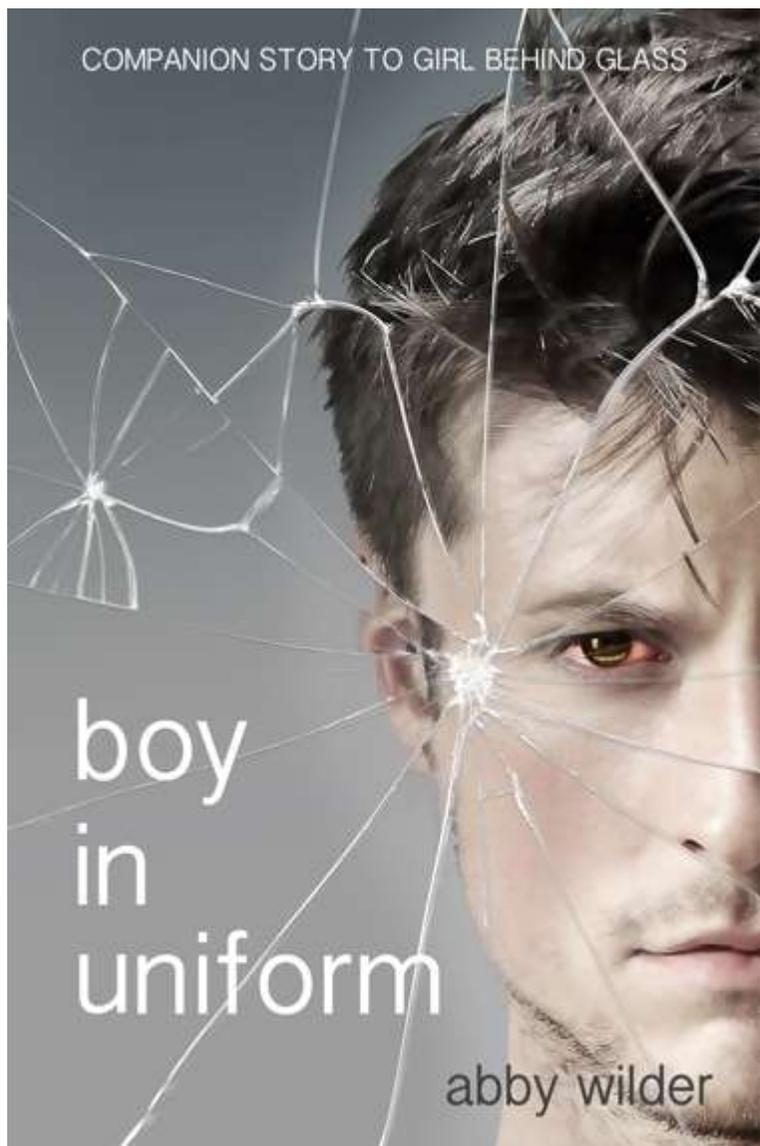


COMPANION STORY TO GIRL BEHIND GLASS

boy  
in  
uniform

abby wilder



ABBY WILDER

# Boy In Uniform

Abby Wilder

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# Boy in Uniform

Abby Wilder

## Guardian Training Grounds

It's always the same.

She's trapped, held down by something that blurs in my vision. It's keeping her from me as she strains against it, calling out my name. Our outstretched fingertips brush against each other, but I can never get close enough to grasp her. She's beyond my reach, and the more I struggle, the further away she slips.

I wake with cold sweat dripping off my body. My tongue is thick and dry. My heart pounds. The sheets cling to my skin as I pull them off and swing my legs over the edge of the bed. A shiver passes through me as my feet touch the cold floor. Quietly, I walk over to the window, passing the rows of sleeping cadets, hoping not to wake anyone. Staring out the window calms me. I feel close to her when I'm looking over the training ground, even if it's shielded by thick glass. It's one of the last places we were together. One of the last places I was happy.

I wrap my arms around my naked chest. It's always cold here. Acclimatisation, they call it. It was horrible at first. Starting with hot and cold flushes, sweat steamed from my skin, even while my breath came out in puffs. It only lasted a few weeks, but once it stopped there was nothing left but bone-weary cold. Even in sleep there is only a thin sheet to shield me. The officers sometimes turn on the sprinklers to give us a taste of sleeping in the rain. Those nights are more miserable than most.

My father thinks I'm obsessed, but I just want her back. I *need* her back. He doesn't understand. It's not an obsession. She's part of me, a part that's missing. And I will do anything to find her.

As I press my forehead to the glass, footsteps pad across the concrete floor, and I know who it is without turning around.

"Can't sleep?" Lily asks, her voice deep with slumber.

I shake my head, my eyes fixed on the ripple of silver the moon leaves in the training ground cast in the artificial moonlight. She places her hand on my shoulder, and I close my eyes and soak in her warmth.

I've never told her about the dream. I've never told anyone, even though it has been on repeat ever since she disappeared. At the start it would wake me with a jolt. My heart would beat faster for a few moments before returning to normal. Now, it's worse. The urgency of her desperation has increased. It's permeated into my being so much even the thought of her causes my hands to go clammy, and my breathing to quicken.

Lily moves closer until she's in front of me and pulls my chin to face her. "Tell me what's wrong. Maybe I can help."

She's a pretty girl, I guess. Dark hair and a pale, round face. But she's not Willow. Sometimes it doesn't matter, it's just nice to have someone who cares. But not tonight. I don't want her touching me. I don't want her fingers brushing against my skin, so I remove her hands and hold them in mine.

"Not tonight, Lily. I just want to be left alone." I turn back to the window, and she places her hand on my chest. I bite the urge to swat it away.

"Is it Willow?" she whispers.

Anger, or maybe it's fear, surges within me at the sound of her name on someone else's lips. "Not now," I say harshly.

There's hurt in her eyes. Her shoulders droop and she lets her hand fall as she turns to walk away. I want to let her go, but I know the fallout will mean losing the one person who is fond of me in here.

"It's just my eyes."

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She turns back and blinks deliberately. “Mine too.”

Two weeks ago they started the cadets on the newly formulated serum. While singing its praises, they elected not to tell us how painful it would be. That was the one night I didn’t have the dream. Instead, like all the rest who were injected, I lay rigid on my bed, breathing through the cramps as my body adjusted. My stomach twisted in pain, and my blood felt like it was on fire, but it was my eyes that hurt the most. They burned with no relief.

Over the next few days, I learned that burn had removed the impulse to blink. They knew about this, they just didn’t bother to tell us.

“Go back to bed,” I say quietly. “They’re watching.” My gaze turns to the clear domes that enclose the cameras hanging from the ceiling.

“What about you?”

Again I close my eyes and bite down the urge to tell her to piss off. “I’ll be fine.” I force out a smile. “Get some sleep. No doubt we will need it tomorrow.”

She steps closer and places a kiss on my cheek before returning to bed. She turns onto her side and snuggles beneath the sheet, pulling it tight to her body, trying to draw any warmth that she can.

I try not to think about Willow, but it’s like telling the sun to stop shining. I said that to my father once, and he said, even the sun takes a break during the night. But he’s wrong. The sun never takes a break, it simply shines somewhere else. She’s always there in the back of my mind. Even in sleep I can’t escape the memory of her.

The days after she was taken all blend together. There was chaos after the explosion, people running around in a state of panic. I searched everywhere for her. Falcon blames her family, but I refuse to believe she had anything to do with it. She was taken against her will. What else would explain why she never told me?

I vowed to do everything I could to get her back, even if that meant becoming something I never wanted to be. Falcon was thrilled when I asked to join the Cadets early. Little did he know it had nothing to do with him and his legacy for me. It was only about her. It’s always been about her.

I often think of the kiss. It's a daydream to counterbalance my sanity against the nightmare. Not the time when I kissed her—though I do not regret it—but when she kissed me. The pressure of her hand on my neck as she pulled me towards her. That's the moment I cling to, the moment I will relive when I find her.

And I will find her.

It feels as if I have only just closed my eyes when my feet are grabbed and my body yanked to the floor.

“Rise and shine babies. Sleep is for the weak!”

I have no idea what time of day it is, but I get up quickly and stand to attention, keeping my gaze fixed on that space straight ahead, focusing on nothing but air. Well, that is until Officer Duggin steps into my vision.

“Good sleep, Rush?”

“Yes Sir!” I yell in his face.

“So no late night wanderings?”

I allow my gaze to focus on the man. He has cold eyes, blue and dull. The light from the panels above reflects off his bald head, and the fat around his neck bulges over his uniform as well as the belt around his waist.

“That's an affirmative, Sir. I did wander last night.”

“Wander last night, what?” he growls at me.

“I did wander last night, Sir!” I say again, letting my eyes drift over him and focus on the empty space between us.

“Anyone join him?” Officer Duggin casts his eyes around the room before coming to rest on Lily.

She swallows before speaking. “Yes Sir! I joined him, Sir!”

He puts his hands behind his back and grins. “Well then, since you enjoy each other's company so much, and have little respect for the sleep we allow you, and those around you, you will both be required out at the track. One hundred laps, one hundred push-ups.”

“Yes Sir!” Lily and I shout in unison.

Lily glances over and mouths, “I'm sorry.”

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I curse inwardly and look away to conceal my disdain.

“Now!” Duggin yells back at us.

I reach for my uniform but Duggin’s pudgy hand blocks me. He shakes his head. “As you are, Cadet.” He grins wickedly.

His pudginess amuses me. He spouts off about the serum and the odd bowl of sustain being all a person needs to survive, but clearly he does not live by his own ideals.

I run down the stairs and out to the training track just as the sprinklers turn on. The rain is biting cold, and I want to wrap my arms around my chest to keep warm, but I refuse to show weakness in front of the officers that I know will be watching just beyond the mirrored glass. I can imagine their sick smiles and looks of amusement as they comment on the torment they intend to inflict on the son of the Governor. Sure, they all idolise my father to his face, but behind closed doors their words echo of nothing but jealousy.

Lily follows close on my heels. She whimpers as she comes down the stairs, complaining of stiff muscles from our training the day before. I grit my teeth together and force back the comments that come to mind. I told her not to sign up for the advanced regimen when we started, but she was determined. It’s not my fault if she’s suffering now.

“I’m so sorry Bracken, I thought for sure they wouldn’t notice me,” she says, as she tries to match my stride. The ground beneath us is hard and our footsteps echo, ever so slightly out of sync, around the enclosed space. I try to block the sound from my mind as all it does is annoy me.

“They always punish people who talk to me. You should know that by now.”

Lily wipes her hand beneath her nose and sniffs. Water has dampened her hair and it clings to the side of her face. “Well at least now you have company.”

I cast her a sideways look. There's no way I would have been punished if she had not joined me, it’s one of the perks of being the Governor’s son. But punishing people who have contact with me is also one of the so-called perks. A cadet without anyone on their side gives up far sooner than

someone with friends. Much to the annoyance of my trainers, this suits me fine.

I stretch my stride to further the distance between us. The burn to my lungs is welcome and familiar. I thrive on the quivering of my muscles, pushing myself further and faster, welcoming the comfort my heavy breathing and repetitive footfall brings.

Ten laps. Ten push-ups. Repeat ten times. The commands thud in my head, over and over, counting down.

When I started, I would fall into bed the second I was allowed, woken only by my dream. When the alarm sounded to rise, I would drag myself out of bed, stiff and sore, some parts of my body refusing to move under instruction. I discovered muscles I never knew existed until they started cramping in pain. Still, it was nothing compared to the serum.

