

A graphic featuring three raised fists in a light gray color. The central fist is the largest and is positioned behind the text. Two smaller fists are positioned on either side of the central fist, slightly lower. The fists are stylized with white outlines for the fingers and knuckles.

NINETEEN

A HERO'S RISE

By Erin Jay Moyer

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NINETEEN

Throughout my life, I've read many books about how human civilization would come to an end and how all the great cities of the world would come crumbling down. Some spoke of a huge war where we would all blow each other up, others of insects and plagues that would wipe out all of humanity. My favorite to read is the zombie apocalypse theories, where hordes of mindless flesh-eating zombies begin consuming all of humanity. The thought makes me laugh, especially seeing as how we now have zombies walking around with us. Our zombies are definitely mindless and can move slowly just like the ones in the numerous stories I've read, but our zombies are still human. Shells of humans really. All addicted to the same extremely potent drug that was released in an attempt to wipe out the remaining poor.

Every apocalypse horror story I've read from these old texts has been way off base. If only they recognized the true evil that would erase the power of the United States. Then... well, they probably still wouldn't have done anything to stop it. The zombies we have are far from the beings responsible for the United States being ripped apart. The one thing none of the apocalypse stories talked about is the real reason for our

downfall. Money. Money is the cause of all this chaos, or so that's the story the old folks tell. Right now it's hard to imagine that some type of colored paper is what started all this fighting. Even harder to believe are the rumors of what the officers used to be before they took control. The officers, the most violent, selfish...

"Nineteen."

...murderers running around in this wasteland. If you ask me, the officers are far worse than anything else that is said to be a threat. Worse than the zombies by a landslide and definitely worse than the stories of the supposed military who are said to be protecting...

"Nineteen, snap out of it! Stop zoning out! Get your head out of that book and come help me, ya punk!"

Startled out of my daze, I look up and about ten feet in front of me is Natalie with her weather-beaten black hair struggling to drag Tank's bag up the stairs. Tank's green bag is nearly as big as Natalie and weighs just as much she does. Natalie is my height at somewhere around 5'9" or at least that's what we've been led to believe. It's kind of hard to guess our heights when we've never come across a measuring tape of any sort. Natalie has a fuller figure than most of the girls we come across—not big by any means, but she has a little meat on her. Her eyes are light blue and, as always, I get caught looking into them and forget the reason I started talking to her in the first place.

"Don't just stare at me! Get off your butt and help!"

"Okay fine. I'm coming. It's just, there's just not much daylight left to read. I got caught in the moment."

I jump to my feet, drop my book to the floor, and walk over to the dirty brown stairs of the hotel. Natalie, already partially up the stairs, has the top end of the bag in her hands and motions me to grab the bottom. I

squat down, grab the bag with both hands, and stand back up as we begin climbing the stairs.

"This thing weighs a ton. What the hell does Tank keep in here?" I ask

"You know Tank, he always says he's too big to hide. He feels it's necessary to lug around every possible thing he thinks he can use to fight. Besides, it's Tank. This is light for him."

"Hmm... so in that case, what's he got in here to use against you?"

"Oh shut up!" Natalie rolls her eyes at me.

Reaching the top of the stairs we swing into the first room we see. We drop Tank's bag next to the bed where the rest of our belongings are piled. Aside from Tank, our group tends to keep a relatively small amount of things with us at all times. It sucks when you want to entertain yourself, but in the long run it keeps you alive. It's much easier to fight or run when all you have is a backpack and weapons. Our group is constantly on the move in order to avoid attracting attention from scavengers and officers. We move to new locations daily while staying on the outskirts of officer patrols and trying to remain near hunter trade routes. Today, we ended up in this beat down hotel.

Looking around it seems that the dirty yellow walls of this hotel are slightly better than the puke green ones from yesterday's building. This room doesn't smell of mold like the other building either, which is a huge plus. The sun is shining in through a singular inoperable window on the far side of the room. It has already started to set and soon enough it will be too dark to do anything but sleep. My stomach starts growling. Hopefully, the others get back from their venture to get food soon so I can eat. We all pretty much suck at hunting so we rely on trading scavenged items to people who hunt in order to get food. We can aim and

shoot just fine—it's the finding and tracking of animals that we fail horribly at.

Nearly all of us traveled with companions or families that were survivors from the inner-city areas. I personally can't remember a time when it was easy to find food. Some of the older people I've come across have said that a long time ago, food in the cities was easy to attain. They talk of massive trading envoys that sold meats of every kind. They even talk about having an abundance of packaged and canned foods throughout the city. Now, most of the trade routes have vanished and the only packaged food I've seen has been in magazines. Since none of us can hunt, the best chance we have to not starve is to keep tabs on locations known for having hunters. Luckily, most hunters are usually willing to barter meat for ammo, weapons, and other scavenged items.

A little earlier in the day, we split our group into two smaller groups of five: one to go search for hunters and the other to hold down our temporary home for the night. The group that went to search for the hunters was being led by Kai. Thanks to a week's worth of bad luck scavenging, they ended up taking a large supply of our ammunition to trade for food. Earlier today the ammo was hard to part with, but as the night grows closer and my stomachs growling gets louder, I'm happy to trade for food.

Murmured shouts can be heard outside as the rest of our group returns from their venture in the wasteland.

"Sounds like Kai's back!" Natalie says, rushing towards the window.

"Finally, I'm starving!"

Right at that moment, the excitement of our approaching group is cut short by a loud gunshot from what must be a high caliber rifle. An unfamiliar voice begins shouting immediately following the gunshot.

Neither of us can make out the words clearly. Natalie and I look at each other and nearly instantaneously make a beeline for the stairs. The closer we get to the bottom of the stairs, the clearer the words outside become. By the time we hit the last step, it becomes obvious who is shouting.

“Officers!” we say in unison

My heart drops through my chest the moment the realization of what is about to happen sets in. Both of us scramble to get to where we had left our weapons. Natalie turns around and runs right back up the stairs. I run to the spot where I was reading. There my green and black AR15 assault rifle is sitting against the wall aimed toward the ceiling. I snatch up the gun with my left hand and look for a strategic place to position myself. Gunshots begin tainting the summer air. It sounds as if every person in our group is outside unloading their weapon. Seeing as how there are only five of them, it’s obvious that our group is in the middle of a shootout with the officers. To my right is the dark brown front counter of the hotel, and to my left, the front door.

I run towards the counter, jump, plant my right hand on the counter, and pivot so I land facing the door. I prop my gun on the counter using the clip for balance, place one hand on the shaft of the gun in order to aim and the other hand on the handle with a finger on the trigger. With the butt of the gun pressed into my shoulder, I tilt my head to the right until I feel the cold plastic of my AR hit my cheek. I stare out of the scope and begin aiming the crosshairs at the top of the front door. My heart is pounding out of my chest and a sick feeling begins resonating from my gut.

I have never killed an officer before and thanks to the trade of ammo for food earlier, I only have fifteen bullets in the twenty-five round clip of my rifle. My back up, which is on me at all times tucked in my pants and

secured by my belt, is my dull black nine-millimeter handgun. Unfortunately, it has a whopping two bullets left in the clip. On the bright side, there are no windows at the front of this hotel, there's just a big brown door. I have to try and calm my breathing in order to improve my accuracy. If I have to kill an officer that comes through that door, I have to hit him in the head as soon as he opens it or I'm as good as dead. I want to believe that my friends outside will survive this shootout, but the obvious odds are that they won't. Officers always have bulletproof vests making them extremely difficult for normal scavengers to kill. A headshot is one of the only quick ways to take them out. To land a head shot with a handgun, you either have to have amazing luck or amazing aim. Even if you have both chances are you're not going to survive long enough to use either skill set to your advantage.

The gunshots cease. Silence. Fear shoots through me as the handle of the door is turned and the door begins opening. A face enters the view of my crosshairs, I squeeze the trigger once and then again immediately just in case I didn't hit my target the first time. The body drops in the doorway propping the door open. Was it an officer I shot? I pulled the trigger too fast... please tell me I didn't shoot one of us! I open both eyes and pull my head away from my rifle to inspect the lifeless body on the floor. An officer. I exhale in relief.

"You little shits! You dare take on the officers! You're going to pay, pay with your lives!" shouts a drunken sounding officer from outside the door.

A few ruffling noises from outside mixed with some taunts and then silence again. To the left of the door I notice Natalie standing on the stairwell, her gun pointed out in front of her. Had she been there the whole time? Waiting with me, waiting with me just as scared, waiting to

try to kill the intruders before they killed us? Of course she was. After all it's Natalie. She's no stranger to violence, none of us are. She looks at me as if waiting for a signal to move. It stays silent for what seems to be an eternity. I don't know if it's out of the fear of another trying to barge in or the shock from killing my first officer, but I don't move.

Funny, I'm acting as if killing that officer is different from killing the zombies or the scavengers that tried to kill us in the past. Officers were complete douche bags in my mind so why the shock. Every other killing that had taken place throughout my life had been out of necessity to survive and this had been no different. Maybe it's because he was so easy to take down. After all the horror stories I've heard of them murdering anyone or thing who entered into their territories without permission. After all the stories of the rapes and raids the officers were responsible for throughout the collapse. After everything, they're just as easy to kill as the rest of us are. Breaking the silence of the room I hear Tank's fifty cal go off.

E M E R G E N C E

Tank told me his mother taught him that there were three hundred and sixty-five days in a year and that to keep track of how old you were you just had to keep track of the days. He said that ever since he was a kid, he had been making tally marks in a notebook and adding them up. He is the only time keeper within the group and for the most part, the only one that cares enough to do so.

I asked him once why he continued such a pointless tradition. He replied that it was to hope for a time when it would matter. The rest of us are focused on trying to survive rather than how old we have become. I actually try to avoid paying attention to my age. Why tally up the years when all you'll end up doing is counting down until the day you die? According to Tank, no one lives much past the ripe old age of thirty these days anyway.

Tank is the biggest member of our group. He told me once that his size was the reason for teaching himself how to become a sniper. Out of fun I occasionally give him crap about being soft and hiding in the shadows. He always laughs at me and tells me I'll thank him the day the enemy standing next to me is ripped in half by his fifty caliber rifle.

"That was Tank," I say, finally breaking the silence of the room.

"That means he didn't get caught in the shootout," replies Natalie.

With my gun still trained on the door, I stand up and walk around the counter towards Natalie in the stairwell. When Natalie and the stairs are only a few feet from me, I turn to my left and peer into the hallway behind the stairwell. I motion for Natalie to follow as I begin walking around the stairwell into the hallway. We've worked as a team long enough to understand each other without having to talk. Without a word, she follows me.

The hotel is set up in an L shape so that the hallway we were now entering went straight, and then branched off perpendicularly in another straight line. At the end of the second hallway would be the back door of the building. The silence we are moving through has me on edge. My heart races faster after each brown door that we pass. At the end of the hallway, my adrenaline glands go nuts as I anticipate turning the corner and ending up face to face with an officer. I whip around the corner as fast as I can ready to shoot, but there is no officer. Refocusing my eyes, I can see light shining out of a hole the size of a grapefruit in the door at the end of the hallway. Pointing at the door, I look at Natalie to see if she has the same reaction as me.

"Upstairs?" I ask.

"Yeah," she returns with a nod.

Tank's gun is what made that hole in the door. If he was shooting at officers that were trying to enter the building, Logan is also nearby. Logan would have entered the building on the second floor as Tank guarded the first. We backtrack to the top of the stairs. As we pass the door to the room used for our base of operations, I stop Natalie. If Logan is on the second floor, it's better we get his attention from far away.

"Logan," I whisper.

I wait patiently for a response, but there's nothing. Maybe that wasn't loud enough. Now taking a chance, I say it out loud perfectly clear.

"Logan."

The sound of metal clanging against metal resonates from down the hall.

"Give away my presence, why don't cha," we hear as Logan turns the corner at the end of the hallway.

"I'd rather that then end up with a knife in my throat," I say with a hint of sarcasm.

According to Tank's calculations, we have operated as a tightly knit team for three years. Most of the time we work well together. Logan, Tank, Natalie, and I, have developed a specific way of operating which utilizes each other's strengths. The entire time we have been a group, we have been led by an older man named Kai. Kai was never really elected our leader. The choice to follow him was more of a natural evolution of sorts as he was the reason we came together in the first place. He had approached each one of us by saying that there was a power in numbers. That we would stay alive longer together. He was right. I was still alive at the moment and I had managed to kill at least one of the officers attacking us.

We meet Logan half way down the dimly lit hallway. I can see him grinning ear to ear with jagged edged knives in each of his hands. He must have killed one of the officers or he wouldn't be grinning so wildly. Logan was a good head shorter than both Natalie and me, but his size only added to his demeanor. His jaggedly cut curly black hair in combination with his dark brown eyes and wickedly large smile always gave

off a strange sense of warmth. His personality however tends to be much colder than his look.

"I thought you two were goners when I heard all the shooting."

"We're not quite that easy to take out. Nineteen here killed an officer as soon as they tried to come through the door. And if he woulda missed, you better believe I was waiting to take out any bastard that made it in!"

I remain silent, watching Natalie brief Logan on where we had been when the shooting started. Drifting off, I begin remembering when Logan and I had first met. Kai had recruited Logan just before the group encountered me. I was still trying to decide whether to accept Kai's proposal or not when Logan approached me. I'm not sure why he decided to approach me the way he did, but it ended up swaying me.

He told me that he was also a loner before he had met Kai. He said he had been on his own ever since an officer attempted to rape his sister. He and his older sister were out scavenging a few blocks from what they considered to be their home when an officer spotted them. He didn't shoot, didn't say a thing to them. It seemed as if the officer decided to ignore them completely. The next thing they knew, the officer had snuck up on the house they were scavenging in. He rushed through the door and began demanding to know what they, the scum of the collapse were doing. He had gone on to ridicule them and tell them that everything left in the collapse was officer property, even the people. The man looked at Logan's sister and told her that she was his. He then kicked Logan in the chest causing him to fly into a wall. He punched Logan's sister in the face, pulled out a gun, and told her to undress.

Logan had landed next to a large chef's knife. In defense of his sister he instinctively grabbed the knife and lunged onto the officers back. With all his might he plunged the knife into the right side of the officer's neck.

EMERGENCE

The gun went off as the knife pierced the officer's throat, hitting Logan's sister in the face. The officer dropped to the floor gasping for air and choking on his own blood.

A few moments later, the officer lie motionless in front of Logan's sister. While sobbing Logan tried shaking his sister awake. After calming down enough to grasp the situation he got up and ran to get the rest of his family. As he approached his families' location, he saw officers on all sides. The woman he referred to as his mother was attempting to flee from the officers and was shot mid run. Logan turned around and ran back to the house where his sister and the officer lay. He wiped down the knife and slowly removed it from the officer's throat.

Logan told me that although he was scared out of his wits and completely alone, that he had managed to do what was needed to survive. He said that it didn't matter whether we wanted to be alone or not, that people like us tended to pick the route best suited for survival.

"Nineteen you hear that? Tank got one at the back door and Logan here crept up on another that ran upstairs."

Looking at Natalie, slightly lost, I said, "Yeah, I heard. Good job. Are there any left?"

"Not in the back," Logan replies.

"Good. Let's wave Tank in and figure out where to go from here. We can't stay the night now that the whole neighborhood knows we're here."

"Okay," both Natalie and Logan say as they head down the hallway. That's weird. They just left without suggesting an alternative.

"Whatever," I mutter to myself.

Back in the room looking out the window, I can see that the sun is getting closer to setting. I really hope Kai survived. He's a good guy. He transformed us into something more than just survivors of the collapse. I

don't think Kai knows how much he's done for our group. Before meeting Kai I was just going through the motions trying to survive. I didn't really know what living meant.

After I joined, I found out that nearly everyone within the group had entered with someone else they knew. Natalie had joined with Tank, as they had been companions before Kai met them. Kai himself, who was responsible for starting the group, had his little sister Reika to fall back on. The other four who made up our ten-person group had all joined together after running into Kai while scavenging. This meant Logan and I were the odd ones out. Maybe that's why Logan told me about his past that day. He didn't want to be the only loner in the group.

"Look at this guy. Daydreaming again. Always lost in some other dimension," comes Tank's booming voice.

Looking back from the window, I see Tank walk into the room nearly hitting his head on the frame of the door. Tank has long dark brown hair, dark brown, nearly black eyes, and an authoritative demeanor that gives him the persona of a stone cold killer.

"Ha, I was just planning, that's all! It's good to see you're still alive and kickin'," I say in reply.

"Yeah and he's not the only one," Natalie says, coming in behind him.

Next into the room enters a girl with frayed black hair, slightly shorter than Natalie, possessing a petite figure that is hard to make out through the grey baggy jumpsuit she is wearing. Her big black eyes lock onto mine as she enters the room with her puffy lips and a face that is completely devoid of emotion.

"Reika?" I say half in shock.

That's right—she went with Tank and Logan to scavenge. How could I forget.

EMERGENCE

Reika nods still showing no emotion.

Feeling stupid I blurt out, "I'm glad you're safe."

"Enough chit chat. What the hell are we doing?" asks Tank.

"Let's take whatever we can from the officers and get out of here before more come after us," I say to the group.

Immediately, everyone grabs their bags from the floor and readies themselves to leave.

Then, as if reading my mind, Tank says, "Me and Natalie will head towards the back of the building to grab what we can from the officers there. Then we'll head to the front to regroup with you and head out."

"Sounds good," I respond, nodding my head.

Natalie and Tank head out the door leaving Logan, Reika, and I in the room. I grab my backpack, slide my arms through the loops, and pick my gun up from the wall I had leaned it against.

"Let's go," I say as I start walking out of the room and towards the stairwell.

Reika and Logan follow my lead. We head downstairs to the front door where the officer I shot lay lifelessly in between the door and the doorjamb.

Pulling the door open and off of the officer's leg allows us to see the rest of his body. The officer lies flat on his back in a pool of his own blood. Logan reaches down and grabs the berretta that dropped out of the officer's hand. He ejects the clip and inspects the contents inside.

"Only two rounds left," he says.

"Let's figure out how to get that vest off of him," I reply while stripping out of my backpack and setting both it and my gun against the wall to the left of the door.

Reika steps over the body and heads outside to keep watch. Logan and I begin fidgeting with the vest. We loosen two straps on either side of the officer's torso. Looking at the shoulders of the vest, we realize the only way to get the vest off is to hoist it over the officer's head.

"We're going to have to prop him up" I say to Logan.

"Yeah, this is gonna create a mess. Sure you wanna do this?" he asks.

"I know. It's gonna suck, but if it saves one of us, it's more than worth bearing."

Crouching over the officer's torso, Logan grabs his right shoulder as I grab his left. After a count of three, we pull the torso of the body to an upright position. Still crouching, I move around to the backside of the body, cringing as I step into the pool of blood. Just remember these assholes tried to kill us—he got what he deserves. I reassure myself in an attempt to prepare myself for what will come next. I look up from the pool of blood around my feet to focus on the body. The first thing my eyes meet is blood soaked wording on the back of the vest that reads POLICE. I can't believe that at one time these very men were sworn to protect citizens from the wrongdoings of other individuals.

Regaining my composure I look at Logan and manage to muster up the word, "Ready?"

He nods and raises the officer's arms. I grab the vest at the shoulders and begin wriggling it upwards. Once the bottom of the vest has reached his head, Logan lets go of his arms and I yank the vest up as hard as I can. As the vest comes loose the man's body drops toward the ground like a brick. Instead of hitting the ground, his head lands on my lower thighs and his back leans against my legs. An immediate pang of disgust shoots through me and I jump backwards to get the body off of me. His

head hits the ground with a plop. I drop the vest and begin searching for a place to throw up.

Amused, Logan says, "I told you it was going to create a mess."

I manage to croak out, "Okay one down. Let's see what else we can find before we leave."

I pick up the bullet proof vest and walk towards Reika, whose eyes have not left the street. Standing next to her, I realize what she's staring at. Seven bodies lay scattered on the weed-riddled pavement. Two of the bodies belonged to officers. A few feet to the right of them lay the other five members of our group. One of the five is Kai, Reika's older brother. My heart sinks as my eyes focus on his lifeless face.

Grabbing the vest from me, Reika looks directly into my eyes and says, "I'll check him."

She walks into the street, stepping over the other bodies of our group before stopping at Kai. If I didn't know any better, I would think she was fine. She put on such a good show of being emotionless. But I do know better—besides, I could see it in her eyes. One of the few things I pride myself at being is empathic. In this world it might not be very useful, but the one thing I have on other people is my ability to pick up on emotions long before anyone else has caught on.

"Let's search the other officers first? Get the vests?" I say to Logan, who is now at my side.

"Let's do it. You done throwing up though? Sun's about to be completely gone. We don't have time to deal with your weak stomach," he says, smiling his wicked smile at me.

"Shut up, just 'cause I don't dissect people as a hobby!" I say jokingly back to Logan.

We walk towards the other officers.

"You guys are slow. How did me and Natalie finish before you three? There are only two of us," Tank shouts at us from the front of the building.

"Yeah, but you're the size of the three of us put together," Logan shouts back.

"Go help Reika since you're so fast, ya giant!" I shout.

"Whatever ya midgets! I'll help her but only so we can get the hell out of here before reinforcements come looking for us."

Tank and Natalie head over to help Reika gather useful items from the bodies of our old group. Moving much faster than before, Logan and I are attempting to shake the vest off of the second officer when we hear a voice. I look in the direction of the sound and end up falling backwards onto my butt. I drop the vest, grab the nine from under my belt, jump up, and begin walking towards the sound.

Logan, having a similar reaction, has knives in both hands and is cautiously walking in the same direction. About ten feet from us are two grey ATVs. The voice seems to be emanating near the ATVs but as we draw closer it stops. I exchange confused glances with Logan as we continue our approach. Two feet from the ATVs, the raspy male voice erupts again.

"Charlie! Come in, Charlie. Will you guys stop foolin' around and answer your damn talkie already."

Talkie? Walkie-talkie! I've only read about walkie-talkies in books. Standing next to the ATV, my eyes scan the vehicle trying to figure out what one might look like.

"Fine, screw it. I hope you idiots get rolled by a group of zombies."

EMERGENCE

I follow the sound to its source. The antennae I thought was part of the ATV is not actually attached to the vehicle. I pick it up and motion to Logan.

"Found it."

"I'll search the other ATV" Logan replies putting his knives away.

I tuck my gun and open the crate at the back of the vehicle. A strong whiff of alcohol fills my nostrils. The crate is filled to the brim with empty bottles. I slowly sift through the bottles eventually finding two boxes of ammo. One is filled with forty caliber rounds and the other with nine-millimeter rounds. I grab the boxes and bump into Logan, not noticing that he had returned.

"I found some fifty cal and seven six two rounds," Logan says.

Unfortunately, neither of us found any two two three rounds for my AR, but this will help keep us alive. I show Logan the two boxes I found and we walk back towards the vest I dropped. Logan picks up the vest and we head over to meet the others who are making a pile of supplies.

"Okay, what do we got and how are we keeping it," I ask Tank on approach.

"Well, we got two vests, two forty cal handguns, and an AK47 from the officers in the back." Tank replies.

"I managed to salvage a good deal of food, two nines, some knives, and a rifle." Reika adds.

I explain what Logan and me found and show the group the walkie-talkie that came from the ATV. As a whole we managed to gather enough bulletproof vests for each one of us to have one. This event yielded some of the most valuable items we have ever found. It also resulted in the largest loss of life our group has experienced since we began traveling together.

Traveling mostly alone before meeting the group, I had grown fairly accustomed to watching others lose their lives. Each time I had been traveling with an individual that died I had viewed it as beneficial. I had never allowed any real attachment to others. If the person I was traveling with died, it left me with more supplies. I had grown accustomed to using logic in order to overcome any feelings of loss I had. The more items I had at my disposal, the higher my chances of survival would be—or at least, that's the conclusion I used to come to. This time, however, I wish Kai had still been with us. I would trade all of these bullet proof vests for him to be here leading our group. It's stupid, it's emotional, but Kai taught me a lot about actually living. He had taught me that simply surviving wasn't enough, that I needed to look for reasons to truly live in order to warrant fighting for life.

"HEY! YOU THERE!"

A yell emanates from behind me in the direction of the ATVs.

I draw my gun and turn around. Heart rate raising, I desperately scan the street for the individual responsible for shouting.

"Don't shoot! I just want to talk! I saw what you did!"

I hear as my eyes struggle to focus on an individual on the opposite side of the street a few buildings down.

I look at the others, wondering if it is a trap aimed at getting the supplies we had just attained. If it was, he wouldn't have warned us. He would have just attacked while we were talking.

"Tank, I need you to cover me," I say.

"No way. You don't know who that guy is or what he wants! We should just get the hell out of here while we can," Natalie says in opposition.

"Okay," says Tank, glaring at Natalie.

EMERGENCE

I don't understand why Tank was glaring at Natalie in approval of my decision. I half expected the entire group to object.

She backs down, muttering, "Fine get yourself killed".

I put my nine away, grab the AK out of the pile, and begin walking towards the man.

"Meet me in the middle!" I shout at the man.

In the middle of the road just past the ATVs, I meet the mysterious man. He has long peppered hair and a very scruffy gray beard. He is a little taller than me with black eyes and meets me unarmed.

"One got away, so there's not much time to talk. I will make this brief. My name is Fox. The group I'm traveling with is on a mission to take out the officers HQ in this area. We were heading to a strategic location when we heard all the gunfire and decided to check it out. We arrived in time to witness your team take out the remaining officers and watched as you scavenged supplies from them. You need to find a new place to set up camp for the night and we happen to know of a safe location to do so. Bottom line is that we could use the extra help and want you to come with us."

Trying to decide whether or not he is being truthful, I notice that he is wearing a uniform of some sort. He has a dark green bulletproof vest on that has a large black R spray-painted on the front of it. On his hip there is a knife and what appears to be a walkie-talkie. His clothes don't seem nearly as tattered as the scavengers I normally encounter.

"Who are you? Who are you working with? And why would you need our help if your group is already prepared to take on the officers?" I rattle off a few questions, trying to hide my uncertainty of the situation.

"We have to get going if we want to continue this conversation. I realize you have no reason to trust me and I understand why. Therefore, I'm

NINETEEN

willing to let two of your group bring up the rear with guns trained on me until I can offer further explanation. I promise I'll fill your group in on the way."

If he does have the group he claims, they're probably nearby with guns trained on us as we speak. My gut knots as I contemplate his offer. I take a deep breath. He's right. We don't have time to stand here in the middle of the street talking.

"Okay," I agree.

MODERN REALITY

Did I just tell him okay for the entire group? Who do I think I am? I can't just speak for everyone. I'm not Kai—we don't have a leader anymore and there's no one here to unite us now. For all I know, the others may wish to go their own ways. I can't speak for everyone without their consent, that's wrong. I should give them a choice in their own fate at the very least.

"Give me a few minutes to notify my group of what's going on and to get ready to head out."

Fox agrees and tells me that he will ready his team and wait for us next to the ATVs. I head back to the group and brief them on what just happened.

"You sure he's telling the truth?" Tank asks.

"Fairly sure. They had all the time in the world to attack us. Why go out of their way to talk to us and then attack us? It doesn't add up," I reply.

"No way! I can't believe you just made that decision for all of us. What if I don't want to go with you? I know I don't want to go with some

strange group that magically appeared. We're doing just fine on our own," Natalie snaps at me angrily.

"I know, I'm not Kai. I shouldn't have made that choice. You have no obligation to go with me, none of you do. I made that decision because I thought it was the best choice at the time. You didn't have a say in it, so if you want to split up that's fine," I respond, sounding as serious as I can.

Truth is, I don't want to split up. After all the time we've spent together, I've grown more attached to them than to anyone I've met in this world. Kai's words seem to be echoing through my head. Find something worth living for, because simply surviving isn't really living, and if you're not living, then there's no point in surviving.

The people standing in front of me have become the reason I continue pushing. As ridiculous as it sounds, they are the very reason that my life has become worth living. I once wandered through this crumbling country solely focused on survival. Now I actually find time to joke around and enjoy things that might be fun. Having people that I feel close to has made me live the way Kai always told me I should.

Stepping up next to me, Reika says, "I'm going wherever you are."

"I'm with Reika. Where else am I gonna find someone that understands my love for knifing people?" says Logan, stepping up next to Reika.

"I didn't say I wanted to split up. I just meant... you gotta think about the rest of us before you make decisions like that!" Natalie says, still trying to project anger at me.

"Y'all are always so dramatic. This must be what all those soap operas I've read about are like," Tank chimes in.

I let out a chuckle and then ask, "Does that mean you're coming?"

"I guess I don't have a choice. Someone has to watch out for you guys," he replies.

"Okay, let's get everything together and get moving. I gotta go grab my bag but you guys can start," I say.

I jog to my backpack, grab it and my AR, and then return to the group to help divvy up supplies. Tank takes the ammo for the fifty cal as Natalie lays claim to the AK and the extra rifle. Whenever we were in a fight, the two of them usually ended up together as snipers. Logan, preferring knives, decides he doesn't like any of the choices in blades, but takes a nine as a backup weapon. I take some ammo for my nine and move it to my backpack so that I can grab one of the forty caliber Berettas.

Reika refuses to take anything at first, stating that she had weapons and she didn't need any more. Not having ever seen her in a fight or with a weapon in hand, we convince her to take one of the Berettas. We shove the remaining necessities in Tank's bag, slide on the bulletproof vests, and head to the ATVs.

Fox is standing with four others. They are all wearing nearly identical gear and each of them has a big R painted onto the front of their bulletproof vests. Now the others could see what I meant when I told them that Fox seemed to be much better equipped than we were.

"Ready to go?" Fox says.

"Let's move," I reply.

We head in the direction that Fox appeared from. Fox's men form two rows of two and take the lead. Me, Reika, Fox, and Logan form a line behind them and follow. Behind us, Tank and Natalie walk with their guns trained on Fox.

We walk through a row of buildings, cross a large street, and enter a residential district. Still paranoid of a trap, I keep watch on the men in front of us while Fox talks.

“The officers have always operated as a large unified network, that’s how they managed to take over when the collapse originally took place. They’ve managed to hold power over the years by requesting reinforcements from other areas whenever necessary. Recently, they’ve been utilizing such advantages less and less. The officers used to maintain daily contact with areas in each state via a main hub of communication.

This hub of communications is what my group calls the Officer Headquarters. Each state had one designated command center when the collapse occurred. These centers are what allowed the officers to coordinate and seize control when the military and government fled. This structure of communication and support is faltering as supplies dwindle. I’m sure you’ve noticed that it’s harder than ever to scavenge useful items. The officers aren’t immune to such problems themselves as they rely largely on regulating the flow of scavenged goods to maintain power.

A few days ago, another group of—ahhh—a group of our friends, were attacked by a patrol of officers. The strange thing was that the officers didn’t shoot immediately when they attacked. They told our friends to surrender or they would be killed.”

He hesitated. He was going to stick a name to the other group. His face confirmed the blunder. He’s definitely hiding something. Another group? I’ll bet it has to do with the R painted on their vests. I’ll have to ask him later when he’s forgotten about his slip.

“Officers don’t typically give warnings before they kill you, and our friends found this strange. They attacked the officers and killed every last

one without sustaining a single casualty. Upon searching the bodies they discovered that they had been completely out of ammunition. Thus explaining the strange warning. Longer story short, my friends and I decided to attack the encampment of officers in our area. We took it over without sustaining a single casualty.

After taking control of the camp, we noticed that they had a much larger operation than we had expected. A raven radio was found next to an enormous map of Colorado. The map had each officer encampment throughout the state labeled and named."

"What's a raven radio," I interrupt.

"A raven radio is basically an upgraded version of the ham radio. It utilizes frequencies to communicate in the same manner as the ham did. You can think of it as a ham radio on steroids. The ravens were viewed as revivals of outdated technology. That's probably why you haven't heard of it."

"I've never heard of a ham radio either, but I get the point. How the hell do you know all this?" I say, shaking my head at Fox.

Laughing, he replies, "You see how grey the hair is on my head? I've been around for a very long time. When you have lived as long as I have, you learn a thing or two. And of course, it doesn't hurt to read every book you get your hands on."

Something's off about this man. Yeah, he's old, but he's not telling the entire truth. I've read a lot of books myself, but it's rare to find unscathed books. It's even rarer to find a book based on electronics or antique radios and how they work. His way of talking, it's different than ours—no slang. It almost seems like he's been to a school of some sort. I know he's lying to me, but I can't place why.

"Anyway, as I was saying, the communication between other areas seemed to be key in taking them on. We began listening and waiting for communication from the other locations to verify that they were indeed other officer outposts. Later that night, someone identifying himself as base camp came over the raven. They announced that despite recent requests there would be no shipments of ammunition. At that moment, we knew it was the perfect time for us normal scavengers to strike back. And here we are, heading towards what was designated on the map as base camp," Fox concludes.

We have been walking for blocks while talking. I estimate us to be somewhere near the middle of the residential district. The only light to lead us is that of the half moon. Luckily there are no clouds in the sky to block what little light it offers. Normally while traveling at night we would try to be as quiet as possible. But we can't afford to be quiet right now. I still have to decide whether to trust this strange man or not. It will be hard to see oncoming threats as we walk and I'm sure they would hear us talking long before we reached any. I try to push the worry of an attack from my mind as we continue to walk.

"Okay, why us? Why did you recruit us to help you and not your friends?" I ask.

"They're currently heading to another outpost to carry out an attack in unison with ours."

"Okay. And what about the R's on your chest? What do they mean?"

"They don't mean anything specifically. Just a way to... identify those within our group. Something to keep me and my men from accidentally killing each other whenever we decide to split up."

Something is off about that answer as well, another small hesitation in his speech to think of an answer. He keeps referring to the people with him as his men. It's as if he's always been in charge of them.

"How did you meet? You and your men?" I ask.

"That's too long of a story to tell, and probably similar to the story of how you met your group. Besides, I think we've gone far enough for the night. It's probably better not to push our luck. Let's find a place to settle so you can soak up all the information that I gave you. That way you can decide whether to trust us or not. Having your guns pointed at me is Okay for now, but when we go fight it's obviously not going to work."

"Okay, let's find a place to stay," I reply.

Nearing the end of a block, we decide it would be best if each group took a corner house. My group decides to take the corner on the right and Fox's group takes the corner on the left. Entering any house or building for the first time meant combing through the entire place for threats. We always search for entrances, exits, and secure a specific room where the whole group can sleep together.

Securing a place to sleep is much easier during the day. In most areas, the electricity that powered houses and buildings no longer functions. Indoor lighting is nearly impossible to find and if you manage to stumble across an area with it, chances are that the area is extremely dangerous. Without light to see, one of us was going to have to take the risk of jumping through the door to assess threats.

I walk up to the door listening for sounds from the inside. Hearing nothing, I grab the handle, turn it, and push the door forward. It swings open easily revealing the interior of the house. Normally, I would wait and slowly work my way inside the house, but I'm exhausted. I plunge myself forward into the darkness gun aimed in front of me.

About five feet into the room, I nearly gag as a foul smell fills my nostrils and mouth. Waiting for my eyes to adjust to see what's responsible for the foul smell, I get the feeling I'm not alone. The smell is not the smell of a decaying body you occasionally run into scavenging, it's something else. An extremely potent body odor with so much sweat it has humidified the entire room. As my eyes slowly adjust to the low visibility, my heart skips a beat and I momentarily cease breathing. Shit!

"Zombie Nest!" I shout and begin immediately backpedaling towards the door ready to shoot at the first sign of movement.

I back completely out the front door and off the porch with my gun aimed straight ahead. Everyone except Logan had drawn guns and was aiming at the entrance to the house.

"How many?" asks Tank.

"A lot, but they didn't react."

We knew that just because they didn't move, it didn't mean they weren't going to. Their reaction times could be drastically different depending on the stage of the drug or how badly they were withdrawing. The drug affected everyone using it differently. I've had experiences where I was attacked the second one of the drug induced maniacs saw me. I've also had episodes where they earned the nickname zombie and moved very slowly seemingly unaware of my presence.

"Time to find a new place to sleep," says Logan, whispering.

"Yeah. Let's warn Fox's crew and then head a few blocks away to find a new place," I reply.

Opening fire in the middle of the night with no light was not an ideal situation. Even though I'm more than confident that we could kill the zombies, the midnight gunfire would alert all in the area to our presence. It was in our best interest to avoid the fight.

Still eyeing the zombie house, we make our way across the street to the house with Fox's men. I walk to the front door and knock twice.

"It's Nineteen. We need to talk, and fast."

The door opens and Fox is ushered out by two of his men. I fill them in on the situation and he agrees that it's safer if we move a few blocks away. We head two blocks farther into the residential district, down to the end of a block, and once again choose two corner houses. Paranoid from our last encounter, I take my time as I breach the entry to the house. No foul smell and no feeling of movement. We seem to be okay. The others come in behind me and we do a search of the house to ensure no threat is missed.

"Looks like we're okay. Who wants first watch?" I say as my eyes burn from exhaustion.

No matter how safe the location, at least one person has to stay awake to guard us while we sleep. We switch off from person to person throughout the night so that everyone can get a fair amount of sleep. With Kai, we were all guaranteed a good night's sleep. Sometimes a few of us would even make it through the night without being awakened to take over. Now with only five left in our group, the amount of sleep we would get would be reduced.

"I'll take it," says Reika in a monotone.

"No way!" snaps Natalie in response.

Before I can get a word out to question Natalie's issue, she launches into a full-scale speech of why Reika shouldn't be the one to take watch.

"No offense Reika, but none of us have ever seen you kill. Or even get in a fight for that matter! Can you even fight? Do you even know how to shoot?"

Reika remains completely silent. I'm sure if I could see her face it would be just as devoid of emotion as always. If there was enough light to see her eyes however, I might be able to see some hint of reaction to Natalie's attack.

"For all we know she doesn't even know how to defend herself. How's she going to defend us? Scare the enemy to death with her silent emotionless face?" continues Natalie.

At that moment, without saying a word in defense, Reika walks out the front door.

"Reika is Kai's little sister. You really think he didn't teach her how to fight?" I say to Natalie, irritated by her unwarranted attack on Reika's character.

"How can you trust her? She doesn't even look like Kai! How do we even know she's his sister? There's no way we can trust her just like that! We didn't survive by being naïve! It would be stupid to let her take first watch, or any watch at all for that matter!"

"Really?" I say in the most sarcastic tone I can muster up.

Anger is now rising in me at the pointlessness of Natalie's argument.

"Really Natalie, you're criticizing her for not looking like Kai? I thought you had at least some real reason behind bashing her, but to say she doesn't look like him so we can't trust her? That's ridiculous! Do you look like Tank? I know you're not brother and sister and you don't necessarily claim it, but you two have acted like it since the day I met you. You grew up here in this fucked up world together protecting each other every day! Does that not make you close enough to be brother and sister? I know it's every man for themselves here, but do the last three or four, or however many years we've spent together not mean anything to you?"

"Three," Tank mutters.

I continue tearing into Natalie completely ignoring Tank.

"Just because Kai isn't here, doesn't mean we simply fall apart! I gave you the opportunity to walk away when we joined Fox. We're either a group or not. We either trust each other or we don't, and if we don't, we have no business remaining a group. Kai vouched for Reika a long time ago, and in one way or another, he vouched for each of us. It was his word that she's his sister and whether they're related by blood or life experiences, his word is good enough for me. Normally, it would be good enough for you too. So whatever you have against Reika, you need to drop it and start looking out for her as if Kai was still here!"

"Ugh. What do you see in her?" Natalie sputters clearly irritated. Then changing her irritation to sarcasm she continues, "Whatever. Sorry, I forgot it's your call fearless leader. Do what you want."

"She's stronger then you think. Give her time. Think about Logan, and me, and who we were when you first met us. Before you trusted us. And I'm not the leader! You make your own decisions," I pause briefly in order to calm myself before continuing.

"Since it's such a big deal, I'll take first watch while you guys get some sleep. If that's okay with you—if you still trust me enough to watch you that is?"

Tank butts in, "Of course she trusts you, we all do ya ass."

"Whatever ya hulk. I'm gonna get Reika," I say walking out the front door.

Outside, I see Reika sitting on the porch step, her black hair glimmering in the moonlight. Seeing her sitting alone causes a flood of memories and an uneasy gut feeling. The feeling I used to get thinking about the next tragic event that I would have to survive.

I take in a deep breath, exhale, and plop down next to Reika. I don't say anything to her. I just sit to show her I'm there.

We sit in silence for a few moments.

"She's right, I'm not really Kai's little sister. He took me in when I was a little kid." She snickers.

"My name isn't even really Reika, it's Vanessa."

She looks up at the moon. Her face for once has sadness written all over it. The same sadness I saw in her eyes earlier when she told me she would take care of Kai's body.

"I was too scared to speak when Kai found me. He told me that if I didn't know my name he'd give me one. Said I looked like a lovely petal or lovely flower standing so silently. That he would call me Reika until I told him otherwise. I never did. I liked the name he gave me, and it helped me forget. I always wanted to tell him what my real name was, just so he would know. But I didn't want him to call me by it so I never did. And now it's too late. I'll never get the chance to tell him."

The memory of my mother's face flashes through my mind, followed by my father's last words. I still don't understand it. The wanting feeling, it's almost like having a craving. I can't understand why I miss or crave the presence of people I can no longer remember. Still it's there, the same feeling Reika now has in her gut, except she can remember everything about Kai.

"A name is something unique only because it represents you. A name doesn't make you who you are. You make the name. I'm sure he would've been interested to know, but at the same time, it wasn't your name Kai cared about. It was you. You were by his side the entire time. That's all that matters." I laugh a little, "At least you know your real name and that Reika stands for something more than just your age."

Back when I first joined the group Kai asked me what my name was. Unlike Reika, I wasn't silent out of fear, I simply didn't know. I hadn't been asked for my name since I was with my parents and had long forgotten it. Tank asked me how old I was. Same as with my name, I had no idea. A name or an age wasn't something required for my survival, and neither had any effect on my life. Tank guessed based on how I looked that I must've been around nineteen. After that, he and Kai decided that they would call me Nineteen until I figured out my real name. Seeing as how I had no idea what my real name was it stuck.

