn. It won't be long now before she's tall like me and strong like her sister. Her hair is growing long, the way Sakura's was when we met so long ago. It feels like a dream that never really existed, that Nico and I never really left this place, that the Betas, Pendleton City, and Kinder are just specs of dust floating in the ether.

But then we'll hear news of another skirmish between the Betas and the rebels. Kinder has disappeared, and there are rumors he is dead, but until I see for myself, I'll be looking for him around every corner. At least out here, there is nowhere for him to hide. No one that will grant him safe passage. Lance believes he is close to finding an antidote, but he hasn't yet, and I'm sure Kato is growing restless. For Gannon's sake -- for Entara's, I hope he discovers the formula and frees all the Betas. It pains me to know that there are families out there who have no idea what has been done to their children, and it keeps me awake until very late on many nights.

It is a solitary life out here on the old farm, and if it weren't for Ryoko, I might go mad wondering what I could have done to save my family from this fate. But Ryoko keeps me looking forward to the future, to a time when she'll be able to fend for herself, and hopefully live the kind of life she wants to live. Most days I spend outside, digging in the dirt, trying

to get something to grow. I have little success, but it's enough for the two of us, and it's soothing, in its way. It eats up my nervous energy and lets me sleep.

I think often of Entara and Nico, making their way north. I fear the danger that Entara is headed into. She has never been to the north, and it is different up there, with technology that connects every citizen with every other citizen in an endless loop of information. I've only heard the stories, and they paint a picture of a city that is half utopia, half hell. They are the only two people on the planet that understands what they've each been through, and I know they'll help each other. They're both miracles, in their own ways, and I often stare off into the distance at the mountains and hope they are okay. Wondering how far they've gone, and how far they've left to go. I wait for them to come back, so we can finally be the family we should have been a long time ago. I have much to atone for, and I only hope the life I have left will be enough time in which to do it.

And then there's Sakura. She wanders as a ghost through me. Her life-giving gifts, her gentle ways, her stern resolve. There are still so many things I wish I could talk to her about, that I could ask her about. As I see the memory of her in my mind, I have so many questions that are still unanswered that I selfishly never thought to ask when I had the chance. I miss her

touch, her voice, the way she turned everything into something worthwhile, including me. In my dreams, Sakura and Entara intertwine and I don't know which one I'm looking at, and when I wake up, I have to separate them again in my memory. Entara will adapt, no doubt, but I don't know who she will be when she returns...if she returns. Until then, I can only wait, and hold what family we still have left together.

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