I was surprised to find that physical work suited me, that punishment of the flesh was a welcome distraction. Even more surprising, I discovered I was good at it, and what crippled me only weeks ago is now my starting point. The endless hours may have had my muscles screaming and my body racked with exhaustion, but my mind was quiet.

Lily is still trudging through her seventh round of push-ups when I finish. The compassionate part inside me tells me to wait, maybe lend her some words of encouragement, but I don't listen to that part anymore. It never did me any favours.

There is no shower on offer, so I simply seal up my uniform, gulp down some sustain, and join the others already waiting in the outdoor training area. It's not really outdoors, but it's as close as you get in Nuovo.

When Willow and I visited, it was set on a forest scene. The ground was covered in lush grass that glistened with moisture, and the trees were thick and tall. Now, it has been transformed into an abandoned town. I love watching the transformations, the way the props fold in on themselves and disappear into the ground only to re-appear and unfold as something completely different.

There are only ten cadets in my group, but not all are present due to Lily still on punishment. Each of them has been made to wait in the plank

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position. I don't know how long they have been there for, probably since I was sent to the track. Groans of relief greet me as bodies crumble onto the wet ground. I look each of them in the eye as I pass, and join the end of the line. If they expect to see empathy or remorse on my behalf, they won't find it.

We are on the advanced regime, pushing ourselves through basic training in three months instead of twelve. I signed up exactly two weeks after Willow went missing, much to the delight of my father. The pressure is high. Only one month to go.

Without a word, I assume the plank position and look to our training provider, Officer Yew. He's a short man with a slow, gentle smile that I quickly learned was just a sheath for his brutish nature. Cruelty is at its worst when served with a smile.

Officer Yew doesn't wait for Lily. He's brisk in his instructions, short and sharp, each of them sounding like annoying barks. Five against four. Find the enemy camp. Last team with a person standing wins.

We use hand signals to communicate, stalking the other team through the remains of the town. My pistol, cool and hard, fits firmly in my hand. As much as I first despised the weapon, it has become my ally. I always knew it would set me apart from the others, but what I had to figure out was how to use that to my advantage. Realisation came as soon as I discovered it was more useful as a distraction than a weapon. My opponents in here couldn't help but notice the emblem of the falcon emblazoned on the butt. It makes them unable to forget who they are fighting against. I used to despise my status, but now I embrace it, abuse it even.

We make our way down the narrow street silently. My eyes scan the surroundings, looking for movement or a variation in pattern. I spot the enemy on a rooftop, a single cadet looking in the opposite direction. I signal the others to fall into formation behind me. The cadet is nothing more than a lookout, but he's still part of the enemy.

My team and I filter through the buildings until we have him surrounded. I position my pistol ready to shoot, imagining him to be a

Mudder responsible for taking Willow away, when the signal on his chest flashes, and he lets out a curse word.

I blink.

Someone got to him before I could. I turn and look back to the shooter who is getting congratulatory slaps from the rest of my team. My gut twists. My ears fill with the sound of rushing blood. I try to control it, but anger boils at the pit of my very being, rising until it spews out of me. I run down the street, my boots echoing on the cobblestones. His eyes widen and he begins to raise his hands. He stumbles as he retreats a few steps back, and I slam my fist into his face, my knuckles connecting with his jaw. He looks up in fear, blood trickling out of the corner of his mouth. But it does little to satisfy me.

“Rush, I didn’t mean to—” he starts. But his voice is muted, just a faint murmur in the back of my mind.

I pound my fist into him again, putting even more force behind the blow. He’s knocked to the ground and tries to scramble away, but I drag him back, pin him down with the weight of my body, and strike him repeatedly.

I don’t know how many times I hit him before they drag me off. I lost count. I lost track of everything apart from the feel of his cheek bone shattering beneath my fists.

They restrain me as I struggle to regain myself. I jerk from their embrace, close my eyes to the staring glances, and concentrate on my breathing.

In. Out. Inhale. Exhale.

The increase of oxygen begins to clear the fog in my brain. When I open my eyes again I’m surprised to see the bloodied mess I’ve left him in. Bile rises in the back of my throat and I swallow it down. I barely remember the boy I used to be. Things that once repulsed me, I’m now capable of with ease. Aggression and violence hits me quickly and suddenly, and it scares me. But I can’t let them know that.

My team mates look at me with disgust. I lift my chin. I want their fear even as I’m shamed by their repulsion.

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“Feel you made your point, Rush?” Officer Yew’s voice breaks the heavy silence.

I nod, step over to the fallen cadet, and offer my hand. He looks at me warily before taking it. Two months training together and I don’t even know his name. All of the cadets are just faces and names. I don’t bother to match them.

I pull him to his feet and turn to Officer Yew. “I apologise,” I say bluntly.

The injured cadet spits blood onto the ground. His left eye is swollen shut, the flesh over his cheek bone split open, and yet at the same time, caved in. I try not to show the remorse I feel in my expression.

“Apologise for what?” Officer Yew asks, raising one eyebrow. It’s an annoying feature of his, the ability to raise only one eyebrow. It gives the appearance of disbelief while still unsure of his pleasure or displeasure.

“I may have gone a little overboard.”

“No sh—”

“Silence!” Officer Yew screams at the interruption. The cadet who spoke draws his body to attention and salutes. “Do you believe you went overboard, Rush?” Another cock of his eyebrow.

I’m unsure how to answer. There’s the truth, and then there’s the answer he wants. The problem is I’m not sure if they are the same thing. I’m spared answering as the cadets from the enemy team spill into the narrow alley. Officer Yew holds up a hand to stop the questions before they start.

“Perhaps, if you explain the reasoning for this discipline you were so keen to dish out, then I will better understand your predicament. I’m interested to see if your motives are the same as what I think them to be.” Officer Yew’s voice is controlled and condescending.

“Cadet—” I squint to read the name on the chest of the injured cadet’s uniform. “Cadet Spray was under my command. The command issued was to surround the target and hold position. I was just about to take the shot when Cadet Spray did, without instruction, without command.”

This isn't the truth. Well, technically it's the truth, but it isn't why I did it. I did it because the urge welled up so quickly, I had no other choice. I did it before I could think.

Officer Yew nods thoughtfully at my answer. "Well done, Rush. Insubordination is a killer to be rooted out at all costs. Best to suffer at the hands of a fellow cadet now, than at the hands of a superior officer further down the track." He claps Spray on the back causing him to wince. "Cadet Spray, I hope you take this as a valuable lesson. Shake hands and be done with it."

I extend my hand and my fellow cadet takes it. He doesn't look at me, but I can feel the heated glares of the other cadets on my back. Good thing I can do without friends.

## Guardian Graduation Ceremony

Willow has been gone one hundred and five days when I graduate. I can't say I'm sad to finish my training. There are so many things I hate about this place. Having no time to myself. Being cold. The resentment of the other cadets. The training officers. The loneliness.

Still, I'm going to miss it. I've developed a strange affection for its plain walls and large empty spaces that surprises me. I've even come to appreciate my fellow cadets. Not in the traditional friendship manner, but there's a certain level of comradeship and loyalty that I've warmed to. Maybe even a sense of pride.

But if I thought people treated me differently because of my father in Nuovo, it's nothing compared to in here. I'm constantly reminded of who I am, and who I'm expected to be. But I manage to find solace in my discomfort. I'm at peace with who I am. Why should I struggle against it when I cannot change it? Besides, I would have never found peace in happiness without her.

My ciid beeps, reminding me to blink. Another thing I hate.

All of us are here, all ten of my fellow advanced cadets, even Cadet Spray, and Lily, which is a surprise in itself. I really didn't think she would make it, but she's made of tougher stuff than I gave her credit for.

I stand in front of the small crowd gathered in the hall for the graduation ceremony. Dressed in the dark-green, formal suit of the Guardians, my parents smile up at me from the crowd, standing side by side, both with their own distinct expression of pride.

I never thought this day would come. Not because of the hardship I endured to achieve it, but because I never wanted to be here in the first

place. Unlike Willow, I never dreamed of joining the Guardians. I wanted to see the outside, but not if it meant becoming a Guardian. I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I knew it didn't involve walking in the footsteps of my father. I was content in my own world, a world with her in it. But a world without her is not where I want to be.

So I stand, smiling obediently as they call my name, waving as the onlookers cheer, every inch of me the perfect Guardian. I've changed everything about myself for her, but I'm starting to like the new me. I'm someone who commands respect, and not just because of who my father is, but because of who I am.

I don't get time to sample the morsels of food floating on trays around the room, before I'm whisked away for a meeting with my father in his office. The conflicting emotions inside me are in battle. On one hand, I'm repulsed by the pride displayed by my father, as I know it's only because I'm doing what he wants. On the other hand, I can't help basking in the warmth of his pleasure. It's a peculiar feeling.

"You received a glowing report, my son." Falcon walks over to the narrow table in front of the window which holds a bottle containing dark amber liquid. I don't say anything as he reaches below, opens the cupboard, and pulls out two glasses that glint under the light shining from the broken ceiling. He pours an equal amount into each glass and holds one out to me.

"You can't go through life without trying a real drink, my boy."

I take the glass and sniff. The vapour stings my eyes and I blink, trying to rid myself of the sensation. My father lifts his glass and drains the contents in one gulp. I follow, but the liquid burns as it slides down my throat, and I end up coughing.

Falcon laughs and claps me on the back. "Good, isn't it? It's the one thing I miss from the old way of life. Nothing like a stiff drink every now and again to blow out the cobwebs. The synthetic stuff just doesn't cut it."

I place the glass back on the table and turn to face him with my arms crossed. I can't be bothered with small talk. "I want to find Willow."

Falcon walks over to the table and picks up the bottle. "No harm in treating myself," he says as the liquid tips into his glass, the level a lot higher

than before. He lifts his eyebrows and looks at me, ready to refill my glass, but I shake my head.

“I want to find Willow,” I state again.

“I heard you the first time, son.” He drinks slowly this time, little sips, savouring the taste. I clench my jaw as he swirls the liquid around the bottom of the glass. Finally, he drains the last drop. “You won’t find her.”

“I have to try.”

He sighs. “Your obsession with her concerns me.”

“Your lack of worry for a Nuovoian Citizen concerns me,” I say evenly. The warmth of the drink begins to flood my senses and I breathe deeply, determined to keep my cool.

“She is the daughter of traitors.” His eyes are steady, not betraying any emotion.

“You can't judge someone by their parents.”

“Look, I understand that you are worried about her.” He smiles sympathetically. “And I’m worried too. But it’s a waste of time, and quite frankly, a waste of your considerable talents if I allow you this indulgence. I can’t be seen to show such favouritism to my own son.”

I swallow back the anger bubbling beneath my skin, and clench my fists at my side. “Your favouritism is the only reason I got into the Guardians to begin with.”

He looks at me sharply. He doesn’t know that I purposely failed the physical testing, and that I know he's the only reason I was accepted. I take advantage of his hesitation to continue. “But as for my indulgence, as you put it, have you thought that since the explosion, you could do with something to put you in a good light? Give the citizens of Nuovo something to talk about instead of the threat from the Rebels, something positive? And what about the Establishment Council? What do they think of all this? If Willow is innocent—” He starts to protest but I hold up my hand. “I said, if. Wouldn’t it send a positive message if you were to have a role in her return? A poor girl taken against her will, and Governor Falcon instrumental in her rescue. It has an appealing ring to it, don’t you think?”