I clear my throat and decide to describe a piece of my life that I hadn't told anyone before.

"My parents, all I remember of them is the last time I saw them. My mother was sick when I was a kid. I think I remember people saying she had got the dysentery, or, something like that. Either way she died when I was really small. Her face is the only thing I can remember about her. Seems like every day the clarity of it fades. At this point, I'm not even sure if it's actually her face."

Reika glances at me and then back at the moon.

"My dad was left to take care of me—at least I'm pretty sure he was. I remember every little detail of the day he died. A small group of us were out scavenging when we heard a loud roar in the distance. I remember my father saying the word 'choppers'. I had no idea what it meant, and to this day, I still haven't figured out the meaning. But he urged us to head back to camp as fast as we could."

Pictures flash through my head of the men and the green outfits they wore. They looked identical to the camo that Fox's men currently wear.

"A few minutes later, I heard a buzzing sound like we were walking by a wasps nest. One of the men in our group suddenly fell to the

ground, his face covered in blood. Across the street from us was a group of three men in green with weapons and equipment I had never seen before. My dad yelled at me. He told me to run as fast as I could away from our camp. He said to wait until just before dark to head back. He was still yelling at me, trying to get me to go when I watched his head explode. I took off running. As I ran, I heard shouts and gunshots, but I just kept running. I tried to do as he said. I found a place to hide and waited until it was almost dark before trying to go back. I had no idea where I was. I was a kid with no clue how to get back home. I remember crying uncontrollably because my dad was gone and I had let him down by not fulfilling his last request."

I stop talking for a moment, trying to think of what else to tell Reika so she would feel like she's part of our group. Before I can think of anything else to say, she starts talking.

"My memories of my parents are a little clearer than yours. I still remember laughs, smiles, and certain little things they used to do for me." She pauses as if deciding whether or not she should continue.

"I was carefree and happy as a kid, right up until the day we walked into a zombie nest. They surrounded us as soon as we came through the door. My father lunged himself at the two who were guarding the door. He created a way for me to escape. My mother fought as hard as she could to keep the others from getting past so I could run. As I ran through the door, I heard the snap of my father's neck. I looked back and saw an addict with strange eyes towering over my father, his hands wrapped around my father's head. I ran from the room and out of the building while listening to my mother's screams. They died saving me, much like your father did for you. Not long after that, Kai found me and took me in."

Reika is stronger than you think. That's what I told Natalie earlier. I didn't know a thing about her then. Only that she had the look of having been through hell and back. The same look Logan carries. And I'm sure if I could see my own face the same look I have.

"I was alone for a while after my father's death. I knew just enough to get by and had the luck of running into people who helped me. I had nothing to offer so I never understood why they wanted to help. I'm sure it was all out of pity, seeing as how I was a kid with no group to travel with. Ironically, everyone that took pity on me ended up getting killed. After I was big enough to fend for myself, I decided to remain alone rejecting anyone who offered help. I didn't want anyone else dying because they pitied me. That was until Kai found me and, in a way, my life started over."

Kai always had a way with words. He always pushed for me to find a reason to live that wasn't just based on survival. He's responsible for changing my outlook on life. He always told me what he felt without sugar coating anything.

I should just tell her the truth, that's what I would want to hear.

"About a week ago, Kai came to me and asked what I thought of you. It was like he knew this was going to happen. He made me promise that I would always watch your back. He said if he was gone, you wouldn't have anyone left to rely on, and, more importantly, that you would need to find a new reason to live. He told me that as long as he could remember, you were his primary reason to live." I pause to give her a moment to think.

"As far as I'm concerned, you're always gonna be one of us. Don't mind Natalie, she's just doing what she always does to test people. I couldn't stick to my dad's last request, but Kai's—I'll keep if it's the last

thing I do. What you decide to do now is on you, but wherever you end up, know that I'll have your back. And remember, it's your turn to carry on Kai's tradition. You have to find a real reason to live."

I get up and head inside, leaving her to think about what I said. I want to give her time to mourn Kai's death in private and to decide if she really wants to stay with our group. She was strong enough to go her own way and tonight would be the night she needed to decide. She was the first volunteer to come with me, but that didn't necessarily mean she wanted to be here. I just gave her a way out and a reason to trust me at the same time.

Waiting for my eyes to adjust to the lack of light in the house, I try to figure out where everyone is sleeping and who might still be awake. Someone to the left of me in the corner of the room is waving me to come over. I can't really make out who it is, but more than likely it'll be Logan. While walking to the wall to sit down next to him, I hear Tank snoring on the other side of the room. Usually it's a safe bet to assume Natalie is lying right next to Tank.

"Tank and Natalie are knocked out in the far corner. I told 'em I'd stay awake till you got back," Logan says, whispering.

"Figured as much. I heard Tank snoring the second I stepped in the room." We both try to hush our laughter.

"A lot of shit went down today but what's up with Natalie? It seems like she's been trippin' on me all day," I ask in the quietest whisper I can manage.

"It's because she doesn't want you to become the leader."

"What?" I say completely off guard.

"She told me that leaders are always the first to die, that they're too busy looking out for everyone else and not paying attention to their own lives."

"So, what's that got to do with me? I'm no Kai, I didn't organize us."

"You haven't figured it out yet? You've been elected."

I start thinking about the day and about everyone's reactions to the things I suggested.

"Why? Why follow me, we're all the same."

"No, we're not. You're a natural leader, just like Kai. You're different from the rest of us. You see things in people before they do. There's times it seems like you know what we're gonna say before we say it. Like you can read other people. You know what I'm talking about, I know you do."

Apparently, I'm not that great at it. I didn't see this coming. I thought something completely different was going on with Natalie. Ha I thought Natalie was jealous of Reika for some reason, or just mad at me and was taking it out on her. I had no clue everyone had been treating me as if I was the leader of the group.

"Okay, so I'm a little different. That's just a skill I have, we all have our own skills."

"And yours is the set to lead. We all see it and we all agreed to follow you."

I shake my head, not knowing what to say. I'm honored but I don't like giving orders. I just step in when everyone's indecisive and suggest what I think is the best choice.

"Look, even just now with Reika, none of us would have gone out there and accomplished what you just did. We would have left her alone and you, you got her to open up so you could see who she really is."

"How do you know I did all that? For all you know she told me off."

"I could hear the two of you loud and clear. There's not really much else going on."

"Yeah I gue..." The door opens. Reika comes in and sits near the door.

"Thanks for the insight. Get some sleep," I whisper.

Logan nods and leans against the wall. I position myself next to one of the two windows at the front of the room. This window should work perfectly as it overlooks part of the porch and I can keep an eye on the street from time to time.

I can't believe they've chosen me as the leader. It seems kind of sudden. They must've agreed that if he died they would follow me. I don't know if I really want the pressure of leading. And Natalie's been giving me crap about every little decision. Why? To try to get me to falter so I don't look like the leader they want? Natalie's way of showing people she cares is usually tough love. But if not me, who? Who would we follow that she wouldn't care about? It definitely wouldn't be Tank, and Natalie doesn't trust Reika. That would only leave Logan. She clashes with Logan more than the rest of us so I don't believe that would fly. I'm still the only logical solution to her dilemma. It's pointless of her to try so why put up the front? I thought she was mad at me for some reason. Not that she was trying to look out for me.

Reika tried not to show it, but today must've been horrible for her. First Kai, then running into the same situation that killed her parents. If Logan heard our conversation, I wonder if the others did too. It might actually be a good thing if they did. Maybe then Natalie would stop sweating Reika about who she is. Zombies, she must hate the things like I hate the idea of the military still existing.

If either the military or the government is still in existence, that would mean one of or both entities are still spreading the drug that all the zombies are addicted to. From what I learned in conversations and various texts over the years, Z was a weapon created and distributed by the government in an attempt to take the fight out of the masses.

Before the collapse the government had a long history of trying to regulate the disbursement of a drug known as 'weed'. Weed was a legal substance that could be purchased at stores or dispensaries throughout the United States.

At the same time the government was allowing weed to be sold throughout the U.S., private corporations began creating synthetic drugs that were aimed at recreational use. These synthetic drugs were marketed as safe alternatives to the harsher, illegal drugs that existed at the time. The 'safe alternative' label, however, wasn't exactly true. The majority of these synthetic drugs were not being regulated. Time and time again, individuals who were high on synthetics were caught on camera hallucinating or attacking people.

At the onset of the financial collapse of the United States, the government released its first synthetic drug, Azure. In an attempt to draw in first time users—or in my opinion, to hook people who didn't know what they were getting themselves into—the government released a form of weed named Azure at the same time. This form of weed was a strain that had the synthetic drug Azure added to it. People who were trying to avoid synthetic drugs were unknowingly ingesting the synthetics under the guise of a new type of weed. Like other synthetic drugs before it, Azure was responsible for inconsistent reactions. Regardless of the numerous reported cases of unwanted side effects, Azures popularity grew.

As the collapse continued the government released a much more potent form of Azure which they named Azure pure. This drug was a much darker blue than the light blue of its predecessor. Its color was far from its only difference. Its name deceptively enticed users of Azure into thinking that this was the purer form of the same drug. However, Azure pure was a different drug altogether. By manipulating the chemical structure of the drug, the government managed to create something that was far more addictive and had far worse consequences for its users.

Nearly overnight, Azure pure replaced all of the previous forms of the drug on shelves. As riots erupted all over America the prices for the drug plummeted. The dirt cheap more potent form of the drug became an irresistible way to escape what was happening. Azure Pure was being used by so many that the name was eventually shortened to Az (pronounced 'as') for convenience.

People I've encountered, especially the older ones, say that the government distributed the drug for free in order to get as many people hooked as they could. Usage of Az caused massive brain damage. With-

draw symptoms were horrendous and made it so that most users sole goal in life became finding more of the drug. For the government this would mean less people organizing to fight against them.

A shadow passes by the window.

"Shit," I whisper to myself.

What was that? I wasn't paying attention. I kneel next to the window and peer out into the street. I squint at Fox's house and see something lurking along the left side of the building. The zombies! They followed us.

My AR in hand, I make a move for the door. As I reach for the handle, Reika stands up and grabs my hand.

"Too loud," she whispers, pointing at my gun.

She's right. If I open fire in the middle of the night, more trouble may head this way.

"Tank has bats in his bag. Watch the door I'll go get 'em," I say back.

"I got this. Just wake the others and get the bats ready."

What does she mean? I'm not going to let her go out there alone. On second thought, she wants revenge—revenge for Kai and most definitely revenge for her family. This is her way of redeeming herself.

"Okay, don't get yourself killed!" I whisper.

"I'll be fine."

Reika pulls something from under her jumpsuit and walks out the door. I can't tell what it is. Maybe she had a bat strapped to her back the whole time.

I run towards the corner of the room where Tank is snoring and shake him from his slumber.

"Zombies are surrounding us. We need melee weapons."

Without saying a word, Tank jumps into action. He pulls his bag out and starts sifting through it.

Natalie, now fully awake and crouching by my side, asks, "Reika?"

"Outside, buying us time," I say in response.

I feel the cold rubber of an aluminum bat grip hit my hand as Tank hands out our defense.

"Get Logan up and ready. I'm gonna go back up Reika."

"I'm up," says Logan walking toward us.

"Get ready then, I'm heading out."

I hope Reika's okay. I jog to the front door, grab the handle, and swing it open. I take a step onto the porch and a dark figure draws my attention. The smell of body odor and Z fills my nostrils. Before I can cock back the bat to swing, the zombie lunges toward me and I feel a warm mist spray my face.

Knocked back by the weight of the zombie crashing into me, I position the bat to swing. To my surprise she hits the floor and her head rolls a foot to the left of her body. Still in position to swing, I stand motionless trying to make sense of what just happened. Looking up from the body I see that Reika is standing in the moonlight. She is holding a sword that is dripping with blood.

"We're secure but there's more skulking around Fox's," says Reika.

Shaking off the shock, I begin formulating a plan.

"Logan, you're with me and Reika. We're going across the street. Tank, Natalie, can you hold the base?"

"Of course," Tank says.

"Alright, let's get these fuckers before Fox's men decide to open fire."

The three of us take off running across the street. I can't believe Reika knows how to use a sword! I was trying to hurry thinking she was in

danger, when in reality she seems to be better prepared than the rest of us. Now in Fox's grass, winded from our sprint, we slow down and decide which way to go.

"I'll take the left. You two take the right?" asks Reika.

After witnessing Reika's abilities with a sword, it's obvious that I'm not needed by her side. She can hold her own.

"Sounds good," I reply as Logan and I begin heading diagonally up the grass to the right side of the house.

Near the corner of the house, we slow down to listen for signs of movement. Logan puts his hand on my shoulder and then motions with his hands that there's someone nearby. We creep a little closer to the corner and I take the lead. I start a countdown with my left hand. Three, two... the creak of a squeaky door from the front of the house interrupts the count and redirects our attention. Logan lets me know through body language that he'll go check it out. He motions for me to go ahead without him.

I watch Logan as he starts walking along the front of the house towards the porch. The sound of shuffling feet from the side of the house is growing closer—it's time to make my move. I take a deep breath, hold it, and then maneuver the corner. About five feet from me, crouching and peering into a window of the house is a very dirty, scrawny woman with blonde hair. Oddly, she's wearing a ripped red mini skirt.

I take slow steps towards her, attempting to get as close as possible without being noticed. A step away from being in range to swing, she turns from the window and stares right at me. Letting out a low grunt, I jump at her and swing the bat as hard as I can. A loud thunk is given off as the bat makes contact with the left side of her head, causing it to

bounce off the window well before she slumps to the ground like a rag doll.

Now standing over her, I press the bat to her temple and take a slow practice swing to ensure my aim. On the second swing I swing as hard as can. Another thunking sound is given off as the bat digs into her temple. There. She won't get back up from that.

"Nice hit!" I hear Logan say from behind me.

Turning around, I see Logan standing with the woman from Fox's group.

"How many left?" asks the woman.

"I don't know. Another member of my group went around the other side. We should meet her and find out."

The woman nods.

"I call the next one!" Logan says, exposing his wicked grin.

We walk along the side of the blue house towards the fence that marks the backyard. As we walk I hear a rustling coming from the back. I look at Logan to gauge his reaction.

"Let's go!" I say as I jog to the fence and climb over it.

On the other side of the fence, I see Reika crouched, cleaning her blade a few feet from the body of another beheaded zombie.

"I just got another two," says Reika, wearing her emotionless face.

"That's one more than us," I reply.

"Is that all of them?" the woman asks as she clears the fence.

"Seems to be," Reika answers.

"Dammit, I really wanted to catch one of 'em for waking me up!" Logan chimes in.

"Whatever wolverine, at least you can go back to sleep now."

"Let's do one more sweep of both houses and call it a night. Where is Fox and the rest of your team?" I ask, starring at the R on the woman's chest.

"Inside guarding the entrances," replies the woman.

"Okay, let's do a sweep and try to get some sleep. I'll head toward the front with Reika. You two okay going back the way we came?"

"Sure," the woman from Fox's group replies.

"Yeah. Maybe I'll get lucky and get to stab something," Logan says.

I jump the fence and nearly fall on my face as I try to avoid the corpse of a zombie on the other side.

"Sorry," Reika says, landing behind me, "forgot to warn you!"

I glance back at the corpse that is laying against the fence.

"Well, at least he's not moving," I say, taking note of the incision stretching from the zombie's upper shoulder to the middle of his chest.

"Yeah, I made sure of that," Reika replies, snickering.

We make our way to the front of the house and meet Logan and the woman from Fox's group on the lawn.

"All clear," Logan says.

"Same," I reply.

We make our way across the street and begin scouting the area around our house. While walking the perimeter of my group's house, we stumble upon another two zombie bodies, one beheaded and another nearly cut in half.

Just before we near the end of our patrol and reach the front of the house again, I look at Reika with a semi-shocked look on my face.

"Damn Reika, how many did you kill?"

"Five," Reika replies with a grin.

That means she killed five of them by herself before we even managed to get one. I knew she had something up her sleeve, but she's much more skilled than I thought. Most people with that kind of skill tend to show off, but Reika hides it for some reason. Maybe she likes to be underestimated. Or maybe she's just been taught by Kai to remain humble.

"Well, it looks like we're good," Turning toward the woman in camo I continue, "Let Fox know I want to scavenge the nest in the morning."

"Okay," she says and then walks toward her house across the street.

"Let's try this sleep thing again?" I say while heading towards the door.

We head back into the house and fill Tank and Natalie in on the events that occurred. A few minutes pass and the excitement from the attack dies down. Everyone migrates back into the positions we were in before the zombie attack. I sit near the window just as before. This time completely focused on the outside, determined not to miss a single sound or shadow.

Time seems to blur and the next thing I know, my eyes are heavy. I slap my head, attempting to stay awake but it doesn't help. Time for me to give it up and pass the watch on to someone more rested. I'll wake up Tank. He should be refreshed from all his snoring. He and Natalie probably got the most sleep out of all of us.

I head to Tank, shake him from his snoring, and let him know that it's his turn to take watch. I'm too tired to look around the room for a comfortable place to sleep, so I jump into Tank's spot, place my head on his bag, and pass out.

INFILTRATION

"One day we'll make them pay for what they did. It's only a matter of time until they get what's coming to them," I hear my father's voice as I fly over a field of tall golden grass.

"Who? What did they do, Dad?" I ask with the voice of a small child.

"Everything," he lets out a sarcastic chuckle, "You'll understand soon enough."

I see a black figure at the edge of the grass and start to fly faster.

"The two, with the government."

I reach the black figure. It's Kai standing in front of a huge beige and silver building with writing on the front. The only letters I'm able to make out are giant red T-E-R above Kai's head.

"The two, they'll pay, and the government, they'll fall!" my father speaks angrily.

I blink. Suddenly Fox and his men have appeared behind Kai. They are fully armed and against the wall of the building.

My father's voice disappears and Kai begins grilling me without moving his lips.

"What are you living for? What's the point? What's your reason?"

Fox, his men, Kai, and the building all disappear, leaving me standing in the field of knee high grass.

"Nineteen," Natalie appears in front of me, calling my name.

"Nineteen."

I see her necklace glimmer in the sunlight.

"Nineteen, wake up ya lazy ass!"

My head pops up off the floor as I open my eyes and see Natalie standing over me. Her necklace nearly hits me in the face as she gives me one more violent shake.

"Okay, okay. I'm up!" I croak out, "What does that mean anyway?" I ask

"What does what mean? Me telling you to get your ass up?" Natalie replies in a less than approving tone.

"No! The symbol on your necklace."

"Oh, I don't know. Probably nothing. It's just something my mom gave me," she responds while holding it out for me to see.

The necklace is silver and gold. The chain and backing of the symbol are silver while the symbol itself is gold. The symbol is a circle that is not fully connected at the top. The incomplete circle leaves a gap where a single line protrudes from the middle of the circle, through the gap, and outwards past its edge without touching the circle itself.

I look up from the necklace into Natalie's eyes and get caught in them. I freeze. I'm at a loss for words, but just before Natalie yells at me again I manage to recover.

"I just had the weirdest dream!"

A confused expression spreads across her face. She pauses as if contemplating something, shakes it off, and yells at me. "What's your dream have to do with us moving? Let's go! Everyone's waiting!"

INFILTRATION

She gets up and heads for the door.

I was too preoccupied with Natalie to notice that we were the only ones left in the house. Usually I'm one of the first awake. I get up from my spot on the floor and see that the only things left in the house all belong to me. Wow, I really must've been out. Tank even got his bag from under my head without waking me up! I feel a helluva lot better than I did last night though. I grab my stuff and walk outside to see both my group and Fox's standing in the middle of the street, waiting for me.

"Ready to go search that Z nest?" Fox asks me as I approach.

"Yeah, let's go see what we can find," I reply.

Logan walks up to me and hands me two sticks of jerky.

"Breakfast."

"Before we go... have you made up your mind yet?" Fox asks.

Crap! He wants to know if I trust him enough to attack the officers. I haven't even given it a second thought.

"I'll let you know after the nest."

We begin walking towards the house where we first encountered the zombies.

I have to give him an answer. The problem is whether or not we can trust him. He hasn't been honest with me about who he is and whom he's working with. Not to mention that the clothes they wear look identical to those of the men who killed my father.

He's knowledgeable about things that I've never heard of. He's also developed an elaborate plan to take down the entire officer infrastructure in this area. No normal group of scavengers would be bold enough to attempt such a thing. I've never met a member of the military, but he has what I would guess the military to be written all over him.

If he is military, what would he have to gain by stringing us along and then killing us? Even if he just needs us for the assault, there would be no logical need to kill us afterwards. Unless they wanted to take our supplies, which wouldn't make sense. We have nothing in comparison to them.

"That's the corner. Let's split up into two groups. One for the front door and one for the back," Fox says, testing the waters.

"We'll cover the front," I say in response.

Tank and Natalie head to the house adjacent to the Z nest and set up on the front lawn to watch our backs. Reika, Logan, and I approach the front door, weapons drawn.

Logan whispers to Reika, "Nice sword," flashing her his wicked grin and a nod of approval.

"It's a katana, but thanks," Reika says in response with a half-smile.

Almost to the front door, I hear what sounds like someone talking. I hold up a finger to notify Reika and Logan that I'm going to try to hear what's going on inside.

I can make out a man shouting, "No response huh? I said where'd your other slut friends run off to? A new shipment of Z came in today but if you want some I need at least two of you! I'm not giving it up for just your worn out ass!"

The man's shouting is followed by a woman's voice, "I'm here! I waited for you! You don't need them—I'll do whatever you want just the way you like it. And then..."

"And then what? You can take all the Z for yourself, ha-ha! You're a greedy little junkie bitch, just like your friends. I said two! I need at least two of you to please me! Plain and simple. If your friends are gonna be

back soon, you can start me off. But no Z until your pal in the red dress comes back to finish the job.”

Okay, I’ve heard enough. I’ll bet the door is unlocked, as they’re waiting for others to comeback. This will be easy. I hold up my hand and count to three on my fingers before I turn the knob on the door. The door opens easily, and as it does, I rush the house with my AR ready to shoot.

“Glad you could join us,” says the officer as I enter the room.

Standing in the corner of the room is an officer with his pants around his ankles and a zombie on her knees. He starts turning to see who entered the room, surely expecting the other zombies. In disgust I take aim at his head and shoot. The bullet pierces his head through his ear and blood spatters on the corner wall. The zombie in front of him tries to scramble for the hallway to the right but is met by Reika’s katana which slices clean through the right side of her neck.

As the body of the zombie settles to the floor, Fox enters the room from the hallway.

“The back of the house seems clear,” says Fox.

“We got a bonus of catching an officer with the remaining zombie,” I say in response.

“That doesn’t surprise me. It looks like the officers made this their private brothel.”

That’s right. Most of the zombies we killed the other night were women. Looking around, there are condom wrappers mixed in with trash strewn about the floor. Several stained mattresses are lined up against each corner of the room.

“Yeah, looks like it. Let’s look for anything of use and get the hell outta here before more officers come,” I reply.

Fox nods in approval and we search the rest of the house.

We uncover nothing of use. It's a good thing that the officer was in the house when we showed up, or else we would be leaving completely empty handed. We take the officer's ammunition and weapon.

"Did you find a talkie on him?" asks Fox.

Logan looks up, "No, we didn't."

"That's strange," Fox says pausing, "Officers usually carry one with them just in case they need reinforcements. I wonder how he got here."

Two of Fox's men enter the room and say they found an ATV on the far side of the house. One of the men hands a walkie-talkie over to Fox.

"Perfect," Fox says with a wide grin.

"At least we found something of use. I'm thinking we should probably move the officer's body to another house. And also move that ATV just in case the other officers show up."

"Agreed," replies Fox, looking at his two men.

"We'll take care of the ATV," his men say in unison before leaving the room.

"I guess that leaves the body to us. Logan, let's move him to the house next door?"

"Sure, why not. You want me to grab you a barf bag first?" Logan says to me, chuckling to himself.

"No. I think I'll be fine, thanks," I say trying not to smile.

I grab the officer's arms and Logan goes for the legs.

"Hold on, I really don't want to see all THAT while moving him," Logan says and then begins pulling the officers pants up.

I lend a hand and together we get the officer's pants back into place. We hoist the body up and slowly make our way to the house next door. Reika breaks the door lock and gets us inside so we can drop the body and leave.

INFILTRATION

It looks like it's time to give Fox my verdict. Both Fox's men and the rest of my group are waiting for us on the front lawn of the zombie house.

As we approach, Fox looks to me and says, "Ready?"

I look around at my group trying to gauge the reactions to Fox's question. This is our last chance to back out and leave his group. Logan has his normal evil looking grin on his face. Reika, as always, is emotionless. Tank gives me a slight nod and smile in acceptance. Natalie is the only odd person out. She is looking at the ground, which more than likely means she's still against it.

Logically speaking, picking a fight with officers in this wasteland is stupid. Natalie is right in that sense. We didn't stay alive by seeking out those in power and attacking them. But what's the point? As Kai always said, just surviving isn't living. Isn't it about time for us to get revenge on these men who killed our loved ones? Isn't it time we stopped living in fear? Before yesterday, I was scared to take on an officer face to face. I could never imagine taking on an entire group of them. But now, after seeing how easy it is to strike back, I almost feel like we owe it to ourselves to take this opportunity.

"Yeah, we're ready. Let's kill these assholes."

"Okay, it shouldn't be too far from here," Fox says as he pulls out a map and points to where we need to go.

After walking a while and seeing Fox interact with his men, I decide that it's the perfect time for me to get a message to mine. I move to the very back of our formation and motion for Reika to take my place near the front. I whisper my thoughts on the situation to Tank. I ask him to make sure everyone is updated with my suspicions so that we are ready to make moves if needed.

We come to a stop at the edge of the residential area. Across the street there are fields of yellow and green plants that stretch to Colorado's Rocky Mountains.

"Just up ahead there's an unfinished air force base. That's where the officers have set up their headquarters. From here on out, we have to pay extra attention to our surroundings. I'm going to give your group a walkie-talkie so you can hear what we hear. We'll use one frequency for ourselves and the other to listen in on the officers," Fox tells us. He continues to show us how to use the walkie and which frequencies we will be using.

Knowing how to use the walkie-talkie and how to communicate with each other while separated will help our attack. As soon as my group understands how to use everything, we continue to walk towards the base.

We change direction and begin, according to Fox, going south. We walk along the perimeter of the housing district keeping the fields on our right.

"You see that building in the distance over there?" Fox points in the direction of the fields.

We all nod.

"That's where we're headed."

"So, how are we going to get the drop on them if there are fields on all sides?" I ask.

"Nobody ever attacks officers. There won't be a single person looking for threats approaching the building."

"Let's hope you're right."

Trying to limit the amount of time the officers have to notice our encroachment, we pick up our pace. About three blocks from reaching a point that is parallel to the base, a voice comes over the walkie-talkies.

"Dave, where are you?"

A few seconds go by without a response.

"I told you to wait for me ya ass! I'm itchin' to get laid too. Pff, asshole! Ya know what, I'll be there in twenty. Let that one with the red dress know I'm on the way."

Apparently he's headed to the Z house. These officers seriously have nothing to do with their time. The ones in the middle of the city have their hands full dealing with other scavengers. Here, I haven't seen a single person other than the zombies since we started heading in this direction. Did they annihilate everything in this area when they set up shop? It's strange that no other groups have ventured out here.

"I think we should go into the neighborhood a block or so to ensure the officer leaving the base doesn't see our approach."

Fox looks back at me, "That's probably a good idea."

We turn left at the next corner and head back into the neighborhood. After walking for a while we reach a block that Fox estimates is close to the base. We return to the perimeter of the neighborhood and pick a corner house to plan our next move.

"Okay, I think it's time to get our game plan straight. Since I've done this before, I'm going to call the shots. That way we all make it out of this alive," Fox says.

Natalie shoots an irritated look at Fox and asks sarcastically, "You've attacked an air force base before?"

"Ha-ha, not exactly. But trust me, I've attacked enough enemy structures to easily prep this attack."

Fox sits down in the middle of the room and begins explaining his plan.

"Since you have a sniper with you, I'm thinking he can stay here. If he climbs on the roof, he can cover our approach and exit of the facility."

We actually have two snipers, but how the hell does he know we even have one. How long was he watching us fight with the officers?

"After he's in place, I figure we can split into three groups. I'll split my men into two groups and your squad will be the third. Each group will approach the building at a different point. The first group will go to the far end of the building and the second group will approach from the middle of the base. Your group will take the side that we're closest to now. The biggest problem we may have is finding an unlocked door that's not being guarded. By splitting up into three groups, the probability of finding an entrance goes up. Once a group makes it inside, the priority will be to help the other two groups in. After that, we pretty much play it by ear. Sound decent?"

"I guess I can't offer a better plan of attack. Except, there will be three of us in my group and two of my men will be staying behind as snipers," I respond to Fox.

"Okay. Your group, your decision. All we have to do now is wait for that officer to..."

The woman in Fox's group interrupts, "Sir, someone is on the move."

"Speak of the devil! Oh... and one last thing before we head out. Introductions. Seeing as how some of us might not make it out of this alive. It's best if you know my group."

Fox begins pointing to each of his men, "The woman whom you've had constant contact with is Lotus. Over there with the lost look on his

face is Clue, next to him with the beer belly is Omni, and the one with the ink all over is Cupid."

"Nice to meet you all," I reply and then one by one introduce our crew to his.

"Now that were all friendly, let's go kill these sons of bitches," Fox says in a very authoritative voice.

"Let's do it," I say as a slight pang of worry creeps up in my gut.

Do I really want to do this? I'm about to go heads up with an entire base full of officers. We can just walk away and let Fox to do the work himself. No, I gave him my word and I told the others that this was what we're doing. I won't back out now, no matter how scared I get.

Tank and Natalie begin to climb up to the roof. Reika, Logan, and I get ready to make a sprint across the street and into the field that borders the base.

"Be safe. I'll be watching ya!" Tank yells to us as he makes it onto the roof.

"Have fun watching us pay these bastards back!" I shout back.

When Tank and Natalie finish setting up on the roof, we sprint across the street. The pavement ends and we hit the prairie-like field without slowing our pace. We run fifty yards into the field before turning left and heading directly towards the base. I see an orange sign and make it the target we head toward. As we reach the chain link fence that the orange sign is attached to, the sign becomes clear. It reads "under construction". We stop in front of the sign to catch our breath.

"That's a huge building. You two sure you're ready to do this?"

"When have you ever known me to pass up a chance to cut up an officer?" replies Logan with his usual grin.

Reika looks at me, smiles, and says, "It's time I dish out some pay-back for what they did to Kai."

I look Reika in the eyes and see a new ferocity in them. I hand my gun to Logan to hold.

"For Kai!" I shout, nod my head at Reika, and hop the fence.

Logan throws my gun over after me and then proceeds to climb over himself. Once all three of us are over, I scan the building for anything that looks promising.

The huge white and beige building has concrete and paved roads on all sides. If this wasn't finished, it must have been damn near close. At the center of the building there is a rectangular set of steps allowing one to walk to glass doors from three different directions. Multiple ATVs are parked at the bottom of the steps. There are several buildings that appear to connect to the middle building. In the far left corner there is a very high tower. I assume it would've been used to help navigate air traffic if the base had ever become operational.

"I think we should try one of the doors," I say, pointing at a white door on the side of the building closest to us.

"Okay," Reika says. Logan nods in agreement.

I look through the scope on my gun to get a closer view the building. Not a single person is standing watch at the front.

"Alright, let's go!" I say as I take off running in the direction of the side door.

I run up to the white door and reach for its solid steel handle. I try pulling, hoping that it will open. The door doesn't budge.

"Shit, it's locked," I say as Logan and Reika catch up.

"On to the next one," Logan replies.

INFILTRATION

With the side of the building providing us cover, we no longer have to sprint. We jog until we reach a green door in the middle of the building. On the door there is white graffiti indicating that the building is officer territory.

The individual or individuals that created this on the door had plenty of time on their hands. The design is quite elaborate. The police badge drawing is done in several shades of white and blue. In the center of the badge there are two smoking guns under the word 'officers'.

I look at Logan and Reika. "What do you wanna bet this ones unlocked?"

"Let's hope so! I'm ready to cut up some pigs," Logan says.

Reika removes the sword from her back without saying a word.

Behind this door is the headquarters for all of the officers in this area--no, all the officers in the state. There could be twenty men sitting around in there. We could be dead as soon as we step foot in the door. Or we could take out this base of operations and enable the people in this area to fight back.

An image of Kai and his speech about living and surviving flashes through my head.

"Fuck it! Let's do it!" I say with my hand on the handle.

I give a tug on the door and it swings open. Logan grabs the door with his right hand so I can take aim with my AR and head in first. I step through the doorway and onto the white tile floor in front of me. Off-white neon bulbs illuminate the narrow hallway which leads to another green door. I glance back at the others and pull out my walke-talkie.

"We've found a way in. Well, maybe," I say over the walkie.

Not waiting for a response, I signal to Reika and Logan to follow me. We move down the corridor towards the door. At the end of the hallway

my heart starts bouncing with anticipation. The walkie goes off with Fox's voice.

"We've just reached our side of the building. We'll be joining you momentarily."

Reaching for the door with adrenaline in full swing, I let out a few words, "For Kai."

I swing the door open, aim the AR, and grit my teeth in preparation for the oncoming officer assault. I take two steps before seeing two officers in the center of the room playing cards on a small table. The first of the two officers sits in a black leather chair with his back towards me. On the opposite side of the table, a second officer sits on a black leather sofa. The officer on the sofa looks up from the game in confusion as he sees me. My heart skips a beat as I take aim at his friend who has yet to notice my presence.

Through the scope I aim at the officer's back and pull the trigger. The shot thunders throughout the room, ripping through my ears and causing them to ring. I pull my head away from the scope and begin walking toward the officer on the sofa. My heart is beating out of my chest as I watch him run towards a table in the far right corner of the room. I take aim at him as he gets closer to the table. Just as I pull the trigger, he lunges for the table, grabs something, and falls to the floor.

I don't have a clear shot. I have to get closer in order to hit him. I decide to sprint towards the officer, taking a few hip shots at him while doing so. I get a little closer to the officer and realize what he lunged for as he takes aim. I hear another thunderous boom before a tremendous pain shoots through my chest knocking the air out of me. I fall backwards towards the ground.

INFILTRATION

I didn't trip, why am I falling? Black sparkles almost like stars, cloud my vision as I feel my back make contact with the floor. I try to take a breath but I can't. The stars take over my vision and the room goes black.

VENGEANCE

What the hell is going on! Where am I? I open my eyes to see Reika kneeling over me and doing something to my chest. I inhale and pain shoots through the right side of my chest. I flinch at the pain and Reika snaps away from what she was doing with a concerned expression on her face.

A moment after her dark brown eyes make contact with mine, she smiles.

“Nineteen, you scared the shit outta me! I thought the bullet went through.”

I can feel the confusion spread across my face. Bullet, what bullet?

“Did I get shot?”

“Yeah, it knocked you on your ass. I didn’t think he hit your vest.”

I sit up and pain shoots through my ribs.

I look down at the vest to see that it is indented where my chest hurts the most. That’s right—I was running at that officer when he turned and shot at me, but I didn’t think he hit me. I didn’t know what to think, it happened so fast.

I hear Logan's voice from the corner of the room, "Any time would be a great time to get moving if you two are done."

"Yea, yea, I'm getting up," I say trying to muster the willpower to stand up.

"You're lucky he only managed to grab the thirty-eight and not the forty that was next to it," Logan says.

Reika stands up, extending her hand out to me in order to help me up. I grab her hand and pull myself off the floor as pain shoots through my chest. That bullet must've broken a rib, or at minimum bruised one. It hurts like hell to breathe and feels as if my chest is on fire.

No time to complain. The longer we sit here the more likely we'll get caught and killed. I grit my teeth and look around the room. The officer that shot me lies on the ground next to the corner table, nearly beheaded. The room isn't as big as I expected it to be. In a building this size I expected to walk into a huge lobby. This room looks more like a conference room, or a break room of some kind. There's a kitchen along the wall, to the left of the door we entered. The center of the room is the focal point of which all the furniture is arranged. There are large half empty liquor bottles next to the now blood soaked playing cards on the table.

The walkie-talkie goes off.

"We're going to attempt to enter through the glass doors at the main entrance. Help would be appreciated if possible," Cupid says.

"Roger," the walkie goes off again with Fox's voice.

I grab the walkie-talkie from my hip and say, "We'll try to work our way there."

"Fox entered the building from the other side while you were knocked out," Logan says.

Logan's voice is interrupted by the sound of muffled gunshots.

“Okay, on to the next room. Door number one or door number two?”
I say, looking at each door.

“Door number two will probably get us closer to the main entrance.”

Logan’s probably right. “Door number two it is,” I reply.

We head over to the door and I peer out of its small rectangular window. Outside is a hallway with white walls and a dull white floor. Leaning toward the door and tilting my head to the right, I make out a grouping of glass windows.

“I can’t see any officers, but it looks like this hall may lead to the main entrance.”

“I just saw movement near the windows. Let’s wait a minute to see if any officers come out.”

If we’re lucky, the officers in the middle will run head on with Fox’s group at the main entrance and we can come in behind to pick them off. As soon as the thought goes through my head, I see two officers walk by heading towards the grouping of glass windows. I turn to Logan and Reika and gesture to let them know what I see. Logan grabs the door handle and begins turning it. Just as I’m about to give him the go ahead, another officer walks by.

Shit! How many are there?

“There’s at least three that went toward the windows. I’m going to swing out to the right to make sure there aren’t any more coming this way,” I whisper.

As Reika and Logan nod, gunshots begin filling the air. Cupid must be at the front. It’s time to make our move. Logan pushes the door open. I run out and turn to the right. I drop onto one knee and scan the hallway for threats. Nothing catches my eye.

I whip around and make a break for the windows. Logan makes a quick right turn onto the hallway where the windows start. I try to catch up to Reika as she makes her way onto the hallway behind Logan.

I turn the corner in time to see Logan abruptly turn right onto another hallway and out of my sight. Reika, who was a few steps behind Logan, draws her sword while approaching an unaware officer in the middle of the hallway. A second officer is at the end of the hallway. He is standing in front of a set of open doors, shooting out of them.

Just before Reika reaches her target, one of Fox's men rushes the doors. The officer standing at the doors decides to retreat.

"Shit!" I say out loud to myself. I gotta hit this motherfucker before he targets Reika.

I take a wild shot which completely misses the man who is now in mid stride taking his second step away from the door. As his foot hits the floor, half of his face is taken off by bullets from Clue.

I look up from my scope to see Reika do an agile maneuver which cleanly slices through her targets head.

Heart raging in my chest, I glance around for other officers and then run to Reika and Clue.

"Anyone hit?" I say as I reach the two of them.

"Yeah," Clue looks at me and collapses to the ground.

Blood paints the white floor. I can't distinguish what's coming from the officers' bodies from what's coming out of Clue. Reika and I frantically search Clue for wounds. We check his vest, his arms, and his face. Nothing hit him in the head. He's wearing a bulletproof vest and although it's been hit, blood doesn't seem to be leaking from it. I look closer at his camo uniform to see a dark red spot on his upper arm right around his bicep.

"His arm," I say.

"His leg," Reika replies. I look down to see his pants stained dark red with multiple bullet wounds.

"Shit. We gotta stop the bleeding," I say.

I get on the walkie, "Clue is hit. Need help at the front doors."

I pull my backpack off and search for anything that may be of use to tie around Clue's leg or arm. There's no point. I never have bandages. I always rely on Tank or Natalie to bandage us. I don't know why I started digging through my backpack. I feel helpless as Clue lies on the floor bleeding.

Cupid and Omni come running through the glass double doors.

"How bad is he?" asks Cupid.

"Multiple hits in the leg and at least one in the arm," I reply.

Cupid takes off his backpack and pulls out a medium sized white and red aluminum box with medical markings on it. A med kit? I've only seen an actual med kit once, but all the items inside were missing or already stained with blood. He opens the med kit, pulls out a few wraps, and begins to go to work on Clue's leg. He also pulls out some sort of needle, rolls up one of Clue's sleeves, and injects its contents into his arm.

No one in the collapse has these kinds of supplies. Who the hell are they? How the hell does he know how to use them?

"Can you guys stand watch for minute while I wrap him up?" asks Cupid.

I snap out of my thoughts and nod. Omni responds formally, "Yes, sir."

I stand up and scan the room but my brain refuses to look for enemies. It's caught on the idea that these men have full med kits and the knowledge to use them. I have to shake this off. I'm going to get myself

killed. I have to focus. It's time to kill officers. I made my choice, it's too late to go back. I'll figure them out when our lives are no longer at stake.

Coming back from the hall I saw him disappear down is Logan with his signature grin.

"Got both those fuckers!"

"Where'd they try to go?" I ask.

"They left their guns in a room down there," Logan replies, motioning towards the hallway he emerged from.

"Can I get help moving him to that wall?" Cupid interrupts.

Omni scrambles to help. Reika, standing next to Clue, bends down and puts her arm under his shoulder. Cupid grabs his other arm as Omni takes his legs. They lift him off the ground and begin slowly hauling him to the wall. Once there, they prop his torso up on the wall.

"Okay, that's going to have to do until we clear the building. Clue! Clue!" Cupid begins yelling and then proceeds to slap Clue awake. Clue's eyes open drowsily.

"I need you to stay here. You just gotta make it a little longer. We're almost done." Cupid yells to make sure he understands.

Clue nods his head and gives a low but audible, "Yes, sir."

Fox jogs onto our hallway from the lobby to our southwest. He sees us and runs toward us with his men following.

Ignoring everyone else, Fox heads directly to Cupid. "How is he?"

"Stable," Cupid replies.

Without asking any other questions or responding to Cupid, Fox starts talking about where we need to go next. "The south side of this building is clear. I take it from the fact that you're all here that the north and the east are clear as well."