The look on Falcon's face tells me I have won. My father is a simple man. He likes to do whatever he pleases, but at the same time he craves the approval of people. Ever since the explosion there have been rumours doubting his leadership, rumours that my close friendship with Willow did little to dispel. So what I have just offered is the option of turning it into something positive. And he won't be able to resist, even if he doesn't agree.

"How many men do you want to take with you?" he says, after a long pause.

"Just two men for the scouting mission, the rest will depend on what I find."

He paces as he thinks. "We had some Mudders come in last night. Maybe having a little word with them before you go will help."

"Yes Sir." I salute to feed his vanity. "I truly believe in her innocence."

He stops walking. "I know you do, but that is part of the reason for my caution."

I should have kept my mouth shut.

"Your mother and I are worried. You have been different lately, distant and distracted. I'm afraid your obsession with the girl is clouding your judgement, and that could be a very dangerous thing on a mission."

"It's the serum. I'm taking a while to adjust to it," I say, hoping to deflect the cause of his concern.

"The serum?" Falcon stands in front of me and stares.

I draw myself up straight to minimise the height difference between us.

"Your superiors report that you are excelling on the serum. Your fitness has improved, as well as your mental awareness and focus. You graduated top of the advanced regime, one of the highest scores ever. There's no evidence that points to you finding it hard to adjust."

I clear my throat, scanning my mind for the right thing to say, the thing that will allow me to search for Willow with his blessing, rather than without it. "The serum has thrown issues into the mix which I was unprepared to deal with. I'm more prepared now. I know what to expect."

"What exactly were these issues?" He narrows his eyes.

I bite my lip as my mind floats back to the night spent in agony, the flashes of aggression, the anger that wells up and breaks the surface before I can control it. His eyes follow the movement of my mouth so I stop, determined not to show any sign of weakness. “Nothing I can’t deal with, Sir.”

“If you’re sure, son.”

“I’m sure,” I say firmly, meeting his gaze.

“Good. People blessed with great talent often have to deal with side effects that lesser people do not have to worry about. The question is whether the effects are worth the payoff.” He walks back over to the table and pours his third drink. “I will arrange the coverage. You may have to do an interview or two, whet the appetite of the people for this so-called rescue.”

I nod, relief flushing over me. “Yes, Sir. No problem.”

“You may choose the men you want on your scouting mission out of your fellow advanced cadets. Lily, maybe?”

My mind skips back to the times I’ve found comfort in Lily’s company. I know she wants more from me, and I don’t like to admit, even to myself, that I have used her when my heart belonged to another. I clear my throat. “I’d prefer not to. I think she would be better suited to a position within Nuovo.”

“Are you saying your superiors got it wrong in passing her through the advanced regime?”

“Not at all,” I add quickly. “I just think that Nuovo would be better served while she is within the city, and not under my direct command.”

“I see,” Falcon says. His eyes narrow and he hesitates before continuing. “You may interview any of the Mudders you please. You have five days, no longer. If you can’t find where the girl is, then you will give up on this mission. Understood?”

I want to argue. I want to yell that I will search for her until I find her, no matter how long it takes, but I bite my tongue. I know that finding her with his help will be far easier than without. Without it, I cannot even leave Nuovo. So I smile and nod. “Understood.”

## The Outside

Interviewing the Mudders provides me with a tipoff. A shop with a hidden store of goods selling Establishment provided rhineharts, no doubt the ones stolen by Willow's mother.

My heart pounds as we head towards the small town. I want to tell the driver to go faster, but I know there is no real sense of urgency, it's only within me that the clock is ticking. I don't notice what's out the window. I don't care as Spray and Narcissus exclaim that the outside is not what they imagined. To me it's all a blur. My hands are clammy, my brow beaded with sweat. My mouth is dry, and I want to claw out of this confined space, but my mind is clear. It's focussed on one thing. Finding Willow.

The Establishment has always known about the trade stores on the outside, they have to exist for people to survive, but it has never been concerned about them. They are petty, and nothing to be worried about. They don't cause any real damage. It was only the selling of nutrition pills that put this one on the radar. We don't have much of a description to work from; wooden building, dirty windows, but they did mention a blue scarf tied to the door handle.

My eyes narrow as we approach the town, scouring the buildings for the tell-tale flutter of blue, and it doesn't take long to find it. I open the door and jump out before the vehicle has even stopped moving, my heart beating a little faster with each step. The interior is dark and dirty. A lone man stands behind the counter, and he's startled when I storm in. Good. Fear is on my side.

I start by walking around the store, slowly examining its contents. Bundles of wire, an old rusted wheelbarrow, a few tools, even a couple of

moth eaten blankets. I pick up a flat, bowl-shaped object and turn it over in my hands as Spray and Narc enter the shop. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see the man's Adam's apple bob up and down as he swallows. He plasters on a smile, only two teeth in his mouth, one of them blackened, and greets us.

"Can I help you gentlemen with something?" His words are unrefined and mumbled. He nods to the object in my hands. "Used for gold panning back in the day, bugga all it's good for now. Had it in the shop for years."

"Must be hard to make a living off selling rubbish like this, is it?" Narc says, as he nudges a pile of fur on the floor. Surprisingly, the pile groans. Narc pulls out his pistol and points it at the matted pile.

"Easy there, boys." The man approaches us. "That's just old Dylan."

"Who?" Narc grunts, not moving his eyes off the mound of fur.

"My dog. Once, he was the guard dog, but now he just sleeps all day."

Narc kicks the pile and sure enough a head emerges. He kicks it again, and the dog yelps and turns sad eyes to his owner. "Looks like it should be put out of its misery."

The man moves between Narc and the dog and gently places a hand on the old dog's head. "I know, but he was good to me in his prime. I'd like to think I can be good to him in his later years."

Narc shakes his head and puts his pistol away, content that the dog is no threat. "It's disgusting, that's what it is."

"But surely you're not here to harass an old man and his dog. What can I help you with?"

"Nutrition pills. Do you have any?" I ask gruffly. I've got no time to hedge around the subject, or for pleasantries. The less time I spend in this god-forsaken place, the better. All it does is serve to remind me that I'm not of this world. I may live in it, but I'm not part of it.

He starts shaking his head before I finish speaking. "No, Sir. Nope. You won't find any of those here. I thought they were only in the city?"

I walk over to the man as his gaze slips to the pistol holstered in my belt. I tower over him, and he lifts his eyes to meet mine, although they do so hesitantly, flicking between my face and my pistol. His breath stinks.

“Now, now, old man. Don’t play me. We know they are here. Best to be open about such things, if you know what’s good for you.”

I had hoped he would cooperate, and judging from the faint beads of sweat that appeared on his upper lip, I didn't think he would take too much persuasion. But I hoped wrong.

“You’re welcome to look around,” he says, taking his position behind the counter again. “Though I doubt you will find what you are looking for.”

I glare at the man, but he pretends to be busy with something below the counter. He should be terrified of me. Doesn’t he know what I could do to him?

I grind my teeth and signal for the boys to start searching. They ransack the place, turning everything upside down. The man doesn’t look up as his store is turned to chaos. Instead, he pulls out a deck of cards and deals them on the counter.

“It’s not even the pills I’m worried about,” I inform him.

“Well you seem to be going to an awful lot of trouble for something you’re not worried about.”

His insolence towards my position is infuriating. I take a deep breath and swallow my growing anger. “But the people that sold them to you, I’m very interested in.”

He places a jack of hearts down on top of a queen. For a second I’m distracted by the game which I have seen on ciids, but never like this.

He shrugs without looking up. “As I said before, I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.”

The switch is quick. The anger that always boils just beneath the surface suddenly reaches the point of eruption. Without warning I lunge over the counter and grab the front of his shirt, pulling him towards me until he is inches from my face. Once again his dank breath spreads over me. “You will tell me,” I growl.

He grins, his toothless smile mocking me. “Tell you what, boy?”

My movements are slow motion in my mind. I see myself drag the man’s body over the counter, and watch as he falls limply to the ground. My fist connects with his face. Hard. Things turn hazy and blurred with red.

I panic for a moment, afraid that in my rage my vision has become impaired, or the serum has developed a new side effect, but as I back away from the screaming man I realise that it is just specks of his blood that stain my eyes.

“I’ll tell you! I’ll tell you!” the man screams repeatedly, and I realise that I’m punching him again.

I stop, my hand quivering in the air. Spray and Narc stare at me, their own level of apprehension showing in their eyes. Spray steps back, placing himself distant between us. I blink, shaking the clouded haze from my mind, and focus on what’s before me. The man is crying and spluttering. Red-tinged drool dribbles down his chin. He only has one tooth now, and his face is already beginning to swell.

I clear my throat and he starts talking quickly, barely taking a breath. “A man and a girl. Tall man, dark hair, with a scar down the left hand side of his face. The girl was upset. She didn’t want him to sell the pills. I bought them and that is all I remember. I swear.”

I bend down close as the man cowers beneath me. “What colour hair did the girl have?”

I can almost see his mind racing, his eyes dart back and forth, reliving the memory. “Red. She had red hair,” he says, releasing a deep breath.

I grip his chin and he winces in pain. I squeeze a little harder to let him know I mean business. “And what exactly did they take in exchange for the pills?”

“A sack of flour.”

“One measly sack of flour? Remember, I know how many pills they had. I’m not schooled in the common rate of trade out here, but I do know that an entire bag of rhinecharts would be worth far more than one sack of flour.”

“They kept most in credit,” he whispers.

A slow smile spreads over my face. “So you know the man?”

He jerks his head away from my grasp and nods. “Only by the name on his credit.”

My patience is thinning. “Which is?” I hiss through gritted teeth.

“Mr C. Redit.”

“C. Redit,” I repeat. “As in, credit?”

“Yes, Sir.”

I straighten up and bark out questions. “Where was he going?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“No, Sir. I don’t know.”

I smile at his use of the word, Sir. “Was there anyone else with them?”

“Not that I know of.”

“A scar you say?”

“Yes. It ran down the left side of his face and down his neck.” The man reeks of desperation to please. He’s pathetic.

“Where had he been?”

“I don’t know that either.” His voice breaks, and I harden my glare.

I look over to Narc. “Shoot the dog.” Narc draws out his pistol and points it at the sleeping dog.

“I swear I don’t know.” The man is whimpering now.

“You want to shoot the dog, don’t you Narc?”

Narc grins and nods. “Just say the word.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.” He covers his eyes with his hands. “I don’t know where they were going. I don’t know where they had been. I swear, I don’t know.” He is babbling now. We will get little else out of him.

“Say goodbye to your dog.”

He starts to sob, pleading with me. “He’s all the family I’ve got. Please, please, just don’t hurt him.” He freezes. “Wait! They said something about going through a town where some kids killed a rabbit.” He looks at me hopefully. “It can’t be too far away. There’s only one town I know of within a day’s travel that’s infested with kids like that. It’s up the road that way.” He nods east. “It’s got to be the one. Looks deserted when you first arrive, but stay there long enough and you’ll find them. Or they’ll find you. Either way, they’re there.”

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I drag the man to his feet and clap him on the back. “Now if you had just been willing to share that in the first place, we could have avoided all this.” I wave my hand over the chaotic state of his dismal store.

“Yes, Sir.” He grins, giddy with relief.

“Still, you did need a lot of convincing, something that I don’t take favourably.”

Fear creeps back into his eyes as I turn towards the door, walking slowly past his dog. The urge to hurt the man wells, and before I can even register what I’m doing, a gunshot sounds in my ears, and a dribble of blood oozes from the pile of hair on the ground. My breathing quickens as a wail pours from the man.

“Maybe next time you won’t need so much convincing,” I say, my voice cracking as I nudge the lifeless body of the dog. The movement causes its body to roll over revealing a packet of pills hidden beneath. I bend down and pick them up, pleased with my find, even if it was unintentional. “Maybe this will ensure you are more honest in the future.”

I signal for Spray and Narc to leave. “Good day, Sir,” I say, as I pull the door shut.

One last glance at the dog turns my stomach.

The town is exactly as the old man described. On arrival it appeared deserted, but soon we are greeted by a large man dressed all in black. His clothing is tattered and he smells. Foul odour seems to be a common factor among Mudders. He approaches us with a cross bow perched against his shoulder, an arrow loaded and ready. Narc and Spray raise their weapons, but I keep my pistol at my side.

“What’s your business here?” The man’s gruff voice floats across the empty car park.

“I mean no harm. I’m just trying to find someone.” I walk towards the man slowly, my hands raised.

“Tell your men to lower their weapons.”

I signal, and they clip their pistols back on their belts. “Better?” I ask.

He is nervous. I can tell from the way his eyes flick around his surroundings. His people hover in the edges of my vision, hiding around corners, ready to spur into action if the need arises. Narc reaches for his pistol but I shake my head. Cooperation is what we require from these people. Force is unneeded, for now.

“What do you want? We have no need for the Establishment in these parts.”

I walk closer to him, keeping my hands held high. “I’m just looking for a man who may have passed through these parts. He was travelling with a girl and I need to know where he was heading, that is all. Once I have the information I need, we will be on our way.”

The only part of his body that isn’t hidden under tattered clothing is his eyes. He directs them at me and stares. Slowly, I lower my hands as I return his glare.

“What if we haven’t got the information you want?”

“I suspect since you asked, you have.” We are standing only meters apart now. His large frame dwarves my own but I have no fear. I’m pretty sure I can draw my pistol faster than he can shoot that arrow. I look around, noting the various weapons in the hands of his companions. A child drags a large machete in the dust behind him. An old woman has chain-link wrapped around her knuckles. These people aren’t afraid of violence, they’re accustomed to it.

I look back to the man whose eyes haven’t left me. “I’m going to be honest here, you can give me the information I want now, or I can come back later with a few more of my friends, and make you wish you have given me the information. It’s up to you.”

His dark eyes flick to the old woman. She nods, and he lowers his weapon.

“A few months back a girl and a man passed through here.”

“Did he have a scar?” I run my finger down my cheek and neck to show the layout of the scar described to me.

The man shrugs. “Could have done.”

A flicker of anger shoots through me, but the presence of the people surrounding me keeps it in check. I take a deep breath. “Which direction were they heading?”

“Back towards the city.”

“Nuovo?”

“Yes.”

It doesn’t make sense. Why would they turn back to Nuovo?

Willow is not in Nuovo. She’s not anywhere that we can trace. The trackers that Falcon sent out had turned up nothing, and this was the first decent lead we had. Where could they have gone?

There is nothing between here and Nuovo apart from the Protected Area, and no one has been in there for years. The thought sticks in my head. *No one has been in there for years.* It’s such an impossibly perfect place that it had not even entered my mind. What better place to hide than somewhere no one would think to look?

“That’s ridiculous!” Falcon scoffs. “No one has been in there for years.”

“But that’s what makes it so perfect. All they would need is one Guardian on their side, or one Guardian they can bribe.”

“And you think that they could have set all this up from inside Nuovo?”

“Of course not. She’s travelling with someone, a man. I told you she’s been taken against her will.”

“And she’s hiding out within our own domain? Within the Protected Area? Boy, listen to yourself.” He shakes his head. “Pure nonsense.”

An image of a map is displayed across the table, showing Nuovo in the centre, the Protected Area surrounding it, and the line of the train Willow was on. The two small towns I visited are highlighted in red.

“I would agree if it were just Willow, but this man obviously knows what he’s doing. He must have masterminded the whole thing. I bet Bear and Dune are just pawns in his game.”

“But why would—” Falcon cuts himself short. “Did you get a description of this man?”

“Not much of one, dark hair, brown eyes. The only defining thing mentioned was a scar.”

Falcon presses buttons on his ciid and the map disappears, replaced by the image of a man. He is young, but by all accounts it could be the man travelling with Willow.

“Who is that?” I ask.

“Could it be the man described to you?”

I shrug. Without something to compare it to, it’s hard to tell. “It could be.”

Falcon stares at the image. A smile slowly creeps over his face. “This, my son, is the leader of the Rebels, Jake Pierce.”

“I thought he was dead.”

Falcon shakes his head. “That’s what we wanted people to believe, but he disappeared and we never found him. For all we knew he could’ve been dead.”

“And you think he has Willow?” I frown.

“Well, if Bear was working with the Rebels...” Falcon’s eyes begin to glint. “This changes everything, son. Everything.” The image dissipates and Falcon directs his full attention to me. “Get a team together. You will scour the Protected Area until you find them, and then you will bring him to me. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sir.” A flicker of excitement ignites within me. Not only do I get to search for Willow, but I’m not going to have to fight my father while I do it. “It may take a while, though.”

Falcon starts to pace. He runs his hands through his silver hair and breathes heavily. “Then we’ll make them come to us. He’s a bleeding heart, always has been. Make your presence known, find something they will want to protect and look like you are about to threaten it.” He stops pacing, deep in thought. “Water,” he says after a long pause.

“Water?”

“To fund the early stages of the construction of Nuovo, this country sold many of its rights to the water reservoirs. The Protected Area was left untouched, but I know there are stores there. We have the old underground

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detection images on file. The thought of another one on the chopping block will be more than he can bear. He will come to you, and then you can bring him to me.”

“And Willow?”

“You can do whatever you want with the girl, just give me Jake and his merry band of Rebels. Whether they were behind the attack or not, I will use them. The Establishment will love me if I give them Jake Pierce.” He rubs his hands together, and I watch as my father gets gripped with obsession. Maybe it runs in the family. He turns to me. “Can you handle this? It’s not about Willow anymore. It’s about the safety of Nuovo itself.”

“I’m the only man for the job, Sir,” I say, and salute him.

“Well done, son.” Falcon claps me on the back and squeezes my shoulder. “Don’t let me down.”

I know it’s not a request. It’s an order.

## The Protected Area

My dreams are getting worse.

I'm struggling against something, but it has me in a vice-like grip. Claws dig into my arms and she is watching, and laughing. I reach for her, but with my arms pinned to my side and a weight on my chest, there is nothing I can do. Her laughter turns to tears and the fight leaves my body. Auburn hair hovers about her, like she is suspended in air. It covers her face and swirls about her body, growing longer and longer, wrapping around her until she is trapped. I want to rip her from its tight embrace. But although I'm no longer pinned down, I can't reach her.

Tears turn to sobs and I yell out to her. "Willow!"

"Bracken, wake up." Another voice enters my dream, deeper than Willow's, more hesitant than mine. I lash out against it, and the weight on my chest returns. "Should we call someone?"

Willow is drifting away. Free from the cocoon of her hair she is encased in a thick swirl of sparkling air. I struggle against my captors but they have me pinned.

The fog lifts, and I wake to Narc and Spray hovering above me, their hands holding me down.

"Get off!" I yell.

They immediately let go, hands held high. "Sorry, Bracs. But you were thrashing about and I was afraid you'd wake up everyone on the transporter," Narc says.

I wipe the sweat from my brow, toss the sheet off, and sit on the edge of the bed. "Go away," I say, before covering my face with my hands. My head is thumping.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Spray asks hesitantly.

“Get!” I say through gritted teeth. Their footfall is soft against the floor as they retreat.

I can smell her. A sweet scent has drifted through my dreams and entered reality. I run my hands through my hair and pull hard. The pain feels good, feels real. It calms my thudding heart.

We made our presence known as soon as we entered the Protected Area. We marched through the bush, our intentions clear, leaving our mark on the land. Jake did not disappoint. Within hours of our arrival, he and three others were stationed only meters away from our transporter base, watching our every move.

Even now, I wonder if they are sleeping, or if they stay, eyes glued to the transporter, watching the drilling equipment lying on the ground. We have no intention of using it, but its presence alone has drawn them out. I’m almost tempted to laugh at how simple it was, how predictable they are. Father was right. Jake lapped it up, just like he said. It would have been easy to wait and follow them back to their camp, but I need to ensure Willow’s safety. We do not know how many of them there are, nor do we know what weapons they possess.

The idea formulating in my mind is insane. I know this. But I don’t care.

Even as I sit on the edge of my bed and only imagine throwing myself down the cliff, my breath quickens. I breathe in through my nose and exhale slowly, going over the list of benefits in my mind. First and foremost, it will ensure Willow’s safety. It will avoid any harm to my men. It will give the Rebels a sense of safety. What better way to gain someone’s trust than to give them what they want?

A smile plays over my lips as I envision my father’s proud expression, the adulation of the Citizens of Nuovo as I bring home the captors. But most of all, I picture the look of relief on Willow’s face when she sees me. The way she will feel when I wrap her in my arms and pull her close. Her scent. Her smile. Her kiss.

It will hurt. There is no doubt in my mind. The cliff isn’t huge, but it isn’t small either. My men have been instructed to watch me from afar. At

first they protested, declaring the risk was too great, afraid of what my father would say if they returned me broken and damaged. But the risk is mine. It always has been. And for Willow, I would risk everything.

I am to be the Trojan horse, except there is nothing hiding within me except the truth.

I lie back on the bed, willing my heart to stop beating so loudly. It drones like a bass drum in my skull. Thud. Thud. Thud.

It all comes down to tomorrow. It all comes down to Jake's reaction. There is the possibility that he will leave me there, but I doubt it. He will have a Guardian at his disposal. A way to stop the drilling. There is no way he will be able to resist.

At first I think I'm dreaming again.

She says my name as a question. Her hair is tied back so only small, ruby wisps frame her face. She smiles, but there are tears in her eyes. Someone moans as one of her tears falls onto my cheek, and with the splash of wet, I realise the moans are coming from me.

"Wills?" My voice is broken and torn, and it hurts to speak. But the reality of the pain proves I'm not asleep. This is not a dream. She's laughing and crying and kisses my cheek. "Is that really you?" I ask, trying to sit up. Pain shoots to every limb in my body and I fall back, cushioned by her lap. "Where am I?"

"You're safe. You're with me," she says.

I look around the room and my eyes fall on Jake. It's the first time I have seen him this close. He's older, of course. The creases around his eyes and over his forehead have deepened. His hair is streaked with grey, but there is no denying it's the man from the image my father showed me. They have taken my pistol away. I know this even before I reach for it, but I must play my part. A boy with strange hair and piercing green eyes glares at me and tells me he's taken the pistol.

“Who the heck are you?” I demand as I drag my body into a sitting position. It hurts. A lot. My shoulder hurts the most. I’m sure it must be dislocated, but I can’t help returning Willow’s smile.