VENGEANCE

He doesn't wait for a response before continuing, "My guess is that their central room will be in the tower. It's usually used as an air traffic tower. I'll bet all their radio equipment is there. I think it would be best to split into two groups of four and start heading towards the tower. If it's okay with you, I'll send Lotus with your group and I'll go with my men." He looks at me waiting for a response.

Lotus, huh? I wonder how she got that name. She was with us outside that night when the zombies attacked. She's either extremely good or extremely new to their group and is made to do the jobs none of the others wish to do.

"Fine. As long as she listens to me."

"That won't be a problem, sir," Lotus says to me before Fox responds.

"Good. Let's get moving. We'll head upstairs," I say, putting my backpack on.

We turn to our right, head into the main lobby, and then make our way through the large room to the stairs in the back left corner. Once upstairs, we pick a hallway that goes in a southwestern direction. After walking for some time, the hallway begins curving to our right. We reach the end of the curve and find ourselves standing before an indoor bridge with windows on both sides.

"It looks like this connects to the next building," I say and then begin walking down the hallway.

"Good, that means more officers for me to kill," replies Logan.

Near the end of the walkway, there is a bulletin board positioned on the wall. There are a few meaningless notices about the construction of the building tacked up along with a large blue and white paper.

"The building layout! If we make a right up here, the hallway should take us directly to the tower."

"Let's end this," Lotus says, nodding at me.

I get on the walkie-talkie and explain to Fox what we found and where the ground entrance to the tower is located. We follow the directions on the building layout to the second floor of the tower.

"I'm gonna guess the elevators don't work. Anyone see a stairwell?" I ask, tapping on one of the powerless control panels.

"Over here," Reika says, pointing past the elevators.

"This'll be a fun workout, eh?" I smile, trying to conceal the stabbing pain in my chest.

"I call first into the room," Logan says, smiling.

I notify Fox that we're on our way to the top of the tower while jogging the steps in the stairwell. The more flights we climb, the more my chest hurts.

"You okay?" Reika asks, looking at me.

"I'm fine," I manage to push out with a smile.

The blueprints said there were fourteen floors, we've gone up eleven. I'm gonna pass out from lack of air by the time we get there.

"Hey," I whisper, "We should quiet down now that we're almost to the top so they don't hear us."

Everyone nods in agreement as we reach a white door at the top of the stairs.

"No window. Guess this means we're going in blind. You still wanna go first Logan?" I whisper, smiling.

Logan shoots me an evil grin and pulls the door open. No more joking—this is it, the final showdown. Logan heads into the room, leaving the door to be held by Lotus. She shoots me an awkward glance and then motions me to go ahead. When I head through the door, I realize that we haven't reached the room we want, but are instead standing in a small

hall with elevators. A few feet to the right of the elevators is Logan peering into a set of propped open double doors.

Logan looks back at us in a confused manner and waves us over. We go to the double doors and look inside. The room is empty and has windows on all sides. On the far side of the room is a stairway that leads up. I point at the stairway and we all creep towards it. At the start of the stairwell, we pause to listen for any sounds coming from the upstairs room. Nothing.

"Trap?" Logan whispers to me.

"I don't see how," I whisper back.

I switch the frequency of the walkie-talkie to hear if the officers are talking. After a few moments of silence, I switch back to our original station and we start moving. Logan and Lotus begin climbing the stairs. Reika and I follow two steps behind and aim down the stairwell to cover our backsides. At the top of the stairs Logan pauses and turns to me. He puts a finger to his lips and then signals that there are two targets up ahead. Once I reach the top of the stairs, I see Logan creeping towards a couch on the left and Lotus approaching a couch on the right. No wonder we couldn't hear any talking. They're here, but are asleep.

Both Logan and Lotus are two or three steps away from their targets when the walkie-talkie goes off.

"We're at the top of the stairs."

Shit! Lotus shoots as soon as she hears the walkie go off, hitting the now waking officer in the top of his head. Logan tries to attack, but his target pops up with a shotgun and fires. I see Logan drop to the floor and I take aim. Before I can get a shot off, Lotus fires again, hitting Logan's target in the middle of his forehead. As the officer falls to the floor, he manages to pull the trigger one more time.

"Fuck!" Lotus shouts.

Logan is lying on the floor motionless as I run to his body.

"Logan!" I shout as Reika joins me on the other side of him.

His eyes pop open with the same confused expression that I had when I was shot. When he sees Reika and I kneeling over him, he connects the dots and tries to give us his wicked grin.

"I guess your chest does hurt like hell after getting shot," he croaks out.

"Good thing your vest stopped everything huh," I reply.

I look back to Lotus, who's now sitting on a couch with blood on her left sleeve. I jump to my feet and run to her side to inspect the wound.

"You okay?"

"Could be better, honey," she replies.

Her vest took most of the damage, but the top of her left arm is bleeding profusely. I pull out the walkie to call out to Fox for help, but when I push the button to start talking, Cupid appears next to us and pushes me out of the way.

"I got this," he says.

I turn to see Fox and the rest of his group at the top of the stairs. Everyone is silent as Cupid begins patching Lotus up. I go back to Logan who is being helped up by Reika. I jump in, pulling him the rest of the way to his feet as it hits me.

This is it. This is the end of the line. We just won. Now the question is what's next. We have to figure out who these people really are and if they're going to turn on us. I look Logan in the eyes, hoping to remind him of the situation at hand. I stare at him longer than normal and open my eyes extremely wide in hopes that he'll understand. He grins with a strange expression on his face.

VENGEANCE

“Good job, guys! Looks like we did it without a single casualty,” Fox shouts, while walking towards the raven radio.

Logan walks to the other side of the room and starts up a conversation with Lotus. Reika walks back towards the stairwell. I notice a sudden tension among Fox’s group. Fox turns on the raven and starts changing frequencies. Picking up on the tension, I move a little deeper into the room and position myself behind Fox, pretending to look out of the windows.

Fox picks up the receiver on the radio and starts his transmission.

“Fox to home base, Fox to home base.”

The room goes silent.

A voice comes back over the radio, “Fox, this is HQ. Please identify yourself and status of mission.”

“FOX 3579. Two injured, but Wolfpack is intact. Mission complete.”

He’s military! There’s no doubt in my mind now! That was entirely too formal to be scavenger lingo. Any minute now, they’ll turn on us. They’ll kill us just like they did my father! Bastards! We gotta take them out first.

I aim my AR at the back of Fox’s head. “Scavengers my ass! You’re military!” I shout, filling with rage.

“Hold it!” I hear Omni yell.

Followed by an immediate, “Not so fast,” from Logan.

To my left, Cupid, Omni, and Lotus have their guns trained on me. Standing behind Omni with a nine to the back of his head is Reika. Behind Lotus with two jagged knives around her neck and a wicked grin is Logan.

TRUTH

Fox raises his hands above his head. "Calm down. This isn't what you think it is. We aren't who we said we were."

"No shit, I kinda figured that out," I reply.

"We're not military either. Just give me a minute to explain."

"I give you a minute and we end up dead."

"Lower your guns," Fox says, turning in the desk chair.

"Sir?" All of his men have confused looks.

"You heard right, lower them. These people are allies! They proved themselves. They should be given the choice whether to join the fight or not."

"That's a nice gesture, but we're not gonna lower our weapons," I reply.

"That's fine, I wouldn't expect you to before I offer an explanation."

"You're right, we're not some group of organized scavengers. We're a helluva lot bigger than that."

Just as Fox starts trying to explain, the radio goes off again.

"Congrats on a mission accomplished! I'll let the others know so we can commence attacks statewide. I'm glad you guys all made it out okay. Were you able to find any means of transportation?"

Fox gets back on the radio. "Not yet, we're going to search the base and see what we can come up with. I'll get back with you momentarily."

"Okay, sounds good. We'll be waiting."

"Fox out."

"Sorry about that, now where was I?" Fox turns his chair to face me.

"Ahh that's right. I was going to tell you that my group here and those that I contacted are part of a group we call Ninety-nine. Err, for now I guess you can call us Rebels."

Rebels? That would explain what the R on their uniforms actually stands for, but rebels of what?

"Rebellion of?" I say with a questioning look.

"It's a very long story, but I'll give you the short version so you can take your gun out of my face. Our group formed originally to fight the U.S. government and the military. It wasn't until later on that the officers began taking over. But when they did, we began fighting them as well. Basically, we *are* still scavengers, just well-trained scavengers. We are on the same side, I assure you."

He is about to continue his explanation when a booming voice startles me.

"Mind if we join the party?" I turn my head to the stairwell to see Tank and Natalie enter the room.

"It looks like we were right to pack it up and head in after shooting that officer. We heard your instructions to Fox over the radio on how to get to the tower. Figured we'd better get here ASAP to look after you guys," Tank says with a huge smile.

TRUTH

I laugh. "I appreciate the thought, but as you can see, we're doing just fine on our own. Of course, I do always enjoy your company," I say, looking Natalie in the eye.

"Sorry for the interruption, you can continue your story now." I turn my attention back to Fox.

"As I was saying, we make up part of the Ninety-nine. In short, we're anti-military, anti-U.S. government, anti-officer, and pro-scavenger. Well, scavengers that are sociable. The men with me make up a Special Forces unit that go by the name of Wolfpack.

"Your group just happened to be fighting with the officers while we were passing through. After watching the firefight, it seemed that you'd be a helpful addition to our mission. After spending some time with your group and fighting off the zombies it also occurred to me that you'd make a good addition to the Ninety-nine."

The Ninety-nine? A rebellion? I develop a strong case of déjà vu as if I've done this before. Anti-military and anti-officer... the two? My dream of the soldiers standing behind Kai—maybe they weren't military, maybe they were a rebellion. My father's words, were they just random thoughts? Or is it possible it's something he said to me in the past?

No. No way. There's no way my dream is connected to this. It's just a random subconscious way of recharging my body at night. Still, the déjà vu remains. I think he's actually telling the truth. There are no stutters in his statements and no hesitations in his speech.

"Chopper!" Omni shouts, looking out the window.

As the word chopper leaves his mouth, my stomach curdles. The déjà vu of the situation is now overwhelming. Fear shoots through my body as I relive the last time I heard the word.

"It seems that you're going to have to make a quick decision on whether to trust us or not. If that helicopter lands before we have a plan, there's a good chance we're all dead." Fox turns back to the radio and switches the frequency back to the officer channel.

"... Eep, again, I'ma come in there and crack some heads. Today we're a man short. We need one of you to meet us outside with the shipment. So... get your asses up!" a voice shoots over the radio. "I swear lazy ass offi..." The transmission cuts off.

Fox turns to me. "We're not the military, they are. The officers have been working with them the entire time. They're probably here to drop off a shipment of Z to distribute across the state." He pauses, letting me take in the situation.

Chopper—that's what they call a helicopter. That's what was said before those men showed up and killed my father. The military must've been responsible. I have to shake this fear and make a decision. Everyone is waiting for my response.

"Hey officer dumbasses, wake up! We're nearing the landing pad! We need your help unloading. Stop sleeping! I repeat we need help unloading!" The radio spits out as the man on the other side yells at the top of his lungs.

They're definitely expecting to see the officers, and judging from his anger on the radio, they've done this a few times. Fear, ha, what a pointless emotion! I was scared of the officers and they were nothing. These men killed my father and I'm standing here frozen, scared to fight. I can feel my nostrils flaring as I remember running away crying when my father was shot. The helplessness I felt then was because of men like the ones who are about to land. I'm no longer a child.

TRUTH

The fear that had momentarily consumed me is replaced by anger. These bastards are responsible for killing my father. They are the ones who facilitated the destruction of our society. All my friends, all the people I've lost, all the people we've lost—these bastards had a hand in it. These bastards won't leave us alone, so why the hell should I leave them alone?

"Okay, let's do this, let's get them before they get us. We're doing it my way this time," I say, looking back to Fox for his decision.

"Okay, your call," He replies.

"Tank, I want you to find a point where you can take out the pilot on my command. Logan, I want you at the bottom of the stairs. If anyone opens the door to come in, kill 'em. Cupid, I want you near the bottom of the stairs with Logan, but I don't want you to use your gun. You're the medic, so I want you near the door in case something goes wrong. Natalie and Lotus are with me. Fox, I want you, Omni, and Reika here monitoring the radio and keeping us informed. The rest of you get to wait impatiently."

The radio bursts louder than before. "You got 'bout five minutes till we're outside landing! If there's not at least one officer out there to help us... I swear I'ma march up all those stairs and I'ma shoot one of you lazy assholes!"

"You heard him, we got five minutes! Let's move!" I shout.

Fox's men all look to Fox.

"You heard him, GO!" Fox says, giving a nod of approval.

I turn and take off running with Lotus and Natalie directly behind me. We run as fast as we can down the stairs. On the fourth floor, we exit the stairwell and I lead us down the first hallway that shoots to the right.

"Where are we headed?" Lotus asks.

"More like what the hell is the plan?" Natalie adds to the question.

I slow our run to a jog, looking for our next stairwell.

"According to the building layout, there should be a stairwell up ahead that'll lead us to a hangar on the bottom floor. Once we're there, we're going to set up and try to gain sight of the landing pad. When they land and we know how many men there are, we'll decide how we're gonna take 'em out."

"When...Never mind. Sounds good," Natalie replies.

We reach the stairwell and just as we're entering it, our walkie goes off.

Fox's voice booms out. "They're attempting to land right now."

"We gotta move!" I shout and begin jumping down multiple stairs at a time.

I open the door at the bottom of the stairwell and, much to my relief, I see the hangar I saw in the layout. Luckily, most of the hangar doors are already open, giving us a view of the landing pad. We run to one of the closed doors and group behind it.

"Natalie, I want you to set up shop and take aim. Let me know how many you can see as soon as you get a head count."

"Okay." Natalie drops to the floor then sets up a bipod for her rifle.

"I'm in place, even found a window that opens!" Tank's voice comes across the walkie.

"All this without them seeing your giant ass? I'm amazed!" I reply.

"Helicopter is officially on the ground. One man out the side, another out the same side, but he appears to have come from the cockpit," Natalie calls out her sight as both Lotus and I hide behind the door.

"Tank, you still have sight of the pilot?" I ask.

"Yeah, pilot is the only one inside from my view."

TRUTH

"Fox?" I ask, waiting for an update on the officer radio.

"No chatter. I think he gave up after the last transmission."

"The two outside are unloading a crate. The crate is now on the ground and one of the men is heading directly toward the tower!" Natalie continues describing her scene.

I peek my head around the corner of the door to watch the man approach the tower. The dark green helicopter is huge. It's definitely meant for carrying supplies.

"Natalie, I want you to take aim on the one that is still by the helicopter. As soon as you hear me say now, take him out," I say, waiting for the man to reach the stairwell of the tower.

"Okay."

"Tank, take your aim," I say into the walkie, keeping the talk button depressed.

Okay, I just need that soldier to make it inside the stairwell with Logan.

"NOW!"

Natalie's rifle rings out and is followed immediately by Tank's. The man who was standing near the crate is now on the ground.

I give Lotus a gesture to let her know I'm about to take action. "Cover us," I say to Natalie.

"What?" I hear Natalie say as I head out the hanger doors and begin jogging with Lotus towards the helicopter.

I use my anger to ignore the fact that I'm jogging through a wide-open area towards a military vehicle. I begin running as images of my father's death flash through my head. I sprint towards the helicopter with my AR shaking.

We reach the side of the helicopter where the crate sits. I aim into the aircraft and slowly approach the interior. I can feel Lotus to the left of me doing the same thing. The inside of the vehicle contains a few large crates, but no people. I look toward the cockpit of the aircraft and see the pilot sitting lifelessly in place. I walk the perimeter towards the front of the vehicle to ensure everyone is dead.

"It's clear. There's no one else." Tank's voice booms over the walkie, startling me.

"Everyone check in, are we good? Logan?" I say over the walkie.

"Cupid here. Logan took out one in the stairwell."

"The raven is silent."

"I just said it's clear! Gosh, never wanna listen to the big guy!"

I begin overtly laughing, relieved that we just took on the military without a single casualty.

"Only three of 'em came huh, ha. Guess it's time to go through their cargo and discuss what's next," I say over the talkie.

"On our way down," Fox responds.

I walk back over to the crate, which is the size of a coffin and made of plywood. I bend over and try to open it.

"You have to cut the straps first," Lotus says as she pulls a knife and begins cutting the green straps that wrap around the crate.

"What's the precious cargo?" Natalie asks, reaching us at the same time as Logan and Cupid.

"Let's find out," I say as I grab the lid and slide it part of the way off.

The entire crate is filled with ammunition.

"Jackpot!" Logan says.

"It's nice, but where the hell we gonna store it?" I reply.

TRUTH

"I'm sure I can find room for it somewhere in my bag. If we can take it that is," Tank says, now a few feet from us.

"That's right, I forgot you can fit an entire building into your bag," I shoot back.

"That's assuming you don't leave with us," Lotus interrupts.

That's right, we still have to deal with Fox and his group. I'm sure we can split everything we've found, assuming he's actually part of some rebellion. He didn't stop us from killing these men and they're obviously military, so I think it's safe to say Fox's group isn't military. But what does she mean by that?

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

"A proposal." Fox walks up to the group with Reika and Omni at his side.

The tension of the situation rises again. It becomes apparent through body language that each group is waiting for the other to make a move.

"I agreed to let you take control of that last predicament not just to gain your trust, but to gauge you as a leader."

"You didn't finish explaining who you are," I respond coldly, trying not to show my curiosity.

Fox chuckles. "It's okay. After that last test I completely trust you and your men. Although it's quite obvious you don't trust me. I guess I can't blame you. I haven't been honest with you from the start.

"As I said before, we are the rebellion. There is a huge group of us actively fighting both the military and the officers. There's much more I can tell you, but there will be plenty of time for that later.

"The reason I wanted to gauge you as a leader is that I want to invite you to join the rebellion. You have more than proven yourselves. Not

only are you trustworthy in combat, but you have the passion it takes to fight the bastards that continue to destroy our society."

"Society? You call this society? There's just scattered groups trying to survive by any means necessary. Look around! There isn't any community left in this rubble of a town," I yell at Fox.

"I understand the way you feel, and I see what you see, but you have to believe me, there is still a society. We do still exist. They didn't wipe us out completely, they couldn't. There are too many of us. Why do you think the military is still showing up in the outskirts to drop supplies to officers? They're still trying to keep us at bay, still trying to starve and kill us off. I'll bet the rest of the crates in the helicopter are filled with Z. Why? To kill off whoever they can, any way they can."

"Just because there are people wandering around doesn't mean this a society." I shoot back.

"Sure, all the way out here in Colorado Springs there's nothing left. But back in Denver, we have a huge community of people who still work together. And we're not alone, there are numerous cities and locations across the U.S. that have survived and regrouped into hidden communities. You won't believe it until you see it." Cupid adds.

"You don't have to agree to join us right away. Come with us back to Denver and see it for yourselves. We have a helicopter now. With it we can get back to Denver in no time! On the way there, we can fill you in on the war. Not just the rumors and half-truths you've gathered traveling from place to place." Fox adds.

I look back to my friends. I try to gauge their reactions, to see what they feel and what they might want to do. Kai's words brought me here, searching for something to live for. I want to fight for all of us. To strike

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back at the cowards who have forced us to live like this. I want to go with Fox and his men to join the fight, assuming it's real.

I already brought them into a fight with the officers that they didn't want. I can't bring them into this as well. They need to lead their own lives and to be happy if they can. With this much ammo and this building, they'll be set for a long time. I want them with me, but I can't force them to come.

"Natalie. Tank. Logan. Reika." I say and pause.

I look at Fox. "Can you give me a minute with my friends?"

"Sure." He motions for his men to walk with him.

I look at Natalie whose eyes are piercing my very being. I can tell she already knows what I plan to do. I have to shake her off. I look at the ground and clear my throat.

"I put you all in this position without asking. We're all still alive and I'm glad we made it this far despite me dragging you into this fight.

"As stupid as this might sound, I believe Fox is telling the truth. If there's a chance for me to learn the truth about the war, then I feel I have to take it. If there's even a glimmer of a chance, to fight these bastards that did this to us, I feel like I have to take it. This is what I feel I must do, and this time I'm not dragging you with me. I love you all, it's been real, but I'm going with Fox."

The silence of the moment is deafening. By now Natalie is usually yelling at me at the top of her lungs telling me how stupid I am for believing in someone I just met.

"Where the hell did that come from? I've never seen you voice your emotions like that, ever, I don't think," Tank says.

Logan starts clapping. "That was a damn good performance."

"Just who the hell do you think you are to us?" says Natalie.

Reika smiles at me.

"I'm... sorry?" I say back to Natalie, confused.

They break out in laughter.

"Do ya think you're just gonna leave us behind to go to some new awesome life of fighting the military?" Natalie says, looking at me impatiently.

Did that just really come from Natalie?

"Do you know how many officers and soldiers I'd be missing out on slicing if I didn't go?" Logan says with his patented grin.

"Somebody's really gotta watch your ass now that you're getting all emo on us," Tank says.

"You know you can't leave me alone with them," Reika says playfully.

"Wait, so this means you all actually want to go?"

"*Duh!* You're so thick headed you thought you could leave us behind? Who said you were the boss anyway?" Natalie playfully shouts.

Everyone laughs.

"Sorry, gosh!" I say gesturing with my hands as if I'm worried she's going to hit me. "If it's okay with you, we should go let Fox know so we can get out of here."

"Yeah, that sounds good," Natalie says, crossing her arms.

I gesture Fox back over to us.

"So?" Fox asks on approach.

"We're on board. At least until we see this rebellion you speak of."

"Okay, sounds good, I'll let them know to expect us," he tells me and then turns to his men, "Let's use that lid to carry Clue, it should work as a decent stretcher."

"Yes, sir," his men say in unison.

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"I think I can help y'all with that," Tank pitches in.

"Okay, let's do it," replies Omni, grabbing the plywood lid of the crate and walking off in the direction of the lobby.

"What do you need from the rest of us?" I ask Fox.

"If I could get one of you to clear the pilot's body out of the chopper and another to make sure the rest of those crates are strapped down, I'd be thankful. In the meantime, I'm going to head back upstairs to tell HQ to expect us," he replies.

"Okay," I say, nodding my head.

I look to Logan with an amused grin on my face. "Ready to move another body?"

"Ya know, I like cutting enemies, not moving their bodies! And it sure does seem like you've been asking me to move a lot of bodies the last few days!" he replies.

"Didn't ya know that's what happens after ya kill 'em...ya gotta dispose of 'em! Why do you think I keep asking you to help?" I say, snickering as we head to the front of the helicopter.

"We'll check the cargo," Natalie says as Logan and I walk off.

After Logan and I manage to get the dead soldier's body out of the cockpit and dragged away from the chopper, we see Fox reappear from the stairwell of the tower.

We head back to the cockpit and wait for Fox to reach us.

"The other crate is full to the brim with Z," Natalie says as she, Reika, and Lotus, join us outside of the cockpit.

"Now, all we gotta do is get this thing up and outa here before the military figures out that one of their helicopters is missing," Fox says, passing us and jumping into the cockpit.

"Looks like we got us a decent find with this chopper. These controls are easy. It's one of the post war models so it just about flies itself," he continues.

Post war? Can he really say what happened was a war? From what I know, we were wiped out of society and we only fought back with protests and petty attacks.

"Once we're in the air, I'll have my men start filling you in on what's going on and anything else you wish to know."

Trying not to show my eagerness, I keep my response brief. "Sounds good."

"Hmm, still on guard I see. That's okay, you won't have to be much longer. You'll see the truth as soon as we get you home. Your new home, that is."

Cupid, Omni, and Tank show up carrying the makeshift stretcher with Clue sprawled out across the top of it.

"He's still kickin' but he's lost a lot of blood. We gotta hurry the hell up," Cupid says with concern in his tone.

"Alright, let's get the hell outa here then. Load 'em up!" Fox says.

Tank and Cupid take Clue from his makeshift stretcher and lift him into the helicopter. Reika and Natalie grab the lid of the crate and secure it back on the container of ammo. Lotus climbs into the passenger seat of the cockpit and Fox takes the pilots position.

"Everyone get in and hook in," Fox says, sticking his head into the midsection of the helicopter to look around. "I see a few. Show 'em how it's done Omni."

I jump in, followed by my group and Fox's men. The middle of the helicopter is surprisingly big. Connected to the ceiling and side walls are

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straps and hooks used to secure crates. Omni takes one of the straps from the ceiling, wraps it around his waist, and clips it to his vest.

We look around the helicopter for similar straps and do as close to what Omni did as we can. Once everyone is strapped in, Cupid grabs the sliding side door and slams it shut.

“Okay, whatever you do, don’t fall out! And grab onto something, the takeoff is going to be the roughest part of the ride!” Cupid shouts to us over the roar of the propellers starting up.

“Hold on!” Fox shouts back to us.

The helicopter rocks, jostling us into each other as it lifts off. The pain in my chest that had briefly subsided shoots back after colliding with Tank’s shoulder. I cringe, drawing a strange look from Natalie.

“What? My chest hurts! I got shot!” I yell at her.

Her eyes grow huge with concern. “What?”

“I’m fine, Logan got shot too! These vests work great!” I say, trying to draw attention away from myself.

Natalie shakes her head at the both of us.

I try to look out one of the small oval windows, but can’t hold my view as the chopper rocks, forcing me to brace myself to avoid falling into Tank. A weightless feeling washes over me as the helicopter takes flight and the jostling subsides.

Regaining my posture, I stare out the window, mesmerized by the clouds. My breathing is erratic and I can feel my palms clamming up. I’m still nervous. I don’t know what to expect. So this is what it’s like to fly. It’s beautiful. Here above all the chaos on the ground, above all the dirt and broken buildings, there’s tranquility.

A PLACE TO CALL HOME

“We have a while to talk before we get to HQ. You ready to hear why we’re all in this position?” Cupid asks.

I snap out of my daze. “Yeah, go ahead.”

“I wasn’t here for it like Fox, but I’ve heard the story enough to re-tell most of it exactly how he would. I’ll do my best at answering your questions.”

I nod, waiting for him to start.

“We were still a decently united country when our population had surpassed the four hundred million mark. We had been on an economic decline for quite some time. The Ninety-nine percent was a group who had been in existence for decades by this time. They were originally composed of idealists who were in opposition to a growing wealth gap around the world.

“Multiple countries outside of our own had ninety nine-percent groups that were rioting and raising hell. The name originates from the fact that one percent of the population controlled the majority of the worlds money. Leaving the other ninety-nine percent of the population to fight amongst themselves for the rest.

“The same wealth disparity found around the world was present here in the U.S. The majority of Americans were upset, but compared to the rest of the world, our ninety-nine percent had far more money in their pockets. Bottom line is that most of our population continued to ignore it until it was too late. Minor demonstrations broke out decades before the issue had turned detrimental.

“The Ninety-nine had been active within the poorest class of the country while everyone else continued to ignore the increasing gap. At the time there was upper, middle, and lower classes categorized by corresponding levels of wealth. As the population increased and the wealth distribution was further stretched, this gradient of wealth disappeared. By the time the majority of the nation took notice, the only economic groups left were the extremely rich and the poor.

“Simple demonstrations started turning into riots. Those riots began to break out across the nation. Rich communities enlisted help from the police to protect their estates. That was around the time when the global economy crashed. The rich had pooled more than enough resources to survive. But without help the rest of the nation would starve.”

“The military and the government stuck where the money was. They lost control over the majority of the population as outraged citizens took to the streets. The riots were now in every community. Martial law was declared state by state as citizens refused to back down. Those that made up the leaders within the ninety-nine percent began calling for a revolution. They were adamant that there was no way the one percent could take on an entire country of people.

“The military and government branded all who were affiliated with the Ninety-nine as terrorists. That’s when the civil war began. People were forced to pick sides whether they wanted to or not. If you weren’t

rich, you were given two choices. You either went with the military to starve in concentration camps, or refused to go and were murdered. Those that rejected both of these options hid and fought back any way they could.

“Government families and the rich were transported to two compounds that were under direct military protection. The compounds were setup in communities that housed the richest of the rich. Areas that were already walled off from nearby communities. The military used this to their advantage. They burned the neighboring towns to the ground and bombed miles of landscape around each compound in order to create a buffer zone.

“The Ninety-nine pursued the rich and mounted attacks on the compounds daily. As time went on, they realized that they were just wasting their resources. Three years or so into the war, long after the Ninety-nine had fallen back and stopped their attacks, the military announced a stalemate. They announced a day of forgiveness where anyone outside the compounds could surrender their weapons and rejoin the ‘glory’ of the United States. After a lack of response, they sent out a second message. The second message extended the offer for one more day but also included a threat. Those who did not rejoin, would from that day forward be left behind to die.

“This brings us to today, some twenty years after the initial war took place. They told us we would all die out here on our own. Obviously, that hasn’t happened. The majority of the country remains a wasteland, but the military isn’t in that wasteland. We are.”

I glance at my ankle thinking about the tattoo that I was too young to remember getting. I wonder if someone I came across was a part of the Ninety-nine? No matter, it doesn’t mean anything now.

"How do the officers fit into all of this?"

"The officers? You've heard stories of the officers being protectors of the people before the collapse right?"

"Yea. I find it hard to believe."

"That's because it's a half-truth. It's true the police were charged with maintaining the peace. And that there were good police officers. But there were always corrupt police mixed in with the good ones. The collapse just drove all the good ones out.

"When martial law started erupting across the country, leaders within the police force began to emerge with ideas on how to organize. With the realization that they too were on the starving side of the population the police force split. Some joined the citizens and tried to fight back. Others sought to utilize their positions for power and control.

"Those that took part in the plans to gain power began referring to each other as officers and these officers took full advantage of the situation at hand. They milked the premise of helping the military maintain control in order to stockpile supplies. When the military pulled out of each area, the officers stepped in to assume control. Those that resisted after the officers laid claim to a territory, well you've experienced that.

"In other words their plan succeeded."

"Yep."

"What about Z?"

"Z is a cocktail of chemical formulas that were cooked up in a military lab long before the civil war started. A sort of countermeasure to gain control over a dissenting population."

"A weapon to keep people from organizing."

"Basically. Years before the war they added a watered down version of it to a popular strain of marijuana to test its effectiveness."

"Azure."

"That's right. That's the catchy name they came up with to market it. People were told it was a new strain of weed but it was just weed laced with another drug."

"What about Azure pure?"

"When the riots went nationwide, the government flooded the streets with thousands of pounds of the non-watered down version of the drug. The same drug we now refer to as Z is Azure pure."

"How do you know all this is true?"

"Fox took part in strategic deliveries of the stuff before he defected from the military. He said they would pick a store that was in the oncoming path of the riots and fill it with Azure pure. When the rioters broke into the stores looking for food and other necessities to survive, they found a hefty supply of Z."

"Wait, Fox was in the military?"

"Yeah, he's ex-military. Thanks to him, a lot of lives were saved when the military starting attacking our water sources."

"How the hell is he in the Ninety-nine if he was military? He would have been shooting us down in the streets! And you just said he was one of the people responsible for distributing Z!"

"He left before they started openly engaging civilians. As for the Z distribution, that was the last straw for him. He defected and gave the Ninety-nine a heads up to steer clear of certain water sources."

"And that absolved him?"

"It didn't absolve him. But he was, and has been, an asset that the Ninety-nine needs. Besides, it took people a while to realize and accept the truth of what was happening. At that time many people in those

positions still believed the military and the government were trying to protect all US citizens."

"Alright, I guess that makes sense. What happened with the water sources?"

Well at first they spiked the water in multiple locations with Z. One or two of the locations had near lethal amounts of the drug in the water. Fox managed to convince enough people of the problem that casualties were kept to a minimum. After that, the military realized they were wasting their resources. So they came up with an alternative.

Holy crap. I thought that the Z in the water thing was just paranoia. "An alternative?"

"The Colorado river runs through multiple states. It used to make up a large percentage of the drinkable water for the southwestern part of America. The military shut down water treatment facilities and allowed the unfiltered water to contaminate the drinkable water. They also diverted unpurified water from several sewage treatment plants into the drinkable water sources. The result was a wide spread outbreak of dysentery and parasitic infections."

"My mom died of dysentery when I was kid. What is it?" I ask, realizing that the military is more than likely responsible for my mother's death.

"Dysentery is an illness brought on by consuming food or liquid that has been contaminated by bacteria. It kills people. Mostly due to dehydration."

"There it is! Home," Fox shouts.

"Everyone brace yourselves, we'll be landing momentarily."

I look out the window. There are buildings that reach into the sky surrounded by rubble and collapsing roads. This must be Denver, the

capitol of Colorado. I heard this place was a death trap for anyone stupid enough to enter.

I feel a drop in the pit of my stomach as we begin descending. My ears plug up. I yawn to try and pop them.

"If you think of more questions, feel free to ask me later."

"Thanks," I reply.

Looking out the window, I see us tuck behind a large building and then fly inside of another. Our landing is much smoother than our take off. I feel one large jarring bump and then Fox shouts, "Home sweet home. Everyone out!"

Omni slides open the door and we disconnect ourselves from our straps. We jump out to be greeted by guards with assault rifles. They are dressed much like Fox and his group, but without the Rs on their chests.

Fox approaches two of the guards. "There are two crates on board, one with ammo and the other with Z."

"Beautiful. We'll get it taken care of," one of the men says.

I'm waiting to hear Fox inform them about Clue when a team of men carrying medical supplies and a stretcher show up.

Fox turns and motions for us to follow him.

"They'll patch up Clue. It's time for you to meet some people, and to see the society I was talking about," Fox says with a huge grin.

Following Fox, we walk past helicopters and a grouping of vehicles covered in camouflage netting.

"I can tell by the look on your face you're wondering what kind of building we're in. It's a multiple floor parking garage, or it was, until we blew away a few floors so we would have a place to park our aircrafts and other vehicles," Fox says smiling.

We walk out of the parking garage to find ourselves in a large parking lot across from a huge building with red letters on the side.

Fox points at the building. "That's where we're headed."

As we start walking through the parking lot towards the building, a feeling of *déjà vu* comes over me. Why does this feel so familiar? I look around taking in the landscape in a very paranoid manner. I feel like I've been here and done this before. Something's not right. A little closer to the building, I look up and see the red neon lettering on the building clearly. They read 'Coca Cola Center'. My eyes stay stuck on the center as I walk. Why does that seem so familiar?

My dream! The red letters on the building behind the soldiers, the T-E-R—could it be the T-E-R in the word center of this building? No, there's no way in hell that I dreamt of a place I've never been. That's not possible! It's just a coincidence.

"This is our building. We're still very much a thriving society, we're just hidden," Fox says.

Near the entrance of the building, I can see a grouping of guards standing inside the glass doors. As we walk through the door, I realize the soldiers are standing in front of strange metal door frames. The door frames don't lead to other rooms. They're out in the open, in the middle of the lobby.

"All these metal frames are metal detectors to keep people from bringing in guns. Well, not necessarily all guns, just fully automatic guns. We had an incident a while back where we let someone in who was withdrawing from Z. He had an AK47 with him and managed to kill a large number of people before we took him down. After that we implemented the no fully automatic weapons inside rule."

"Hey Fox, how you doing?" A soldier in front of a metal detector greets us as we approach.

"Hey Ben, these are my new friends. HQ knows we're coming. They're allowed their weapons," Fox replies.

"Yep, they told us. Tattoos?" Ben asks.

Fox pulls his right pant leg up and his sock down. He shows the guard something on his ankle and is allowed to walk through. Each member of Fox's crew proceeds to do the same thing. When Omni walks up to the guard he stops.

"You know my mom doesn't want me to have tattoos."

The guard chuckles as Omni pulls up his pant leg. This time I'm in a position where I can see what is shown. A tattoo in black ink that says "Ninety-nine percent" above Omni's right ankle. I nearly drop my gun in shock of what I just witnessed. My heart skips a beat as the *déjà vu* is completely over whelming.

What the hell? Why do they have that? More importantly why do I have that same tattoo on my right ankle? It's been there for as long as I can remember. I don't, I don't remember ever getting it. I just remember always having it. Natalie walks in front of me and heads in after Omni.

I remain frozen as a memory of my father flashes through my head. In a dark room with my mother on a bed coughing, my father closes a curtain to talk to me. "I know it hurt. I'm sorry, but this will get you back in if you ever get lost. Just show it to the guard and tell them that you're my son."

I snap out of it and see that everyone, except Logan and I, has gone inside.

"Nineteen, let's go." Logan is staring at me and then motions me to go ahead of him.

He's the only one that's seen my tattoo. He asked me what it was for once and I told him I didn't think it meant anything.

I walk through the entrance.

"Sorry, just amazed at the building," I say passing the guard.

Once through the entrance, we head up a grouping of metal stairs that have glass railings with black plastic rails on the top of them. At the top of the stairs, Fox turns to us and begins giving us the breakdown of the building while we walk.

"This building was originally built to seat twenty-five thousand people to watch sporting events. We've changed it into a place to live and trade. The first floor houses all official Ninety-nine soldiers so that we can be the first out the doors if we are attacked."

We walk out of a stairwell, past an archway, and into a large hallway that stretches two different directions in an ovular shape. The floors are a grayish marble complexion and very shiny. In front of us, there is another archway that has numbers printed above it. On all sides of the hallway there are shops with soldiers sitting behind the counters. Some appear to be selling items while others appear to be talking amongst themselves.

"This building has seven floors like this. Each of the other floors house scavengers who operate independently but live here under our protection. As you can see, there are several shops open. That's how most of the families here survive. They pick a place to stay and run a shop out of it.

"This of course isn't mandatory, but it seems to be the best way to survive. It allows families to trade amongst themselves for items they need. Many of the families have members outside of the building scavenging for goods or hunting. What they bring back they either utilize themselves or trade back into the community."

"You said seven floors like this? This place is huge. We've been walking forever and the hall is just now starting to curve," I say.

"Haha yeah, I told you there was still a society." Fox smiles a huge cheesy smile as if he had won a prize of some sort.

"Here we are."

We reach a grouping of glass doors with five soldiers standing in front. Fox walks past the soldiers, motions for us to follow, and then heads through the doors. The room is huge. It has red and blue-carpeted floors and a long counter that's made of shiny red wood. We walk past the counter and continue to the back of the room. At the back of the room sits a long black table where several men are seated.

"Fox! Good to see you made it back in one piece!" A man with a dark blue polo shirt and khaki pants says while standing up.

In the middle of the table, there is a raven radio with multiple speakers placed around it.

"And you must be the group Fox spoke of! What do you call yourselves?" he asks us.

"I'm Nineteen. This is—"

The man's laughter cuts me off. "I meant as a group, I'm guessing you guys don't have a name yet? Well, you have a little time to think one up before the report of your success hits everyone here. Most of the missions we carry out are group jobs. To keep morale high, we pick our own group names. When we succeed, that name is made known throughout our forces. Good job, by the way. I'm Oleg, one of the men in charge of this operation. It's nice to finally meet you." He extends a hand out to me in greeting.

Upon shaking his hand, he continues.

"Well, let's get to business shall we. I know you're still contemplating whether or not to join us in the fight. Have a seat, there's a lot to explain and not a lot of time to do so."

We all sit at the black table.

"You've come to us at a good time. While you guys were assaulting the officers' HQ, we had squads attacking officer bases all over the state. The end result is that the officers are no longer a threat in Colorado. This means we get to move on to the next stage of our plan. A direct assault on the compound. I'm assuming Fox filled you in on what the compound is?"

"Yeah."

"Very good. As you can see, this is a huge building filled with thousands of people. We manage to survive, but it hasn't been easy."

I interrupt, "How do you get food for so many people?"

"Ah. Good question, I'll have Fox fill you in later as it's not of importance at the moment. The point I was trying to get to is that it would be much easier to survive if we had all the facilities and technology that the military has at their disposal.

"So with the officers out of the way, our next plan is to attack the southern military compound in Texas. We've been in contact with the Ninety-nine factions in New Mexico and Kansas and are planning a massive attack on the compound. We have a decent size force to attack with, however, we'll never make a dent in their defenses without someone on the inside."

"I take it this is where we come in?" I ask.

"Exactly. It's been years since they've been attacked, so they won't be expecting us and they definitely won't be expecting a lot of us. Our

scouts suggest that their defenses have gotten very relaxed over the last few years.

"There is a two to three mile barrier of flat landscape that they patrol throughout the day. It's basically a huge circle of sand around the compound that prevents any unseen entry into their territory.

"This area used to be patrolled all day long, but recently we have discovered that the patrol is only happening twice a day. This means that we have a decent chance to get someone into the compound unseen. It won't be easy, but we will have about eight hours to get across the flat land and into the compound."

"And once we're to the compound how are we getting in?" Tank asks.

"They have part of the western wall down for construction and expansion. That will be our entry point. Once you've reached that area I can't tell you what to do. Everything after that point will be completely up to you and your team to figure out."

"Say we do make it in. What then?"

"Once inside you'll have a few days to find a way to exploit their defenses before the bulk of our attacking forces arrive. We'll be in communication with you via raven radio. Any weakness you can find or create in their defenses will be extremely helpful."

"Why us?" Natalie asks.

"It's not just you. There will be a few other groups heading with you towards that entrance." He pauses momentarily, letting out a sigh. "Look, the bottom line is, this mission is viewed by the majority of our soldiers as a suicide mission. There hasn't been an approach to the compound in over ten years. We don't have nearly as many soldiers as

we would like. And you going would free up another group to be a part of the main assault on the base." He pauses again.

"You've proven yourselves to be very capable scavengers and we've already set the wheels of this plan in motion. Basically, we don't have any time to train you. You'd be best utilized to us by infiltrating the camp if you can. It's not something we can teach, as we have no idea the resistance you'll encounter once you get there.

"If you had come to us sooner, we could have trained you to fly the helicopters or even assigned you a larger group of men to lead into battle. But none of these things are possible given the timeframe. Our date to approach the facility has been agreed upon with the other states as tomorrow.