“That’s Luke. And this is my Uncle Jake,” she says, pointing at each of them in turn.

“Uncle?” The word is out of my mouth before I can help it. Her uncle? The leader of the Rebels is Willow’s uncle? “Are you okay? Are you hurt?” I stammer out quickly.

She’s deliriously happy at my arrival and laughs at my questions. I can’t imagine what she has been through. I wish they would leave us alone so I could truly talk to her.

“I’m fine. No, actually I’m good. These are my friends. They won’t hurt you.”

My heart falls at her words. She has no idea who these people are, or what they are capable of, of the destruction they caused all those years ago delaying the sealing of Nuovo.

The one with the rope-like hair reaches for my arm. “You took quite the tumble. That arm looks rather nasty.”

I jerk away and wince at the sharp pain that travels through my body. Moments later a woman bustles through the door. She has blood on her clothing, and I move closer to Willow. She examines me as they talk about someone called Emmy. I guess that’s whose blood it is. She shakes her head a lot and sighs before ordering everyone out.

“We can’t leave you alone with him,” Jake says, glaring at me. I can’t imagine what he thinks I’m capable of in this state. And does it not occur to him that she’s the one covered in someone else’s blood?

“He’s in no condition to be any sort of threat to anyone, Jake,” the woman says.

She walks over to me and glares at the others, hands on her hips. Willow protests when she’s ordered to leave, but the woman is not one for nonsense. I smile at Wills, letting her know I’ll be fine, and then I grit my teeth and ready myself for more pain. I try to be tough. I try to brace myself. But I can’t help the moans that escape. Even though she has given

me some fabric to bite down on, the pain is excruciating as she rough-handles my shoulder back into place.

I can't help but stare at her when we are finally left alone. I have known Willow forever. Her image is etched in my mind, but she is even more beautiful than I remembered. She has put on some weight and it bides well on her. Her eyes sparkle excitedly when she looks back at me, but there is sadness there too. I want to bombard her with questions, find out every detail of her life since she left.

"I can't believe it's really you," I say to her. "What happened Wills? One minute you were there, and the next you were gone. They're saying your parents were involved in some plot. Are they keeping you hostage? I can get you out of here." The words rush out of me, one after the other, tumbling over each other, all fighting to be heard first.

Willow holds her finger to my lips. I close my eyes, soaking in the warmth of her, the scent of her. She slides down the wall so she's sitting next to me. Her thigh presses against mine. "Take it easy," she says wearily. "Not too many questions."

In my head, when she first sees me, she runs into my arms, wraps her legs around my waist, and our lips meet in an endless kiss. In reality, she yawns. I need to touch her, so I run my fingers across the back of her hand resting in her lap. "I've missed you," I say. My throat hurts. My voice is husky.

She squeezes my hand. "Me too."

I drink her in as she rests her head against the wall. She has no idea what she does to me. No idea that the mere thought of her makes my heart pound.

"Tell me what happened, Wills," I say quietly.

She shrugs. "You probably know more than I do. Dune and Bear apparently organised for us to escape Nuovo."

Relief floods me. She had no idea. She tells me about Jake and her parents. It was their idea, their fault. She is innocent in it all. I can't imagine how scared she must have been.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Don’t be. It’s kind of nice here.”

I snort. “Yeah sure.”

“No, seriously, it is.”

“Don’t let people hear you say that when you get back to Nuovo.”

She chews on her bottom lip and it grows redder with each bite. “How are Bear and Dune?”

“You haven’t heard?” I close my eyes for a moment. I hate that I’m the one that has to tell her. “Well after the explosion—”

She looks at me sharply. “What explosion?”

“You don’t know?”

“Don’t know what?” I know she can’t help the annoyance that creeps into her voice. “I wish you’d just spit it out. I told you. I don’t know anything.”

I take a deep breath and explain it to her. I tell her about the explosion, and that it was Bear who did it. I tell her about the message displayed over the devices. I tell her everything. I watch her face closely, but it’s all news to her. Her eyes well with tears when I tell her about her parents.

“I tried finding out what happened to them,” I assure her, even though it’s a lie. Well, not a total lie. I know where her mother is. Bear, on the other hand, I’m not sure. I know he’s been shipped out, I just don’t know where. But that’s all information she doesn’t need at the moment. I will tell her when the time is right. “But I can’t find anything. Falcon said it was none of my business and I shouldn’t worry about people like your parents. They’re nothing but Mudders in disguise, never truly conforming to the standards or ideals of the Establishment and so on. I managed to convince him you were taken against your will. You were, weren’t you?”

“That’s ridiculous,” she says.

I keep quiet as she processes what I’ve told her. Her bottom lip pouts, and her brow creases as the thoughts tick over in her mind. I long to reach out and touch her, place a kiss on those pouting lips, but I’m unsure how she would respond. Our last moments together were sealed with a kiss, but

if I'm honest with myself, I don't know whether that was her, or simply the effects of the pill she had taken.

"That's ridiculous," she says again, her voice breaking.

I press her for information, even as I loathe myself for causing her more pain. "I know, and I tried telling Falcon that, but the rumours have taken on a life of their own. There is a whole feeling of unease in the city. People are waiting for something, but no one is sure what. Are you sure there is nothing to them?"

"I have no idea," she mutters. "What about you? Luke is convinced you've been planted to spy on us."

Her question startles me. Of course, I expected as much from the others, but for her to actually question me about it, proves how much she has changed. Living with the Mudders has affected her more than I would like to think.

I laugh, trying to appear unaffected, and the movement grates my shoulder. I quote my practised speech. I feel bad for lying to her, but it won't work if she doesn't trust me.

"So you're not dangerous?"

It hurts that she even asks. "Do I look dangerous?"

"I don't know anymore. You just look like Bracken, though in slightly less stylish clothes than I'm used to seeing you in."

"Yeah, I know. Skylark would be appalled. But are you alright? Are you sure they've been treating you okay?"

"I'm fine ... honestly," she assures me, reaching out and taking my hand.

It feels good to have her this close again, good to feel her hand over mine. I sigh deeply, relishing the moment. "It's been four months, two days, and . . . well, I've lost count of how many hours, but I have missed you, Wills. You have no idea."

She yawns widely. "Me too," she says. "Sorry, it's been a big night. I just need some sleep and a chance to take in all you've told me."

I don't want her to leave me yet, but I have nothing to keep her here. I hang onto her tightly as she helps me off the floor and leads me into the

next room. There is only a mattress and a thin blanket lying on the floor. Still, it will probably be warmer than I'm used to.

She turns to me before heading out the door. "Don't you go anywhere, okay?"

"I'm right where I want to be."

She closes the door, and I call after her, desperate for one more glimpse. She leaves the door ajar, waiting for me to speak.

"It's good to see you," I whisper.

I thought they would use me as a bargaining chip to stop the drilling, but it doesn't seem to occur to them, or they don't want to upset Willow. I didn't need to worry though as Willow provides a way to get them to trust me. Part of me feels bad to deceive her this way, but I can't risk having her say something to one of her new friends. I need to keep up a level of resistance, so when she comes to me with her request, I act hesitant.

"But why do they need to get on the transporter?" I ask, following her out the door. "Wills, this isn't sounding good."

"It's nothing serious. Well, not really. Do you know anything about the reservoir they found?"

I nod, and smile inwardly.

"Well, they are going to drain it, and Jake wants to stop them," she explains.

I take her hand and pull her close, amused by her naivety. "Drain it? Wills, they can't drain it. It's being constantly replenished. And what about the people that need the water?"

That pricks the ears of the one they call Luke. He turns to face me, the flush of anger creeping up his face. He peers at me closely with those pale, green eyes. He's challenging me, questioning how close Wills and I truly are. Ever since I arrived, his eyes flick between Willow and me, straining to see our connection, wondering why she gives me the attention she does.

"If they take the water faster than it replenishes, like they've done with others, then technically, they can drain it," he says. I roll my eyes and turn

away, but he isn't about to let it fall. He is jealous and determined to start a fight. "And what people?" he continues. "This water, like everything else, will be sold to the highest bidder. It's got nothing to do with need, and everything to do with greed." He walks away, assuming the conversation is over.

I drop Willow's hand and turn my full attention to him. If he wants to start a fight, I'm only too willing to oblige. "That's not the way things work, and you know it. We protect the land. We don't pollute it with our presence ... unlike some."

"It's not? Tell me, Mr high and mighty I don't pollute the land." He spits the words out. "What are your clothes made of? Your pills? Your sustain? Your precious dome? Something cannot be made from nothing!" He's shouting, and I almost laugh at the way he is so annoyed over something that's not even going to happen.

I walk closer until we stand only inches apart. "Everything I use is harvested in a sustainable manner and approved by the Establishment."

"And you believe that, do you?" His arrogance astounds me.

"Of course I do. Why wouldn't I?" My voice matches his now. We are both yelling, both firm in our stances.

"So this land, these resources that the Establishment supposedly protects, do you get to see them?"

"Of course not. As I said, we don't pollute the land with our presence, unless called to do so."

"Like now?"

"Yes, like now. There are people in need of that water."

"And you know that's where the water is heading?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

He's really beginning to piss me off. He doesn't know when to back off. I clench my fists at my side, determined not to let him raise my anger, even though it's there, pulsing away underneath my skin, begging to be released. I take another deep breath and let it out slowly, digging my nails into the flesh of my palms. "Because that's what we are told."

“And you believe them without question?”

“Why would I question them?”

Luke snorts and turns away. “It’s about as useful as talking to a brick wall.”

“And you know they’ll exploit the reservoir because they’ve done it before? You’ve seen it, or do you just believe what you’ve been told?” I shoot his own argument back at him. Luke doesn’t respond and keeps walking. I turn to Willow. She can’t possibly agree with this idiot, can she? “What about you, Wills? Surely you don’t believe this rubbish?”

She looks between Luke and me hesitantly. She lingers a little longer while staring at Luke, and my gut begins to twist. There is something in that look.

“I don’t know what to think anymore. It makes sense that while creating the domed cities has protected the land, it also means that we have given them free reign to do what they like.” Her voice is quiet and she talks with her eyes cast to the ground.

“You’ve changed your tune,” I say.

But it’s Luke that answers. “Sometimes it’s only from the outside that you can see what’s on the inside.” His eyes challenge me and we stare at each other, both waiting for the other to back down.

Finally, I turn back to Willow. “You don’t know that, Wills.”

“And you don’t know that they are not,” she says with surprising passion. “If you saw the land beyond the Protected Area you would be shocked. Everything is gone. Destroyed. Well, anything that’s not is being farmed by the Establishment.”

“I’ve seen the outside, Wills. But it’s not the Establishment that did that to the land.”

She closes her eyes and draws in a deep breath. I can see the curve of her eyes flit from side to side under the thin membrane of her eyelids. “Tell me, are they planning on draining the reservoir?”

I know what I’m about to say is not the answer she will want to hear, but it’s the only answer I can give, anything else and I will blow my cover. “Only to help people that need it. When did you become so cynical, Wills?”

I see a familiar blush of red edging up her cheeks. “I don’t know Bracs,” she says, her voice beginning to rise in pitch and volume. I take step back, surprised by the strength of her tone. “Perhaps when I was dumped out the window of a train by my own mother and left in the wilderness to fend for myself. Perhaps it was when I discovered my father was involved in a plot against the Establishment. Or, perhaps it was when I actually spoke to people outside the dome.” She looks at me with those beautiful hazel eyes, and my heart skips a beat. But then, Luke moves closer to her and takes her hand. She doesn’t pull away from him, and in that moment, my world stops. I try to act unaffected, try not to stare at their joined hands and keep my eyes trained on hers. But I can’t help it. A magnetic force pulls my vision down to their entwined fingers. I pull my gaze back up quickly, but it’s too late. The image burns red in my mind.