"Fox and the Wolfpack have already agreed to be one of the infiltration groups and would be working alongside you if you choose to go. I'll give you the night to decide, but we have to leave tomorrow morning. If you accept, you'll be provided with whatever ammunition and supplies you need. No matter your decision, you're always welcome to stay here with us."

I'm at a loss for words. A suicide mission as soon as we walk in the door. Why am I not deterred? Then again, what haven't we done in the last few days that didn't likely result in our deaths. For that matter, I don't think there's anything we've done in our lives that didn't likely result in our deaths.

Oleg clears his throat. "Fox, feel free to show them the rest of our facility."

He turns back to me. "Thank you again for your help with the officers. You don't know it, but you've become heroes to a great many people this day."

I still haven't given a response to his mission proposal.

"No, thank you for providing us with a place to stay and showing us your home. I'll talk with my friends and give you an answer in the morning." I smile get up from the table, shake Oleg's hand, and head towards the door of the room.

Fox and Lotus follow my group and me out the door while the rest of the Wolfpack remain at the table with Oleg.

"Sorry to drop that bomb on you your first day here. You don't have to go, but you're leaders, you and your men. You're different from the rest of our soldiers who just blindly follow orders. You think for yourselves and are very good at thinking on the fly. You would've made good special ops men if you had come to us sooner. Anyway, enough of that for the day. Follow me, I'll show you the rest of our building and explain how we eat."

We walk down the hallway and turn at an archway that has numbers above it. We walk through it to see rows of stairs and a humongous room completely lit up with sunlight. On our left, there are rows of chairs. On our right there is an entire section of weight equipment with men and women using nearly every machine.

"This is what we call the atrium of our building. If you look up, you can see the sky. The roof opens and shuts but we try to keep it open as much as we can to keep from using electricity. When it's closed, the lights are kept on until about midnight."

"We removed the majority of the seats on this lower level so we could add in whatever we want to use. If you look at the upper levels you'll see all the chairs that we haven't removed. We don't really plan on removing them as it's too steep up there to add much."

We walk down row after row of stairs that lead to the ground floor.

"How do you maintain reliable electricity for all of this?" I ask.

"Believe it or not, there's an intact power plant not too far from here. It wasn't destroyed during the war and we were lucky enough to come across an ex-employee who taught us how to run the place. The power plant can power much more than this building, but most of the power lines in this area are down so we're nearly the only building on the power grid. Still, we like to conserve as much as possible because we'll be screwed the day that place goes caput."

We stop walking as we reach the ground floor. On one side of the floor there are kids running around and playing games on dark green grass. On the other side there are bookshelves, chalkboards, and tables scattered across a wooden floor. Kids and adults are sitting at the tables reading books.

"We decided to keep this floor half artificial grass and half basketball court. The grass is what they call astro turf, in other words it's fake grass they used to use for sporting events. This arena was used year-round and was constantly converted back and forth between the two. As you can see, there are kids running rampant on the turf. We try to give them a place to be kids away from the outside world."

"What are the chalkboards for?" Reika asks.

"We decided to turn the basketball court into a learning center of sorts. That way we can pass on our knowledge to the kids and to anyone else who might want to learn."

"That's cool." Tanks says.

"Well that's the atrium. Feel free to use anything you want while you're here. Let's head up a floor or two so I can show you where the civilian quarters and shops start. "

"Sounds good."

"How the hell do you all manage to eat?" Logan asks as we start walking.

"On the backside of the building we tore out the asphalt and deposited soil. The entire area is now an enormous garden.

"Adjacent to that garden we have set up an area to house goats, rabbits, and chickens. The chickens and goats eat just about anything we feed them, and the rabbits aren't much harder to keep fed. The goats provide us with milk, cheese, meat, and fur. The chickens yield meat and eggs, and the rabbits provide a good chunk of meat for a small amount of space.

"We have a few fish hatcheries established as well. The two small hatcheries that we created nearby we made after reclaiming a massive one that the officers had kept running after the collapse. The reclaimed hatchery is nearly big enough to provide our entire population with fish. However, it's an hour and a half drive to the north of us so we only utilize it a few times a year. We rotate teams to and from the facility every eleven to twelve weeks or so. When a group rotates home in a convoy, they bring a massive amount of fish back with them."

"You sound like you're well-fed!"

"And I haven't even got to my favorite food yet!"

"Your favorite food?" I ask.

"Cherries! In the spring and summer we make annual trips to pick grapes, raspberries, cherries, and apples from some of our farther locations."

"Wow, that's impressive! You definitely eat a lot better than we do."

We walk back the way we came and up to the next floor. We go through an arch much like the one downstairs but with different numbers.

Every floor looks exactly the same. The only difference is the families that reside on each and what they sell.

"Oh and by the way, we actually have running water throughout this place! It works pretty poorly, but it still works. Just before the collapse, water was rerouted from the Colorado River to this entire area. Residents at the time decided that fracking was a good thing. In turn, they destroyed the original water source they had and the city had to reroute and rebuild most of their water system. Luckily, the project was completed before the collapse began. It's thanks to them that we have enough water to keep our food supply and us alive!"

Fracking?

"Lastly, on your tour of our home, you get to find your own quarters. If you look at the ceiling, there are numbers representing each section. You guys have been given a place to stay on the seventh floor, section seven zero five. If you need to find any of us, I'm on the first floor, section one twenty-three. Lotus here is in section one thirty-two."

"Lotus is just my code name by the way, you can call me Britt while we're here if you want."

"Well, nice to meet you Britt."

"Likewise, sugar."

"I'll let you guys unwind for the day and explore for yourselves. After all, you still have a big decision to make. You should come join my family and me for dinner in a few hours. If you want that is. Oh, that's right time! Do any of you know how to tell time?"

"No," all of us except Tank say in unison.

"Kind of," Tank replies.

"Near the stairs on each floor, there are groups of glowing red numbers. Each set of those numbers make up a clock. The clock on each floor

is synchronized with the same time we all keep. It helps us meet and head out efficiently." He goes on to show us his watch and explains minutes, seconds, hours, and the meanings of a.m. and p.m.

"So, we eat twice a day. Dinner is always right around seven o'clock. Can you tell me what time it is now?"

Tank responds before anyone else, "It's two p.m."

"Good, looks like you got it. I'll see you for dinner, and if not, find me when the intercom goes off in the morning."

Intercom?

"Sounds good," I say as I turn with my group and start walking.

"Anyone know what the inter..er...thing he's talking about is?" I ask.

"I dunno, must have something to do with a radio that's wired so everyone can hear it," Logan responds.

"Yeah, you're probably right. Let's go check out where they've put us for the night?" I ask.

"Uhh yeah, I want to see our new home!" Natalie says, half sarcastically, half excited.

We head back to the metal stairwell and begin walking up to the seventh floor. We walk out to the oval and look to the numbers to figure out which way to go.

"Looks like we're to the left," I say as I start walking.

"This floor seems a lot less crowded than the others we were on," Logan says.

"It's the last possible floor, probably houses less people," Tank replies.

"Hurry up, let's check out our new home!" Natalie says as she starts skipping ahead of us.

"Well, she's suddenly cheery," I say.

"She has that thing about finding a place to call home. Remember?"

Tank responds.

"Oh yeah, that's right. I forgot she tried to convince us to stay at that house we found in the middle of nowhere. Ha, we had to practically pry her away from that place!" I say.

"No hunters for miles, yet she insisted on staying. Yeah, I remember you and Tank basically dragging her out of the house," Reika adds.

"Here it is guys!" We hear Natalie shout from down the hallway.

Seven zero five. We walk over to her and meet two soldiers who are standing rigidly in front of the counter.

"One of you Nineteen?" A soldier asks.

"I'm Nineteen."

"There are pillows and beds in the back as well as a small box of supplies for you to use. Feel free to leave your belongings without having to watch them. This area has been sealed off for your group. There will be a soldier on each entrance guarding it for you."

I look to the left and to the right—not another family or shop in sight.

"Umm. Thank you. We can, uh, take it from here," I say, unsure of what to do.

"No, thank you sir! We heard that you're the ones who hit the officer HQ. Today was a victory for us all!" the quiet soldier says before bowing and walking off.

"Thank you." The other soldier nods and walks the opposite direction.

I look back at everyone. "Well, that was weird!"

"Shut up! Let's see what we got!" Natalie says, pushing me to the side and then running behind the counter and into the back of the room.

"We're never gonna be able to drag her out of here!" Logan says, looking at me with wide eyes.

The rest of us walk around to the back of the counter and through the opening in the wall behind it. We walk into the room and see Natalie in the middle, sorting through a camouflage duffle bag.

The room has enough space to have five beds against one wall with a ton of elbow room in between each bed. It is illuminated by yellow ceiling lights and several posters hang from the brown walls for decoration.

"That must be my bed," Tank says.

"It's huge!" Logan follows.

"Wow! They even gave you a special bed that actually fits you. That's a first!" I say.

"Yeah, we're never leaving!" Tank says as he plops down on the bed.

"I call the one farthest from Tank. I would like to actually be able to sleep," Logan says.

"What's wrong, don't like his snoring?" I pitch in.

"Not particularly."

I look at Reika, who is silent. She's studying one of the posters on the wall.

I walk over to her. "They really decked this place out for us."

Startled she looks at me and smiles. "Can I take this bed? I like this picture." She says staring into my eyes.

"Sure."

"Look guys! They even gave us real tooth brushes!" Natalie shouts.

"What are you talking about?" I ask walking over to her.

"I read once that people used specifically designed brushes to clean their teeth. This is them! Look, it says toothbrush on the package! And there's even one for each of us!"

"You're not kidding," I say very low, dazed by the items.

Toothbrushes, books, some kind of waxy bar that has the word 'dove' engraved in it, and a piece of paper that reads 'please enjoy while you can'.

"Well, I'm out. I'm gonna go explore," Logan says, exiting the room.

"This is nice. Something we've never been able to attain out there wandering, a permanent place to stay," I say out loud, not really meaning to.

The room goes silent.

"Sorry to bust up all the excitement, but we still have to make up our minds about tomorrow."

Natalie looks back at me. "You already know the answer. The only reason you don't just say it is because you want us to be happy regardless of your own feelings," she says and then looks back down, pretending to be studying the toothbrushes.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. I just don't want to force anything on you. Especially when you've finally attained something you've been searching for. You know you can always stay, I'll be happy for you either way."

Natalie cuts me off. "Shut up! I don't wanna hear it. I already know it without you saying it. We all do. We know you too well. We've been by your side too long. Even before Kai's death you were always looking out for us, whether you said it or not."

Natalie turns around and stands up to face me. "You were always giving your food up to feed us, or staying awake to watch over us even if there was a designated guard. I've watched you step in front of us

numerous times whenever you thought there was risk of someone shooting from a certain direction. Before I understood it, I thought these were just mistakes, but a person doesn't make that many mistakes. A person doesn't have that much insomnia. And a person cannot be starving when he gives the majority of his food to other people. Kai saw it before we did. He noticed it because it's how he was.

"So before you go on some speech about finding your own personal reason to live, and before you try to convince us to find another path, realize that we're not gonna leave your side. We're happy with you no matter where it is we end up.

"And stop beating yourself up about dragging us along for the ride! Look where we're at! We got to see this because of your decisions. Because of your choices we took out an entire officer hideout! Give yourself some credit. I respect Kai and everything he did for us, but Kai would never have gotten us here. It's been all you and us trusting in you that landed us here."

Natalie stares at me, waiting for my response. Reika and Tank are both looking at the floor, not wanting to comment.

I glance down, trying to come up with something to say. "Okay." I look into Natalie's eyes.

"Thanks," I say, offering her a slight smile.

Huh, so she finally let the floodgates loose and told me how she feels. I have to do something to break the tension. I don't want to ruin her chance to have a day at home before we leave again.

"So, I think I'll umm, let you guys redecorate our room here and I'll go catch up with Logan!"

Natalie shows a smile, chuckles, and shakes her head at me. "See, there ya go again. You don't want to ruin my day any more then you already have because you know that I want a place to call home."

Wow didn't expect her to see through me that easily. "Umm...no, what are you talking about? I deny these wild allegations! I just really want to find... umm Logan." I start shaking my head back and forth. "Not buyin' it?"

She laughs. "No asshole." she says playfully.

"Okay, okay... I'm sorry, I'll leave you to do, umm. your stuff for a while."

"I told you to stop apologizing."

"I'm sorry?" I say, trying not to burst into laughter.

She shakes her head, biting her lip.

"I am gonna go explore though. I'll be back in a little."

"Bout time!" Tank busts into the conversation.

"Can I go with you?" Reika asks.

"Sure."

I actually wanted some time alone to try and sort out why I have this tattoo on my ankle. I guess I'll just have to do it while Reika's with me. I head out the door and back into the oval with Reika following closely behind. Where to start? How do I remember if I've actually been here before?

"She's right you know. We see you for who you really are, not the tough insensitive front you put up. Most of the time that is."

"That's okay, I see you for who you really are too. I see right through your emotionless faces. You're not as hard to read as you think." A large smirk crosses my face as Reika cocks her head to the side, giving me a confused expression.

"What are you talking about?"

I laugh. "Believe me or not, I can read you better than you think. Now, come on Reika, enough chit-chat about who can read who. Let's go see what our new 'home' has to offer us," I say in a playful manner before turning and speed walking down the oval hallway.

"Okay, fine! Hey, wait up!"

Reika's even confronting me about my mannerisms! I wonder why? She's a lot like me. She holds her emotions in unless... unless someone else she cares about is in need. But I'm fine. Well, not completely. Is it that obvious I've been shaken up since we stepped foot in this place? They can't figure out what it is, but I guess they can see something is wrong.

I'm better than this. I have to pull myself together. I have to get this crap out of my mind. I have to be the rock of the group, especially now that I'm the leader. I have to figure out what these feelings of déjà vu mean and why I have this tattoo on my ankle before tomorrow. If we're going to fight, I need to be concentrated on watching everyone's back, not stuck in lala land inside my own brain.

"So, we gonna just walk in circles while you think or are we headed somewhere specific?" Reika asks with a sly grin on her face.

I let out a huge half laughing smile. "Well, we gotta make a quick pit stop before I can stop thinking." I might as well bring her along for the ride. She's not gonna leave me alone until I resolve this.

"I actually want to go talk to Fox real quick if that's cool with you."

"Fine with me. Let's find some stairs," she says, smiling bigger than before.

We make our way down to the first floor and begin our search for section one twenty-three.

"Wait, isn't that Fox right there?" Reika says, pointing to our left.

"Yeah, that's Fox and Cupid."

They're talking in front of one of the entrances to the atrium.

"Hey," I say to draw their attention.

"Nineteen. Cupid here was just updating me on Clue's condition. He lost a lot of blood and unfortunately will be left out of our next mission, but other than that he's going to be just fine. The doc said he'll be back on his feet in a month or so."

"That's good to hear," Reika replies.

"Well, I'll let you guys talk. I'll catch up with you at dinner," Cupid says and then walks away.

"What brings you to me?" Fox asks.

"I actually had few questions I was hoping you could answer for me."

"What's on your mind?"

"Do you want me to go... find Logan?" Reika asks before I can answer Fox.

I look at her, pausing for a moment. She knows I'm going to ask something personal and more than likely relevant to how I've been acting since we've been here. Yet she respects me enough to try to bow out. I'm not sure that I want Fox to pick up on that, especially seeing as how I can't remember the truth.

"No, you're fine. Feel free to add to anything I ask."

I turn to Fox. "So, my first question is actually a little personal. I ran into a man when I was younger who taught me a few things, he helped me out immensely. I think he might have actually been a soldier here because it wasn't too far from this area."

"What was his name?"

"His name was Fallon."

Saying his name stirs up the emotions in my gut. I immediately try to shake it off by focusing on Fox's facial expressions.

"Fallon, hmm, I did know a Fallon, a long time ago. He was actually a good friend of mine."

I take a breath, trying to hold in the floodgate of emotion that tries to leap out of my chest. I can feel my nostrils flaring. I can think about this later, I have to go cold. I have to suspend my emotions.

I clear my throat. "Do you know what happened to him, or is he still here somewhere so I can thank him?"

"Yeah. He was a teacher here when we were first setting up. Well, actually, he was a soldier of the Ninety-nine, but when he had his son, his focus changed to teaching. He remained a soldier part of the time, thanks to me harassing him.

"Unfortunately, he's no longer with us. He and his son were killed in a military raid while out scavenging. He was a really good guy, a great father and an even better teacher. It was a sad day when we lost him. How did you say you knew him?"

My father was one of the Ninety-nine! That explains the tattoo and my memory of the conversation I had with him. They think I'm dead. This whole time they thought I died along with my father.

"I'm sorry. What?" I say clearing my throat again, forcing myself to put a hardened expression on my face.

"I was just curious as to how you knew him. But it seems the news of his death doesn't sit very well with you. Perhaps that's a discussion for another time."

"Uh yeah, well, when I was little and was scavenging I got separated from my group. He spent the day teaching me things and eventually

reunited me with my group. I just never forgot his name, it's rare to run into someone like that out there."

"True, did you get to meet his son then? He usually took his son out with him."

"Umm."

I look at the floor trying to hide the water that is attempting to take over my eyes. Now is not the time. I can't break, not now, not here.

I look back up to him with clear eyes. "No, I don't recall his son being with him. I don't really remember much, other than his name. It was a really long time ago."

"Ah, okay," Fox replies.

"So, anyway, I had a few other questions for you. The rest are a lot less personal than that," I say chuckling.

I have to come up with a complete bullshit question for him before I ask about the tattoos.

"The first is..." I pause slightly before Reika steps in saving my ass.

"What is that white waxy thing with the word 'dove' engraved in it? And where's this running water? It was actually my question he was going to ask." Reika flashes a completely fake smile to Fox.

Fox starts laughing. "I guess you haven't seen some of the stuff we gave you out there, huh? The waxy stuff is soap. It helps with water to wash your body and leaves a sweet smelling scent on you. It's a luxury and extremely rare, but Oleg figured you might like it, as it might be your first and last day here.

"And the water to wash up with is actually in a few places on each floor. Just look for a sign that has a little blue person wearing a skirt. The one with the skirt is the washroom for the women and the other is for the men."

“Okay, thanks. I know where I’m headed as soon as we’re done here,” Reika says completely unauthentic.

Of course, if you didn’t know Reika, you’d never suspect she was lying through her teeth.

“Oh and that’s right—the other thing we wanted to ask you is about your tattoos. The ones you had to show to get back in. Do we need one and how would someone go about getting one?”

“No, you don’t need one yet, and actually, given the mission you’re about to go on, it’s probably much more beneficial for you to not have one in case you’re caught.

“And to answer your question, they’re given to all soldiers of the Ninety-nine as well as their family members. It’s a well-kept secret amongst us to ensure that everyone who comes here is actually one of us. It also ensures family members who might have gotten lost outside can re-enter to the building.

“The R’s that we had on our chests earlier today were a distraction. If the military actually caught us, they would more than likely believe that’s how we identify ourselves. It’s better than them discovering the small tattoos on our ankles.”

Okay, I need to draw suspicion away from my taking note of such a specific tattoo.

“Oh okay, smart! Is there anywhere we can get other tattoos, something we might want for ourselves?”

“Yeah! Actually, we have a group of soldiers that do ‘em. They run a shop over on one fifty-three. If you want to gather up whoever wants one in your crew, I’ll pass along the word to give them to you for free!”

"Awesome! I think we might have to take you up on that offer, assuming we can all agree on something to get. I'm pretty sure that's all I wanted to ask you. I'll see you at dinner. Thanks Fox!"

"No problem. I'll see you guys later."

Reika and I turn and start heading back towards the stairwell without saying a word to each other. So that's it, problem solved. I'm from here. The military managed to kill both of my parents because they were part of the Ninety-nine. The reason I have a mini ninety-nine tattoo on my ankle is because my father was a soldier.

We reach the stairwell before Reika finally breaks the silence.

"That's why you froze at the entry isn't it? You have a tattoo on your ankle?" She pauses, waiting for a response that I don't give her. "Fallon wasn't a random person you ran into, he was your father. The story you told me, it's the same story Fox told. That was him and you, only you didn't die like they thought. You've finally made it back home. Why didn't you tell him who you are?"

"Because I'm no longer that person, that's my past. I don't want to know my real name. I wanted to piece together the broken memories that keep rattling around in my brain. But it's better that I don't know everything. I'm Nineteen now, that's all I need to know. You and the others are the only family I need. This is no longer my home, my home is wherever we end up together."

"What about the others shouldn't you tell... never mind. I understand. I'll keep this to myself," she says then remains silent for the entire walk upstairs.

On the seventh floor nearly to our quarters, I break the silence.

"Maybe it's not a bad idea if we get tattoos. I've always kind of wanted one. And it's free."

"Or maybe we should come up with a group name before we get tattoos, then think about the tattoos," she responds.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. We better brainstorm our group name so we can become 'heroes' to the people when we return," I say, letting out a small laugh.

We get back to our room and see that Logan has returned. Natalie is reading a book and Tank is snoring.

"I see you made it back in one piece. No officers to slash?" I ask Logan.

"Unfortunately not, I'm thinking I might just take a nap like Tank over there."

"Well, you can't just yet. We have to come up with a group name to tell Oleg and the others before we leave tomorrow."

"So, while I was gone you finally stopped pretending that we might not go..."

I chuckle. "Yeah, you can say that. I had a little, umm, persuasion by someone in this room," I say, eying Natalie.

"Aw man! I missed her finally breaking loose on you!?"

"Hey! You know I am in the room with you two!" Natalie jumps in, finally dropping her book to the floor.

"Soo. Anywaaaay, about that group name, what do you guys think? Any ideas?" I ask, attempting to change the subject as fast as possible.

"How about we go with 'Nineteen Sucks?' How's that sound? No?" Natalie pitches in.

"Whatever. Seriously though, we have to come up with something. Fox told us there's a soldier that will give us all free tattoos. I was kind of thinking that if we came up with a name, we could all get the same thing

on us. I know it sounds kind of stupid, but, I don't know, I've always wanted a tattoo. I'll probably just get one myself anyway."

"Really? Ooo! No, I'm going with you and I want one!" Natalie says, jumping up off the ground.

"Hmmm. You know what? I think I know exactly what I want to get," Logan says with his mischievous grin working its way across his face.

"Okay, well, that leaves Tank. Hey Tank!" I shout to no avail, then turn to Natalie. "Natalie?"

"On it!" she says as she runs over to Tank and slaps him on his stomach. "Bighead! Wake up!"

Tank pops awake, looking around disoriented, "What's goin on?"

"We're going to get tattoos, come on! Let's go!" Natalie says as she grabs his hand and tries to pull him to his feet.

He gets up drowsily. "Do I have a choice in this?"

"No," Natalie immediately cuts him off.

"Fine. Where we getting inked at?" Tank says, looking at me.

"First floor," I reply.

Natalie shoots out of the room before anyone else. Now understanding the setup of the building, we easily navigate our way to the section where the tattoos are done.

Three heavily tattooed men wearing short sleeves and shorts are sitting on the counter, talking to each other when we approach.

"Excuse me, Fox sent me over here to talk to you guys about getting some tattoos," I say.

"Yeah, yeah, you must be Nineteen. Come on back guys. You know what you want?" he asks.

I look around to everyone. "I'm pretty sure everyone has an idea of what they want."

"Okay, sweet. Well, we can do three people at a time and at the moment we only have three different colors, blue, red, and black. This morning we had some yellow, but some guy came in and used it all up. So who's first?"

"Me!" Natalie jumps in front of everyone.

"Okay, you can head over there to Ted in that far chair."

"I'm next," Logan jumps in.

"Might as well get it over with," Tank says, stepping forward with Logan.

I sit next to Reika on a smooth black couch that is resting against the wall. We watch as the tattoo artists bring different books with pictures to each of our friends. All three of them are sitting on black chairs that move up and down.

The artists pull out needles, dip them in ink, and attach them to mini vibrating guns that are duct taped together. One by one the artists go to work. I watch for facial expressions as the needles make contact with their skin. It can't be that bad, no one has as much as flinched. I start getting drowsy watching facial expressions.

Next thing I know, I'm waking up on the couch to one of the artists telling me it's my turn. I guess I didn't realize how tired I was from this morning's craziness. I pry myself off of the couch and see Natalie smiling as she walks towards me.

"What'd you get?" I ask her.

"I got roses down my arm!" She shows me her left arm, which has a black rose vine wrapping down her arm with alternating blue and red roses.

"You got roses? I was expecting..."

"What? Roses are pretty, I like them!"

"They are pretty. You're right, I like it."

On my way to the chair, I see Tank getting out of his seat with a smile from ear to ear.

He turns to me with his shirt up exposing a large tank in black ink on his belly. "Check it out!"

I start laughing. "That's awesome!"

I sit down in the chair with the tattoo artist named Ted.

"Where's Logan?" I ask.

"He already went back outside, he was the first done. He got a strange x on his chest that was made with three lines going each way. We asked him what it meant and he just said that it was his signature," Ted replies.

I start cracking up in the chair and nearly fall out. "Yeah, that's his signature alright."

Freaking Logan and his obsession with that comic book character! That's definitely his signature.

"So, what do you want? Or do you want to take a look at our collection of tattoo books?"

"Do you know what a phoenix is?" I ask.

"Yeah, of course, they rise from their own ashes. I actually have a small one on my back."

"Well, that's what I want—a red phoenix on my left arm with cold eyes!"

"You got it!" Ted says as he busts out a little plastic cup with red coloring in it.

He dips the gun with the needle in the ink few times while pressing the button for the needle to move. The duct taped gun is connected to a pedal on the floor that the artist presses whenever he wants it to turn on.

Every time the gun turns on, I can see the needle moving at high speed back and forth.

He grabs my left arm and pulls it over a plastic wrapped part of another chair. Reika is sitting to the left of me, getting something tattooed on her forearm. I wonder what she's getting? I'll be willing to bet her's has more meaning than Natalie's random roses. Haha, leave it to Natalie to get a completely random design and be content with it.

"Ready?" Ted asks me one more time.

I give him a nod to start and watch as he puts the needle to my arm. The initial stab of the needle is accompanied by a mild stinging sensation. As he continues down my arm in a pattern that makes no sense to me, the rhythm of the needle starts to feel better. It doesn't hurt as much as I thought it was going to.

The longer he works on my tattoo, the sorer my arm gets. I start thinking about random subjects to draw my focus from the pain and to help pass the time.

Today in the room it seemed like Natalie stopped being upset with me for a moment. When she isn't mad at me we have a good chemistry. She has a tendency to challenge my decisions when she thinks I'm not acting with my own best interests in mind. But ever since Kai died it seems like no matter what my decision is she challenges it. There's no way every decision I've made since then has been selfless.

Reika gets up from her chair, thanks the artist, and then shows me her tattoo. There are lily pads around very fancy writing that reads 'Rest In Peace Kai' down her entire left forearm.

"It looks good, Reika," I say as I find myself gazing deep into her dark brown eyes.

"Thanks." She smiles, stares back briefly, and walks away.

Reika is extremely attractive. She's more like me than Natalie is and might understand me better. But with Natalie, there's this feeling I get whenever I look into her eyes that I can't shake. A gut feeling that I don't get with anyone else.

If we were to stay here and call this place our home and things weren't so crazy, then maybe... What the hell am I thinking! That day will never come, there's no point in me even contemplating it.

This must be what it feels like to have a home, a safe place to stay. You stop worrying about survival and begin thinking about the other things you might want in life. I've never really had the time to stop and contemplate how I feel about Natalie. The reality of the matter is that I shouldn't even be thinking about it.

My focus should be on the people who killed my parents and the war we're starting with them tomorrow. There isn't time for me to contemplate what it would be like to be with a woman and have a family. Quite frankly, that type of thought won't matter once we're in combat, it's just a waste of time that puts us all at risk.

"Alright, you're done! What do you think?"

I look down at my arm to see a phoenix with cold blue eyes spreading his red wings across my arm.

"It's perfect! Thanks!"

"No problem. You guys are free to come back anytime. Oh and you're gonna wanna keep this plastic seal on your arm for the next week or so to make sure it doesn't get infected. As long as it seals correctly on your arm, you should be fine leaving it there. I know you're going to fight tomorrow so I wouldn't take this off until you're back."

"Okay, sounds good. Thanks again," I repeat.

I turn to see Natalie, Reika, and Tank waiting for me on the couch.

"What is it?" Natalie asks as we walk out of the shop.

"It's a phoenix. Whenever it dies it rises again from its own ashes. So if they manage to kill me tomorrow you don't have to worry. I'll just get back up and fight again."

Natalie punches me in the arm with my tattoo. "Ow! What the hell was that for?"

"Don't ever talk like you're gonna die," she says in a serious tone and then walks ahead of us.

Logan walks over to us from a wall he was leaning on.

"So where to next?" he asks.

"Wait, what time is it?" Tank says, looking at the wall clock.

"Huh? Who cares?" I say.

"Oh crap, it's seven oh five. We're 'spose to be at Fox's!" Tank blurts out.

"Crap! That's right. Let's go! He's just down the hall," I say.

We make our way to Fox's and are greeted by Oleg, Cupid, and Fox at the entrance to his quarters. We head inside to see a rug is set out along the ground with a small feast worth of meat for us to eat.

"Grab a seat. Anywhere you would like. This is my wife Annette and that's my son Chris over there in the corner. Don't mind him, he's a little shy when it comes to new people."

We all exchange pleasantries with Annette and introduce ourselves. Food is passed out amongst all of us. Large chunks of meat are handed to each of us along with some kind of red berries I've never seen before.

"I only know what these are because I managed to stumble upon a can of 'em once! This is amazing!" I say, looking at the green beans as they're handed out to us.

"We don't normally eat this lavishly, however, tomorrow will be a huge day for us all. Many of our soldiers might not make it back, so today we feast. The red berries are raspberries and the vegetables are green beans if you've never had them before," Fox says.

"So have you made up your mind about tomorrow yet?" Oleg asks us and the room goes quiet.

"We'll be there," I say.

"Excellent, I'm glad to hear it! What about your group's name?" he asks.

I look around the table at each one of us and take a moment to think about what makes us who we are. My mind jumps to our tattoos and how we don't fit in with the other individuals here. The people that live here have real families like the ones I've read about. We don't have relatives or children that we care about. Our group is our family and our primary concern has always been to keep each other alive. We act according to our own laws and what each of us individually feels is right. The only reason we're here is because we're an able-bodied group who happen to share the same enemy.

"Well, I guess you can call us the Undesirables," I reply.

Snickers break out across the entire rug.

"That's definitely us," Tank says proudly.

Oleg and Fox both break out into laughter.

"Alright. Tomorrow I'll let our men know that the Undesirables and the Wolfpack attack the gate of our oppressors," Oleg says.

"Cheers." We all raise cups of water.

The feast commences and the food is amazing! Much better than anything I've eaten before. As we continue to eat people tell stories and jokes. We sit around laughing and oohing wasteland tales.

So this is what it would feel like to be truly free. To have a home and share it with friends without worries of the outside world. Maybe it was premature to make the assumption that these people wouldn't want us here. Maybe we aren't necessarily undesirables after all. This is why Natalie is always so determined to find a place we can call home.

It almost feels too good. It's as if I'm dreaming. After being out in that wasteland my entire life, this feels completely surreal. As I look around the room at all the laughter and happy faces, it's hard to imagine that earlier in the day we were killing men and dodging bullets. As surreal as the scene is, it ends far too quickly. Before I know it, we are on our way back to our quarters.

Everyone aside from me continues to laugh and joke the entire way to our quarters. I watch the others, thinking about how happy they would be if things could stay this way forever.

"Why are you so quiet, fearless leader?" Natalie asks me right outside our quarters.

"Just thinking, that's all."

"You're always thinking. Always planning for us. For one night don't worry about it! Get some sleep! You'll need it in the morning," Tank jumps in.

"Yeah, I guess you're right." I fake a smile for everyone's sake as we enter our room.

After fumbling around for a while, we manage to find the switch that turns on and off the lights. Everyone finds their beds and almost as soon as the lights are out, Tank starts snoring. I guess it has been a long day. I'm sure the others aren't far behind him. Me on the other hand, I can't shut my brain off to go to sleep. Perhaps it's because I've concealed too many emotions from everyone today. Holding it in all day has taken a

toll on me. My brain won't let it go. It's the middle of the night and I can't stop thinking.

We've finally found a place that we can call home and the very next day we have to go to war. Natalie grilled me for kicking myself on my decision making, but what if I would've told them no? What if I told the Ninety-nine that we wanted to retire and stay here like the other families? Would that have been so bad? Everyone would have been happy. Everyone but me would have been content. What is it about me that makes me want to chase down past ghosts and seek revenge? Why can't I just let go like everyone else and just be happy?

I need to get out of this room. I need to get some air! Everyone must be asleep by now, so they'll never know I'm gone. I get up as quietly as possible and make my way out of the pitch-black room. The lights in the hallway have been completely dimmed and in many areas turned off. The oval is silent and dark. I stand in the middle of the hallway contemplating where I can go to think. I don't want to wake up the other families by pacing by their rooms and I can't just walk outside at this time of night.

The atrium! It has seats and, if I remember right, Fox said that the roof stays open if the weather's nice. It'll feel as if I'm outside. I walk through the closest archway and into the atrium. Just as Fox said, there are rows of seats up here. I walk down to the balcony and sit in the corner seat looking up at the night sky.

I've finally made it home Dad, I'm sorry it took me so long. I had no idea that this place existed. My dream was composed of past events and places I had been. It wasn't as random as I thought it was. Maybe the memories I had lost were trying to resurface to tell me something. The words I heard you say I must've heard you say before.

The two with the government in my dream, you said they were responsible for everything. I thought that it was the officers and the government who had conspired somehow. But I kept discarding the dream as being random. When I think about it as something you've said in the past and now knowing we were from the Ninety-nine, it makes sense. The two are the rich and the military and along with the government they're responsible for the war.

Something cold grabs my right hand and I flinch.

"You okay?" Natalie asks, whispering.

"Why are you here?" I whisper back.

"You left the room and never came back. I was worried."

"You were awake?"

"Yea. I couldn't sleep."

"Oh, sorry. Me either. I left to get some air."

"So you aren't mad at me anymore?" I ask as Natalie sits on the steps next to me.

"Mad at you?"

"It seems like... I don't know. We've been off lately. I mean, I know we're all trying deal with Kais death but"

"I just don't want to lose you," Natalie says cutting me off.

"Or Tank. Or anyone else. But especially not you and Tank. I don't want to see you hurt. And it seems like you and Reika have been getting closer lately. So."

"Me and Reika? What's she have to do with you being mad at me?" I ask.

"Nothing. I just ... I thought... I don't know." She says with a hint of frustration in her voice.

"I just hope we can get back to how we were. And I know your worried right now. But, I really miss having you by my side. You know, giving me a normal amount of shit, but still showing you care." I stare into her eyes and smile.

She laughs. "I never left your side. And I hope I never will. The last few days, have been rough." She looks down and takes a deep breath.

She looks back into my eyes and continues. "I guess I must have been picking up on something that wasn't actually there because of it. So, I'm sorry. I've been thinking a lot about us and ... "

The stars are illuminating her face. Her blue eyes are glowing with the reflection of the moon. My heart is pounding out of my chest. She's beautiful. Even more so in the moonlight. I lean in a little closer trapped in her eyes. Fuck it. I slowly press my lips to hers.

All I can feel, all I can think about, are her lips meeting mine. For a moment the world around us disappears and she begins to kiss back. Then, as if awaking from a trance, she pushes me away from her.

"What was that?" she asks, with an expression of surprise on her face.

"I've never kissed anyone before. I figure tomorrow we might..."

Natalie pulls me toward her and out of my seat, kisses me and then wraps her other arm around my back. I press down into her body as she leans back against the stairs. I wrap both of my arms around her and pull her to me as tightly as possible. Her soft body feels amazing pressed to mine.

"Ahem!" Tank's voice shoots into my ears, making Natalie and I jump to attention on the floor.

"Ya know, I don't really wanna watch my sister make out."

"I..." I start to say.

"See..." Natalie starts.

“And ya know, I’ve read about a gazillion books! Aren’t you guys supposed to wait until we save the world before you can go at it and live happily ever after?”

I let out a laugh relieved at Tank’s joke. “Well, that’s in books, this is real life! Ya never know what’ll happen tomorrow,” I shoot back at him.

Tank shakes his head at me and lets out a sigh. “Look, I don’t really care. I woke up to pee. Saw you were both missing. Decided I’d figure out where the after-hours meeting was, and, well I guess I found it, eh!” He laughs.

“You two are crazy. I’ll leave you guys alone. I’ll be back at our makeshift home.” Tank turns and starts walking.

Natalie looks at me with a half-smile across her face.

She turns to Tank. “Wait up, our meetings over.”

Tank mutters something under his breath shaking his head.

Natalie looks back at me. “We’ll have to talk, after tomorrow.” Then she runs to catch up to Tank.

I sit on the ground watching Natalie and Tank disappear into the darkness at the top of the stairs. Wow, that really just happened. Am I dreaming? I pinch my leg. Yeah, I’m awake. Wow! That did just happen. I start laughing to myself. That felt amazing! Why didn’t I do that sooner?

Crap! Right, back to the real world. I haven’t done it because we’re never in a safe place. I’d much rather have her alive and by my side then dead because I dropped my guard to kiss her. I have to focus. I really need a plan for tomorrow so we can come back to this place and truly make it our home. Okay, I’m still on the floor. I need to take myself to bed. I’ll just slowly sneak back in and pass out.

I hurry back and enter entirely too fast, not giving my eyes enough time to adjust.

"Hey!" I hear Reika let out in a very low voice as she pinches my leg to let me know I stepped on her bed.

"Sorry!" So much for sneaking my way back into the room.

I find my bed and try to make myself comfortable when I hear a shuffling sound. When the sound stops, I feel Natalie's hand brush across my arm trying to find my hand. I open my eyes and can almost make out her figure in the dark. She moved her bed next to mine.

"Fuck it," she whispers rolling her body next to mine.

I wrap my arm around her, cuddle, and fall asleep.

ALL HANDS ON DECK

"All soldiers please report to the first floor for orders! I repeat, all soldiers please report to the first floor for orders!"

I open my eyes to the horrendously loud sound emitting throughout the room. Before I can say or do anything, Natalie brushes my arm off and jumps out of bed. She grabs her mattress and scoots it back to the corner.

"Real smooth, almost nobody saw that," Tank says, causing Natalie to jump.

I turn and sit up to see Logan laughing and Reika watching emotionlessly.

"The one day you all actually wake up on time. Figures! Now shut up and get your butts outta bed!" Natalie says, turning to me. A smile shows through her angry face when we make eye contact.

I get up from the bed, gather my backpack, and inspect my guns. We head out of our room and down to the first floor. The first floor is packed with soldiers. We walk to the glass doors where we first met Oleg. Standing outside the doors is Fox with the Wolfpack and one other group of men.

I walk over to Fox and Lotus, nodding to them in greeting.

"What now?"

"We wait until Oleg lets us in and asks what we need to do our job. Then we get what we need and head out," Fox responds.

"Simple and easy march to our death," Lotus adds, smiling.

The intercom echoes down the hallway. "If you're not already in position, get there!" A short pause is given before it starts again.

"Today is a very important day for us! Today we strike the first blow of revenge in over thirty years. Decades ago we were left for dead by our own government and military. We were left behind not because we did something wrong, but because we were trying to survive. Those in control of the country, sat back in ivory towers fattening themselves while we starved. Those same men are responsible for the collapse of our entire nation. It's time they answered for their crimes. It's time they pay for the innocent lives they've taken. It's time for them to fall!

"Today, the Wolfpack, the Cutthroats, and the Undesirables, will infiltrate the obsidian gates of our enemy! Shortly afterwards, our enemies will feel the wrath of the entire nation they left to die. We will overrun their walls, destroy their hierarchy, and take what is rightfully ours!

"Today marks the beginning of the long awaited end to our struggle. Today will be remembered in the history books as the day we took our future back from the hands of tyrants. Now get out there and make us proud!"

The intercom cuts off. The cheers are so loud they shake the foundation of the building. I can't join them in cheering as I know what awaits us. It's not as simple as the man on the intercom said. It'll be a blood bath. I'm all for revenge and making those who are in power pay for what they did. But glorifying it, I'm not sure how I feel about that. They deserve

what's coming to them, but there's not going to be anything glorious about their fate.

The cheering dies down and Oleg waves us inside the glass doors.

"Come in ladies and gentlemen."

We follow Oleg back to the conference room where we met the day before. Scattered across the table are backpacks and camouflage clothing. The camouflage is much lighter than the dark green everyone in the room is currently wearing.

"This is desert camo. It'll help you blend in with the landscape surrounding the compound. The two miles you'll be crawling through to get to the compound walls is desert. It's been turned into a desert that is—the military burns or bombs anything that grows within their radius of protection. That being the case, we've also decided to get creative with our weaponry."

Oleg waves at two soldiers on the far side of the room. The soldiers leave the room and then return through a side entrance wheeling in a cart.

"Camo guns stripped down and painted to match your desert camo. I don't know what type of weapons you're going to want for this mission, so I'll let you pick 'em out yourselves. If it's not on either of the carts we're wheeling in, please ask. That being said, Nineteen, I'm giving you and your men the first pick of weapons."

I look up to Oleg, trying to gauge why he would give us the first pick when were the newest recruits into the Ninety-nine.

"Don't just stand there, have at it! I'm giving you and your men the first pick because you're fresh out of the wastes and I'm sure the weapons you've been carrying could use some R and R."

I let out a laugh. "That works for us," I say and then walk around the table browsing through the weapons.

I want something I have some experience with. I need to hit whatever I'm shooting at and I know my AR inside and out. I wonder if I can find something like it.

"You got a section for sniper rifles?" I hear Tank ask.

"Yeah, there's a few right over there." Oleg responds pointing to one of the carts.

"These handguns are nice and all, and I want one or two of 'em, but my specialty tends to be in blades. You have any spiffy knives I could look at?" Logan asks.