“Can’t you just help me out?” she begs.

My heart beats so slowly I’m afraid it has stopped. I clear my throat and attempt to keep up the act. “I don’t really have a choice, do I? Are you sure all they are going to do is stop the water drainage?”

“Yes.”

“You’re certain? Because a plot of attacking Nuovo would probably involve taking over a transporter.” I steal a look at their clasped hands. His tanned skin covers hers, their fingers blending together. Pain twists in my gut.

“These are just normal people Bracs, trying to stand up for something they believe in. Do you honestly think I would ask for your help if there was more to it?”

I can’t look anymore and drop my head. “I guess not.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s lucky I love you, Willow Stanton,” I say, staring at Luke, begging for him to challenge me again. I would relish the chance to fight him now. Not verbally like before. Physically. So I could feel his cheekbone crunch under the weight of my knuckles. “I wouldn’t be doing this for anyone else.”

I barely concentrate on what they say once I'm in the dining hall. All I can think about is their interlocking fingers. Nausea floats at the pit of my stomach, and every time I look over at Luke he glares at me as if he has some right to be angry.

Willow touches my arm and pulls me out of my daze. "What are you doing?" she whispers.

I look back over at Luke who is sitting back in his chair, arms resting behind his head, chin held high, looking down his nose at me. "I don't like him," I say loud enough for him to hear.

"Well I'm pretty sure he doesn't think much of you either. Now would you just quit it and play nice?"

"Right." Jake interrupts our exchange. "We head out tomorrow. Pack only what you need."

"Tomorrow?" I say, falling back into the conversation. I wasn't counting on them to move this quickly. I lift my bandaged arm. "What about this?"

"Do you need the use of your arm to get onto the transporter?" Jake asks.

"Well no, it's just it might be easier if—"

"Good. As I said, we leave first thing in the morning."

I get to my feet. "One more thing, after I help you out, you'll let Wills and me go."

"No one is holding Willow prisoner," Jake says evenly.

"So she is free to leave?"

Willow laughs nervously. "Of course I'm free to leave. No one is holding me here, Bracs."

I don't believe her. This is not where she needs to be. She needs to come home with me, home to Nuovo, and away from these Mudders. "Well, then it will be fine if I take her and leave once I help you? I will take her back to Nuovo, back to her family, her friends."

"Willow is free to choose whatever she decides," Luke says. "She can stay, she knows she is wanted here, but we would never make her stay if she didn't want to. So it is up to you, Willow. Do you want to stay or go?"

She looks to him first and my voice catches in my throat. “Tell them, Wills. Tell them you want to come home.”

“How do we know he won’t lead the Guardians back here after it’s all done?” a strange man covered in grey facial hair asks.

I watch Willow as I talk, begging for her to hear me. My eyes hurt and I blink slowly. Without my ciid reminding me to blink they have become irritated and red. “I have no interest in any of you. Only Willow.”

But Willow has no chance to respond as Mrs Morton bustles her way through the door. Her news casts a sombre spell on the group. I’m surprised they let one of their own die when help was available. It makes me even more anxious to get Willow out of here.

Later, when we are alone, I take her hand in mine and ask her the one question that’s been playing on my mind ever since she left. “The night you left, you kissed me. Do you remember that?”

“I was drunk,” she says, not looking at me.

“So you do remember then?”

“I remember bits and pieces. I can’t believe they are still keeping you under guard.”

She is keen to change the subject and I allow her, letting my thoughts crash against the sides of my mind. For the first time, I feel something different when I look at her. It’s no longer warmth, no longer love. It’s bitterness.

“You’ve changed,” she says quietly.

“We all change, Wills. It’s part of life. The training was hard in ways I never expected. It changed me. But for the good I think. I see things differently now, think differently. I’ve even come to realise that what my father wants for me may not be all that bad. I’m actually pretty good at it even, being a Guardian I mean.” I want to add that I did it for her, but I know there is no point. She is slipping away from me out here in the wilderness.

“I always told you, you would be.” She smiles sweetly.

“Just promise me you’ll come home.”

“I can’t promise you that,” she says, and her smile falters.

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I know she's thinking of him, that it's him, who is keeping her from me. I think about my plan and inwardly smile. She will see the truth soon. She doesn't see the danger she is in. She has been brain-washed by these people, and I'm just the person to rescue her.

She will thank me once she is home.

## Back in Nuovo

There is a fine line between love and hate, and my feelings for Willow are dancing along it. One moment I love her and cannot imagine my life without her, and in the next, the mere sight of her spikes my anger.

I just about hit her. My fist was in the air, I was wavering, and I just about hit her. She reacted badly to my plan to save her. She saw it as a betrayal, not a rescue. I need her to understand, but she refuses to see clearly. Tonight will be different. I will remind her of what we once had, of what we could have, if only she will give me the chance.

Willow used to wear her feelings in her facial expressions. Just one look and I could tell how she felt. Her lips most commonly formed a pout, but when she smiled it was like the sun came out. It was magical. Now, she has put a wall between us. I can no longer tell when she is lying and when she is telling the truth. She has changed, just like she insists I have.

I know the serum is messing with me, and yet here I sit, strapped to the table awaiting another injection.

The nurse shines a light into my eyes. “Have they been hurting a lot?” she asks.

I nod, tears running uncontrollably down my cheeks, as she unapologetically studies them under the burning light. “I lost my ciid, so there was nothing to remind me.”

“I’ll give you some eye drops which will help. Hopefully they will only take a few hours to clear up and get rid of some of that redness.” She pushes her chair from the table I’m strapped to and rolls across the floor to get the syringe off the counter. She squeezes the plunger until a jet of liquid squirts across the room.

“Everything else okay?” she asks, while patting my arm with quick, sharp slaps. I take a deep breath as she inserts the needle. “Sorry,” she says quietly, but she doesn't mean it.

“Things are different in my head,” I say between gritted teeth.

“That's normal.”

“Normal how?” My voice rises as the serum flows like ice through my veins. I grip the sides of the table, the veins in my arms turning blue. They told me it wouldn't be as bad as the first time, that with each injection the pain would lessen. What they really meant was the pain wouldn't last as long. The intensity had not wavered.

“It can alter your emotional triggers. Say the scent of vanilla used to bring on a feeling of nostalgia because your mother wears it, well, sometimes the serum will change the path of that trigger, and instead the scent of vanilla may now bring on feelings of anger, or fear. It's different for everyone. Something that may have once repulsed you, can now excite you.”

By the time she finishes inserting the serum, my body is rigid with pain. I can hear her words but they don't register, not really. They are dulled by the pain, muted into submission by the agony washing over me. She pats my arm again, as though I've experience little more than the prick of the needle, and feels my forehead.

“There's nothing wrong with this,” she continues, “it's simply changing the chemical balances within you. I've read your reports, Bracken. Everyone is extremely pleased with your response to the serum. Whatever it's doing, it's something to be proud of.”

I think of Spray and the bloodied mess I put him in, of the dark, red liquid seeping out of the dog I left on the floor of the shop, of the welcoming party I arranged for Willow's Mudder friend, and of my fist wavering in the air above Willow. I embrace the pain. I deserve the pain. I don't like who I have become, serum or not.

I had to call in a lot of favours, but I have finally come up with a plan to win her back. Falcon, still giddy with the capture of Jake, even agrees to help by giving me access to the Great Hall.

She is stunning in the silver dress she wore to the ball. Her eyes skip happily when I show her I've re-created the dance, even down to the same illusions. The dress hugs her figure and exposes the skin down her back. It doesn't fit the same as before. Her flesh strains against the material begging to be noticed, begging to be touched. I stare at her in wonder as she floats around the room admiring my handwork. This is the way it should have always been.

I walk over and take her hand gently in mine. "It occurred to me that we never danced together." I bow deeply before her. "May I have the pleasure?"

She curtsies and steps into my arms. I hold her close, savouring the feel of her body so close to mine, and inhale her scent. Her skin is warm against my hand as I pull her closer. I feel an intake of breath, but she doesn't resist.

"You've always been the one for me Wills. I've been stuck on you from the moment I met you."

I think back to when we first met. I'm not sure if she remembers, but I do. Our mothers sat in the corner together, watching us while we played. She had her hair tied in piggy tails and I was fascinated with them. I was fascinated with all of her, and I still am. "I'm not sure if a little kid is capable of falling in love, but I certainly fell for you."

I tilt my head until I can feel the soft skin of her neck against my lips. "This is the last time I'm asking you this. Please tell me you feel the same. Tell me I'm not wasting my time by holding out hope for you."

She doesn't answer but stares into my eyes, her gaze unwavering. I have bared my soul to her, pulled out my heart and given it to her still beating. She loves me. I know she loves me. She *must* love me.

I pull her close and crush my lips to hers, months of pent up passion culminating in one act. She twists and pushes me away.

"Don't!"

With that word something breaks, and I am defeated.

“So you’ve made your choice then?” I don’t wait for her answer. I don’t trust myself around her in this moment. I feel the anger rising, and I need to get away.

“Bracken wait!” she calls out.

I should walk through the door, but something pulls me back. My love is quickly being replaced by hate. My desire to see her happy, replaced with a desire to see her hurt. It scares me.

“Wait?” I splutter, unable to form my words fast enough. “I did, Willow. But I’ve waited long enough. I’m not going to waste my time being played the fool by you.”

“But you don’t understand,” she wails.

“Understand what? That once again you’ve played me? You’ve got some gall Willow, I’ll give you that. Every time I think, this time it will be different, this time she really does care for me, and every time, you betray me again.”

“You want to talk about betrayal?” She steps closer and I see anger flashing in her eyes. “You are the one who betrayed me! You are the one who sold us out, put my friends in prison.”

I can’t believe she is still defending them. It makes me sick thinking about her and her lover-boy. I would have been able to overlook it if only she could admit to her mistake. But this girl in front of me now is not someone I know.

“That’s really what this is about, isn’t it? You can’t get over your little fling with your Mudder-boy. Well don’t worry anymore. I’ll make sure you two spend lots of time together. Do you think you and he can still live happily ever after? Not if I have anything to do with it! Did you think this through? Do you know what this means for you? I’m not some boy you can have your fun with and then throw away when it doesn’t suit.” I walk away, afraid of where my anger will take me, then think better of it. I need her to understand how I feel, that I truly loved her, and thought she loved me too. “You know, I really thought you cared for me. I really did. Some fool I am.”

“Bracken, I do care for you. You don’t understand. You don’t know everything that has gone on.”

“Save the act Willow. I can see right through you. I was blinded before, but looking at you now, I don’t know by what. I wish we had never met. I wish I had never known you.”

I need to get out of here.

“Bracken, please! You’ve got to believe me! It’s not what you think.”

“Let me go!” I yell at her. She is looking at me through eyes blurred with tears. I realise now they are nothing more than a guise for her to control me. “They won’t work on me anymore. You’re dead to me, you hear? Dead.”

“Jake Pierce is your father.”

My world stops at those words. And then I see them for what they are. A ploy to distract me. “Who told you that drivel? It’s not even possible.”