"Actually, we have a ton of knives, they don't get as much use as they should. Martin can you take Logan to the armory and show him the blades. Let him have whatever he wants," Oleg says to one of the guards.

At least my group isn't shy of asking what they want. Here we go, this looks just like my AR. I pick up one of the guns from the cart and begin examining it. Well, it's like my AR but looks like a few things are different.

"That's an M16 A5 assault rifle. It's a lot like the AR15 you carry, but it's fully automatic and a few generations newer. If you take it you'll want to burst spray. You'll burn through ton of ammo if you don't. Of course, we'll load you up with plenty of ammo before you leave, if you want it," Oleg says, walking over to me.

"Okay, I'll take it, along with these two handguns," I say, pointing out a forty and a forty five caliber handgun.

"Done, we'll get you squared away with extra clips and ammo for each gun. Anything else you want?"

"Hmm... do you by any chance have any suppressors we could use? For the handguns?" I ask.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure we have one for each of the handguns you picked. Grab yourself a backpack and some clothes you think will fit. I'll go look for the suppressors and come right back," Oleg replies.

I grab some camo clothing and try on several backpacks before deciding on one to keep. A few moments later, Oleg returns with a basket full of suppressors and Logan who is grinning ear to ear.

"Your suppressors." Oleg says handing me two suppressors. He puts the basket on the table and begins sorting and labeling each of them.

"I'm not sure what you guys picked so I grabbed a suppressor for just about everything. Go ahead and put 'em on and make sure everything fits. There's also a bathroom outside where you can try on the camo," Oleg says to me and the rest of our group.

"Okay," I say, as my group begins digging through the suppressors.

"Now the rest of you. You know the drill—grab what you need and let's get moving. We're scheduled to leave forty minutes from now," Oleg says to the Wolfpack and the Cutthroats before walking out the door.

"You hear that? We got forty minutes to get ready," Tank says.

"Yeah, guess we better hurry. Seems they were taking their time with us because we're new," I say, as I head for the door.

"They need us, they'll wait," Natalie pitches in as we exit the room.

"Yeah, they'll wait but that doesn't mean it's a good idea to make them," I say back.

"True," she replies.

"What the hell just happened? Did you just openly agree with Nineteen?" Tank says.

"What? He's right!" Natalie snaps at Tank.

"Oh man, now I know we're all gonna die. Hell just froze over!" Tank says.

"Shut up! Go get dressed. You're all slacking" Natalie yells at us as we reach the bathrooms.

"Doesn't anyone want to know what I found?" Logan adds out of nowhere.

"No!" everyone but me shouts at him.

We head into the bathroom. I throw my beat up dirty clothes to the ground. Examining the pristine camo gear they gave us, I feel the urge to put my dirty clothes back on. I shake off the feeling and begin slipping on the camo.

I feel out of place, almost like this isn't me. After all this time wearing raggedy clothes, I've grown accustomed to the feel against my skin. This camo feels scratchy and unnatural.

Now I guess I have to get the bulletproof vest on underneath if it's going to fit. I start sliding the vest under the camo, cringing slightly at the thought of the officer's blood making direct contact with my skin. Tank shoots me a strange look, already wearing his full camo outfit.

"What are you two doing?" he asks.

I look at Logan who is doing the same as me.

"Uhh, we're putting our vests on underneath so we can still use the camo to blend in," I say back to Tank, unsure of myself.

Tank starts laughing. "Seriously guys? You know there's slots in the gear they gave us that contain Kevlar."

What the hell is Kevlar? I look at Logan and see he has the same lost expression as I do.

Tank starts laughing again. "You two have no idea what kevlar is, do you?"

"No," Logan and I say in unison.

"It's the same stuff that's in the bullet proof vests. You know, the stuff that makes them bullet proof! Didn't you notice the clothes they gave us seemed a little heavier than normal? It's because they're lined with a military version of Kevlar."

I grab the camo shirt from off the floor and weigh it in comparison to the bulletproof vest. He's right, they feel about the same. The camo gear is heavier than the vest.

"Okay, you're right! But how the hell did you know that?" I ask.

"I asked one of the soldiers yesterday if they wore vests under the camo."

"I should cut you!" Logan says.

"You asshole. You didn't know before we got here either. You just wanted us to make fools of ourselves!" I say back to Tank, shaking my head.

"Yeah, it was pretty funny." Tank says and then starts laughing again.

We finish dressing, and then wait outside the bathrooms for the girls. Reika and Natalie walk out of the bathroom, both with their bulletproof vests on under their camo. Tank starts laughing uncontrollably.

"What?" Natalie demands.

"Umm. Your clothes are really tight and there's black padding poking out by your neck. So I'm guessing that you're wearing your vest underneath the camo?" I ask.

"Yeah! And?" Natalie replies.

Logan starts laughing. "Okay, you're right, it is pretty funny!" Logan says, hitting Tank in the arm.

"Apparently the camo has the same thing the bullet proof vests have in 'em to stop bullets. You don't need to wear the vest underneath, you can take them off."

"You couldn't tell us this before we went to change?" Natalie asks.

"Don't look at me." I point to Tank.

Natalie walks over and punches Tank before turning and heading back into the bathroom. Reika follows her. A few minutes later, they reappear ready to go. We head back to the glass room to be greeted by Oleg and a few of his soldiers.

"The other groups have dispersed and will meet us at the lift off point. I'll take you there myself, but first let's quickly go over the compound that you're going to infiltrate." Oleg unravels a large map on the table.

"Right here in the middle," he points at a large x on the map, "will be the compound. We're going to drop you here about three miles out to ensure we can land without being seen. You'll have to hike a mile or so before you reach their defensive desert or what we call Zone D. You'll know you're there as soon as you get close. The only thing you'll see is desert and a huge black object off in the distance. The west side of that object is where the wall is currently down for expansion. That will be the side you'll be approaching from.

"You're gonna want to be most careful when you first enter Zone D. Our intel suggests that they keep a close watch where the desert meets the rubble of the city. I'm giving you this compass to make sure you stay headed in the right direction. Once you've reached Zone D, you'll have to

head straight for the big black object in the distance. Questions?" Oleg asks as he hands me a compass.

"I've never used a compass," I say.

"Oh, well, it's easy. All you have to remember is that the red arrow always points north."

"Okay... one last question. What's with the tubing that comes from our backpack that's attached to this mouthpiece?" I ask.

"Those backpacks are what we call 'CamelBacs'. You fill that compartment with water so you don't get dehydrated while you're out there. I'm guessing none of you filled them up?"

Everyone shakes their heads.

"That's okay, there's a place we can hit on the way to fill them up. If that's it, we should get going. We only have about fifteen minutes until you're supposed to head out," Oleg says

"That should be it," I say in response.

"Follow me," Oleg says, walking out of the room.

We walk to a stairwell on the backside of the arena and go down to the ground floor. This must be the scavenger or civilian entrance. There's metal detectors everywhere, just like the other side, but it's much busier and has a smaller soldier presence. At the far left side of the room, there is a metal detector that has soldiers standing around it with no one passing through.

Oleg directs us through the metal detector with soldiers and we exit the building. Outside, we stand on a sidewalk inches away from a massive field of green. This must be the garden.

"Here we go," Oleg says, walking us to a garden hose with running water flowing into the garden.

"Fill up your backpacks and we'll head to the chopper."

"Okay," I say, nodding.

Each of us takes a turn filling our backpacks. I take a few drinks from the hose while it fills. After everyone's backpack is full, Oleg leads us back to the sidewalk where we walk around the building until we hit the parking lot where we first arrived. We head across the lot to the parking garage we flew into the day before. As we enter the lot, the Cutthroats and a multitude of soldiers stand impatiently waiting for us.

"You're late!" a soldier says, approaching Oleg.

"I know, it couldn't be helped. Everything ready?"

"Yep." The soldier turns to us. "Come with me, we're in chopper two," he says and starts jogging towards one of the helicopters.

We follow him to the helicopter, which is nearly the same size as the one we rode in on the day before. Fox and the Wolfpack are already strapped inside and taking up the front half of the aircraft. One by one, we jump in and look for harnesses to strap ourselves to. I press my back against the far side of the helicopter and strap myself in between Natalie and Logan. After we're in and secured, the soldier who scolded Oleg hops in with us. He pounds on the side of the chopper and slams the door shut. As soon as the doors close, we lift off the ground and begin maneuvering our way out of the garage.

"I'm Estabon. I'll be getting you to where you need to go!" the man yells to us over the roar of the propellers.

I nod to him in response.

"This is going to be a much longer ride than the one the one you took to get here. We have to go to a place in Texas that used to be known as Hunters Creek. It's nearly all the way to the gulf coast," Estabon continues.

"So in other words, get comfortable," Fox throws in.

"He's right, this helicopter can go a little over a hundred ninety miles an hour. It'll take us a good five to five and a half hours to get there. It's a little past seven a.m. now, so we'll be getting to our drop point around noon, maybe a little later. That should still provide you with plenty of time to get to the walls before the patrols start. Ah, and by the way, I'll be the one you're in contact with once you're on the inside. I'll be holed up near the entrance of Zone D with a raven set to frequency one ninety nine."

"Okay. Anything else we should know?" I say.

"That pretty much sums it up. Just make sure not to forget the frequency I gave you. From here on out, I'm your only contact to the outside world."

"Okay, I won't."

"Now, unless you have any other questions, I'm gonna take a power nap before we get there."

"Go for it," I reply.

"Thanks," Estabon nods then leans backward onto the door of the helicopter and closes his eyes.

I don't know how he's going to get any sleep with the roaring of the propellers. Then again, I guess he's probably used to it.

A familiar sound hits my ears. I look to my right to see Tank snoring loudly with Natalie sprawled out on his left arm, sound asleep. In front of them in the middle of the helicopter, Reika is curled in a ball with her eyes closed, using her backpack as a pillow. I look to my left and in the corner of the aircraft, Logan is curled up with his eyes closed. Okay, apparently I'm the only one who has a problem sleeping on this thing. Whatever. Someone has to stay awake to warn all the sleeping people when we're crashing.

I look around studying the faces of the Wolfpack. They all seem emotionless, much the same way Reika tries to be. Half of them are asleep, the other half are staring into oblivion. They must feel a lot like I do. They've been through enough fights to know that this isn't going to be a simple 'run in, run out, we're victorious' endeavor.

Guilt fills the pit of my stomach at the thought of what will surely ensue after we land. This is my fight and I'm dragging our entire group into it. They said they wanted to go with me and that they wouldn't let me go alone. But the truth is, that aside from Logan, I'm the only one who truly wants to see this through to the end. I'm the one who wants to see these bastards pay for what they did to my parents. I'm the one who wants to see them pay for what they did to us as a group.

Natalie is always searching for a place to call home. We finally found it and then we left because of me. I look back at Natalie. She's sleeping peacefully. She's beautiful. Even when I'm not caught in her eyes, there's something special about her. I can't believe I made out with her! I never thought I would live long enough to experience the lips of a woman. Beyond that, it was soothing to hear her heartbeat next to mine last night. The world and all of its flaws seemed to melt away with her next to me.

Enough of that. I have to focus. I need to think out a plan of attack before we get there or I'll never experience her lips again. I turn away from Natalie, trying to shift my thoughts. I look at Logan in the corner. His head nods forward due to the motion of the helicopter and he pops awake. He takes a look at me, then the grin he had earlier reappears. He flips out a large camouflage knife from his pocket to show me before he leans back against the corner closing his eyes. I shake my head laughing to myself. Leave it to Logan to be so happy he found a knife he likes.

Okay, plan of attack for today. What can we do with what I know? They said we'll have eight hours to get to the wall and inside before the patrol comes out. If the wall is down in one area, they should have more security posted around that area to make up for it. It doesn't make sense to approach it directly like Oleg said. They would be waiting for a direct approach. With all that time, we could walk further along the outside of Zone D and head to another part of the wall first. One that's not down, a part that they're not watching. Then we just walk along the wall until we hit the lowered part. Screw what Oleg said and what the other groups decide to do. It was me who dragged everyone here and it'll be me who ensures we get out alive.

My eyes are starting to burn. I guess I didn't get as much sleep as I thought last night. I glance at Natalie and then lean back against the helicopter, closing my eyes for a second. I struggle to reopen them but manage to do so. Looking out the window at the clouds, I try to refocus on my plan of attack but my brain is mush. I'll just rest my eyes for a second, then I'll contemplate what else we can do.

OBSIDIAN WALLS

"Rise and shine everyone! We got about five minutes till the landing zone!" Estabon shouts at the top of his lungs.

I pop awake, pull myself off the side of the helicopter and rub the sleep from my eyes. Wow, I was out just like everyone else. I guess the last few days have worn us down.

"As soon as we touch down, everybody needs to file out to the east as fast as possible. We need to get off the road and away from the chopper just in case it got spotted on the way in. There will be a row of beat down buildings off the main road we're landing on, that's where you wanna head. After you're secure and away from the chopper, I'll meet with you for a small briefing on the landscape. After that, it's every group for themselves," Estabon continues.

"Hang on for descent," the copilot yells back to us.

Everyone positions themselves to brace for impact with the ground. There is a little shaking but we touchdown smoothly. Estabon slides the door open to reveal the beat down concrete road that we landed on.

"Go. Go. Go." He motions everyone to leave.

I unhook myself and jump out the door, looking around wildly for the line of buildings he told us to run to. I run around the helicopter and start jogging towards the buildings. On the left side of the road there are two soldiers standing next to a large truck watching us scramble. Military? No, they would've attacked. They must be with us. I stop in front of a huge white stucco building.

I turn around, looking for the other groups and discover that everyone is standing right behind me.

"Okay, I guess let's head in?" I look to everyone and ask.

I get a mixed grumble, mostly consisting of nods and low pitched shouts saying to go for it. I walk up to the door and try the silver door-knob. It's locked. I pull the M16 from my shoulder and aim at the door-knob, squeezing the trigger gently. I'm greeted with a surprise kick and bullets flying up the side of the door before I can remove my finger from the trigger.

"Good job, I think it's dead!" I hear Tank say sarcastically behind me.

Holy crap! Oleg wasn't kidding when he said I had to burst spray with this thing! It's nothing like my AR. That would've been only one round with the AR. I let out a good five bullets by barely pulling the trigger. Tank brushes by me and kicks the door.

"Let me help ya," he says, smiling as the door swings open.

I lead the way into the building. Inside, there is one massive open room with rows of shelves spanning to the ceiling. The floor is concrete and looks a lot like the floors of the arena. Everyone files into the building and we cluster in the middle of the room.

"Good choice!!" Estabons voice radiates into the building.

"You guys hit the jackpot! I'm pretty sure this is the hostess warehouse that I always wanted to come check out!"

"Hostess?" I say.

"Yeah, Hostess! They used to make Twinkies and all kinds of sweets back before the collapse. Looks like there are plenty of shelves with stuff on 'em. Let's go check it out. I can explain the layout of where we're headed while we look for a snack." Estabon says, walking past us and to the nearest group of shelves.

He begins explaining the terrain we'll be walking through while rummaging around the plastic wrapped pallets that are sitting on the shelf.

"This area is pretty desolate as far as scavengers are concerned. Everyone knows the compound is nearby and most everyone stays far away because of it. It'll make our hike rather easy. That is aside from the heat of the area. So make sure to stay hydrated or you'll end up—oh, bingo! Gotcha!" He says and disappears around the side of a shelf.

I start laughing at his abrupt pause. He emerges a few seconds later holding a white box with pictures on it.

"I found us a variety pack! It has Twinkies, Ding Dongs, and Snowballs in it!"

Not a single person in the room responds to his excitement.

"Okay..." Natalie says, extending her arms in a questioning fashion.

"What? Ya'll don't know what Twinkies are? They're awesome!" Omni says, jumping to the front of the group showing enthusiasm.

"No? Okay, well, I don't know either I was just bs'ing. What the hell's a Twinkie?" Omni turns to Estabon who is ripping open the box.

"A Twinkie is a type of dessert! It's sweet and lasts forever! I've only had the pleasure of eating one my whole life," he says, pulling out a small package of plastic with something yellow inside.

He throws the box to Omni. "Take one and pass 'em around."

"I'm okay, not a big fan of sweets," Omni says, turning and passing the box to me.

"But as I was saying, what was I saying?" Estabon tries to continue.

"Dehydration," Fox chips in.

I pull out a circular brown object that is wrapped in plastic and then pass the box to Natalie. Estabon grabs another box from the shelf and throws it out to a member of the Cutthroats.

"Oh, yeah, that's right! Keep drinking water! It gets really hot here. The sun will beat you down. The last thing you need is to pass out while crawling towards the wall. But that's it. We can head out and start making our way there as soon as were done here."

"So, we're spouse to eat this?" I ask, looking at the package.

"Yeah, rip open the package and take a bite like this." Estabon rips the wrapper off and takes a huge bite out of the ovular yellow object.

"It's good!" he says with his mouth full.

Looking around I see a few other people biting into things. Sure, why not. I rip open the plastic and take a bite.

An extremely sweet sensation rushes into my mouth. It's actually not bad, aside from making me really thirsty. I devour the entire thing. Afterwards I gulp down some water from my backpack.

"Okay, if everybody got one we should get moving. Sorry for the detour, I couldn't help myself. We're about to risk our lives right? Might as well take in some scenery before we do!" Estabon says as he starts walking towards the door.

"They should be done refilling the chopper by now so we can begin our trek east. Feel free to split up into your groups and head out at your own pace. Just do me a favor and let me know via our raven frequency

when you start crawling in." He walks to the door and holds it open for us to file out.

I walk outside and turn to group up with everyone.

"Ready?" I say looking at Natalie, Tank, Logan, and Reika.

They all nod. "Let's go kill some people already!" Logan says, with a full mouth.

"Umm, you got black crap all over your teeth!" I say back to him laughing.

"Huh?"

"Never mind lets go," I say, shaking my head and walking off to the side of the building.

I pull out the compass to ensure that we're heading in the right direction as we walk along the side of the building.. Ahead of us are collapsed buildings and dilapidated houses.

"It's greener then I expected," Tank says.

"Yeah it is, for a place they made out to be the desert there sure are a lot of trees," I say, looking at the green surrounding the structures ahead of us.

It's a lot greener here then back home. He wasn't kidding about the heat either, I'm pouring sweat and we just started walking.

"It feels like I'm bathing in my own sweat! What'd that thing I ate do to me?" Logan says.

"It's not what you ate! It's this place, it's even affecting my hair!" Reika adds.

I glance over at Reika. Her hair is puffing out and becoming frizzy.

"Looks like your gonna have a 'fro soon Reika," Tank says chuckling.

"You guys complain too much! I kinda like it," Natalie says.

"Who are you and what have you done to Natalie?" Tank asks.

"What?" Natalie says in response.

"I know who... I mean what happened to Natalie." Logan says grinning and looking at me.

"Shut up! The both of you!" Natalie shouts.

I look straight ahead trying to hold in my laughter but it oozes out of me in the form of a huge smile. The sun continues to beat down on us as we make our trek around buildings and through the neighborhood. Time fades as we continue to crack jokes with each other and reminisce of past experiences.

Before we know it, we're all frozen in place, staring into a vast sea of grey and beige dirt. Heat is radiating from the ground in small lines that blur my vision of the large black object in the distance.

"Apparently it is like a desert, in places," Tank says.

"This is it. It's weird, look at the ground, the pavement just abruptly stops and then there's grey dirt that takes its place," I say, kneeling to the ground, picking up a handful of dirt, and sifting it through my right hand.

"It's ash," Reika says in a low tone kneeling next to me.

"Smell it," she continues.

I smell the sand in my hand and it smells as if someone had lit it on fire.

"You're right. It's probably a mixture of sand and ash from what was here before."

"This is why we follow you to fight," Natalie says, seriously.

"Because this is what they do, to everything. This is what they tried to do to us. They squander and then burn everything they touch. They deserve what's coming to them," she continues and then walks off to the left of the store we are standing behind.

"She's right. It's time they pay, in full," Logan adds and then walks over to Natalie.

I stand up and take a deep breath. "I want to march along the border until we're out of the section where the wall is down. That's where we'll start making our way in."

"These binoculars they gave me work pretty good, I can see the entire wall. It doesn't look like it's completely down anywhere. It just looks lower in that section than over there," Tank says, pointing to our left with a pair of binoculars to his eyes.

"Okay sounds good. In that case, we'll head that way. Let's stay off the ash and keep to the other side of these buildings until we reach the higher part of the wall," I say, starting to walk.

"Let us know when we've gone far enough," I say to Tank and then increase my pace.

We silently walk along the edge of what feels like reality. A strange feeling takes hold of me. If I cross this imaginary line of grey sand, I might never make it back to the world we just left. The people in that compound not only left us behind to starve, but they scorched the earth to try to keep us away from them.

Why? Why did they do all this just to try to keep us from surviving? All they had to do was let go of some material things. If my understanding of the story is correct, the rich only needed to let go of a fraction of their wealth to sustain the country. How much does one person need to obtain? How could someone be so greedy they'd let millions starve?

"It looks like we're almost there. I can see where the small wall ends and the big one begins, but it's kinda hard to gauge exactly where to head in," Tank says.

"That's okay, as long as we have a rough estimate. We can always alter our approach when we get closer."

"Well in that case, anytime from here on out should work fine."

"Ready to head into scorched earth? Last chance to turn around and run away!" I say.

"Let's go bring these douche bags down already." Logan stops walking.

"Everyone else?" I ask.

"Ready," Natalie and Tank say.

Reika nods.

"Okay, this is how I see it. We drop to the ground and crawl in for a while then we get up and sprint closer in bursts. So to start this off, let's put these camo net things over our heads. Everyone on your bellies and let's start crawling," I say.

I kneel to grab the camo netting attached to my backpack and drape it over my head. I take a deep breath and look out over the grey sands at the obsidian walls. This is what life has come to, Kai. This is what truly living is to me. Fighting for who and what I believe in.

I look behind me at the rubble we walked through. Goodbye, old world.

I lay myself on the ground and start crawling as fast as I can out into the hot gray sand. The heat from the ground radiates through the camo making my arms and legs feel like they're on fire.

"Oh shit! Hold on."

I stop crawling and everyone stops with me.

"I forgot to radio Estabon! Never mind, keep going. We can't afford to sit here in the open. It'll have to wait till we get farther in." I start crawling again.

I didn't even turn on the walkie. I've been too caught up with my own thoughts. The other groups probably entered a while ago and would have crawled in quite some way by now. I haven't heard any gunshots, I guess that means everything is still going smoothly.

Sweat starts stinging my eyes, but I don't dare stop to wipe them. Just keep crawling, focus on something else. Focus on getting revenge. For Kai, for my parents, and for our future. It's time these tyrants fall.

The pace of my crawling speeds up as the anger from my memories takes over. I try to focus on breathing as my body starts tiring from the awkward motion. Two small breaths in through my nose, one out through my mouth. Repeat. Can't stop! Have to keep crawling, the faster we get there the less chance they have to shoot us.

"Nineteen!" I hear Tank say my name and then pause breathing heavily.

"Hold on, I'm gonna pull out the fifty cal and use its scope to make sure we're still on course. I should be able to see if anyone's watching us from the wall. It's stronger than those binoculars, don't know why I didn't think of it earlier."

"Okay, in that case I'm going to radio us in."

I press the left side of my face to the sand, taking in the heat of the ground while I fish the walkie from my back pocket. I bring it to my face, fidgeting with the on button and volume switches.

"This is the Undesirables checking in. We're to the left of the lowered wall and we've crawled a substantial way towards it," I say and then wait for a response.

"Hey Nineteen, ya forgot to check in! Anyway, the Wolfpack had the same idea as you except they went to the right. The Cutthroats went straight up the middle."

"Okay, thanks for the update. We're gonna get moving again. I'll check in once we're on the inside."

"Sounds good and good luck," I hear Estabon say before cutting the walkie off and placing it back into my pocket.

"Tank, what do we got?" I ask.

Before Tank has a chance to respond, Logan answers for him, "A huge pool of sweat! I'm gonna drowned in it if we don't find shade soon!"

I hear a few laughs. "Shut up Wolverine! Tank, what do we got?" I ask again.

"Looks like a whole lot of nothing. The only guard I've been able to make out is on the lower wall and he only popped out for a second before disappearing."

"What about our approach to the wall? How far off are we from the lower section?" I ask.

"We need to angle ourselves to the right slightly, but other than that we're about perfect," Tank replies.

"Alright, well I'm thinking it's time we get up and run. What do you guys think? Caught your breath?" I ask.

"Let's do it. Maybe the wind from my running will dry some of this sweat!" Logan says.

"Stop whining Logan. Gosh. Remind me to never go anywhere that's hot with you!" Natalie yells at Logan.

"Is that good with everyone? Tank can you get your gun situated so you can pop up and run like hell on my count of three?"

"Already done," Tank responds.

"Yep," Natalie says.

"Yeah," Reika replies.

My heart beats faster as adrenaline starts pumping through me. I sure hope I'm right and they aren't just waiting for idiots like us to run towards the wall. Fuck it. Let's do it.

"One, two, three, go!" I shout using my arms to push off the ground and jump to my feet.

I lean forward, digging my left foot into the sand and launch myself with all my strength. Adrenaline courses through my body as the wind cools my face. The cooling sensation makes me think of Logan's complaining and causes me to smile as I run.

Without warning, the camo netting covering my head flies off. Luckily, it's attached to my backpack so I continue running with it flapping in the wind. Just a few more seconds of sprinting then we can stop. My legs start burning in unison with my lungs. I turn to my right and see that Tank is starting to fall behind.

"And DOWN!" I shout, dropping to my stomach using my arms to absorb some of the impact. My hands flail wildly trying to grasp the camo netting to get it set back over my head. In between my panting, I force myself to take a few large breaths to calm my body down.

Logan crawls to my left side. "You're a crazy motherfucker, you know that!" he says in between gasps for air.

"I said I was ready to sprint twenty yards! Not run a damn marathon!" he continues, shaking his head.

I start laughing. "I figured we might as well run until we can't anymore. It's better than crawling another million years."

"The good thing is, we're almost there," Natalie says.

"I still don't see a single guard, so the sprint worked," Tank reports.

"The wall is huge. The closer we get the more impossible this seems," Reika says, crawling closer to Logan and me.

"No guards is good, but it won't stay like this forever. Let's get moving again."

"You want us to get up and sprint again?" Logan shouts.

I start laughing uncontrollably. "Well, I was actually trying to say we should start crawling instead of talking, but since you brought it up, I guess it's not a bad idea. Tank, what do you think?"

"Yeah, actually I think we should run now while we can. Then when we're closer we crawl the rest of the way in," he replies and Logan groans.

"Let's go for one more all-out run then crawl the rest of the way in?"

"Yep," Natalie says.

"Yeah," Reika says.

"I hate you! But the faster we get there the faster I get to stab someone."

"Okay, on three then," I say.

"One, two, three, go!" I say, pushing myself off the ground.

The all out sprint quickly turns into a jog as my body is exhausted from the combination of crawling and running. Looking around, everyone appears to be moving at about the same pace. I start laughing. I can't believe we're not dead yet. We're running directly at an enemy who has us outgunned, outmanned, and who has never let anyone anywhere near their establishment. We're running towards them in the middle of an open landscape and somehow they're the ones with their pants down. My jog turns into a brisk walk. I guess it's time to crawl.

"Down!" I yell, hitting the ground exhausted.

"Tank, how are we not dead?" I ask jokingly.

"I have no freaking clue! The whole last part of that run reminded me of a slow motion moment in a book. I can only imagine what it would

look like to the military if they saw us rushing towards them at a snail's pace!"

I start laughing. "No kidding!" I reply

"Speaking of that, I'll take a look around and see if there's anyone on the wall yet. Gimme a minute"

"Yep," I say and then drop my forehead into the hot sand.

I'm super thirsty. Where's that tube? I fiddle with the straps on my backpack looking for the mouthpiece that leads to my water. Finding it, I shove the piece in my mouth and drop my head back to the sand. In between breaths, I take large gulps of water in hopes of recuperating before we have to move.

"I got nothing. We're too close for me to need my fifty, and I can't see a single person with the binoculars. At this point, I think we could probably walk our way to the side of the wall without getting caught," Tank says.

I spit the mouthpiece out. "Good to know. Let's keep it that way. Let's get crawling I guess," I say and begin crawling.

As we crawl I study the wall to our far right. It comes out farther than the wall in front of us and extends out in a rectangular shape past the other walls of the facility. That must be the wall they said would be completely down. They were wrong, it's not down, it's just significantly lower than the rest. Luckily, it looks like we'll be able to jump it without much effort.

We could turn right now and start crawling to the lowered wall. But I think it's safer to go to the finished wall and walk along it until we hit the lowered wall. That should provide us with a decent approach that they won't be expecting. Hopefully it'll put us behind the defenses they've set up to guard the lowered area.

Okay, we're only about ten strides from the wall, it's time to get up. I stop crawling and stand. The obsidian wall fills my entire field of view, I look up as far as I can and can't see the top. Completely disregarding my surroundings, I walk to the wall and put a hand on it. The surface is slick and extremely hot, causing me to withdraw my hand.

"You done molesting the wall boss?" Logan asks.

I turn around to see everyone impatiently waiting behind me.

"Yeah, guess it's about that time we find a way to hop inside," I say, looking to the lowered part of the wall.

"Let's go," I say, and start walking.

After about a hundred yards, we come to a point where the smaller wall extends from the compound. I stand next to it looking at Tank, comparing him to the size of the wall.

"Looks like Tank won't need help, he's taller than the wall," I whisper.

Everyone breaks out in quiet laughter.

"Hey, I might have an inch on it, but I'm gonna have to jump it just like the rest of you midgets," he whispers in response.

I reach over my head attempting to grab the top of the wall, but it's just out of my reach. My fingertips graze the top of it but not enough to grip anything.

"Midget," Tank leans in and whispers in my ear.

I give him a dirty look before squatting down and jumping as high as I can. My hands slip on the slick surface of the wall before they squeak to a stop. The wall is extremely hot but I refuse to let go. I struggle to manage the extra weight of my backpack but the burning of my hands causes me to make my move. I nearly fall off the wall as I pull myself on top of it.

Lying on the wall, I get my first glimpse of what's inside the compound. To my surprise, all I can see are one-story houses that are under construction. I guess they must have just started building this area. I turn my head to the left to see Tank giving Logan a boost onto the wall.

"Midget," I whisper.

He shakes his head back and forth. "Ya know, I coulda helped you too."

"Yeah, a little late for that, thanks!" I say sarcastically.

"All ya had to do was ask," he says nonchalantly while moving over to give Reika a boost.

I shake my head, laugh, and then snap back to the task at hand.

"You, me, and Reika will go over first. We'll check the scene and wave the others over after it's clear." I say to Logan who is now on the wall next to me.

He nods in approval and then stares into the compound.

"I'm going over. When Reika gets up here, you two follow," I say, scrunching my body together propping myself up into a squat.

"Okay," he says.

I inch to the inner edge of the wall, trying to get a view of what I'll be landing on and if anyone is around to spot me. Not a soul in sight. There is a platform made of plywood that runs along the inside of the wall to groupings of plywood stairs. I grab my forty cal, make sure the silencer is secure, and lower myself feet first onto the platform. After lowering myself about half way down the wall, I let go and drop. I hit the plywood with a thunk. As soon as I land, I spin around and crouch. Still no one. I look up to see Logan and Reika jump down next to me.

"No one's here," I whisper to Logan.

Aside from the hum of vehicles somewhere in the distance, it's silent. Something isn't right. I knew this seemed too easy. My heart starts racing.

"What's goin on fellas?" Tank's voice booms even in a whisper.

I look up at Tank who is crouched on the wall.

"Nothing," I reply.

A concerned expression crosses Tank's face just as the sound of Tank's gun rings out repeatedly. My heart jumps and fear shoots through the pit of my stomach. It's obviously not Tank. Someone is letting loose fifty caliber rounds.

"Military along the wall!" Natalie says.

"How many and what part of the wall?" I ask as Natalie jumps down.

"The houses are between them and us," she says, landing in front of me.

"I can't tell how many there are. That house on the corner is obstructing my view. Should I start picking them off?" Tank says now lying on the wall.

I look around for something we can use to our advantage. We're sitting ducks from this distance against a squad of soldiers with fifty cal. The moment they see us we're dead. We have to find shelter and then worry about a way to attack.

"No. Hop down with us, we're heading into that house." I point to the frame of an unfinished house directly across from us.

"Lead the way Reika," I continue.

Reika turns and runs down the small group of plywood stairs connected to the platform. She takes off towards the house with the rest of us following close behind. We run through the side of the house to the center of it.

"Alright, this isn't great but at least we're not in plain sight," I say as a few more gunshots ring out.

The question now becomes whether or not to attack. We were supposed to get in and figure out a way to bring their defenses down from the inside. If we attack now there's no way we'll put a big enough dent in their defenses. On the other hand, if we sit here and do nothing one of the other groups might get wiped out.

For all I know military could be shooting at a decoy. We all have our own ways of doing things. We came around the side to get in stealthily and it worked. Maybe one of the other groups had a plan to draw fire as a distraction. The best thing we can do now is further infiltrate the compound and trust that the other groups know what they're doing.

"We're not attacking."

"Say what?" Logan nearly shouts.

"We're not attacking. We're supposed to bring this whole place down! How the hell are we gonna do that if we attack before we actually know how to bring it down? We'll just get ourselves killed. We need to head further in, look around, and develop a way to take them out. You good with that?"

"Yeah, I'm good with that. I just really wanted to use my new knives," Logan says looking disappointed.

"What's the plan?" Tank asks.

"We're obviously on the outskirts of the compound. I'm thinking we work our way in house by house until we find something else we can use. Or at the bare minimum find something worth attacking. What do you guys think?"

"Okay," Tank says.

"Sounds good," Natalie replies.

"Something worth attacking that's what I'm talking about!" Logan says grinning.

"Okay, let's do this!" I say.

I run out the front of the house and down the dirt lawn to the unpaved street in front of it. I stop momentarily to gauge potential threats in the houses ahead and then continue to sprint into another unfinished house. This time I don't stop inside, I continue jogging through it and across the street to the next house.

A few blocks later, out of the corner of my eye I see a neon green figure. I slide to a stop in the middle of the street and aim my gun at it.

"Shit," I say to myself.

"Whoah! Calm down guys, we're just taking a lunch break. We're not intruders, we work here!" one of the men shouts.

A lunch break? What the hell? The men are wearing neon green vests and sitting in the shade next to a grouping of food. I see dozens of tools lying around the yard and a huge construction vehicle parked in the street. These must be the men building everything. They don't recognize us as outsiders?

"We heard the gunshots. Is everything okay? No one got in right?" another one asks.

They think we're military!

"No, no of course not. Nobody from that wasteland could get in here. Carry on, you just startled us," I shout back to them and then take off running as if we belonged in the compound.

I turn my head as I take off to make sure everyone follows my lead. Logan starts running behind me. Soon after he joins me, everyone begins running. They had no idea we weren't from the outside? How do they

not know what their own military looks like? I guess it might have been different if we had ran by in our old clothes instead of this camo.

I continue jogging block to block, not stopping to discuss what happened with the others. There's no time to stop and figure it out. We have to get somewhere safe and come up with a better plan. I run out the back of a house and find myself standing in a field of dying grass. On the other side of the field is a paved road and a neighborhood of finished houses.

"Okay, we need to get inside. Let's hit that house on the corner."

I run towards the street and start making my way across it when the blare of a horn startles me.

"Get out the way, motherfucker!"

I turn to see someone in a truck yelling and flipping us off. It looks like he turned the corner right as we were trying to cross the street. That's right, that's what streets were originally created for. Vehicles.

"Can I?" Logan asks.

Judging from the vehicle and the look on his face, he can't tell we're from the outside.

"No. ignore him. Let's go."

We continue running up into the yard of the house as the truck takes off. I run to the front door. Without stopping I raise my left foot and kick the door with all my strength. The door flies open and I stumble inside the house. I jog into the front room to keep from falling. I end up face to face with a startled man sitting on a chair.

My heart jumps. "Shit!" I aim my forty caliber and shoot twice before he can make a move.

The rest of the group comes swarming into the room with weapons drawn.

“Good job! You shot him in the, throat and face,” Logan says with a confused smile.

“Hmm. Wasn’t there a time you use to brag about your head shots?” Natalie adds.

“Uh, I guess I have to get use to this new pistol. Besides, that was a long time ago! And it was against other scavengers!” I reply.

“He doesn’t look military to me! In fact he looks easier to kill than a scavenger,” Natalie says.

I turn to Logan. “You see what you started!”

“Hey, that’s what you get for not letting me kill him,” he replies.

“But you weren’t in... oh, whatever! You guys all suck!”

“Hey, I’m just watching the fireworks as they happen,” Tank says. Everyone laughs at me.

“Anyway, now that we’re out of sight, we need to find a way to blend in.”

“What’s that noise?” Reika asks.

We all go silent. I hear a barely audible voice talking. I start walking towards the man in the chair with my gun trained on him.

“It’s coming from here look,” Natalie says, pointing at a glowing picture in the middle of the room.

I walk closer and we all crowd the picture frame that’s showing a woman talking into a microphone.

“It’s a video. I’ve read about them,” I say, unsure of my response.

“No, I don’t think it’s a video. It says 'live' at the bottom of the screen. And look, that’s part of the wall we jumped in the background,” Tank says.

“How do we turn it up?” Natalie asks as she starts pressing buttons with arrows on the bottom of the box.

The second button she presses increase the volume. The person on the screen identifies herself as a reporter and begins talking about an attempted attack on the wall. She goes on to say that the attack was completely put down and that it had been the first attempt in over thirty years. She says that it is no concern for the citizens of New America, as the outside savages would never be able to penetrate the wall. Anger fills me as the rich lady with her pristine clothes continues talking.

"Savages, huh? They're the savages! All the shit they've done to us just to live in this bubble!" I say, walking away from the frame.

"This is a TV! I've read about them in my comics," Logan says, grinning.

"At least they don't know we made it inside," Natalie says.

"She's right, we still have the element of surprise. Especially if they think we're a bunch of savages. They won't expect us to fit in with the rest of them." I stop myself abruptly, trying not to let anger cloud my thoughts.

"I wonder if he has clothes we can change into?" Reika says.

"That's a good idea. Let's check the house. If we can change into something less conspicuous, it'll be much easier to get around," I say.

We search the house as if it was an abandoned house in the wastes.

"Holy shit! Jackpot!" Natalie shouts from one of the bedrooms.

I walk in with Logan and Reika to see Tank and Natalie standing in a closet at the back of the room.

"What did you find?" I ask.

"These people are rich! There's an entire closet full of women's and men's clothing!" Natalie replies.

I walk over to the closet and squeeze my way between Tank and Natalie.

"Wow, you aren't kidding."

"Something tells me these aren't gonna fit," Tank says holding up a shirt.

I bust out in laughter. "What's wrong, you don't like belly shirts? At least it's new!"

"Yeah, I'm good but you two midgets ..." He says, throwing Logan a shirt and handing me another.

"Here, I'll pick some pants for you guys too." He turns to Natalie. "What do you think? Will these look good on your boyfriend?"

Natalie punches Tank in the arm.

"Ouch! I was just trying to help!"

"Nineteen will look just fine in them." She snatches the pair of black jeans from Tank and throws them at me.

I take off my backpack and begin removing the camo outfit.

"What do you think you're doing?" Natalie asks.

"I'm changing?"

"Not here you're not! We're in the civilized world now! Go to the other room! Besides, the girls are going to change in here!" she yells at me.

"Fine!" I say, grabbing my backpack.

"I guess I got the bathroom," Logan says.

"Okay, I'll be in the living room." I head to the living room, change into the new clothes, and sit on the floor.

Logan walks into the room and sits down next to me. "These clothes fit, but they're really baggy."

"Yeah, I know. There's a ton of extra cloth on them for no reason. I feel kinda like I'm wearing a dress my shirt is so big," I reply.

"You guys look a tad bit ridiculous! It's too small for me and on you guys." Tank starts laughing uncontrollably.

"Whatever, giant! Least we can hide our weapons easily! And what are we gonna do about you?"

"He's staying here with Reika," Natalie says, entering the room.

I sit motionless staring at her as she walks out in a tight white shirt and jeans. The outfit she has on sticks to the curves on her body and I have a hard time tearing my eyes away from her. Then Reika walks out from behind her and my jaw drops. Wow! She's wearing a black dress that sparkles when she moves. She's beautiful, they both are. Where's my head? We're trying to kick off a war and here I am losing focus because the girls have different clothes on. Pull it together, Nineteen.

"Ahmm." Natalie clears her throat to draw my attention.

"You two look great," I spit out.

"Thanks, we cleaned up a bit in the bathroom," Natalie says while Reika shoots a smile at me.

"Anyway, you were saying Reika wants to stay behind?" I ask.

"Someone has to stay with Tank, and Natalie said she really wanted to see the inside of this place so..." Reika answers.

"Okay, that makes sense. So it looks like me, Logan, and Natalie will head out and try to find a target while you two hold our new base down."

"Have fun," Tank says.

"You know it! I'm leaving my M16 and the backpack here, keep an eye on it for me."

"My backpack and rifle are in the bedroom," Natalie says.

"Okay, let's do this," Logan says.

"Let's go," I say as I get off the floor and head for the door.

THE COMPOUND

The brightness of the sun nearly blinds me. We walk across the yard, around the corner, and down the block into the compound.

"Where to?" Logan asks.

"There." Natalie points into the distance at a grouping of tall buildings.

"You sound sure of that," I say.

"I have this weird gut feeling that says to go there. I can't explain it."

Her face is covered with the feeling she's explaining. It almost looks like she's scared to go—no, not scared, it's more of a nervous look.

"Sure, why not. Looks like a good place to start."

A black and blue car with red and blue lights on the roof begins creeping down the street next to us.

"Why is that car going so slow?" Logan asks.

"Look at the paint and lights," Natalie says.

A siren goes off and the lights on the top of the car suddenly turn on, causing all three of us to jump and start reaching for weapons. The car pulls in front of us and a loud voice comes on.