“It’s true,” she insists.

I hesitate at the earnest look in her eyes. Once upon a time, before all this happened, I would have sworn my life on her promise. “What are you playing at Willow?”

“I’m not playing. Your mother is the one who told me. Years ago, before Nuovo, before any of this, your mother was with Jake.”

I can’t listen anymore and hold up my hand. “Stop. That’s not right. Skylark and Falcon have been together since Nuovo was created.”

“But not before. Not eighteen years ago. How did you think our mothers knew each other?”

I shake my head. “No. It can’t be true. This is one sick joke you are pulling Wills.” There is a voice in the back of my head asking why she would lie, but I push it aside.

“It’s no joke. Ask Skylark if you need to. She fell pregnant to Jake before she even met Falcon. But she chose him. She chose Falcon and never told him that her child wasn’t his.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Ask Skylark.”

"I don't need to. You're lying." A new emotion rolls over me, one I haven't experienced in a while. Panic.

"I have no reason to lie about this, Bracken."

My body's response to the panic rising within me is to quell it with anger. I clench my fists at my sides, digging my nails into my flesh and resisting its pull by dulling it with pain.

"So what now?" she asks.

"Now nothing." My voice is gravel.

"Are you just going to take me from here?"

"Take you where?"

"The holding cells."

"Don't be stupid," I growl harshly. I can't believe she thinks I would want to do that to her. She doesn't know me at all. "I won't do that to you, no matter how much you piss me off."

"You won't?"

"I'm a man of my word. You keep yours, and I'll keep mine." It's the only option I have left.

"So you're going to go through with it then?"

"With what?"

"Sentencing your own father to being shipped out?"

"He's not my father!" I yell. It echoes off the walls and plays over and over in my ears. I lower my voice to a hiss. "And if you ever mention anything along those lines again, I will make sure no one believes a word you say. Do you hear me?"

She nods. "Please talk to Skylark, Bracs. She will be able to explain everything, make you understand."

"Shut up!" Why won't she stop talking? I need to get a hold of myself. I need to think. I block her out of my vision and breathe deeply. "Just shut up, okay? You are not to breathe a word of this to anyone. We will go home. We will attend the street parade tomorrow. You will smile. You will act like the perfect little Nuovioian girl. And then we will go home."

"But what about—"

"Not a word. Not one."

Rejection is one of the hardest feelings to digest. There is nothing in this miserable world that will make me feel better, no justification in my mind of why she doesn't return my feelings. There is nothing to do but face the cold reality of the facts.

She doesn't love me.

She never loved me.

She is willing to lie rather than be with me.

We don't talk the entire trip back home. I go to my room, slamming the door behind me. Pulling up the display on my ciid, I call Lilly. I may not be able to forget, but distraction can go a long way towards it.

I leave Lily with disgust seeping into my thoughts. I'm not sure if it's aimed at Lily for letting me use her so willingly, or if it's at myself for my lack of guilt in using her. Lily knows how I feel, she knows she's nothing more than an amusement, a distraction, but she never turns me away. Does this make me a bad person? Or does it simply make Lily a stupid one?

I had thought that my visit would relieve some of my pent up emotion, but the tightness in my chest is still there. I'm not even sure which emotion it is anymore. It's similar to excitement, or panic, or maybe dread. It's a ball of tension, ready to explode in my chest. I need to physically exert myself, push myself to exhaustion, to breaking point. It's the only way if I hope to get any sleep tonight. Skylark would explode if I arrived for the street parade with dark rings under my eyes and a scowl on my face.

Skylark. Mother. If what Willow said is true, she has lied my entire life. She has no right to call herself my mother. When the word mother is uttered by a child it is the definition of trust, love, protection, and loyalty. If what Willow says is true, she is none of these things.

My footfall echoes off the walls. I'm the only one wandering the streets. It's a lonely city, everyone tucked up inside their homes, choosing to communicate with the rest of the world via ciids, rather than face to face. I don't want to go home. I don't want to face anyone. What if Falcon pops his head out the door to greet me? What would I say to him? Would my

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thoughts show clearly on my face? What if I run into Skylark? Could I even ask her the question? And what if it's Willow who waits for me? I don't trust myself to be alone around her. With the hidden emotions coursing through my veins, and my body's unknown response, I can't trust myself. But I need to relieve this pressure before it builds to something I can't control.

Any sane person would talk it over with friends, but I don't have any of those. If my fellow cadets disliked me before, now they despise me. They all congratulated me after the capture, but I could see the resentment in their eyes.

In a split second my mind is made and I turn towards the prison.

The Guardian on duty knows me, but I don't know him. I stride past and turn off the camera trained on his cell. "Don't turn it back on," I order at his questioning look. All he can do is nod.

Luke is asleep as I step into his cell. The light illuminates his features and I fail to understand what Willow sees in him. His hair is wrong. Rope instead of hair. And long, too long. The lines of his chin, cheekbones, and nose, are strongly defined, yet the length of his eyelashes give off a feminine appeal. Bruises from the welcoming party I arranged still mar his face. He is bigger than me. The muscles covering his bones more defined than my own, but that doesn't mean I can't take him.

I lean back against the wall and cross my arms. "She isn't yours," I state, my voice a low growl.

Luke doesn't move but there is something in his position that tells me he's now awake. I'm not sure if it's a change in his breathing pattern, an unnoticeable movement in his limbs, or perhaps a flick of his eyes underneath the lids, but he's awake.

"Get up and face me," I say, pulling myself from the wall and squaring my shoulders.

He opens his eyes without hesitation and they run over me, sizing me up. I draw myself to full height.

“Look—” he starts to say, but I cut him off by flying across the room and driving my fist into his gut. He doubles over, and I feel some of the tightness in my chest open, just a crack.

Luke holds up one hand, breathing deeply and wincing. “We both care about her, we both—”

This time my fist connects with his cheekbone and his head swings to the side. Spit flies out his mouth.

“Get up!” I yell.

His eyes turn cold and he gets to his feet.

I barely remember the next few minutes. My emotions, the serum, whatever it is that controls this anger in me, takes over, and we fight. I’m aware that he gets in some decent punches. I’m aware of the blood that covers my knuckles. But I’m not aware of the pain. He aims for my body. I aim for his face. The room fills with grunts and howls of anguish. Fists, feet, teeth, blood and sweat. Curse words and spit. I keep going, drinking in each blow. My chest cracks and the ball of tension seeps out. It’s the force behind me.

I’m pulled back by the guard. “I think that’s enough,” he says, straining to hold me. I resist, but only a little. The tightness has gone. I don’t say anything as he pulls me from the cell. Luke merely looks up and watches me go, wiping the blood from his lip.

## The Parade

I stand in darkness, counting the seconds before the backup power source kicks in. I know she's no longer at my side. I felt it the moment she left. My eyes scan the surroundings even though there is nothing for me to see other than darkness. People are panicking. Falcon is panicking. I can hear it in his voice. He doesn't have a clue. He's arrogant in his defeat of Jake and the Rebels, but I'm not.

I couldn't meet her eyes this morning. I couldn't meet anyone's. I kept my injuries hidden and walked as if there was no pain in my limbs, as if my stomach wasn't black and blue with bruising. Thankfully, my face was uninjured, nothing more than some slight swelling around my left eye.

What happened next was enough to stun me. Her plan was brilliant in its simplicity. One flick of a switch and Nuovo was plunged into turmoil. If I'm honest, I never saw it coming. I believed her when she gave me her word.

Fool.

With the power back on, I see her leaving me. I see the guilt in her eyes. I also see fear.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Ash on the ground. She screams in pain as someone steps on her hand. She's calling out to Willow but her voice is drowned in the commotion of the crowd.

"Where's she going?" I demand as I run over to her.

Ash gives me a death stare and holds out her uninjured hand. I look at it, uncomprehending. "Help me up you asshole." She's not badly injured. As usual, she's just playing the drama queen.

I pull her up, impatient for her answer. “Where is she going?” I demand again.

“How the hell would I know?” Ash looks down at a tear in her dress. “Oh great.” She shakes her head. “Now it’s ruined.”

My patience is waning so I grab her injured hand and squeeze hard.

“Bracken!” She tries to twist away from me. “Bracken, you’re hurting me.” She looks at me and I twist harder. Fear and confusion reflect in her eyes. “Bracken, stop it.”

“Where’s Thorn?” Ivy says as she runs over and leans on her daughter for support. She doesn’t even notice the pain Ash is in, and I drop my grip on her hand.

“How the hell would I know?” Ash yells, and storms off, glaring at me in the process.

“Have you seen him?” Ivy asks me. “He said he would meet me here, but I can’t see him anywhere.” Her voice rises in pitch as her panic increases. I’ve never had much tolerance for the woman, but something pricks my interest.

“You haven’t seen him at all during the parade?”

“He was here, but then he said he had a message to do, and then the power went out. Oh, oh.” She fans her face with her hands, willing away tears. “What if he’s lying hurt somewhere with no one to help him?”

I stare blankly at Ivy as the thoughts formulate in my mind.

“Help me find him, Bracken,” Ivy wails.

“Wait here,” I instruct, and run off in the same direction Willow did only moments before.

There are four known ways out of Nuovo. By gondola, by train, by air, or by foot through the gates of Nuovo. It looks as though Thorn Burrows may just know the fifth. I know it exists, I just don’t know where.

My feet pound the pavement in search of him, and with the help of my ciid he doesn’t take long to find.

## The Black Door

I wait for her with my pistol aimed at the door. The look on her face when she sees me is at first shock, but then an unbearable sadness passes over her that almost causes me to lower my weapon. It's like she is seeing something she expected, but still held out hope of never witnessing.

"Nice to see you again, Willow." My voice cracks on her name, as if somehow it burns my throat. I wave my pistol signalling for her to move and let the others behind her through. The looks that pass between them feeds my anger. "Surprised?" I ask.

"Bracken." Jake stands in front of Willow. "Put the pistol down."

I restrain myself at his boldness. He dares to protect Willow from me when he is the one who put her in danger in the first place?

"Sure, right after you are in handcuffs," I say through gritted teeth. I narrow my eyes, trying to see any resemblance between us. There is nothing. No way could I be related to this excuse of a man.

"You don't want to do this," he says, his voice that of someone talking to a child. He looks me in the eye and walks slowly forward, much like we are trained to do if we come across a wild animal. He has courage, I will give him that. He keeps walking until the barrel of my pistol presses against his chest. I swear I can feel the vibrations of his heartbeat travel through the metal.

"It won't work. It's over," I tell him.

Jake lifts his hands into the air. "What won't work?"

"Whatever you're planning. Don't try it."

"I'm not planning anything. I'm just trying to figure out a way for both of us to get what we want. What is it that you want, Bracken?"

I know what he's trying to do. He's trying to get me to lower my guard for just an instant so he can get the upper hand. Well, it won't work. "I'm just doing my job." I look over at Willow who is staring at me, eyes wide and glassy with tears.

"This isn't your job, Bracken. You're not this person."

"How would you know who I am?" My anger swells at his arrogance.

"Bracken, please," Willow begs from behind him.

"Shut up!" I yell at her. Her voice does nothing but remind me of her betrayal. "Just shut up!" Sweat starts to ooze from my pores. My gut clenches and twists. When the sweat drips into my eyes, I take a moment to wipe it away, a moment that leads to my downfall. Jake lunges and knocks the pistol from my hand. It clatters across the floor and before I can recover, Jake has it pointing straight at me.