"How you guys doing today?"

My heart starts pounding as if we just got caught with our pants down by a group of officers. What do these people want? Are they part of the military? Do they know we got in? My head fills with uneasy thoughts. Neither Logan nor Natalie have drawn weapons yet. I keep my hand near my waist where my forty is tucked. We have to wait and see what these men do. We're just normal citizens until they say something hinting we aren't.

The doors on both sides of the vehicle open. Two men wearing black uniforms with shiny metal objects on the upper left side of their chests step out. The man on the side closest to us is as tall as Tank and has spiked blonde hair. The other is much shorter with dark hair.

"I said, how are you guys doing today?" the tall man with blond hair says.

"Fine. And you?" I muster up.

"Great, it's a fine day. What are ya'll doing out here in the middle of the day?" he continues.

We all look at each other. I'm at a loss for words. What do people in this place do during the day?

"Why aren't you at work?" the other man in uniform asks, approaching us.

"We took the day off." I say.

"Really? Interesting. You're wearing a lot of black there," the blonde says.

I look down at the clothes Natalie gave me, a black shirt and black jeans.

"Yeah, I like black."

"Hmm, you in a gang son?" the blonde asks.

"What?" I say, not understanding his question.

"You heard me boy, you in a street gang? Or is it, you gang bangin' homeboy? You understand that?" the blonde begins talking in a demeaning tone.

As he rattles off questions, I notice that he has a gun and a walkie-talkie strapped to his waist. I cock my head to the side and shoot Logan a confused glance, hoping he can conjure up a response. Before either of us reply, the blonde man walks in front of me cutting off my line of sight to Logan.

"Yes? No? No response? I'll take that as a yes," he continues.

"Umm no?" I say, still not fully understanding what the man is implying.

"That wasn't very convincing. You got any tats on ya? You probably got gang tats all under this shirt, huh?" he says lifting the right sleeve of my shirt.

I can't risk them seeing my weapons. That means I can't take off my shirt and if he tries to, I'll have to shoot him. My gut fills to the brim with the uneasiness. We can't afford to get caught here. We need more time to find something useful to attack. He moves from my right to my left arm and lifts up my sleeve.

"Oh, what's this? You do have a tattoo! What is it, a flaming bird?" the blonde officer continues while prodding my arm.

"It's a phoenix," I say, growing angry.

"He has a brand new red phoenix on his arm, Bill. And he looks scared as shit. Leave him be we got better things to do," the dark haired officer says.

"Yeah, you're right. You're just a soft little chicken shit! Not a gang member. You kids have a nice day," the blonde officer says turning around walking back to the car.

As he turns, I see the word police clearly printed on the back of his shirt. They're Officers! This must be how they were before the collapse. I feel my nostrils flare up and I grit my teeth. I grab my waist to feel for my gun. I'm going to kill these bastards here and now.

"Nineteen," Natalie says, walking in front of me.

"Calm down. Not now," she whispers.

"If I can't do it, you better not be allowed to." Logan pitches in grinning at me.

The car pulls away from the sidewalk and drives off down the street. We begin walking the same direction we were going before the officers arrived.

"For now they're lucky! And what the hell was he trying to imply about my clothes? What's wrong with them? Just cuz we don't have shinny badges on us we're inferior? Screw them!" I start rambling angrily.

"Calm down, they'll get what they deserve soon enough. At least they didn't figure out who we were," Natalie says.

"If they didn't know who we were, why the hell did they stop us? Do they treat other rich people like that or just the ones wearing black?" I ask still venting.

"That's a good question. I say we kill them the next time they come by," Logan says semi-seriously.

As we walk, we approach two grungy looking men sitting under a tree next to the sidewalk who reek of alcohol. They don't say a thing as we pass but I can't help but wonder why they're as dirty as they are. So far, all the people we've encountered inside have been squeaky clean.

THE COMPOUND

"Let's get off the street so those officers don't try to stop us again. Look, there's a pathway between the houses," Natalie says, pointing at an alley.

"That's a good idea. Let's go," I say back.

As we get closer to the ally, I notice graffiti on the fences and the pavement. It reminds me of entering officer territory. There are only a few things I can make out: the word 'snake', random variations of the letters 'EES' and 'DK', and a large pyramid with a five-point star in the center.

There are small red fences on each side of the alley separating backyards. As we make our way into the alley, I hear laughter accompanied with the sound of glass connecting. About halfway through the cramped walkway, the noise grows louder. As we pass two large orange dumpsters, a voice comes from the right of us.

"Ay, where you think you're goin'?"

"Yeah, that's right, you! Disease lookin' motha fucka!" another shouts as a group of five heavily tattooed men wearing white approach us from the backyard of a house.

"Eee eeee!" one of them shouts in a high pitch as another puts his hands in the air, making some sort of signal with them.

They file out into the alley through a gate in the fence and stand blocking our progression down the alley.

"We're just passing through," Logan says grinning.

"Nah. See homie, you got it twisted, you can't just pass through here." the big bald man says, closing in on Logan, starring him down.

Logan looks at me flashing his patented grin, letting me know he's ready to kill the guy.

"Sup wit' you disease? Why you wearing all that black?" one of the smaller men in the group says as he and one other walk up to us. They come close enough for me to smell the scent of alcohol on their breath.

I hesitate, trying to think of a response. I don't want to get us noticed by shooting some random people in an alley. At the same time, it doesn't look like they're going to let us pass.

"It's my favorite color. There something wrong with that?" I reply.

"What? You got a problem?" the one to the left says, looking me up and down.

"Disease motha fucka! Evil east sidars all day!" the one slightly to the right says, throwing up his hands with a signal.

My irritation grows as his hands almost hit me in the face. I look to my right at Natalie to try to calm down and think my options through.

"Sup wit' you sexy," a man says, trying to grab Natalie by her right hand.

"Ay girl, you looking pretty fly! Why don't you let me show you a good time?" another with tattoos covering most of his face says. He tries to grab Natalie's waist.

I snap at the sight of the man trying to put his hands on Natalie. Anger floods through me. I push through the one on my right and head straight to the guy grabbing at Natalie's waist. Natalie pushes him off, but it's not enough to calm me down. I push him as hard as I can which causes him to fall backward onto the ground.

The man on the right of Natalie lifts his shirt, showing me his tattooed stomach and revealing a gun tucked into his pants.

"Ready to die, disease?" he says, cocking his head to the side and stepping forward.

"Done fucked up now!" the man on the ground says standing up.

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“Get his ass!” another says.

As I’m reaching for my gun, I get pushed in the back. The push sends me towards the guy exposing his waist. I stumble forward while grabbing my gun, stopping just in front of the man. Before he has time to react, I have my forty an inch from his face. His eyes widen and he tries to move for his gun.

The suppressed sound of my forty rings out as blood spatters out the back of his head and he drops to the ground. Before I can turn around, I’m tackled at the waist into one of the red fences. I scramble, trying to turn my body towards the attacker when two more gunshots ring out. I turn in time to see my attacker falling forward onto me. I try to work his body off of mine to get off of the ground and back into the fight.

As I struggle to get free from the dead man’s weight, Natalie’s gun goes off. I see her fighting with one of the men to gain control of it. Before I can get free, I notice that the bigger bald man in the group is headed straight toward Natalie. Logan jumps and plunges two knives into the base of the man’s throat before he can reach her. I get to my feet just as Natalie’s gun goes off again.

I’m rushing towards Natalie to help when I see Logan throw a punch that looks like it misses. His punch flies past the back of the man’s neck and blood splatters onto the ground in front of me. I take a few more steps before the man’s body falls one way and his head slides off in a separate direction. Now closer, I can see that both of Logan’s hands are gripping a sharp blade that’s covered in blood. It looks like a smaller version of the katana Reika uses.

There’s a moment of silence while we try to take in our surroundings and catch our breath. I hear the distinct sound of a gun cocking behind

me and turn around to see a rather large lady with an enormous shotgun hauling ass towards us from the backyard.

"Die motherfuckers!" she screams.

"Oh shit!" I say as I dive towards the dumpster.

The sound of the shotgun blast fills the air.

"I'ma kill all of you!" the lady yells.

I hit the pavement in front of the dumpster before hearing a voice I don't recognize.

"What's going on out here?"

I look up to see Logan grabbing Natalie and diving out of the way just as the shotgun goes off again. As they dive towards me and the dumpster, I see a man standing behind a fence on the other side of the alley. His eyes go wide as he gets shot in the chest and drops out of view. Logan, Natalie, and I scramble to the far side of the dumpster to take shelter from the woman.

"We gotta get the hell outa here," I say as we huddle together behind the dumpster.

"To do that we gotta kill that bitch!" Natalie replies.

Fence hinges creak as she exits the backyard.

"Oh, you motherfuckers! What have you done to my babies?" she yells, sounding like she is going to cry.

"Mark baby, you still with me?" I hear, followed by the sound of coughing.

"Gun?" I whisper looking to Natalie.

"Where's yours?" Logan asks as Natalie pulls a small handgun from her sock.

"The forty-five must've fallen out of my pocket when I hit the fence. And the forty I dropped when I was tackled," I reply, grabbing the gun.

THE COMPOUND

"That's my backup. It's not very strong," Natalie says.

I pull back the slide slowly to see what caliber it is. The bullets are extremely small. It has to be a twenty-two.

"A gun is a gun. It'll still kill her," I whisper back.

"You see how big she is? The bullets might bounce back!" Logan says jokingly.

"Hold on baby! The ambulance will be coming soon," the lady shouts, sounding as if she is crying in between words.

I peek around the side of the dumpster to see the woman crying on the ground and holding the man who tackled me in her arms. The shotgun is sitting on the ground next to her.

"Okay, she put the gun on the ground. I'm gonna rush her," I say.

Still kneeling, I take a few steps back from the dumpster so I can sprint around it towards the lady. Logan is right, she's a big lady. While this gun will kill her, it's not going to put her down right away.

I take a deep breath in. "Fuck it," I say to myself, jumping to my feet running as fast as I can around the corner towards the lady.

She's too focused on the man to notice me running towards her. I pass the dumpster and I'm right behind her before she notices the movement and goes for the shotgun.

As she reaches for the shotgun, I unload while rushing at her. Three, four, five shots in her back and she's still moving. By the time the shotgun is in her hands, I'm standing a foot away and take two more shots at her head before diving to the ground behind her. I take another two shots at her as I hit the ground trying to ensure that she is no longer moving.

I wait, watching for her to move again. No movement. She must be dead. I start pushing myself up when I realize that I landed on the bald man's head. The head is tucked under my armpit and blood is smeared

all over my shirt. Horrified and disgusted by the sight, I scramble to my feet. Shivers run down my back as I rush to the side of the fence to throw up.

"Still yakking? I thought you were done with that?" Logan's voice comes into my ears.

I wipe my mouth.

"Not quite a heartless killer like you just ye—" Sirens erupt into the air, halting my speech.

"Officers. Think they're on the way here?" I say, looking at Logan and Natalie.

"Probably. We need to get outta here," Natalie says.

"Yeah, let's get our weapons and go," I say, handing Natalie her gun.

As soon as the words leave my mouth, the siren intensity increases and I see a police car fly by the end of the alley with his lights on.

"Shit! We gotta go NOW!" I shout.

"What about—" Logan starts.

"Fuck the weapons! We can't get caught yet," I shout, cutting him off.

"We can't just walk out of the alley with them outside," Natalie says.

"Just follow me!" I say as I take off down the alley.

That car was going to the right of us, so we should go to the left. I pick a backyard at random and hop the fence. We run through the backyard to the fence that separates the backyard from the front. I put my hands on the top of the fence and jump onto it so I can see. With half of my body over the fence I scan for police.

I look back at Natalie and Logan. "It's clear."

I jump the fence and roll as I hit the ground. We take off across the front yard and down the right of the block. We then run across the street and sprint two blocks up.

THE COMPOUND

We're still too close to what happened. We need to get off this row of blocks and head farther into the compound. I hear screeching tires as we run down the street to switch blocks. I glance back and see a police car fly down the block we were just running on.

My chest is on fire. I'm breathing as hard as I can but it feels like I'm not getting any air into my lungs. There's no time to stop. I push through the lack of air and keep running. Natalie and Logan seem to be getting tired too. Our sprinting has turned into fast paced jogging. We make it another two blocks inward before we start walking.

"Think we're far enough?" Logan asks, panting in between words.

"I have no clue."

"Let's go that way," Natalie says, pointing to our left.

Midway down the new block, we see three men in white jumping an older man wearing all black.

"Ya know what? I think getting a new shirt would help us disappear. Mine has blood all over it," I say, looking at Logan.

He grins back. "Want a white one?"

"That's what I was thinking. Natalie, can I borrow your gun again?"

"Hell no! I'm gonna use it! You want a new shirt? I'll get you one!" she says.

Wow, she's pissed!

I start laughing. "Alright, let's do this!"

Just before we reach the fight, one of the men in white notices our approach.

He turns to us and throws his arms up. "What are you looking at? You want some too?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact I do!" Natalie says, pulling out her gun.

"Alright! We outta here," the man says.

"Not so fast! Take your shirt off!" Natalie barks orders at him as me and Logan sit back and watch.

The other two men in white who are kicking the man on the ground finally take note of what's happening, but instead of helping their partner, they take off running.

"What?" he replies with a confused look on his face.

"Looks like your friends just left," I say.

He turns and watches his friends disappear down the street.

"I said take your shirt off and throw it on the ground unless you want a bullet in your head!" Natalie continues.

"I ain't given you my flag!" he replies.

"I don't want a flag I want your damn shirt! You got about three seconds. Three... two..."

"Okay, okay! Take it," he says, taking off his shirt and throwing it to the ground at Natalie's feet.

"Now get out of here!" she yells at him.

He turns and runs down the block the same way his friends did.

"Here ya go!" Natalie says, picking up the shirt throwing it to me.

"You're crazy when you're mad!" I say.

She lets out an evil laugh. "Shut up!"

"Better watch out, she'll steal your shirt!" Logan chimes in.

"Hey," the man who was getting jumped says, walking up to us.

He has cuts on his face and a busted lip.

"Thanks. Ya'll saved my ass! You bang DD?" he asks.

"No," we say in unison.

"Oh okay, just thought with all the black that you might. Anyway, thanks. If you need anything and are on the west side, come find me. They call me Kisin."

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"Uh, okay," I reply, knowing this man will never see us again.

"I'm outta here, but be careful on this side of town wearing that much black. They'll think you're one of us," he says as he starts walking back down the block.

I guess there are two rival groups in this part of the compound. One wears white and the other wears black. I wonder if the ones who wear black also carry black bandanas or flags as that man called it. Why are they fighting? If they're rich, what's the point of trying to kill each other?

"Good advice. Thanks," I shout to him, looking at Natalie.

"This is what happens when I let you dress me!" I say to her while taking off the black shirt and slipping on the white one.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know!" she says, causing Logan and I to shoot each other a confused look.

Did she really just apologize? "Can you run that by me one more time?" I ask.

"Shut up! Let's get going!" she says, shaking her head and walking down the block without us.

We run after her to catch up.

"The sirens have stopped. Let's head for those buildings again," I say.

"Sounds good," Natalie replies.

At the corner we turn and head in the general direction of the buildings. Two blocks before we reach a large street with stoplights, I hear a car on our left. I turn to see an officer car driving slowly behind us. You got to be kidding me! Another one? How many officers are in this area.

"Shit!" I whisper.

"What?" Logan says, looking around.

"Oh shit!" he says, seeing the police car.

"You changed shirts. They should leave us alone, just keep walking," Natalie jumps in.

I face forward, pretending not to notice the car driving alongside us at nearly the same pace that we're walking. The brakes squeak loudly, causing me to instinctively look at the car.

"How're you kids doing today?" an officer asks, rolling down the window as the car pulls up to the curb next to us.

"Good," I say.

"Where ya headed?" he asks.

Not knowing what anything in the compound is called, I decide to tell the truth.

"That big old building way over there," I say, smiling.

"Huh, interesting. What's that on your pant leg?" he says, ignoring my answer opening his car door.

Great, here we go again. The door on the other side opens as well and two officers join us on the sidewalk. I can't believe this. They won't leave us alone. For all they know we haven't done a thing. I look down at my pants and my heart skips a beat. Shit! I have blood all down the left side of my pants.

"Huh?" I say, trying to buy time to think of an excuse.

"What'd ya get on your pants?" he says, walking closer examining my pant leg.

"Brandon! Come look at this," his partner calls out to him.

I turn to see that the other officer is standing in front of Natalie, holding her necklace in his hand.

"Oh wow! Sorry ma'am! What are you doing on this side of town?" Officer Brandon asks her.

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"I'm just hanging out with my friends," she says with a lost look on her face, turning to me.

The officers turn toward Logan and me.

"This is a bad area to be in. There was a shooting just a few blocks from here," Officer Brandon says.

"You really shouldn't be over here," the other officer says.

Why are they suddenly trying to help us? Logan and I exchange glances.

"Can we give you a ride so you can get out of here?" the officer asks Natalie, letting go of her necklace.

"No thanks, I think we'll be okay," Natalie replies.

"Ms. Gates, you don't know me but my wife is friends with your father. Both my wife and your father will kill me if they find out I left you in this neighborhood. Just let me give you a ride back by your house and—"

Natalie cuts off Officer Brandon mid-sentence. "No, really, I'm okay. Thank you," she says, shooting me a look of confusion.

"I really must insist you come with us. The gangs run rampant in this area. An entire group of people was just murdered a few blocks from here. Look, I don't have to take you home if you don't want, but at least let me drop you downtown." he continues.

"Your friend pointed to your family's building. So, you're headed downtown right?" the other officer asks.

Ms. Gates? Her family's building? This officer has Natalie confused with someone else all because of her necklace? Their demeanor changed completely when they started thinking she was 'Ms. Gates'. We should use this to our advantage.

"Just do it. It'll save us some time," I say.

She looks at me, then at Logan, and back at the police officer as if contemplating what she should do.

"Okay. But just to our building downtown. And I want to be dropped off a block away," she says, playing along.

"Sure thing, Ms. Gates. And sorry guys, didn't mean to interrogate ya. It's just a rough area. Hop on in," one of the officers says while heading back to the car and opening the back door for us.

The other officer walks around and hops back in the driver's seat. I jump in the back of the vehicle and scoot myself across its blue leather seat. Directly in front of me is a cage with a sliding glass window in the middle. Wait a minute, could this be a trap to get us into the car?

I start panicking as Logan scoots in, followed by Natalie. The back door is slammed shut. Did I make the wrong decision? Did they just capture us by tricking us? I start scanning the back seats for any kind of weapon or way to break the cage in front of us. As the officer sits in the passenger seat, I attempt to open my door and it doesn't budge. The car pulls off with me trying to open the door again.

"It won't open for ya," Officer Brandon says from the driver seat.

It is a trap! An uneasy feeling shoots through my gut.

"The backseat is normally for criminals. We keep the doors on child safety mode so that you can only get out if someone lets you out. We'll let ya out when we're near Gates Tower," the driver continues.

"So, Ms. Gates..." Brandon starts asking Natalie questions and I zone out.

These doors are locked and my guns are in the alley. I wonder how many knives Logan has left. If I attack, Natalie and Logan will follow my lead. The officers have guns on their waists. When one of them opens the

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door, I can get out and go after the gun. Maybe I'll tackle the officer first, then go after it to give Logan and Natalie a chance to get out.

While staring out the window trying to come up with a viable plan, I notice that the closer we get to the downtown buildings, the larger the houses get. All the houses are now two or three stories rather than the one story houses that we had wandered through.

In fact, the whole area looks nicer. There are water fountains and small bodies of water in the middle of each grouping of houses. The street expands from two to eight lanes. I look to the right and see adults and kids throwing balls at a park. The park grass is green. The trees are green. The basketball court is filled to the brim with people playing. There are people riding bicycles on paved paths.

The car jerks as we take off from the stoplight. We approach a huge brown wall. Why is this here? Is this the original wall and they built out from here? Passing the wall, my eyes grow wide at the change in scenery and the size of the buildings.

People are in huge groups walking in all directions. So many cars fill the street we have gotten stuck in place behind them. It grows so loud my ears can't focus on any one thing. Cars are honking, people are laughing and shouting. Bright colors are everywhere. Each building has a hue that's different from the building next to it. People are wearing all sorts of bright colored clothing. There are glowing lights and light up signs everywhere.

"Nineteen."

Outside that brick wall it's mostly quiet. But inside there are people everywhere and the sound is nonstop.

"Nineteen! Where do we wanna get dropped off?"

I snap out of my trance and look at Natalie.

"Umm, doesn't matter. A block from your building in any direction, I guess," I reply, unsure of what to say.

"Okay, well I guess we'll go up one more block and turn somewhere to let you out," the driver says.

Are they actually going to let us out? If I attack when he opens the door, that gives us away. If they truly think Natalie is this Ms. Gates then I'll be destroying a good cover by attacking them. But if not, and I don't decide to attack, we may lose our chance to escape. If they stop outside along the sidewalk to let us out we're probably okay. But if they pull into a facility, I'm going to attack.

The car turns left at the light and we start to drive under an overhead pass that connects two buildings. We're heading inside. I'm going to have to make a move. Wait, no, we're still outside? The overhead pass ends and we are still outside on the street with people when the car pulls to the curb.

"This close enough for you guys?" Brandon asks.

"Yeah," all three of us say at once.

Well, looks like we're on the same page. We all want out of the car and none of us know where the hell we are. Both the driver and Brandon open their doors and exit the vehicle. My heart starts racing. Now is the time to decide if we need to attack. Is there anything amiss, anything at all? I scan the outside of the vehicle as the driver opens the door for me.

"Thanks," I say, stepping out of the car into the street.

I start walking around the car towards the others who are already standing on the sidewalk.

"Remember, you guys need to stay out of that neighborhood. It's not safe!" I hear Brandon scolding Natalie as I approach.

THE COMPOUND

He turns to me. "Be careful. Take care of her. Now you guys have a good day. Don't get into too much trouble," he says before turning around and hopping back in the car.

All three of us stand on the sidewalk, paranoid. I keep waiting for something to happen or for someone to pop out and attack us. But all the people who walk by are completely oblivious to us. The officers drive away without further harassing us.

"Okay! So Ms. Gates, what the hell was that about?" I say, looking at Natalie.

"I don't know. That was really weird!" Natalie replies.

"Ms. Gates, would you like some Grey Poupon?" Logan asks.

"What?" Natalie asks.

"I don't know. I saw it in a magazine that had rich people in it," he says.

I start laughing and shaking my head.

"Shut up!" she says, starting to laugh herself.

"Okay Ms. Gates, shall we look for your building now?" I ask.

"Well, that building has to be farther that way right? If they turned instead of continuing straight?" Natalie asks.

"I don't know. It's a good guess. You wanna check it out?" I reply.

"Yeah. I wanna know why they think I'm this Ms. Gates. And why my mom's necklace prompted them to think it."

MR. GATES

We walk back to the street that we drove in on hoping to find the Gates building the officers were talking about.

"So do we know what it looks like?" Logan asks.

"Shouldn't it have a big sign that says Gates on it or something?" I say.

Natalie stops dead in her tracks, her face turning pale.

"No, that's it!" She points up towards a building at the end of the block.

The building is enormous with gold windows and has a huge green symbol on the front that matches the symbol on Natalie's necklace.

"Wow! Apparently you're rich Ms. Gates." Logan says.

"I remember this," Natalie says, barely under her breath.

Did she just say what I think she did? There's no way. I have to be hearing things.

"What did you say?" I ask.

"I, I remember this building. I remember..." she starts but doesn't finish.

"Natalie, you okay?" I ask.

"Umm, yeah. Let's go check it out," Natalie says, shaking her head as if trying to shake herself back to reality.

"Okay, let's go," I say and we walk across the street to the front of the building.

We stare at the gold windows of the building before walking towards the golden glass doors. I walk up to the front door looking for a sign that says we can go inside. On the door in small white lettering there is writing that says 'hours' and gives different times.

"What time is it?" I ask.

"Huh?" Logan says in response.

"I don't know," Logan says, realizing what I asked.

"Why?" Logan asks.

"The door has times on it. I'll bet that's when they're open and when they're not. If I'm reading it right, they're open till five."

"It can't be past five right? We got to the drop point at, what, twelve? You think it's taken us five hours to get here?" Logan asks.

Natalie suddenly walks past both of us and opens the door.

"Okay, I guess they're open," I say, looking at Logan.

We follow Natalie through two sets of glass doors and into the building. The temperature drops drastically as we step inside.

"It's cold in here," I mutter.

"Look at all the gold!" Logan says ignoring my comment.

The floors are black with gold flakes that glimmer in the lighting of the room. To our left and right are elaborate arrangements of golden furniture and glass tables. There are TVs mounted along the walls of the room.

Natalie starts walking as if she knows what she's doing. She heads directly to the front counter. The counter is completely gold. Behind it

there is a blonde lady wearing black pinstriped clothing with a golden frames around her eyes.

“Do you have an appointment?” The lady starts to say in a rude manner but then looks up at Natalie.

“Oh Ms. Gates. I am so sorry! Please forgive me. What did you need?” The lady changes her tone from rude to pleasant.

Natalie gets a few steps closer to the counter before replying. “Where’s my father?”

Out of all the things she could say, why did she ask that?

“He’s gone home for the day,” she says, not making eye contact with Natalie.

This lady seems to be nervous talking to ‘Ms. Gates’ — so nervous she hasn’t even paid enough attention to Natalie to realize that she’s not the real Ms. Gates. What the hell is going on?

“Oh, I see.” Natalie sounds disappointed.

“We can give you a ride home if you need one. Harold is still here,” the lady says nervously.

“Yeah, that’ll work. Thank you,” Natalie replies.

When Natalie says thank you, the lady looks up as if she’s surprised to hear the words and then looks immediately back down at her phone.

“Yes, yes, right away. I’ll get Harold here immediately!” she says.

“Okay,” Natalie says then turns from the counter and walks past Logan and me.

“Let’s find a place to wait,” she whispers to us as she passes.

We follow her over to the furniture and have a seat.

“What the hell is going on?” I whisper to Natalie after sitting next to her on the golden couch.

“I think this is my dad’s building,” she says.

"What?" I say, almost forgetting to whisper.

I'm torn between disbelief and a sudden pang of anger.

"You mean Ms. Gates' dad's building?" I say.

"No. I remember now. My dad left me behind," Natalie says with a deep sadness in her voice.

"Harold's out front!" the lady shouts, walking as fast as she can towards us.

Natalie jumps off the couch.

"Okay thank you!" she says then motions for us to follow.

We walk out the front door to see a long car with black windows and a man holding the back door open. I look at Logan and we exchange the same confused, angry looks.

"Madam," the man holding the door says.

Natalie approaches him and just like the lady at the front desk, he looks away. He looks directly at the ground as she enters the vehicle.

"Young sirs," he says, waving us into the vehicle still looking at the ground.

I slide across the black leather seats until I'm next to Natalie. The back of the vehicle has room for at least ten other people. There is a black window that separates the driver from the back of the vehicle. After Logan jumps in, the man whom I'm guessing must be Harold shuts the door.

"You were saying?" I whisper to Natalie in a harsh tone.

The black window separating us from the front of the vehicle opens a crack.

"We'll be there any minute, Ms. Gates," Harold says and then shuts the window.

"I blacked out a part of it until today. I don't think I wanted to remember it. I couldn't accept it, but it's the truth. I'll tell you the whole story I promise. But right now is not the best time to tell you. Just trust me I'll explain when I can." Natalie says.

What the hell is going on? Anger and the sting of betrayal shoot through me as I take in what she's saying. Natalie is from the compound! Has she lied to us all these years about being separated from her family as a kid while out scavenging?

Tank knew her way before us. That would mean that she lied to Tank or that he's been lying to us this whole time as well. I start to feel like I can't breathe and suddenly want to get out of the vehicle. I take a deep breath to calm down and look out the window as we pull up to large black gate.

No way. She wouldn't withhold something this big from us. We all have our secrets, but she's not the type to hold everything in. That's me, Logan, and Reika but not her. Something doesn't add up. I have to calm down until I know the facts.

The car stops. I hear a door open and close. Harold opens the door for us to exit.

"Here we are," he says.

"That was fast," I say.

"Only a few blocks from the main building. I tried to get us here as fast as possible," he says, looking at the ground again.

I step out to see that we are on a long driveway that leads to a road and then the black gate we passed. It looks like we are still in the middle of downtown. Beyond the black gate, I can see buildings and people walking. As Natalie gets out, my eyes hit the massive house that is behind the car.

"What the fuck?" I say to myself under my breath in disbelief.

This house is huge! It's unlike anything I've ever seen. It has to be at least three stories high! It looks as wide as an entire block of houses!

"Nineteen," Natalie says in a sad tone, drawing my attention.

"Let's go," she says and takes a deep breath.

"Thank you, Harold."

"Ma'am," he says with a confused expression before bowing.

Logan and I follow Natalie to a walkway that leads to the front doors of the house. The house is obsidian black with gold flakes just like the floor in the building. The porch and a few other outlying pieces of the house are a smooth white that offsets the black. We walk onto the porch and to the door when Natalie pauses as if she's frozen. Sorrow shoots through me as I see the sadness on her face. I grasp her arm gently.

"You don't have to do this. You already know who you are," I say.

She looks at me giving a faint smile. "Thank you, Nineteen. But I do, not just for me, but for all of us."

Why would she need to do this for all of us? I don't understand what she thinks she can accomplish here. And why did I just tell her it's okay? She might have betrayed us.

Natalie reaches forward and presses the doorbell. A few moments later, the door opens and I can't believe what's in front of my eyes. I must be hallucinating! Standing in front of Natalie is a mirror image of herself. You can tell that the girl is younger and she is wearing something on her lips and eyes, but she looks exactly like Natalie.

"Who...? Dad!" the girl is caught completely off guard and starts screaming for her dad to come to the door.

Natalie looks just as off guard at first, but something seems to click and she steps forward and hugs the girl.

"What's your name?" Natalie says to the girl, still embracing her.

The girl looks as if she is in complete shock. A tall thin man with jet-black hair and black eyes appears at the door behind Natalie and the girl. His eyes grow wide.

"N—N—Natalie?" he manages to get out.

"Dad." Natalie responds, letting go of the girl to push past her and hug the man.

He awkwardly pats her on the back.

"Come in, all of you come on in," he says, waving us in.

We walk into an enormous room with a ceiling that looks as high as a warehouse. Everything inside is gold, black, or white. The entire room glimmers and shines in one way or another.

"Sit down, sit down. Jennifer, take them over to the coffee table. I'm going to go get us something to drink."

"Fine!" the girl who resembles Natalie replies in an irritated manner.

We follow Jennifer into the house. It seems as if we have to walk for an eternity before we stop at large glass table surrounded by black leather chairs. Jennifer turns on a light above the table and then sits down.

"So, you're my sister? The one mom can't ever shut up about?" Jennifer asks in a stuck up tone.

"I guess so. Mom was still pregnant when I got lost," Natalie replies.

"Who are these two?" she asks, sneering at Logan and me.

This little girl is the epitome of a spoiled brat.

"These two are my family. They have been for years," Natalie says with anger starting to leak through her tone.

"Oh, I see. Hmphh," Jennifer says, pulling out some kind of small device to play with.

"How old are you?" Natalie asks.

"It doesn't matter. They're your family, not me." Jennifer shoots a look of disgust at Logan and me.

"How do you even know about age if you've been living outside with the savages anyway?" she continues.

I grit my teeth as rage runs through me. This little girl has the audacity to call us savages! She's the one who could care less that her older sister is back from the brink of death in the outside world.

"You stuck up little—" Natalie starts to say as her father enters the room.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. So, what happened to you? How'd you survive? And after all these years, how'd you make it back?" he asks, squinting his eyes and sitting down next to Natalie.

Something's not right. I thought he said he was going to get drinks. Where are the drinks?

"It's a really long story, but I had a lot of help from these two and another close friend of mine. I—"

Natalie's father interrupts her. "Jennifer, can you shut those blinds?"

"Ugh, fine but I'm outta here. I don't have time for this reunion," Jennifer says, angrily making her way to the window behind us. She grabs the side of the shades and yanks them down trying to show her irritation. She storms off, leaving the shades still partially open.

"Sorry, as you were saying," Natalie's father says.

"Well, after we were separated—" Natalie starts but her father doesn't seem to be paying attention. It looks as if he's looking out the window for something.

"Sorry, it's been a long day. After we were separated?" he says.

I look at Logan to see if he's been noticing the same thing as me. We both turn to look out the window at the same time. My heart jumps as a figure runs past the window. I jump out of the chair.

"Nineteen, what are you doing?" Natalie asks.

As I get lower to the floor, I see military vehicles mobilizing in the driveway!

"We gotta go! Now!" I jump to my feet, looking at Natalie.

Natalie jumps up looking confused. "Why what's going on?"

"You're a piece of shit! You're lucky I don't kill you right now!" I say, yelling and pointing at her father.

"Military! We gotta go!" Logan shouts.

"Oh shit! You motherfucker!" Natalie starts screaming at her father.

"I knew you fucking left me out there! You left me to die!" she continues yelling as I grab her arm and yank her away from the table pushing over the chairs around us.

"Let's go. Fuck him! He's a piece shit." I yell at Natalie who's fighting back tears.

"Okay. Okay! Follow me, I know how to get out of here. I remember this piece of shit house!" she yells at me as tears roll down her face.

We take off running through the house, winding through huge rooms, past an indoor pool, pool tables, and a bowling alley before we come to a set of double doors that Natalie bursts through. Inside there is a garage filled with vehicles. She runs to one of the walls and pushes a button that opens two different garage doors. Then she runs to one of the vehicles and grabs something from inside of it.

"He doesn't leave the keys out. We're gonna have to make a run for the street!" Natalie says.

"Lead the way!" I yell back.

With Logan and I following, she sprints out of the garage onto a cobblestone trail. We sprint down the trail, through trees, and past a lake before the road ends at a wall.

"My dad built this as his own personal way to sneak out of the house." Natalie says, pulling out a small black button on a clip.

As soon as she presses the button, the wall starts separating in two different directions. We run out as soon as it's open wide enough for us to fit through. Natalie presses the button again to conceal our exit and we run onto a downtown street. A car swerves to avoid hitting us as we try to cross the street. It screeches to a stop and a man rolls down his window and starts yelling at us from the car.

"Logan! Get that shit!" I yell, pointing at the car.

Logan runs to the driver side door. With his mini katana in hand, he opens the door and tosses the driver onto the street. I run towards the cars circular backlights and up the side of the car to Logan.

"Fuck you. I'm gonna find you and I'm gonna..." We ignore the man yelling at us and hop in his car. Logan jumps in the passenger seat and Natalie hops into the back seat. I jump into the driver seat and close the door.

"Why'd you leave this to me, I've only driven once." I say, pushing down on the pedal to the far left trying to get the car to go.

"I've never driven. I thought you knew how! You're the one who told me to get the car!"

The crack of gunfire shoots through my ears. My panic multiplies. No time to argue. I have to figure out what the hell to do. I push the pedal on the far right to the floor and hear the engine come to life but we still aren't moving. Looking at the middle of the car there is a stick that says P.

"Maybe this is it?" Logan says, moving the stick to N with no success. Gunshots ring out again shattering the rear windshield of the car.

"Shit! That's right, move it to D!"

Logan moves the stick to D. The tires screech as the car starts moving and we take off. We fly past several intersections heading alongside the fence that separates Natalie's house from downtown.

"Where the hell do we go Natalie?" I yell.

"Keep going straight. I think this will wind around to that main street we were on earlier." Natalie replies.

Sure enough, as soon as she says it we hit a main street with stop-lights and cars. I swerve in between two cars that are stopped at the light. I slam on the brakes and squeal around the corner, nearly mowing down three people.

"They're behind us!" Natalie yells to me.

"How many?" I ask

"All of 'em!" Logan says.

"As soon as we hit that corner, they came out the woodwork! There's five of those big military vehicles behind us!" Natalie says.

"Where the hell should I go?" I ask.

"How the hell should I know? I didn't even know how to get us back to this main street!" Natalie says.

"What? Why'd you tell me to keep goin' straight if you didn't know?"

"It was a good guess! I don't remember the streets. I was eight years old the last time I was here!" she shouts back.

"Shit! Okay, okay, okay. We need weapons! Let's go get backup.

There are multiple cars stopped at a red light ahead of us. Shit! We can't stop. What the hell are we gonna do. I gotta find a way around them. Slamming the brakes at the last minute, I swerve onto the sidewalk

to get around the traffic. People are diving and running out of the way. I hear a loud crash as we maneuver over the sidewalk and through the intersection back onto the street.

"What was that?" I ask.

"It looks like one of those military vehicles didn't clear the sidewalk. It hit the building. Only one of them got past before it hit!" Logan replies.

"I don't know what the hell I'm doing, but I guess I'm doing better than them, huh?" I yell as we fly past the brown wall.

The tires of the car are screeching as I swerve back and forth across the street trying not to hit other cars. We fly through the fancy neighborhood running stoplights. We reach the smaller houses and I start looking for our turn. Everything looks the same. I don't remember where we came from!

"I think we just missed our turn!" Logan shouts.

"Are you sure?" I ask.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure that was the alley from earlier. It has caution tape all over it!" he yells back.

"Shit!" I slam the brakes, trying to slow down enough to turn onto the next street.

As we start to make the turn, we get hit in the rear by one of the military vehicles. It causes us to do a one-eighty and stop in the middle of the road. I look up disoriented as the military vehicle comes to a stop a few feet away from us.

A voice comes out of the vehicle over a speaker. "Get out of the vehicle. We're only after one person. If you get out of the vehicle two of you will be able to walk away."

Why the hell are they only after one of us?

"Fuck that!" I say, punching the gas. The car sputters violently and then takes off. I swerve around two other military vehicles that are pulling up.

"What street Logan?" I ask.

"This one!" he shouts back.

A massive amount of gunfire hits the air as we turn the corner and I punch it down the street.

"Everyone okay?" I ask.

"Yeah." Natalie and Logan reply much to my relief.

We fly up several blocks and I finally recognize where we are and how to get back.

"Okay, we're gonna dump the car on the other side of the block and bail. As soon as we stop bail! Got it?" I shout.

"Yeah!" both Logan and Natalie yell back.

This should be the block. This row of houses we're coming up on should be directly behind the house we need. I slam the brakes. We slide to a stop after popping a curb and sliding into the corner house's front yard. We jump out and run a few houses up. We start hopping fences diagonally towards the house we need to reach. We hit the backyard of the house I think is ours, but the house seems unfamiliar.

"Shit, it's one block over!" I say, realizing we still needed to turn right before we were on the correct block.

"Lead the way." Logan says.

I jump the fence and take two steps down the front lawn before I see that there is an entire group of soldiers standing in the street waiting for us. I look back, hoping to prevent Logan and Natalie from jumping the fence to follow but it's too late.

"Freeze!" one of them yells, running towards us.

I don't have any weapons on me. There's no way I can attack unless I can get a weapon away from one of them.

"Get out of the way, son!" the soldier shouts, pointing his gun at me.

"What?" I say confused.

"That girl is from the outside. She's not who you think she is!"

I turn and look at Natalie. Why are they just after Natalie and not me or Logan?

"I said move, son! You'll be dealt with later. I won't tell you again!"

Her father ratted her out, but not us. Why? Why would he do that to his own daughter?

"No! If you want her, you'll have to go through me!" I yell at the soldier, putting my arms out to prevent him from passing.

"Nineteen, stop!" Natalie shouts at me.

"Fine." the soldier says, putting his hand in the air.

I don't understand what he's doing until it's too late. By the time I realize that it's a signal, he jerks his hand and I hear a gunshot that rips through my very soul. Everything seems to slow down. I turn just in time to see Natalie's body hit the ground, her face covered in red, unrecognizable. Anger and anguish surge through me. After a momentary pause from shock, rage wins and I lose control of myself.

I turn back towards the soldiers and lunge at the first of them, hitting him in the face as hard as I can. I feel his nose break beneath my fist as he goes down. While he's going down, I run towards the next soldier in the group and I swing with all my might, hitting him in the temple. As my fist makes contact with his head, the soldier next to him draws a handgun. I feel a hot stabbing sensation shoot through the side of my torso.

I stumble backwards, seeing stars as Logan jumps onto the soldier's chest, stabbing him at the base of his neck. I try to stabilize myself using

my anger as a platform. I rush forward again, but my legs refuse to work. I take a step towards the soldiers before my face is splashed with Logan's blood. His head is ripped open as the sound of another gunshot reverberates through my head. I take one more wobbly step forward, attempting to swing at the soldier closest to me, but I don't reach him. I fall to the ground.

Stars everywhere. Black speckles cloud my vision as I hit the ground. I hear shouting behind me, but I can't make it out. I feel the pain in my side again as an arm is placed on my shoulder and I'm rolled over. It seems like I'm in a dream. The voices aren't clear, but I can hear them. The soldier with a broken nose stands over me, waving a gun. It sounds as if I'm under water listening to him talk.

"This is what you get, you dumb fuck! You deserve the misery you're in. I'ma leave your ass here to die on the front lawn. You'll be my example! Everyone in this shitty neighborhood can see what happens when they fuck with us!" He spits on me as the speckles of black take over my vision. Darkness engulfs me.

I hear a woman's voice that I don't recognize. My eyes refuse to open. I'm tired. No, I'm exhausted.

"My house isn't the only one that's set up like this. When I left my husband, I bought the entire block. I wanted to create a few safe havens for people to go when they had no place to turn. Some of the houses transformed into clinics out of necessity."

Who does that voice belong to? It sounds familiar, but I can't place it. I try to open my eyes but they still won't budge.

"I'm glad you did. You're the reason he's still with us."

Reika, that's Reika's voice. I fight harder to open my eyes.

"I'm just happy you brought my baby home after all these years." The woman's voice fills my ears.

She sounds just like Natalie. Natalie! Logan! A feeling of disgust shoots through me. My eyes open wide and I spring upward getting only halfway upright before an overwhelming pain shoots through the right side of my body. I let out a yelp and immediately lay back down.

"No. No. No. You can't get up yet." the woman shouts.

The pain continues to rip through my side. I close my eyes, clench both of my fists, and grit my teeth, trying to endure but nothing seems to help.

"Nineteen," Reika says as I feel her gently place a hand over my right fist.

I try taking a deep breath so I can talk, but as I inhale the pain gets worse. I want to know if she's okay. A flash of Natalie on the ground lifeless shoots through my head and I clench my fists harder than before. Anger rushes through me and I hear a loud fast paced beeping.

"His blood pressure just spiked." I feel the woman's hand touch my left arm. "Hold on just a minute, we'll get some more pain killer in you," the woman says.

The pain from moving subsides. I open my eyes to see Reika standing over me.

"Where's Natalie?" I manage to croak out.

The look of concern on her face deepens but she doesn't respond.

"Loggaan?" I ask, slurring his name.

Waiting for her response, my vision goes blurry and my eyelids close.

"You're going to be okay, that's all that matters," I hear Reika say as everything goes black.

It feels as if someone is inside of me trying to claw his or her way out. I let out a very low pitch moan and grit my teeth together. What the hell is going on and why am I in so much pain? This sensation shooting through me needs to stop! This nightmare, it needs to stop!

The voices are back. I can hear Reika talking with that woman again.

"All that money did nothing to save my daughter, and at the end of the day, money won't ever make you happy. Only the ones you love can do that."

"All we had on the outside was each other. Natalie was just like you, she just wanted to find a place to call home. She didn't care where or how we would survive. She just wanted to settle somewhere."

I want to leave! I want to get out of this bed, run out the door, and out of this dream. Someone needs to wake me up. Natalie needs to wake me up already! The clawing pain becomes unbearable and I moan out loud in response to it. Reika and the woman's voices stop. I shift back and forth in the bed trying unsuccessfully to ease the pain.

"I'm here," Reika says and I feel her hand grasp my fist.

I open my eyes to see Reika standing over me with the same look of concern as before. A sick feeling knots my stomach. Natalie and Logan aren't dead. That was a nightmare.

"Where are Natalie and Logan?" I ask.

Water wells up in Reika's eyes and I can see her clench her jaw to regain composure.

"Just worry about yourself for once. Concentrate on getting better," Reika replies.

I don't understand. What the hell is going on? Is Reika part of this dream? She must be, this doesn't feel real. It feels as if I'm floating.

"Where are we?" I ask.

"You're at my house." The woman's voice comes from my left side.

I turn to see a woman standing next to me who looks strikingly similar to Natalie. An older version of Natalie.

"The pain you're feeling is from the nanobots reconstructing your body," she says as she uses a syringe to insert clear liquid into a plastic

tube. I follow the tube, suddenly realizing that it and many others are running into my arm.

"We're going to be lowering your sedatives over the next few days. You'll slowly become more conscious. If you need anything, just ask for it. Either myself, Reika, or Tank will be here," the woman continues.

Tank. Where's Tank? The last place I remember seeing him was in that house with Reika. He stayed behind with Reika. Logan and Natalie were with me. My eyes start drooping and dark clouds start appearing in my vision. The clouds are too heavy. I can't concentrate.

"My name is Megan, by the way." I hear before I give way to the darkness.



My heart is racing and my nostrils are filled with the scent of gun smoke as I run down a dark hallway. I don't know what's chasing me, but my instincts say to run as fast as I can. A white door appears at the end of the hallway. I'm reaching for the handle when the sound of a rifle causes my ears to ring.

The door opens and I'm standing in a familiar field of knee high golden grass. The fear from the hallway washes away. Enemy soldiers are standing in front of me, looking at something to the left of me. Something splashes my face. I wipe it off and look at my hand to see that it's covered in blood.

Something wet brushes against my shins. I look down at the golden grass but it's no longer golden. It's soaked in blood. The entire field has turned blood red. I'm unable to move. I can't breathe. My head is forced up and my body is turned towards what the soldiers are facing. I'm staring at another me who is standing with Logan and Natalie in front of the soldiers.

An overpowering sense of dread fills my gut. They can't stay here. They need to run! I shout at the top of my lungs, but no sound comes out. The ringing of a gunshot rattles around in my brain, but no guns are drawn and no shots have been fired. I look down at the grass, trying to regain my composure and the ringing in my head ceases. Complete silence takes over. I look up from the scarlet grass at the other me and hear the roar of rushing water. I watch helplessly as the other me steps in front of Natalie with his arms extended to protect her. They have to leave! I start screaming at them with every ounce of being, but again nothing comes out.

I hear the crack of a rifle over the roaring of rushing water. Immobile, I watch as Natalie falls in slow motion to the ground. I'm still screaming with no voice as the scene speeds up. I watch as the other me attacks the soldiers and is shot. Logan then attacks and is shot in the face. As the bullet rips through Logan's head, a river of waist high blood submerges my legs and washes away the scene.

"No!" I pop up yelling with tears streaming down my face.

"It's okay brotha! We're here! It's okay," Tank shouts as he and Megan rush to my side.

Reika runs into the room just as I stop yelling. I sit silently, trying to accept the truth.

"It's okay," Reika says, wrapping her arm around my neck and hugging me from the left side.

"They're dead. It wasn't a nightmare," I say looking straight ahead at the yellow wall.

No one speaks.

"They're dead aren't they?" I say, looking at Tank.

He looks down and is about to start talking, but before he can reply, I apologize.

"I'm sorry," I say, looking at the ground in front of my bed.

"It's not your fault. We all knew what we were getting into when we..." Tank tries to reply.

I don't let him finish. "No! This is my fault. I assumed the role of our leader. I wanted to fight these people. I'm the one who couldn't let it go. I'm the one who wouldn't have been happy just finding a place to call home. They'd still be alive if it wasn't for my decisions. This falls on me! No one else," I say, gritting my teeth and staring at the floor.

A moment of silence goes by as neither Reika nor Tank say anything in response. Reika lets go of me and takes a step back from the bed.

"Without you, Natalie never would have made it home," Megan says entering the room.

"Everyone I've talked to about her said that she was always trying to find a place to call home. That home she was always searching for was here with me." I look up at the old lady whose resemblance to Natalie is uncanny.

"My understanding of the situation is parallel to yours, but I see it differently. It was you who helped her stay alive out in that wasteland. It was you who enabled her to fight for what she believed in. It was you who she fell in love with. And it was you who finally helped her accomplish her goal of finding her home. What would you have given to see your family one last time?"

I sit, trying to take in what the lady is saying.

"Blame yourself if you want. But I'm happy to hear my daughter had such amazing people by her side. That's more than most of us ever get, including those of us within this compound. Keep in mind that Natalie would want you to get back up and fight," Megan says and then walks out of the room.

Did she just refer to Natalie as her daughter? What the hell is going on? How did she find us? Where are we? And come to think of it, how am I still alive? I look at Tank, wanting answers.

"Who...?" I start to ask.

"That was Natalie's mom. It turns out that you guys ended up on her front lawn when the soldiers caught up to you. I've never believed in the concept of fate, but somehow you brought Natalie home before she died," Tank says, his eyes watering. He looks at the ground to regain his composure before continuing.

I look around the room at all the medical equipment and machines, allowing Tank time to catch his emotions. He clears his throat and then continues.

"Her mom owns this entire block. Apparently after losing Natalie, she divorced her husband and used the majority of the money she had to develop it. Half of the houses have medical facilities in the basements. The other half are shelters for people who have no place to go."

"How did she lose Natalie in the first place?" I ask.

"You'll have to ask her that. I haven't been bold enough to ask after this week's events."

"The week's events? How long have I been out?"

"Counting today, eight days," Reika answers.

"Eight days?" I say, bewildered at my lack of memory.

"Yeah, they kept you sedated for most of it. Aside from when the drugs wore off, you've been out the entire time," she continues.

"They said it was necessary for you to heal correctly. A surgeon put some kind of little robots in you that he said would repair you from the inside," Tank adds.

That must've been why I felt like someone was clawing at me from the inside.

"Nanobots to be exact." A deep voice draws all of our attention.

A tall skinny man with blonde hair and blue eyes walks into the room with Megan by his side.

"Modern medicine is usually only available to the elite these days, but Megan here managed to snag some from her ex before she left," the man continues.

"I've been saving them for an emergency like this," Megan says.

"Basically, they're robots that enter your bloodstream and exponentially increase your body's natural healing process. I'm Mark by the way. I'm the surgeon who operated on you." Mark extends his hand to me to shake.

"Nice to meet you," I say, shaking his hand.

"You too. You were shot through the right side of your abdomen. Luckily it was at point blank range, so the bullet went in and right out your back without bouncing around or breaking apart. The only real worry we had was that there may have been some nerve damage around your spine. The exit wound was only an inch or so away from your spinal cord. This is nothing the nanobots can't fix of course, but it will take some time to recover. How's your pain level right now?"

"It's not bad. I have a slight ache in my side but compared to the other day this is nothing."

"That's good. You'll probably feel that for quite some time. The nanobots work wonders. Without them, you probably would've been bed ridden for at least a month and then you would have spent months afterwards trying to rehabilitate yourself.

"I took a look at your wounds last night while you were still out. I'd say one more day of bed rest and your body should be able to handle some movement. Just make sure not to do anything too intense for a while. The nanobots helped you heal, but that doesn't mean you're one hundred percent yet. It'll probably be few weeks before you're fully recovered.

"Make sure you ease yourself back into walking tomorrow. As I said before, we were worried about nerve damage. Your nerves might not have completely healed yet. It really all depends on how extensive the damage was. Any questions?"

Ease into walking, my ass. I need to be on my feet right away. If it's been a week since we've been in here, then our forces should have already attacked. And if they're attacking, I have to join the fight!

"No. Thank you," I reply.

"Don't thank me, thank Megan. She's the one who brought you in. If you have any other concerns, Megan here knows how to find me. See ya later," Mark says and then walks out of the room.

"Thank you," I say while looking at Megan.

"That's not necessary, as far as I'm concerned you're family," Megan says.

Why would she trust me so easily? Why would she bring me here without knowing why we were with her daughter? Why were those soldiers only after Natalie and not all of us? Did Tank know Natalie was from the compound? So many questions are running through my head.

"I'm sure you have questions for me just like your friends did. However, I'm sure your questions will be more pleasant since you won't have a gun pointing at my face," she says and chuckles.

"I do. I need to fill in all of the gaps. First and foremost, what do you know about us?" I ask.

I look at Tank. "How much does she know?" I redirect my question to him, trying to gauge from his reaction if he has kept our purpose here hidden.

"Everything," Tank, Reika, and Megan say simultaneously.

I shoot Reika a confused look, trying to decide if they truly told her everything or if that's what they want her to believe.

"I know you came to attack the compound and that you're with the Ninety-nine, if that's what you're wondering," Megan says.

I stay silent, trying to digest what she just said.

"I saw the tattoo on your ankle. It's not the first I've seen. And I don't have a problem with it. My feelings toward the compound and the outside world began to change the day I lost Natalie."

My emotions stir. I want to know how Natalie ended up outside the compound, but now is not the time to ask. I need to know our situation.

"How do you know about the Ninety-nine and what do you mean you've seen the tattoo on my ankle before?" I ask.

"I know about the Ninety-nine and your tattoo because my ex-husband was part of a group called the Council. Back before he completely lost his soul, he would tell me bits and pieces about the things they would do. A large part of what they did back then had to do with the Ninety-nine."

The council?

"Where have you seen the tattoo on my ankle?"

"I've seen it on another ninety-nine member who was being held hostage"

"What? Where is he?"

"Probably long dead."

"What?"

"Obviously you don't trust me so I'll give you the long version."

I nod trying to downplay my defensiveness.

"A few years after the compound was established, there was an outbreak. A large number of people that lived in one of the poorer sections became very sick. Vaccines were distributed, but most of the people infected died anyway. The media claimed that the cause was a disease that was spreading outside the wall.

"Greg told me that it was a biological attack carried out by the Ninety-nine. In order to convince me, he took me to the cell where they were detaining the man responsible. Greg forced me to look at a tattoo on his leg. It looked identical to the one you have on your leg. He said that the tattoo meant that the man on the floor was part of the ninety-nine percent."

"No one in the wastes has access to biological weapons."

"I figured as much. At the time he claimed that the man was found inside the compound in the same area where the disease started. That man was so pale it was obvious that he hadn't even been outside his cell, let alone the compound. I don't believe that the Ninety-nine were responsible for that outbreak. I think that man was used as a scapegoat."

"And you just let him rot in that cell?"

"There were a lot of things that I justified going along with back then. It wasn't until the day I lost Natalie that I realized the type of person Greg had become." Megan stops talking and stares at the floor.

What happened to Natalie? I can't ask that now, I have to stay focused. For all I know, she could be doing this intentionally. She could be

trying to draw my focus away from the situation at hand. I have to try and gauge if she's genuinely trying to help us or if she has some ulterior motive. If her husband was a part of this Council, then why wasn't she?

"If everyone is so scared of the Ninety-nine, then why do people in here seem to be so worried about each other?" Reika asks.

"And how'd you end up with Greg if he was a part of this Council?" Anger leaks from my voice as I ask the question.

"Neither of those questions have simple answers. But I guess, understanding the compound will help you survive." Megan pauses and takes a deep breath.

"I'm sure you expected to find a utopia when you got inside the wall. Since you've been here for a few days, I'm sure you can see that's not the case. Parts of this compound are very run down. Others are excessively luxurious. The farther out from the original wall you get, the less money there is.

"When the compound was first created, we were all on semi-equal footing. We all had money and we were all trying to escape the hordes of needy savages that had taken over the rest of the country.

"As things started to calm down, we were told that we had to rebuild the nation and that the outside world would be left behind. For a functional society, many different roles are necessary. As the rebuilding of New America began to take place people began fighting with each other over who would do what. Everyone within this compound had come from wealth and had known little else. The vast majority of us didn't want to fill roles that involved things we didn't want to do.

"That's when the cycle that created the Ninety-nine started all over again. With a shortage of people willing to do jobs they didn't want, everything became a matter of wealth. Those with the most money were

able to hold out the longest and in turn seized the best jobs. In many cases, they were able to attain jobs doing what they did before the collapse. Those with the least money were placed in jobs they did not want. Jobs where the pay was completely determined by an individual at the top of the food chain.

"This type of behavior whittled away at our population and led us to where we're now at. Everyone's fighting everyone just to keep what they have, even if they don't need what they have."

She pauses and shakes her head before looking at me.

"And to answer your question, I was fortunate enough to realize what was happening early on and in a position to go after one of the elite to maintain my status."

"Greg?" I ask.

"Greg was the second wealthiest man in the United States when it collapsed. His family had roots in all modern technological advancements."

"If he was so elite how did you manage to marry him?"

"My parents were friends with his parents long before the collapse. I pulled some strings and sold my soul to avoid working a job in the food industry."

"You married a tyrant to avoid working a job you didn't like?"

"He wasn't that bad of a man at first. The government needed his expertise concerning the computer systems and defense systems his family had designed. They gave him nearly unlimited power in order to pick his brain whenever they wanted. That power coupled with his ties to the Council are what turned him into the monster he is today."

"He's a piece of work alright," I say, letting more of my anger towards him slip out.

Tank and Natalie are looking at me in a state of shock. I need to calm down. I'm exposing too much emotion. They don't know what happened with Natalie's father yet and neither does Megan. I have to keep it to myself until I know whether or not Megan is hiding anything. I need to drop the subject of Natalie and her father.

"How did I survive?" I ask.

If Logan were here, he would catch on to what I was doing and immediately come up with a witty remark. Sorrow shoots through me at the lack of his voice.

Tank lets out a chuckle. "Well, actually, believe it or not, I had to hold Reika back. We had that picture—err, that television, I guess it's called—we had that on, and the news said they were chasing an outsider. We watched, trying to decide if it was you or one of the other groups running from the military. We watched until the cameras caught you guys hopping out of the car to run. That's when Reika went ape shit! She popped up, grabbed some of the guns, and was heading for the door before I grabbed her." He pauses to laugh.

"She started yelling at me, trying to get loose and saying that we needed to come help you. Eventually I managed to calm her down by convincing her that it was better to let you guys come to us. We sat back down in front of the television, watching in wait until you reached the house.

"A moment later, the cameras caught up to you. We saw you putting your arms out to stop the soldiers from something and then the picture cut out. It said that the station had momentarily lost signal. We changed the channel and every single channel that had been broadcasting the chase had the same message. We were losing our patience when it finally

came back on, showing the three of you on the ground and medics around multiple soldiers.

"When the soldiers started leaving and the camera cut off, we left. We watched from across the street as they took Logan and Natalie's bodies away. It looked like they were going to take you away too, but one of the soldiers stopped them. He dragged you to the middle of the street, shouted something to the other soldiers, kicked you in the side, and left."

A brief flash of the soldier spitting on me, saying that he was going to let me be an example flashes through my head.

"He said he was going to leave me there as an example," I say.

"That's when I ran outside for the second time to help," Megan breaks her silence.

"I came outside after the gunshots. Tried to run to Natalie when I realized she was on the ground, but the soldiers grabbed me. They wouldn't let me interfere. Two of them ushered me back inside and held me there until the others were done hauling the bodies away. As the soldiers left, I ran back outside. I saw that they had dragged you to the middle of the street. I ran up to you just as they were leaving," she finishes.

"We had an awkward stare down with Megan when we reached you. We were in the middle of the street with weapons in our hands, looking at her, unsure as to why she was there. She broke the silence, saying that she had a clinic in her basement and could save you if we let her," Reika says.

"We didn't have much of a choice but to trust her. You were covered in so much blood that we couldn't tell where you were shot. I picked you up and brought you inside while Reika kept her guns trained on Megan." Tank says.

The atmosphere of the room turns frigid as they recall having to carry me to the operating table. That's all I need to know. I have to change the subject to get their minds off of it. Wait. I've been here for a week! What the hell happened with the attack on the compound?

"If I've been here for a week, what happened to the attack? Where are the others?" I blurt out, momentarily forgetting Megan is in the room. I look at Tank and then glance to Megan, hoping that I didn't just give her information she was after.

"It's okay, I'll leave the room so you can talk. Can't expect you to trust me so soon. I'll be upstairs if you need me," she says, getting up.

"Thank you," I say and then look back at Tank.

"It was cancelled," Tank says.

"What?" I shout in outrage.

"Estabon said the detachment from the arena was attacked before they got here. They think that the helicopter we took to get to the arena from the officers headquarters had a tracking device in it. The task force was small and didn't do too much damage, but they said it was enough to re-think the attack.

"If we had found a way to attack before the task force hit, they might have continued. And unfortunately, we weren't the only group that was stopped. The gunshots we heard when we first hopped the wall were compound soldiers shooting at the Cutthroats. They were killed before they got to the wall. Fox and his men managed to get in the same way we were able to, they just did it on the opposite side."

"What happened to them?"

"They found two areas that allowed access to the interior of the obsidian wall, but both were heavily guarded. A direct assault wouldn't have been possible, so they were forced to back down. Fox said that with time

they might be able to infiltrate, but there was no way to do it before the Ninety-nine arrived. So in other words, the entire attack has been postponed. According to Estabon, they're waiting for us and the Wolfpack to make some progress before they proceed."

Anger and guilt surge through me.

"They didn't attack! We lost Nat." I catch myself before going completely off the rails about losing Natalie and Logan.

The guilt is overwhelming. I'm the one responsible for trusting the Ninety-nine. I expected them to follow through no matter what. But it looks like we sacrificed our people for nothing. I have to stay calm for Reika and Tank's sake. They're still looking to me to be a leader. I can't show my emotion.

"I can't believe they fell back. I guess that means it's up to us to take these bastards down from the inside," I say, maintaining a calm tone.

"You need to worry about healing first. Revenge can wait," Reika says.

"She's right. It looks like we're gonna be here for a while. Worry about walking first and then we'll move to the next hurdle," Tank says.

"If Fox and the Wolfpack got in, where are they?" I ask.

"They're a few houses down. We decided to split up in case we get raided," Tank replies.

"Okay. Do we have any orders from the outside or are we completely on our own?" I ask.

"On our own," Reika says.

They left us here to fend for ourselves, great. We're martyrs for their cause and nothing more.

"Great," I say, taking a deep breath in.

"In that case, we do whatever we want. I want you two to get out of my room and find something fun to do," I say.

"What?" Reika says, cocking her head to the side.

Tank looks at me confused, waiting for a response.

"You heard me. For once you don't have to worry about finding shelter or food. Leave me. Enjoy something while you can," I say.

"Actually, food isn't necessarily the easiest thing for us to attain without Megan's help," Tank says.

"And we're not going to leave you here while we run around outside," Reika says.

I look at Reika. "Why not? I'm not going anywhere. For once in our lives, you don't have to watch my back. We don't have to worry about random scavengers sneaking up trying to kill us. There's food here regardless of how we have to attain it. GO! Enjoy something here. Our lives are too short to squander."

Reika and Tank exchange confused glances.

"But it's nine pm. It's almost time to go to sleep," Tank says.

"Yeah and—" Reika starts but I interrupt her.

"Yeah and nothing. Go! I'll still be here in the morning. Find something you've always wanted to do and do it! Even if it's as simple as sitting outside and relaxing. Leave me to my thoughts!" I yell.

Reika stares into my eyes for a moment. She's trying to figure out whether I'm serious or not. I focus on my anger to hide the pain reverberating through me. I stare back into her eyes as intensely as I can to throw her off.

"Fine. We'll leave you to your thoughts. Tank, let's go," she says with an expression of concern on her face.

"Okay, we'll see you in the morning," Tank says, getting up from his chair.

Reika and Tank move the chairs back to the wall and head upstairs. I stare at the yellow wall, taking in everything that I heard throughout the day. So much has happened. I don't know how I'm supposed to feel or what I'm supposed to do anymore.

I don't think I care anymore. I'm tired of fighting. I don't want to move. I'll just lie here and stare at this wall. All the fire I had yesterday has been extinguished. That's right, it's not yesterday anymore, a week has passed already. What does it matter? A week or a day, it's all just a waste. No matter what we do, it always ends the same. Death. We're born and then we die, it's a cycle. It just repeats. Why try to break it? What good does it do to fight the flow?

We've all been fighting for years now and for what? We lost half of our group a few days ago and now two more of us are dead. If anything, they might be dead because they chose to fight. What do we accomplish if we continue to fight? Are we just postponing the inevitable? Why can't we just fit into place like the rest of these people here in the compound? They eat, live, and go about their daily lives without struggling. That's the whole point isn't it?

Kai would disagree. It's not enough to simply survive he would say. Finding what you want in life and pursuing it is the only way to truly live. Does that mean these people in the compound aren't truly living because they don't follow their hearts? Do they just ignore their inner selves so they can fit into society and continue to survive? Or is this how they want to live? As pawns seeking acceptance from someone above them.

Why don't those kids who were fighting each other in the streets team up and go take from the rich? Both groups have nothing, so why fight against each other when there's nothing to gain from it? Why not go after the ones in charge? Take the person out at the top whose greed and thirst for power is responsible for their positions in life? Or would that somehow reset the same cycle?

It's pointless. Our lives are completely pointless. My eyes fill with water as anger mixes with anxiety and helplessness. My concentration breaks as I hear someone walking down the stairs. I'm not in the mood to talk anymore. I lie down and close my eyes pretending to be asleep.

"Figured you would go back to sleep. Pretty sure you had some sedative still in your system," Megan's voice fills my ears.

"I'm glad my daughter was able to meet someone like you," she says, standing right next to me.

Her lips press to my forehead before I hear her walk away. I hear the click of a light switch and open my eyes in time to see her walking up the stairs. When she's out of view, I hear another click and the stairwell light goes off. I lie silently in the dark, zoned out, not wanting my emotions to wash back over me.

Natalie. Megan thanked me for bringing her daughter here. If she understood the truth, she'd probably slap me. Natalie would have been perfectly happy settling down at the arena and never coming here. That's the only home she would have needed. Megan's right to say that I'm the reason she came here, but that also means that I'm the reason she died. The truth is that my decisions as a leader got her killed. I couldn't protect her when she needed me the most.

A feeling of longing crushes my chest, making it hard to breathe as I remember the last few days with her. I hold my breath, remembering the way her body felt, the way her lips felt, and how beautiful she was.

"I'm sorry Natalie," I whisper, staring at the ceiling. My eyes filled with water.

I close my eyes and shake my head, trying to shake the pain away. "I'm okay! It's okay. I have to focus on what to do next!" I say to myself empty.

At least Logan came with me because he wanted to, not because I asked him to. He was just as intent on revenge. Maybe even more so than me. Why doesn't that make me feel any better? Would he really have made the decision to come here if it wasn't for me? Or would he have been perfectly happy killing officers in the wasteland? I guess I'm just as responsible for his death. Logan was as close to having a brother as I'll ever get. He was my best friend. Perhaps the only one who truly understood me. And I got him killed. I couldn't protect either of them.

These spoiled bastards in this compound all deserve to die! They don't know how good they have it. Listening to Megan talk about how parts of this compound are run down was a joke. One area might be less luxurious than another, but at least they have food! They have shelter and they don't have to worry about the constant threat of death. They fight amongst themselves over the pettiest of things. She's just like the rest of them. She's probably just playing the part to get information out of us. I pause after the severity of my last thought.

I need to stop. I don't know that for sure, not yet at least. I need to calm down. I take a deep breath, trying to get my rage to subside. Megan saved my life, and she's Natalie's mother. I owe it to Natalie to find out

the truth before passing judgment. I'm sorry, Natalie. I take a few more deep breaths, trying to eradicate the anger coursing through me.

"Why the fuck didn't I die with them?" I say out loud as a tear falls from each of my eyes.

What am I doing? What's wrong with me? Crying never solves anything! The last time I cried was when I was alone as a little kid and it sure as hell didn't help anything. I wipe the tears from my face and stare into the darkness. Emotions aren't of any use. They're pointless. It's time to cast them aside as I did when I was a kid. Embracing the hole in my heart, I stare into the darkness until I pass out.

FLEA MARKET

"Hey, Nineteen." I hear Reika's voice as I'm lightly shaken awake.

I roll over and open my eyes to see Reika and Tank standing over me.

"We're going to the market today. Figured it would be a good way to get you out and about," Tank says.

"Okay. Are there some clothes I can wear beside this, umm, gown you have me in?" I ask.

"Right there," Tank says, pointing to a black shirt and pants neatly folded on one of the chairs.

"Um, I don't think that's the best color to be wearing. You have anything else?"

He and Reika exchange confused glances.

"Actually, where we're going it kinda ensures our safety," Tank replies.

"So I take it we're going into that gangs territory?" I ask.

"Yeah, how'd you know about them?" Reika asks.

"We kinda had a run in with their opposition the other day... or last week I guess. I was wearing all black, remember?"

"That's right. Natalie picked out your clothes," Tank says. The pain in his voice is clear as he says Natalie's name.

"They call themselves Death's Disciples. Megan says they don't allow anyone wearing white to get near the market. She instructed us to wear anything but white and we figured black is the way to go, seeing as how that's what they wear," Reika says.

"Well, the problem is if you're wearing their colors their rival might come after you. So really, any color besides black and white is probably best. But whatever, I like black anyway. It'll do just fine," I say, throwing the blankets off my body.

Reika and Tank are watching me a little closer than usual. It's weird. I turn to the side of the bed to jump off. Reika moves around the bed to the same side as me.

"Uh, I'm going to get dressed now. You guys mind giving me some space?" I ask.

"Yeah, no problem. Sorry," Reika says, taking a step back.

That was weird. I look at her with an amused expression on my face. "Okay. If you guys want to watch me change that's fine by me I guess. But I am naked under this gown."

Reika smiles at me. "I know that's fine, I'll look away."

Something's up. They're both still watching me, worried about something. Whatever. I'll get dressed in front of them. It's not like I haven't had to before.

"Okay," I say, jumping off the bed.

When my feet hit the floor, I have trouble moving them. I trip and fall. I catch myself in a pushup position. I do a push up and try to stand up, but for some reason I can only move one of my legs.

"Are you okay?" Reika says, rushing to my side and grabbing my right arm.

"Let me help you." I hear Tank say from my left side.

"No. I got this," I say.

This must be why they were watching me so closely. There must be something they know that I don't. I lower myself onto my stomach and then roll onto my back. I sit upright with my legs straight and position my hands at my sides slightly behind my butt for support. I try to bring my legs up towards my chest so I can get my feet under me to stand, but only my left leg moves. Why the hell won't my right leg move? Mind over matter, that's all it is. I can do this. A tingling sensation shoots up the right side of my back as I successfully swing my leg around using my right arm to bend it.

"What the hell is going on? And why didn't either of you tell me?" I ask.

"They said there was chance that you would have difficulties walking once you recovered." Tank says.

"They said that it might make it worse if we told you that you couldn't walk before you tried. Sorry," Reika says, kneeling next to me on the floor.

"Okay, so what does this mean for me and how could it have possibly made it worse if you told me? I just fell flat on my face because you didn't tell me!" I say angrily.

"They said a part of it is mental. You try to tell your body what to do after a traumatic event and it might not respond. If you don't know anything is wrong, you try to move as you normally would. But if I would have told you about it, you might have withheld yourself from

walking by not trying as you normally would," Reika says, pleading her case.

I calm down after Reika's explanation.

"So you're telling me, that me being on the floor may be mental?" I ask sarcastically.

Reika nods. "Well, maybe. I guess."

"What it means is that the nanobots haven't finished fixing your nerves yet. Or that they ran out of juice and have already been flushed out of your system," Tank says.

I look at Tank. "And what if they've been flushed from my system before they fixed my nerves?"

"Then we have to get you more nanobots," Tank says.

"Does Megan have more?" I ask.

"No," he replies, looking at the ground.

I let out a chuckle. "So it's either I can't walk because I'm stopping myself or I can't walk until we get our hands on some extremely rare nanobots. That's what you're telling me?"

"Basically," he says.

"Great. Guess I better find a way to will myself into walking correctly."

"I'll go tell the others to give us a few extra minutes," Tank says.

"Others?"

"Yeah. Omni, Cupid, and Lotus are coming with us today," he replies.

"Oh okay," I say.

Tank walks out of the room.

"Let me help you up," Reika says, wrapping her arms around my upper body, hugging me from behind.

"No," I say just before she starts trying to pick me up off of the floor. She stops in place.

"You said that it might be mental right?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says, letting go and kneeling beside me.

"Then I need to do this on my own. You're not always gonna be around to help me," I say as I start leaning onto my left side again.

"I'm not letting you out of my sight ever again," Reika replies in a demanding tone.

I look at her and crack a smile at the remark. I bend my right leg with my right arm and roll all of my weight onto my left side. I slowly stand up using my left arm and leg to support me.

"See. Like you said, it's all in my head," I say, shooting her a sarcastic smile.

"If it's all in your head, take a step forward with your right leg," she shoots back.

"How 'bout I just walk using my left leg first. Easier that way," I say as I take a step towards the clothes with my left leg.

I try to take a step with my right leg, but instead of lifting my leg I have to drag my foot. What the hell is wrong with me?. It doesn't hurt, I just can't lift it. I pound on it a few times with my fist. There's a tingling sensation above my kneecap. I can barely feel the spot where my fist makes contact with my leg. It's numb. I walk the rest of the way to the chair by stepping normally with my left leg and dragging my right foot.

"I can see that it's all in your head. How do you plan on getting up the stairs like that?" Reika asks in an overtly serious, semi-angry tone.

I have no idea how I'm going to get myself dressed and get up the stairs without falling down.

"No big deal. Same way the undead from the books I've read do. They manage to walk around dragging limbs just fine," I say, downplaying the situation as much as I can.

Reika shakes her head, but her demeanor softens a little.

"I'll get dressed and meet you upstairs in a minute," I say.

"How about I wait down here with you until you get dressed, so I can help you get up the stairs."

"You can if you want, but I'll get up the stairs on my own. As I said before, you're not always going to be here," I say, untying the paper-thin gown from my back.

"You might want to look the other way," I say.

"Maybe. Or maybe I want to see you naked," Reika says.

It's not like her to say something like that. Is she trying to make me feel better? I'm not going to play along. Not today. I need to remain cold. I need to ignore anything that might distract me from protecting her. I might as well start now. If I wait until we're outside, she'll notice my change in behavior and figure out what I'm doing.

"Suit yourself," I reply coldly.

I take off the gown and slip on the new shirt rather easily. The trouble comes when I try to get the pants and boxers on. I can't rely on my right leg to keep me up. I'm going to have to sit down and do both legs at the same time. A few moments later, I manage to slide all of my clothing on.

It took me twice as long as normal to get dressed. If something as simple as getting dressed took that long, today is going to be a long day. More importantly, how am I going to protect Reika and Tank if someone attacks? An uneasy feeling creeps through my gut at the thought of not being able to protect them. I can't take losing them too. I have to figure out a way to keep them safe.

"Let's go," I say coldly as I walk slowly towards the stairwell.

"You go first. I'll stay behind just in case you decide you'd rather tumble back down the stairs," Reika says playfully.

I ignore her comment and start up the stairs. One stair at a time. I step up with my left leg and then drag my right to follow. Slowly but surely, I work my way to the top of the stairs and exit the stairwell onto a hardwood floor.

"Go to the right. And then out the front door," Reika says.

I turn to the right, walk a few steps into the hallway, and make another right into the living room. The walls are light brown, complimenting the color of the dark floor. A piano is sitting along the left wall of the room, and along the opposite wall, there is a desk with one of the television screens sitting on top.

"That's a computer, not a television. I'll show you how to use it when we get back. If we have time. I'm sure you'll love it," Reika says, walking past me to open the front door.

I make my way to the door, nearly losing my balance while trying to keep up with Reika.

"Calm down! We're not in a hurry. We don't have to cross the state to look for food remember?" Reika says, mocking my statement from the night before.

I can't help but let out a laugh and shake my head at the comment. She holds the door open for me. I hop out of the house and onto the porch. A brown minivan is parked in the driveway. Tank is standing next to the minivan, holding the rear sliding door open.

"Took ya long enough!" he yells.

I take a breath in. I don't have to be a complete asshole to be cold. After all, he just lost his sister thanks to me.

"Sorry, my leg dragging skills aren't quite on par with my normal walking yet," I say back sarcastically.

I stare inside the van, trying to figure out how the hell I'm going to make it in the vehicle without falling on my face.

"You want a boost?" Tank says, looking at me with an amused grin.

"No, I got this," I say back harshly.

I have no idea how I got this, but there's a first time for everything I guess. My upper body works fine. I'll just brace myself with the door-jambs and lift myself in. Without too much of a struggle I make it through the door. Omni and Lotus are sitting in the rear seats and Cupid is in the driver seat.

"Glad to see you up and about," Cupid says.

"Thanks," I reply, looking for a place to sit.

"Hi sugar!" Lotus says.

"Need any help?" Omni asks.

"Hi guys. No, I think I got it," I say, hopping to the closest seat.

As I sit down, Reika comes in and sits next to me in the first row of seats. Tank jumps in last, sliding the door closed behind him.

"Nice, I get the second row all to myself!" he says before he sprawls out across the second row seats.

Tank is trying to act happy, but Natalie's death is written all over his face. When he sits down, he looks out the window trying to cover it up. A pang of guilt shoots through me. I'm the reason he lost his sister, yet he's still by my side. Acting as if nothing happened.

"It should take us about ten minutes to get there. I'ma crank up this music since it's not something we get to listen to on the outside," Cupid says from the driver seat.

Music? I've read about it, but I've never really heard any. Suddenly my ears fill with sound. A person yelling or, singing, along with the instruments. As we take off down the street, the music hits my emotions head on. It's as if the sounds hitting my ears align perfectly with the anguish in my gut.

I feel sadness creeping across my face and stare out the window opposite of Reika. I grit my teeth and try to get angry at the situation to fight off the sadness. I have to be cold. I can't show emotion! They're expecting me to be a leader. I feel Reika's hand grab mine. I look down to see that I inadvertently balled both of my hands into fists while trying to keep everything in.

I look up at her to see that she has a sad smile on her face. Her eyes give away her concern. The song changes. I manage to regain composure and unball my fists. She removes her hand and looks out the window, letting me return to my thoughts. Reika. I wonder what she thinks about all I've dragged her into.

I told Kai I would look after her when he was gone. Some job I've done with that. She's trapped in a compound full of untrustworthy people who would kill her if they found out she was from the outside. Regardless of the situation I've got us into, she keeps trying to offer me support. I put us all in this predicament and she still seems to worry about me more than her own safety. I have to protect her at all costs.

"Here we are," Cupid says, turning down the music and parking the van.

We exit the van with Tank leading the way. My heart beats wildly at the thought of encountering more people from the compound. How am I going to fight back if we get attacked again? I completely ignore everyone and scan the parking lot looking for threats.

"Hey, Nineteen!" Tank yells.

I nearly jump at the sound of his voice. "Yeah?"

"Entrance is that way. You ready?" he says, pointing the opposite direction from where I was looking.

"Yeah."

Reika stays by my side, walking slowly. Everyone else in the group walks ahead of us. I try to walk faster to keep up with them, but it's not possible with my bum leg.

"At least you're not dragging it anymore," Reika says.

I look down to see that I was inadvertently lifting my right leg to walk rather than dragging it along the ground. That's good. It's still not going to be of much help if someone attacks us.

"Yeah. I didn't even notice I was lifting it," I reply.

"I swear, I don't know anything!" A man's voice shoots into my ears.

My heart starts racing again. I scan the parking lot where I think the noise came from.

"Look, ya little shit. I know where yer from. Now spill it!"

My eyes catch the officer who harassed us yelling at a man on the other side of the parking lot. I stop in place watching the argument unfold. Anger flushes through me as I flashback to the day we were stopped by him.

"I don't know," the man insists as the officer pulls some type of black club from his side.

"You got one more chance!" the officer shouts.

"I swear! I don't know anything," the man pleads.

"Fine, I'll beat it outta ya!" the officer says, striking the man in the face with the club.

"Come on, it's not our business. Let's go," Reika says, breaking my focus on the situation.

"Yeah, you're right," I say and then start shuffling forward.

"Hey! You know we can't walk that fast," Reika shouts at the others as they have walked quite a distance ahead of us.

"Assholes!" Reika says only loud enough for me to hear.

I let out a laugh. I don't know how I'm going to maintain my act of being cold with Reika acting like this.

"It's okay," I say.

"The big guy isn't the slowest of the bunch anymore, huh!" Tank yells back at us while stopping to wait.

I laugh again shaking my head.

"Sorry, honey. Forgot you're all busted up," Lotus shouts.

The entire group stops and waits for us to reach them.

"Sorry," Omni says as we reach the group.

"It's no big deal. You guys can go on ahead if you want. I've never been here so I might as well sight see while you take care of business," I say as we start walking again.

Cupid laughs. "Site seeing, huh! That sounds more like something to do at the other market. This market will remind you of the arena," Cupid says.

"Other market?" I ask.

"Yeah, there are two markets. Even inside this place there's segregation. This market is for the lower class people. The one for the rich is downtown. The people in this neighborhood aren't allowed to shop there," Cupid explains.

"That's ridiculous! They're all well off in here! I might have to go 'sightsee' and slap some sense into the people over there," I say.

Omni and Cupid both start laughing at my remark.

"You should! We'll go with you to help," Omni says.

"We were kicked out earlier this week," Cupid adds.

"We were followed the entire time we were there. That is until a policeman finally walked up and told us that we had to buy something or leave," Omni says, shaking his head.

The aroma of food fills my nose as we reach the front of the market. On both sides of a street, there are booths with blue and white tent like roofs. The street is filled with people walking to and from each booth with their hands full of items.

On either side of the street, in front of the first booths, there are individuals wearing all black. There is one person on each corner, staring at us as we approach the shops. The woman on the left side of the street begins walking towards us and meets us in the middle of the street. She has a black bandana neatly folded hanging out of her front right pocket.

"How are you guys today?" she asks as she walks up, eyeing each one of us.

"Good and you?" Cupid replies.

"I'm great. Good luck finding what you need—" she says, stopping her sentence abruptly when her eyes hit my face.

She continues past us and walks to the other side of the street toward the other individual dressed in black.

"That was odd. They usually don't stop to say anything to us," Omni says.

"I think they're looking for someone. She took the time to stop and examine each of our faces," Cupid says.

"And I was just getting comfortable coming here. Guess we get to watch our backs as usual," Tank says.

I don't know why you would ever stop watching your back. These people are our enemies—every last one of them. Everyone in this place would turn us in if they knew who we were or where we were from.

"I'm sure it has nothing to do with us," I say, trying to hide my uneasiness.

Reika shoots me a glance as if she knows I'm up to something. She stares at me, examining my reaction. I ignore her and try to act nonchalant about what I said. If she isn't paranoid about the people in this place, it's better for her to stay that way. If I perpetuate the idea that there isn't a threat, maybe she'll be able to enjoy herself. Perhaps the false safety of this place will allow her to relax for the time being.

As we pass the first set of booths, I glance back at the two individuals in black. Both of them have their eyes trained on us as we walk into the market. Something's not right. They shouldn't be this focused on us. That lady stopped what she was saying when she saw my face. I wonder if she recognized me from the shootout with the soldiers? From what Tank said, it was broadcasted all over the compound.

We walk past a few more booths weaving through the crowd of people.

"Mmm, right there!" Lotus says, pointing at a shop that has a sign reading turkey legs.

"Turkey legs?" Tank says with a disgusted look on his face.

"Yeah! They're delicious, you gotta try one!" she continues.

"We should go grab what we came to get and then come back to get some! I love turkey legs!" Cupid says.

"Okay... whatever you say," Tank says, sticking his tongue out at Reika and me as if he was gagging.

"Why does Megan want this stuff anyway? This list she gave us is all over the place," Omni says, staring at a sheet of paper.

"Bro-co-li. What the hell is a broccoli?" Omni asks.

Tank starts laughing. "That's a vegetable."