"Don't move," he says, as I stare at my own emblem.

"Thorn!" I yell. He has a pistol, but even from this distance I can see it shaking as he trembles with fear. Useless.

"Not one step closer."

There is no point waiting for Thorn to save me. I get to my feet and hold out my hands signalling my defeat. "What are you going to do now, Jake? Shoot me?" I want to lunge at him, force him in hand to hand combat, but my own pistol pointing at me stops me in my tracks. "Go ahead, do it. Shoot the son of the Governor. That will be a sure way to put everyone here in even more danger, and make sure you are hunted like the animal you are for the rest of your life."

Jake lifts the pistol and smacks the handle across the side of my skull. Pain splits across my head as I fall to the ground. I glare up at him and wipe the blood from my cheek. My whole body pulsates, ready for a fight, all previous injuries forgotten.

"Stop!" Willow shouts, her eyes wildly darting between us. "Stop it," she says again quietly.

"You're still defending him?" Jake splutters.

He rams the butt of the pistol into my face again. I'm beginning to see the family resemblance.

“He’s your son!” she yells.

Jake freezes, the pistol suspended in the air, his face etched with shock.

“Liar!” I laugh and it comes out distorted and strange.

“It’s true,” Willow says. “Skylark was pregnant. That’s why she left.”

I can see the hesitation in his face. He believes there is truth to her words. “Don’t believe her,” I say, more to myself than Jake. “You could never be my father.”

The silence is broken by gunshot. The little girl screams. Jake grabs his leg and falls, and I scramble across the ground and reach for my pistol.

“I shot him!” Thorn yells.

I could aim for Jake. I could aim for any of the others in order to get them to do my bidding, but it’s Willow I choose. “Tell him you’re lying.” I grip the pistol harder, willing my hand to stop shaking.

Her lover-boy steps in front of me blocking my aim. I take delight in seeing the state of his face. “Don’t do this Bracken. You don’t want to hurt her.”

He’s wrong. In this moment there is nothing I want more. I bite the side of my lip, drinking in the blood, and using the pain to sedate my rising anger. It does little to help. “How would you know what I want?”

Willow’s small hand wraps around his arm and she pushes him aside until she faces me. “Bracs, you don’t want to do this.”

I bite my cheek again, but it’s doing little to dull my emotions. “Why does everyone think they know what I want? No one knows. None of you know me, not even you, Willow. And certainly not that man you are claiming is my father. I have nothing in common with you, nothing.”

“But I do know you, Bracken. We grew up together. We played together—”

“Yeah, well apparently you’re not the girl I always thought you were.”

She takes a step closer, and I lift my pistol, wary of the affect I know she can have over me. She won’t sway me this time. The pistol is heavy in my hand. “Don’t think I won’t, Wills.”

She takes another step until she is close enough for me to see the flecks of yellow in her irises. I squeeze my eyes hard against her beauty, and the memories of us that are etched so deeply in my mind.

“I’m leaving, Bracken,” she says. “You can either shoot me to stop us, or you can let us go. The choice is yours.”

She reaches across and touches my cheek. For a moment I’m frozen. Her warmth radiates into my body, reminding me of who I once was. The memory of her is faded, but true. It bubbles beneath my skin, struggling to come to the surface. I loved her once. But can I let her go?

“Goodbye.” She says it so quietly I barely hear.

My heart starts to race again, my breath coming out in short, sharp puffs. “Willow stop.”

She ignores me and keeps walking.

“Halt!” I yell, but even my voice is unsure. Every piece of me is trembling. Love and hate dance together. “I mean it, Willow. Stop!” My heart beats fast. Fog clouds my brain. “Last warning.” Sweat drips into my eyes. She looks at me, her face blurred. “Damn you, Willow!”

I close my eyes and pull the trigger. But even as I do, I know it’s too late. She is gone. I have let her go.

## Establishment Council Meeting

“Well, is it true?” Tom Fulton, one of the Establishment Council members, glares down at Falcon and me from his position behind the desk. It’s odd hearing such a name inside the walls of Nuovo, but we are the only city within the Establishment that has the ridiculous naming laws.

We are in my father’s office, attending a meeting called by Falcon, but it’s Tom Fulton who occupies the seat of authority. I don’t meet his eyes and stare down at the floor, my heart racing in my chest.

Falcon splutters and shakes his head. “Of course not! Where did you hear such nonsense?” I can tell he is unnerved. He knows there is tension between Skylark and me, but he’s been too obsessed with finding the Rebels to take any notice.

“So it’s not true?”

“I’m not sure where you are getting your information from, but what we should really be concentrating on is capturing Jake Pierce, not listening to ridiculous stories that do nothing but distract from the real issue.”

“Which is?” Tom Fulton raises one eyebrow reminding me of Officer Yew.

Falcon lets out a frustrated sigh and runs his hands through his thick hair. “We need to change the law to reflect that anyone still on the outside is an enemy of the Establishment.”

Fulton grins slowly, and briefly I wonder if he and Officer Yew are related. They look nothing alike, but their expressions are the same. He is toying with Falcon, enjoying watching him squirm as he feigns ignorance. “And what do you suggest we do with all these people suddenly labelled as outlaws? Bring them inside the city? Place them in prison? The system is

hardly prepared for such an influx of people. What you are suggesting, Governor Falcon, is nothing short of ludicrous.”

“So you're just going to let them away with it?” Falcon yells. He checks himself and clears his throat. “These people have made a fool of us, not to mention the damage they inflicted on my office, and on this city, from which we are only just recovering.”

“Let them away with it? Most certainly not. We will declare Jake and his band of Rebels as outlaws, to be arrested on sight. As for all the others out there, we will tighten up the laws, *slowly* clamp down on them. Destroy them *slowly* so they have no option left, other than to trickle *slowly* into Nuovo.”

“And you think they will do this without a fight?” Falcon says through gritted teeth.

“No one said without a fight.”

“But we can hardly let them inside the city if—”

Fulton holds up his hand. “You really do bore me at times. Enough about this, they are nothing but a small nuisance in the sight of the Establishment. Now, is it true?”

“What? That Jake has a son inside Nuovo?”

“That’s not all I heard.” He cocks his head to one side, his eyes slipping over to me. “I received information that this son of Jake’s is not only inside Nuovo, but that he’s hiding in plain sight.” He feigns a smile. “Bracken, you’re awfully quiet. Is there something you would like to add?”

I swallow the lump in my throat. There is no use in lying now that I know it to be truth, but even voicing the words brings bile to the back of my throat. “It sounds like you already know everything you need to know, Sir,” I say, squaring my shoulders and staring the man in the eye.

“But Falcon does not know.” He looks to Falcon and then back to me, the light catching in his eyes. “And I would like him to know.”

Falcon looks between the man and myself, the pallor of his skin reddening with each word. He’s ready to explode. He’s talked of nothing more than the Rebels and Jake Pierce since their escape. He blames me, of course.

“My mother thought it best not to mention it.” I swallow, and avoid the death stare from Falcon I can feel burning the side of my face. “Something you obviously disagree with.”

“Well, it seems to me that we have a valuable asset on our hands, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I’m not sure Jake Pierce would agree, Sir.”

“Would someone please tell me what is going on here? Who are we talking about? What asset?”

“That asset would be your son. Well, actually... why don’t you tell him, boy?” Fulton looks at me, a slow smile spreading across his face. He’s enjoying my discomfort.

I turn to Falcon, and he looks at me expectantly. “Well?”

I bite down the anger. I bite down the fear, the confusion, and the pain I felt when Skylark told me it was true. I close my eyes to the vision of her tear stained face, her eyes begging me not to tell Falcon. “I am Jake Pierce’s son.”

Falcon laughs, not prepared to take it seriously. When I don’t say any more, when I don’t look him in the eye, and when the satisfied smile splays out on Fulton’s face, Falcon falters.

He shakes his head. “No. It’s just not possible.”

“Don’t you see what an asset we have in Bracken? What father can resist his own son? He is the perfect under-cover agent.”

I look up sharply. “There is no way he would welcome me, Sir.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, Sir, I do.”

“Well I guess we will just have to find out who’s right and who’s wrong.”

The Establishment Council is firm and simple in its instructions. Simplicity is best, Fulton said. It develops the strongest mental bonds. I’m to leave for the outside. I’m to find the Rebels. I’m to get them to trust me. And then I’m to betray them. Again. He seems to think it will work. I know

it won't. I may have been able to fool them once, but it won't happen again. I don't want it to happen again. I'm weary and tired. I'm sick of games.

Falcon is quiet as we take the tram home. He keeps looking at me, searching for something in my features, but I can't meet his gaze. I stare down at the black boots on my feet, and wish I could simply lie down and not get back up. I have been lied to by everyone important to me. Everything about my life I thought to be true, isn't. I smirk inwardly, amused by the irony of Willow saying those words to me not all that long ago. If anyone would understand my situation now, she would. A pang of longing for her passes through me, and I push it away.

"This changes nothing, boy." Falcon's torn voice interrupts my thoughts. He's still staring at me, his eyes flicking over my every feature. "You are still my son, no matter what that bitch says."

I look back down at my boots unsure how to respond. I haven't talked to Skylark since I confronted her, but hearing the venom in Falcon's voice makes me scared for her.

"You will do this. You will find him." His voice is gravel grinding against the cogs of my brain.

"It won't work," I say quietly.

"You will make it work. You will make him pay." Falcon walks over and grips my chin with his fingers, forcing me to look at him. "You hear me?" His fingers bruise my skin as his voice reduces to a cruel whisper. "You will do this. We will make those bastards pay for the way they have humiliated me." He releases his grip and steps back to lean against the tram wall. He crosses his arms and closes his eyes. "You will leave immediately."

I look up, startled. "But I can't—"

"You will."

I stop talking and our eyes meet, both shadowed with anger, and his a reflection of my own obsession.

"We are heading to the gates now."

"I need—"

He silences me with his hand. "You don't need anything. You are a Mudder, you hear? You eat, breathe, and drink Mudder." He reaches down

## BOY IN UNIFORM

and yanks the ciid from my wrist. “Say I cast you out. Say you are no longer one of us. Do me proud, my boy.” He clamps my shoulder with his hand as the doors slide open. It’s a threat more than a comfort.

I look straight into his eyes and wonder if he can see the hatred boiling. Everyone has betrayed me. I have no family.

Falcon reaches inside his shirt and pulls out my pistol. I’m surprised, as I thought I had lost it in the aftermath of the Rebels escape. He shoves against my chest. “Don’t forget who raised you.”

I take the pistol and walk away.

## Gates of Nuovo

Wire fencing encloses the Protected Area as I walk the lonely path away from Nuovo. Behind me, the dome stretches high into the air and light glints off its panels, reflecting the dimming sun. But I don't turn around and look at it. I walk away, leaving it all behind.

The pistol is warm and comforting in my hands. It's familiar. It's part of me, of who I have become. I turn it over in my hand, watching the metal change colour with the sun's rays. The emblem burns red in my vision, even when I look away.

I walk alone. Nothing on my back. Nothing to remind me of who I am, of who I was, but this pistol in my hand. I hold it out to the side, relishing in its comfort, before tossing it away.

Keep an eye out for the sequel to be released in July 2015

## Girl Beneath Stars

To learn more about the author please visit:

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