"Oh ha, okay. So it's a good bet that some of this other stuff I haven't heard of is food too," Omni says.

"Probably. If I remember right, the first intersection is where most of the vegetables are sold. Let's head there?" Cupid asks.

"Sounds like a plan!" Omni says.

"It's going to take us forever to get there with hop-along," Tank says, looking at me.

"Leave hop-along alone," Lotus says.

"He's right. You guys should go on ahead. Is there anything closer that I can get while you guys grab that stuff?" I ask, ignoring Tank's joke.

"Umm. Let's see here," Omni says, scanning the list.

"Oh, here we go. She wants us to grab nine pork chops. There's a booth just up ahead on the left side that sells 'em," Omni continues.

Cupid walks up to me and hands me a flimsy rectangular sheet of red paper.

"What's this for?" I ask.

"It's currency—how they trade. You'll need it to buy the pork chops," Cupid replies.

Oh, it's money! I've read about this. This is how people traded before the collapse. I examine the piece of paper. One side has a holographic picture of a husky looking man with the word 'America'. The other side has a picture of the black wall that surrounds the compound. The ink on the paper changes colors between purple and red in the sun light.

"That should be more than enough for the pork chops," Cupid says, awaiting a response from me.

"Money, gotcha. I'll head towards that intersection you guys are talking about after I get the pork chops," I say.

"Sounds good," Cupid says.

"I'll stay with him," Reika says.

"Alright, I'm gonna go explore with them," Tank says.

"Later," Lotus says as they start walking further into the market.

"You can go with them too if you want. I'll be fine," I say to Reika as I start walking in the direction of the pork chop booth.

"I'm good. I'd rather be with you," she replies.

"You know, you don't have to watch my back here. It seems to be pretty safe."

Just as the word 'safe' leaves my mouth, I notice a group in black clothing behind one of the booths. The four individuals are eyeing Reika and I as we walk.

"I know, I'd just rather be with you than them," Reika says while I stare at the group in black.

"What are you looking at?" Reika asks, turning her head to look the same way as me.

"Nothing. Come on," I say, grabbing her arm and pulling her so she doesn't see the group watching us.

"What was it? I know you jerked me for a reason. Who's watching us?" Reika starts rattling off questions.

Shit! I have no guns with me. I didn't even think to try and find them before we left Megan's.

"I'm not sure yet. You have a pistol I can carry?" I ask.

"No. We haven't been carrying them outside the house."

"What? Why not?" I ask as anxiety spreads through my gut. I don't have a way to protect her.

"I guess it's illegal to have them. Megan said the penalty for being caught with one is execution."

"What? They just kill you on the spot?" I ask shocked.

"Basically. She said they passed the law right after entering the compound. They didn't want the possibility of a rebellion within the compound walls. The only ones allowed to carry guns are police or military," Reika explains.

"Wow. People can't carry guns to kill us even if they wanted to, so we should be fine," I say and smile, trying not to worry her.

"That doesn't stop people from having them. Just makes it risky to keep them on you. And you never answered my question!" she says.

"I think I'm just a little paranoid after everything that has happened. I'm probably just imagining things. So don't worry about it, it was nothing," I say as convincingly as possible, knowing that it's not just paranoia.

"Hey stop! LET GO OF ME!" a little girl starts screaming at one of the nearby booth owners.

"Empty your pockets. I saw what you did!" an elderly booth owner shouts back.

"I didn't do anything! Let me go!" the little girl pleads.

"Look, I saw you pocket it! I won't turn you in, I just want my merchandise back," the old man says.

"I'm sorry. I was hungry. I haven't ate today," the little girl replies, beginning to cry. She takes two sticks of meat out of her pockets and hands them to the booth owner.

"It's okay." The owner takes one of the sticks from her. "You know what the penalty for stealing is right?" the booth owner says sharply.

"Yes," the little girl responds, sniffing.

"Well, tell me!" he says.

"It—it's—they take one of your hands," the girl stammers.

They take one of your hands for stealing? Even if you're a kid? That's ridiculous! I stop walking to watch the exchange.

"That's right. They chop off one of your hands!. You don't want to steal. I'll tell ya what. If you promise to come to my booth tomorrow and work for me, I'll give you this kabob today free of charge."

The little girl stops crying and her eyes brighten.

"And tomorrow when you come in, we'll discuss how much food you will get each day you work for me. Deal?"

"Yes sir. Thank you sir!"

"So, it's a deal? If it's a deal then you have to shake my hand," the man says, extending his hand.

"Deal," she says, reaching out to shake hands.

These are supposed to be our enemies. They're supposed to be heartless. They're supposed to be rich bastards who don't have the ability to care for others. But that old man didn't turn in the girl. He even gave her free food.

"They really cut your hand off if you steal anything?" I ask Reika as I start walking again.

"Yeah. They have some really crazy laws. Megan said most people agreed to them when they first entered the compound."

"I bet they wish they hadn't done that now that they're at the bottom of the barrel," I say.

"Yeah, no kidding," Reika replies.

We reach the booth that says 'pork chops' and stand in line. To the right of the pork chop booth, there is an empty booth that has a banner above it that reads 'vaccines'.

"What's with the empty booth?" I ask Reika.

"From my understanding the military comes in and administers vaccines from time to time,"

"Vaccines for what?"

"I'm not sure, but she said that there are people in here who have gotten deathly sick with some illness. She claimed that it's something that has been spreading outside of the compound for a long time."

"And it's not Z related?" I ask.

"No, she didn't even know what Z was when I asked about it."

"That's strange."

"Yeah, I thought it was weird and even weirder that she'd never heard of Z."

"No way! That guy was awesome! I'm gonna be just like him when I grow up!" a little boy shouts, running past us towards two other boys.

"He was a traitor! He went against our soldiers! Are you a traitor?" one of the other two boys yells back at him.

"He's a hero, just like I'm going to be one day. He stood between the soldiers and that girl. My mom said he must've loved her to do such a foolish thing."

"Traitor! You're such a momma's boy. That's why you're a traitor, 'cuz you have no dad!"

"Shut up!" the boy yells at the other two and starts chasing them down the street.

"Looks like you're a hero to the kids," Reika says.

"That couldn't have been about me,"

"I'm pretty sure it was. The last time we were here, I talked to a booth owner who said that it was one of the bravest things she'd seen. She said that no one stands up for each other anymore. That they're all too scared of the consequences so they back down even when they're right," Reika continues.

Hero, huh? If they knew I was the reason Natalie was in that position in the first place, I wouldn't be viewed as a hero.

"Sir, can I help you?" one of the ladies running the booth asks me.

"Yeah. I need to get nine pork chops please," I say.

"Cooked or uncooked?"

I look at Reika, having no idea if we were supposed to get them cooked here or not.

"Uncooked," Reika answers the woman.

"Okay. Give me a minute and I'll get that all packaged up for you," the lady behind the booth says.

The woman returns with a bag full of individually wrapped pork chops. We pay her, get our change, and walk to the middle of the street.

"So, I guess we should make our way towards the intersection they were talking about, huh?" I ask.

"Yeah, it isn't too far," Reika says.

We start working our way through the crowd of people. As we walk, I notice that behind the booths, there are people in black walking along with us. They must be following me. I can't put up a fight in this condition. I have to find a way to get Reika to split from me so they only catch me.

"I'm assuming this is the intersection?" I ask as we approach the corner of the street.

"Yep," Reika responds.

"I don't see them anywhere. Maybe you should go on u—"

My sentence is cut short when I see two groups of three walking towards our position on either side of the street ahead of us. I force out the rest of the sentence, hoping Reika didn't see them.

"Sorry. Maybe, you should go on up ahead to see if you can find the others," I say, shaking my head.

"Yeah right. And leave you alone with all those Death's Disciples walking this way?" Reika says angrily.

"Yeah, that was the plan. Not falling for it, huh?" I say jokingly.

The intersection grows quiet as every person standing between us and the Death's Disciples clear out. I stop in the middle of the intersection and turn around, looking to see if we can make a run for it.

"Last chance to go look for the others," I say.

"Not happening. Besides, swords aren't illegal remember?" Reika says, smiling.

She still has her sword on her! That's good, at least she can defend herself.

"You Nineteen?" asks one of the Death's Disciples while approaching me.

"Yeah, what do you want?" I ask coldly.

"We're gonna need you to come with us," another says.

"You just need me?" I ask.

"Yeah, just you."

"I'll go if you let her walk," I say in response.

"No way, I'm not leaving you!" Reika says angrily.

"That's fine. We weren't told to look for her," he says.

"Reika, look at me!" I turn to her.

"I'm not leaving. They'll have to take us both," Reika says, staring into my eyes angrily.

"Look, they're after me. I don't know what they want, but this is my fight, not yours."

"Your fight is my fight! You know that just as well as I do," she says.

An image of Natalie's dead body on the ground flashes through my head. "I'm not letting my decisions kill another person I care about. I never want to experience that pain again. Avenge me later if you feel it necessary, but this is an impossible situation so you need to leave, NOW!" I yell as emotions take control of me.

She clenches her jaw as she stares into my eyes. Anger and worry emanates from her face. She has to know what I said was true.

"FINE! If you die, I'll never forgive you," she says, storming off.

At least you'll still be alive. That's all that matters.

"Where to?" I ask.

"Follow us," a Death's Disciple to the right of me says, leading the way with his group.

The other two groups engulf me, preventing any chance of escape while we walk.

Usually I would be looking for a way to escape. But for some reason I don't care. It doesn't bother me that I might die.

If it were Reika or Tank, I would be scrambling to figure out a way to save them. Since the military chase was broadcast to the whole compound, my presence only puts them in danger. If I die, they will have a better chance to get out of here alive.

We stop walking in front of a black car with blacked out windows.

"We're gonna need you to wear this," one of the Disciples says, pulling out a blindfold.

He slips the blindfold over my head and then guides me into the backseat of the car. I get moved to the middle of the backseat and feel two other people get in on either side of me. The doors close, the car starts, and I can feel a slight jerk as we pull away.

"We thought you were dead. How did you survive?" a woman asks.

"I got lucky," I say back coldly.

I hear a few snickers around me.

"We can see that. Who treated you?" the woman continues.

"A stranger," I reply.

"Well, that stranger did a good job of keeping you alive. He didn't fix you. You can barely walk," she says.

"Yeah, I noticed," I reply sarcastically.

I hear muffled laughter from both sides of me.

"Did they tell you why you couldn't walk?" she asks.

Why is this lady so curious about my health? Should I tell her the truth or should I make something up? I guess it really doesn't matter what I say, I'll be dead soon enough.

"Cuz I got shot?" I say.

"Ya don't say," she replies sarcastically.

"Might be mental, might be nerve damage," I say.

"You're actually telling me the truth?" the woman says with a hint of curiosity in her voice.

"You must not be very afraid of us. Or maybe you don't care about your life?" she says.

"How do you know that was the truth? For all you know I can walk fine and I'm just waiting for the opportunity to attack," I say.

"A threat? Ha, you're a bold one! Now I understand why he likes you!" she says energetically.

I feel the car stop and hear one of the doors open.

"Who's 'he'?" I ask.

"You'll find out soon enough," the woman says as one of the men next to me grabs my arm and pulls me out of the car. We walk up an incline and then two stairs before I hear a door open.

"The package has arrived," a man shouts inside the structure we enter.

We take a few steps inside the building before I hear a familiar voice.

"The blindfold isn't necessary. You can take it off."

"I saw your television debut! It was very impressive," the familiar voice continues as my blindfold is taken off.

This is the guy we stopped that other gang from jumping.

I think he said his name was... "Kisin?" I ask.

"That's right! Sorry about the whole blind folding you and stalking you at the market thing. I have a lot of enemies and there tend to be prying eyes at the market. My people just did what was standard practice for us."

"What do you want with me?" I ask.

"Figured that after your altercation with the military, you might be in need of some help. And I figured that now's probably the best time for me to repay you for helping me out."

"So, you're telling me you brought me here to help?" I say sarcastically.

He laughs. "Yeah, I know, forcing you into a car blindfolded isn't the most flattering way of offering help. But I had to get you here somehow

and, yeah, that's why you're here. I see you're still limping quite a bit from the shooting. What do ya say I pay you back by fixing that?"

Is this guy serious? There's no way he's doing this out of good will, he has to be after something. No one in this place would do anything without an ulterior motive.

I shake my head and let out chuckle. "Yeah, the transportation here was a little odd. But I guess you got my attention."

"What did they say was wrong exactly?"

This must be why the woman in the car kept asking me about my health, she was trying to provide Kisin with intel about my situation.

"They told me I might have residual nerve damage."

"So in other words, you need more nanobots to fix yourself up?"

"Basically."

"I'm pretty sure I can arrange something. After all, you might have saved my life that day," he says.

"It didn't look that serious. I'm sure you would have been fine if we hadn't shown up."

A huge smile crosses his face and he shakes his head back and forth. "That's another reason to I like you, you're brutally honest. I'm offering to help you because you saved my life and you still choose to share what you think. Not many people have enough balls to use that type of honesty. Nor do many people have the type of bravery I saw when you went up against the military."

"And who exactly are you?"

"You're definitely from outside the wall if you haven't figured it out. And if you're from the outside, it really doesn't matter who I am. All you need to know is that I'm in control of everything the Deaths Disciples do.

"As for the ass whooping you're questioning, the DDs have a deep rivalry with those East Siders. If they figured out who I was, I would have been dead. And if they figure out that you're working with me, they'll come after you," he explains.

"I see. Why such a rivalry?" I ask, ignoring his assumption that I'm from outside the wall.

"We have our reasons, but that's not what's important. What's important is paying you back, so let's cut to the chase. I'm sure you want to walk normal again and I happen to have some nanobots at my disposal. They're yours on one condition."

There it is, one condition.

"What's that?"

"You do me one more favor. I know, you're thinking, 'if I owe you, then why should you do another favor for me?' Well, if you do this for me, you'll get your nanobots and I'll owe you another favor. And I'm a very powerful ally to have."

"What kind of favor?"

"Sometime tomorrow, I need you to head downtown to the rich market and pick up a package. You bring it back here to me and that's it," he concludes.

That seems too easy. He has to be up to something.

"Let me get this right. You want me to get a package for you and you're going to pay me by giving me nanobots? But then, because I'm doing this for you, you will owe me another favor? So then to collect my new favor, are you gonna ask me to do something else? Is that how this works?" I ask.

Kisin starts laughing. "Not quite. I'm not trying to employ you, if that's what you're asking. Although, that would be a smart way to do so.

I'm giving you the nanobots now. It's up to you to go do the pickup if you want. You can always decline, and if you decide to, fine. That's up to you, no hard feelings."

"Why are you asking me and not one of your lackeys?"

"No one will recognize you. You're dead, remember? And if they did, they'd never connect you to me. Not to mention the peace of mind I gain from knowing that you have no need to steal the package."

What is he sending me to pick up?

"Hmm. Sounds fair I guess. I'll think about it."

Kisin laughs at my reply and two men enter the room. One of the men is carrying a large needle with a blue glowing substance in it.

"You're too much! I'll have Edgar here provide you with a cell phone. That way you can call me in the morning for further instructions. And since the nanobots have arrived, I'll be making my exit," he says, smiling as he grabs a black duffle bag from the floor and heads out the back door.

The two men approach me.

"Here's your cell. You can call him tomorrow morning by saying his name backwards," the smaller of the two men says, handing me a small disk shaped object that has tiny holes on one side.

As I take the object from him, I stare at it, confused on how I'm going to get in touch with Kisin by using it. It fits in the palm of my hand and has a very small button on the side opposite of the holes.

"Something wrong?" Edgar asks as I stare at the foreign device.

"No, this will do," I say, trying to pretend that I know what the object is.

"As for your nanobots... You're gonna need to lift up your shirt so I can give you this shot near your spine. The closer they are to the dam-

aged area, the faster they'll find and fix the problem," the other says, towering over me with the needle in his hand.

"Sure," I say, looking at the size of the needle and its glowing contents.

"You might want to sit down. This is going to hurt quite a bit," he continues.

"Okay," I say, walking towards the closest chair.

Do I really want this man to inject me with that crap? For all I know, it could be some type of poison. I have no idea what the hell nanobots even look like. I can't protect Reika and Tank if I'm dead. Then again, they might be better off without me. If this kills me, so be it. At least it'll take some heat off of them.

I sit on the chair, pulling my shirt half way up my back so the man can administer the shot.

"Ready?" he says.

"Go for it," I say nonchalantly.

I feel an intense pressure as if I was just punched in the back by the large man. A burning sensation spreads throughout my lower back and down my right side.

"Done. It'll probably hurt like hell for the next few hours, but soon enough you'll be as good as new. The nanobots I gave you are the newest prototype, direct from the military. They'll fix every little thing that's ever been wrong with your body."

Yeah or I'll be dead.

"Okay. What now?" I say.

"There's a car waiting for you outside. They'll take you wherever you need to go. Oh, and Kisin says to call him at seven a.m. to let him know if you're going to accept the job," Edgar says.

NINETEEN

“Alright, thanks,” I say and then walk out the front door of the house.

ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Four people wearing black stand around a large black sedan talking. I wonder if that's the car I was brought here in.

"Ready to go so soon?" the woman of the group takes a step towards me and asks.

Yeah, that has to be the same car. That's the woman's voice from the ride here.

"Yeah, let's get out of here," I say.

"Where to?" a short bald man standing near the driver's door asks.

I wonder if my group is looking for me? I guess if I can't find them, I'll have to find my way back to Megan's.

"Back to the market."

"Hop in," the woman says, smiling.

I try to get into the back seat like the first time, but the woman stops me.

"You can take the front this time. Sorry about the blindfold," she says as she opens the front passenger door for me.

"Thanks," I say as I take a seat.

We pull out and drive down a winding road that leads us through the residential district. I have no need or want to speak to any of these people. The less they know about me, the better. I manage to maintain my silence for the entire ride. We pull into the same parking lot where the van was parked when I left with the group this morning. If the van is still in its spot, that'll mean they're here somewhere, looking for me.

The car rocks as we hit some kind of yellow barrier in the street and pain shoots up my back causing me to cringe.

"Sorry, speed bump," the driver says.

They weren't kidding when they said my back was going to hurt for a few hours. I shake off the pain from the jolt and ignore the driver's apology.

"Can you turn onto this row?" I ask as we reach the row that the van was parked in.

"Sure," the driver says.

I scan ahead for the burgundy van and see Reika standing in the middle of the street behind it.

"Isn't that your friend from earlier?" the woman asks.

"Yeah, can you let me out by her?" I say.

"Yep," the driver replies.

We approach Reika and she stares at the car. As we get closer, she recognizes me and then puts her hand behind her head. She must be getting ready to pull her sword to attack. I better hop out and let her know everything's okay before she does. Before the car comes to a complete stop, I open the door and hop out.

"Thanks," I say into the car as my feet hit the pavement.

"It's okay," I shout at Reika.

The car drives off as I walk to Reika.

"We've been looking for you everywhere! What the hell happened?" Reika yells at me angrily.

"It's a long story, but I'm fine," I say.

She takes a breath to calm herself. "We have to go get the others. You can tell me what happened on the way."

"Where are they?" I ask.

"Still scouring the market looking for you," she replies.

"Alright. Let's go," I say and we start walking back into the market.

"You're walking better, not dragging your foot as much," Reika says, examining my walk.

Another sharp pain shoots through my back where the needle was inserted. I cringe but quickly shake it off. "Yeah, there's a reason why..."

I tell the story of how I met Kisin and what he wanted with me as we make our way into the Market. My back begins tightening up and a much stronger pain starts pulsing through it. No longer confined to the injection spot, the soreness spreads over my entire lower back and the right side of my body.

"You're sure it was nanobots he gave you?" she asks at the end of my explanation.

"Yeah, fairly sure. I can walk better can't I?" I say.

"Yeah, but maybe that's from the first shot. Maybe they're still in you," Reika replies.

"Maybe or maybe not. I guess we'll find out soon enough." I say, shirking her comment off as unimportant.

"There's Tank," I say, pointing.

He is standing next to one of the booths scanning the market. He spots us and meets us half way.

"You okay?" Tank asks.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'll fill you in later. Let's worry about finding everyone and getting out of here," I say.

"Okay," Tank says quickly.

"Or we could concentrate on finding them and I'll tell him the story as we walk," Reika says.

"Or that," I reply.

We walk back to the intersection where I was accosted as Reika tells the story to Tank. Passing the middle of the intersection, my eye catches a booth that is selling a game that is being played on television screens. Just as I start walking towards the booth in awe, I hear Cupid's voice.

"Nineteen!"

"What the hell happened?" Omni asks as he, Lotus, and Cupid approach.

"It's a long story. Tank and Reika can explain on the way back, but for now let's get outta here."

As we make our way back to the van, Reika and Tank fill the others in on what happened. Aside from having to respond to a few remarks about me walking better, I keep quiet. We arrive at the van, pile inside, and start our drive back to Megan's.

"Why are you so quiet?" Reika whispers so that only I can hear her over the music.

"Just thinking, I'm fine," I reply.

I have to decide whether or not to work with this Kisin character. He seems to be anti-government and anti-military, so he could prove to be a decent ally. Still, the question remains as to what he's trying to accomplish by helping someone from outside the wall. What would he have to gain by helping me? I guess it doesn't much matter at this point, I'm going to accept the offer either way. It's the only play I have.

The van pulls into the driveway and Tank slides the door open, motioning for us to exit. Despite the soreness in my back, my ability to walk seems to be back to normal. Those military nanobots they gave me worked fast. I walk up the stairs and into the house. Upon entry, the aroma of meat cooking fills my nostrils. My stomach growls. I don't remember the last time I ate.

"I bet you're hungry! You've been fed through an IV all week," Reika says, smiling at me.

"Megan told us that if we grabbed these supplies for her, she'd make us lunch," Omni says.

"Seeing as how we have nothing better to do, it seemed like a win win for us," Cupid says.

We make our way through the living room, past the hallway that leads to the basement, and into a large dining room. In the center of the room is a large glass table surrounded with black chairs. There is a couch against one wall and a small TV against another. To the right of the table is the kitchen with cabinets that are painted to match the walls of the house.

"You made it just in time. The food is almost done," Megan greets us.

"Where do you want us to put all this?" Lotus asks with a hand full of bags.

"You can set it right here on the counter, I'll put it away. The rest of you go ahead and have a seat. I'll be bringing out the food in a few minutes.

I walk around the far side of the table to see a mantel with various frames on the wall. A picture of a little girl and a woman catches my eye and I walk closer to take a look. My heart drops as I realize that the little

girl in nearly every picture on the mantle is Natalie. Maybe Megan has been telling us the truth.

Sadness engulfs me. I'm trying to fight off the tears filling my eyes when Reika startles me by grabbing my hand. I turn to her. She stares into my eyes with a sad smile on her face.

"Come on, let's eat," she says.

The table has been set with food and everyone is sitting around it, waiting for me to join. I sit and try to ignore the piercing eyes that watch me as I do so. Without a saying a word, I grab my fork and poke at the food in front of me. I've completely lost my appetite. What smelled so alluring a minute ago now racks me with guilt. To think that I'm sitting here eating with Natalie's mother but not with Natalie, and that I'm the reason, feels horrible.

Everyone is digging in and thanking Megan for the meal. I sit and stare at the food, clenching my jaw, trying to fight off the wave of emotions within me. Why the hell was she out there with us in the first place? Now is probably a terrible time to ask the question, but I don't care anymore. I just want the truth.

"What happened? How did she end up outside the wall?" I ask, causing the room to go quiet.

"I was waiting for one of you to ask," Megan replies.

"I'm sorry, I know this probably isn't the—" I start but Megan cuts me off before I can finish.

"It's okay, there's no good time for that question. Now will do just fine." She pauses, taking in a deep breath.

"We were out scavenging. Natalie was exploring the area with one of our guards. I shot off into a house by myself." she says, pausing briefly.

"Greg and one of the soldiers started shouting for me from the outside. When I ran out, Greg and two guards ran up to me. They told me we had to leave. I argued with Greg about getting Natalie, but he said that we were out of time. I tried to go after her but one of the guards knocked me out.

"When I awoke, we were in a helicopter on the way back to the compound."

"They left her," I say darkly.

"Wait, did you get attacked?" Tank asks.

"No. But that's what the broadcast claimed."

"Broadcast?" Reika asks.

"A special bulletin. Mr. Gates took his daughter with him to see the outside world. The convoy encountered a strong, unexpected horde of well-armed men. Due to the faulty older technology, the convoy was overrun. Mr. Gates lost his daughter." She says sarcastically.

I exchange confused glances with Tank and Reika.

"A military spokesman came onto the TV and announced that they had launched several unsuccessful recon attempts. He went on to hint that with greater technology, they might have avoided such a catastrophe." She looks down.

"It was staged?" I asked in disbelief.

"Yep. After the broadcast I figured that they would stage a reunion and bring her back to us. I waited for months."

"Wait, why was Natalie left behind? I don't understand," Tank asks.

"The whole thing was staged." she says, with anger permeating her voice.

"The day before we left to scavenge with Natalie, Greg had several Council meetings. Natalie was left behind because of an agreement he and the Council had," Megan concludes.

"What reason could he have to give up his daughter?" Reika asks.

"The fear and focus of the compound was no longer on the outside. The elite needed a way to scare the population into cooperating."

"What does that have to do with Greg?" Tank asks.

"His company inherited all the benefits from the new influx of military funding. With the added money and the military deals, he became the most powerful citizen in the compound."

"That's why he called the military on her. If she resurfaced after all these years telling the truth, it would challenge his position," I say, connecting the dots.

But it still doesn't explain why they were just after her. When we're all from the outside.

"What are you talking about?" Megan asks.

"Huh?" Tank says looking at me confused.

"That's how we ended up on the run. We went to explore and one of the officers noticed the necklace you gave Natalie."

"She still had it?" Megan asks.

"She always had it around her neck," I say, causing Megan to look away.

I look to Tank and continue. "We ended up at her father's mansion. He seemed on edge when he saw her, but invited us in. He claimed he was going to get us drinks. When he came back, he came back without drinks and tried to distract us. That's when the military showed up and we ran.

"Now it makes sense why there was an entire troop of soldiers waiting for us when we hopped that fence. They expected her to run to her mother's even though we had no idea you were here. That bastard set us up!" my anger spikes, causing me to shout at the end of my explanation.

"He set Natalie up to get killed!" I say, trying to calm down.

"It's okay, we'll get our revenge. That's why we're here," Reika says, grabbing my fist.

I take a deep breath in trying to calm myself down. I look at Reika who is normally emotionless. Her face is filled with concern, her eyes nearly tearing up. I look back over to Tank who's staring at the floor. They need me to keep my composure. Every time I lose it and let my emotions get the best of me, it hurts them.

"I'm sorry, I'm gonna go outside and cool down. Thank you for the meal," I say, getting up from my chair.

I walk outside and sit down on the front porch. That fucking bastard! These men sit at the top making decisions about who lives and dies. They deserve to rot! His own daughter. He fed her to the wolves to maintain his power. I have to let the Ninety-nine in so they can tear this place apart.

I hear the front door open and Reika plops down beside me.

"Looks like we both like porches," Reika says.

I have to keep my emotions in check. I stay silent.

"You have to stop blaming yourself. More importantly, you have to stop holding everything in for our sake," Reika says, scolding me.

I shoot her a confused look pretending not to know what she's talking about.

"Yeah, that's right. I picked up on it! You're planning to do something about this place without involving us."

"Look, Reika—" I turn to her, starting to object but she cuts me off.

"I don't care! Listen to me, truly listen,"

"Kai once told me that even leaders need someone to save them. Not because they lose their will or their determination, but because they're human. Dealing with the brunt of everything for everyone takes a toll. Making the decisions that everyone else is too scared to make and then dealing with the consequences, will tear an individual apart.

"He said that it's not the intent of the leader that fades, it's the leaders compass that breaks. Instead of fighting for what he believes, he starts protecting what everyone else believes and fighting only to protect those he loves.

"Kai lectured me. He said that he wasn't a hero because his compass had broken. He said that if he had someone to save him from himself when it broke, he might have still been a hero."

My heart feels as if it is being picked apart and examined by Reika.

"He told me that good men were impossible to find and that heroes with working compasses no longer existed. With one exception. Kai told you to protect me knowing that you were that exception. He told me that one day I would need to step up to the plate and save you from yourself."

My heart drops as Reika explains her intent to fulfill a promise to Kai.

A loud beeping fills the air and is accompanied by a vibration in my right pocket.

"What's that?" Reika asks.

I reach into my right pocket and pull out the small black disk that Kisin's man gave to me.

"I think it's called a cell phone, but I don't know how to use it."

"Put it to your ear with the button facing outward and push the button. Hurry up before it stops ringing," Reika instructs me.

I do as she says and the disk presses firmly into my ear after wrapping itself around the outside of my earlobe. The awkward feeling causes me to flinch.

"Say something!" Reika shouts.

"Uh, hello?" I say.

My ear erupts with the laughter of Kisin. "Well I'm glad to see you figured out the cell phone. Anyway, I'm calling because there's been a slight change of plans. I need to know your answer now."

"Uh, yeah. I'll do it."

"I'm going with you!" Reika yells at me as I reply.

"Great! In that case the drop has changed to four p.m. today. This package is very important to me. I'll be sending you a car to drive and some clothes to wear. I'll also send a diagram of the two exit routes I've set up in case something goes awry. You can't bring your guns to this market. There are detectors that will catch them as soon as you enter. If something does happen, Got it?"

"I—" I try to get a word in.

"Tell him I'm going with you!" Reika says to me again angrily.

"Good. One of my men will be there in about thirty minutes to hand off everything you need. Including an extra set of woman's clothes for whomever it is I hear in the background. Good luck. I'll see you tonight."

"Wait," I say but I am met with a click and then a strange tone.

I push the button on the side of the disc and it unwraps itself from my ear.

"Do you even know where I'm at?" I say out loud sarcastically.

"What?" Reika asks, giving me a strange look.

"What's going on? Am I going?" Reika asks me with a hint of attitude in her voice.

"I guess so. He's bringing us clothes to wear downtown and we're not allowed to have any weapons. We have to be there by four p.m. today."

"Today?" Reika asks surprised.

"Yeah, they're on the way now. They're bringing us a car to take."

"I better go tell the others and let 'em know I'm going with you."

"Okay, I'll bring the clothes in when they get here."

FUCK THE POLICE

Reika's words struck me just as deep as she meant them to. Maybe she was right, maybe my compass is broken. I don't want to lose Tank or her, and the best way to prevent that from happening is to keep them away from whatever I decide to do. The problem is that I still don't know what to do. My indecisiveness seems to be getting worse.

When I woke up from being shot, I still wanted to kill every last person in the compound. Now, I'm not sure what I want. I tried to hate Megan as one of them. I wanted to hate her for losing Natalie despite healing me. I wanted to believe she had an ulterior motive for helping us. But after listening to her explanation, I can't hate her. I don't trust her, but she genuinely seems to have loved Natalie.

If I look past my anger to the reality of the situation, I know better than to think that everyone here needs to die. Half of the people we've met aren't nearly as greedy as we had pegged them to be. Walking through the market and watching the kids play reminded me of the very thing we're trying to attain. Is killing everyone here the only way to attain it? They have more than we do on the outside, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they deserve to die for it.

How do I distinguish who needs to die and who doesn't? Do all the people with those fancy houses need to be executed so the rest of us can prosper? Is it the people downtown who need to die? Everything used to be so clear before we got here. Out there, you just kill whoever comes at you. It's kill or be killed—there's no time to think about it. There's no grey area. I expected the same to be true inside the wall. But so far, people in here couldn't care less that we're from the outside world.

If I went with my gut and decided to kill Natalie's father and some of the others at the top, would it be enough? And how would I take them out? What manner of attack can I use to draw out those who need to die? I'm sorry, Kai. I've failed to become the hero you so wished me to be. I don't know what to do.

A blue car with blacked out windows pulls up and parks in front of the house. That must be Kisin's man with the clothes. I get up from the porch and head down the lawn to meet the man before I realize that it's not Kisin's man, but Fox.

"You're up and moving I see," Fox says, approaching me.

"Yep, been waiting to talk to you about what's going on. Where you been?" I ask.

"There was a tour on the east side of the wall today. They take you through a military checkpoint, show you the inside of the wall, and then explain how the various areas function."

"Are you serious? They just let you in?" I ask.

"Yeah! Apparently they do it once or twice every day. It wasn't free, so I'm guessing the reason they're doing it is to make money."

"That's not a smart way to make money. To let anyone and everyone see the thing responsible for the majority of your defenses," I say, shaking my head.

"Yeah, definitely not. I found at least three places we can plant explosives that would allow for us to get our reinforcements in. The biggest problem now is figuring out how to get the charges past security and on to the inside."

"Well, if our reinforcements come back, at least we'll have a strategy to get them in."

"It's not an if, it's a when. We're the ones responsible for letting them know when to attack. I've been in contact with Estabon every day. He relays what I say to the rest of the Ninety-nine. They're just waiting for us to give them a green light."

Or so they say. They seemed far too eager to retreat during our first attempt. If we out ourselves in another attack and they don't follow through again we're sitting ducks.

"Okay, that's good to know. What time is it?" I ask, trying to change the subject.

"It's almost three o'clock."

Just as he finishes his sentence, two black cars pull up in front of the house. One pulls into the driveway and the other pulls behind Fox's car by the sidewalk.

"That's the start to my plan. Wish me luck."

Fox looks at me with a confused expression.

"Good luck, I guess," he says as I leave him to greet Kisin's men on the driveway.

Before I can get a word out, a woman hops out of the car and throws me a pair of car keys. Without saying a thing, she walks down the driveway, hops in the other car, and pulls away.

Okay, that was weird. I guess our clothes must be in the car. I open the driver's door and inside on the grey passenger seat is a neatly folded

pair of clothes. There is a white shirt, a bright blue dress, and a bright blue pair of pants. The colors are so bright they nearly hurt my eyes to look at. I grab the stack of clothing and head inside to go find Reika.

Why would he give us such bright clothing if we're trying to fit in?

"Looks like you guys are headed downtown," Cupid says as I enter the dining room.

I look up hesitant to respond. Did Reika tell him that, or is there something about me that says downtown?

"The bright colored clothes gave it away," he continues.

"Everyone who has money wears that type of clothing. Certain colors are more expensive to attain than others. Businessmen even wear bright colored suits. It's strange if you ask me," Fox adds to the conversation.

"Yeah, we're headed downtown. And that's good to know, I was wondering why he gave us such bright clothing." I reply.

Fox and Cupid both laugh.

I hand Reika her dress and motion towards the hallway. "I'll see you guys later. We need to be downtown by four," I say, shooting Reika a glance to hurry as I head out of the room.

I walk downstairs to the basement to change. While changing, a folded-up map falls out of my pile of clothing. On one side of the map there is a crudely drawn diagram of streets and directions on how to get from Megan's to the market. On the other side is a blown up diagram of the market.

Two distinct sets of X's mark Kisin's planned escape routes. Along each route there is an X that is entitled 'Change of clothes and weapons' and then a second X that is entitled 'Getaway car'. This package is so important to Kisin that he's set up multiple escape routes. What does he have us picking up?

I walk back up the stairs with only a tinge of soreness in my back. The nanobots they gave me seem to have completely healed me. If something goes wrong, I might actually be able to get away in time. Maybe that's why he gave me the nanobots ahead of time. He wants me to be able to get away with his package.

I meet Reika at the front door. We head to the car.

"You're gonna drive?" she asks with an amused look on her face.

"I did it before," I say.

"Yeah, well, you're still busted up and I've had a little more practice driving, so maybe you should give me the keys."

I hand Reika the keys, acknowledging that she knows more about driving than me.

"Yeah, there's specific markers in the streets that you're supposed to follow here. I guess officers can stop you if you don't drive a certain way."

"Great. Another way for officers to spot us as outsiders," I say as we pull out.

A few blocks past the inner wall and about fifteen minutes from the time we left, we're downtown next to an enormous white pickup truck trying to park.

"Okay, it looks like we have about ten minutes before we have to be at the drop point. I'm thinking that's about perfect. It'll probably take us that long to find our way there," I say.

We get out and head towards a large red overhead sign that reads the "Downtown Shop Around Market". I feel awkward wearing bright blue pants. But Reika looks stunning in her blue dress. I guess it doesn't matter how ridiculous I look when I have her by my side.

We walk under the huge overhead sign and I look around, scanning for metal detectors. Kisin said that they screen for weapons, but I don't see any sign of security. At the entrance, we walk through flat black pylons with lights on top. I wonder if those pylons screen for weapons? Weird. Doesn't matter. It's too late to go back and get our weapons anyway.

There is a huge water fountain with a white dolphin spraying a mist into the air. Behind the fountain is a small, rectangular body of clear blue water stretching out the length of the market.

"I guess everyone does dress like this," I say to Reika as people walk by us dressed in extraordinarily bright colors.

Bright yellow, bright green, bright red. There is not a single person dressed in normal colored clothing.

"No kidding! The map said that the drop person is upstairs, right?" Reika asks.

"Yeah, let's find a stairwell," I say, scanning the marketplace.

We walk to the first stairwell we see but as we approach it, I realize that it isn't a normal stairwell.

"The stairs are moving?" I say, staring at the shining metal stairs as they come out of the floor and rise upward.

"Yeah, weird," Reika replies.

I carefully step onto the moving stairwell with Reika following my lead.

"It's just an escalator," a teenage boy says, standing behind us.

"Yeah, I know," I say, snapping back at the kid while trying to fit into our surroundings.

As we step off of the escalator onto the second floor, we are greeted by a three dimensional image of a person advertising glasses. We walk

around the image. The teenager who was behind us scoffs and walks through it. That's amazing—a real life hologram! I catch myself staring at the hologram and remember that someone will notice us if we act strange. Everyone is walking from store to store as if they were in a hurry.

"Let's speed up," I whisper to Reika.

"Okay," she says.

We walk to the opposite end of the market, stopping near the entrance of a store labeled 'Giros Medical Surplus'.

"This is the spot. He should be here any minute," I say to Reika, scanning our surroundings for threats.

As I turn to look at the walkway we just came down, an officer brushes past me, nudging me out of the way. My heart jumps and my senses heighten as I recognize the officer. I watch him walk into the medical store before turning to Reika.

"That's the officer that harassed the hell outta us when Logan, Natalie, and I went to explore. Something's not right," I whisper to Reika, looking around paranoid.

"Hopefully he didn't recognize you," she replies.

"I didn't give him a reason to," I say as Reika points at something.

I turn just in time to see a figure wearing a bright orange hoodie walk up to us.

"You friends of Kisin?" he asks in a deep gargled voice as he reaches us.

"Yeah," I reply.

"Here's your care package. Don't open it until you're outside," he says, handing me a black and white, rectangular box with strange wording on the top.

I try to thank the man, but before I can he turns and walks away as fast as he can.

I look down at the feather-light box. It appears to be made of cardboard. I wonder what's inside.

"Those shoes are badass brotha!" a teenager says to us, pointing at the box and then at his shoes before walking away.

"What the hell was that about?" I look at Reika.

"The package he gave you is a shoe box," she says, smiling.

"Oh. Okay, let's get outta here," I say.

"Yeah, let's go," Reika says.

As I take a step towards Reika, a loud scream from the medical supply store fills my ears. I look back to see the officer dragging a small child out of the store by his wrists. The officer stumbles with the crying child and the child hits the floor hard. When he hits the floor, a memory of the child flashes through my head. He's the little boy who was fighting with those kids about me being a hero at the market. Why is he in this market? I freeze in place, watching the scene unfold.

In between his tears, the boy pleads with the officer, "My mom's sick! I just wanted to help my mom! Pleeease sir!"

Those other kids made fun of him for not having a father. If his mother is sick, then who's left to take care of him? The pit of my stomach fills with sorrow for the young boy. The memory of being lost and alone as a child myself flashes to mind.

"You should have thought about that before you tried to steal those meds!" The officer yanks the boy to his feet by one arm.

Anger rushes through me as I watch how the officer treats the boy. This asshole picks on everyone, even little kids! I get the sudden urge to crack the lid of the shoebox to see what's inside. I lift the lid just enough

to see that the box is filled with medical supplies. Even someone like Kisin is struggling to get meds. What the hell is going on?

"Now get up. We're gonna go cut your little hand off! And if ya keep fighting me, I'ma cut 'em both off! Or how about I shoot you in yer little kneecap!" the officer taunts the kid, unbuttoning the gun holster on his hip.

All day I've been ignoring the things happening to people in here because they are our enemies. I have no reason to feel remorse for them. They condemned us to stay on the outside and starve. They're the reason Natalie is no longer alive. But this is a child. He knows nothing of the past crimes these people have committed. He knows no better than what he has been taught. That kid is just trying to survive like I was when I was his age.

I can't stand here ignoring how this child is being treated. I hand Reika the shoebox and give her an intense stare to tip her off that I'm about to make a move. She nods and tucks the shoebox under one of her arms.

The officer handcuffs the boy and starts pulling him violently by the cuffs. As the officer reaches us, I step out in front of him. Before he can respond, I grab his shirt and yank him as hard as I can towards me. Just before our heads collide, I dart to the right of him and grab his gun out of its holster. I take aim at the officer's head as he stumbles past me, dropping the boy to the floor.

The officer turns around, reaching for his missing gun before realizing that I took it.

"You better put that gun down boy. You don't know who you're messin' with!" the officer shouts at me.

"I know exactly who I'm messing with! Now throw me the handcuff key!" I yell back.

He reaches to his waist and tosses the key to the floor by my feet.

"I got it," Reika says, picking up the key.

"I'm not your average policemen." The officer lets loose an evil looking smile and then chuckles.

"When the Council hears about this, they're gonna hunt you down and rip ya ta shreds," he continues.

"The Council? What do you know about them?" I demand.

"Wait a minute, I know you! You're that chicken shit with the phoenix tattoo!" he says mockingly.

I hear a loud yelp to the right of me and instinctively look in the direction. A woman panics at the sight of us and starts running. The officer tries to take advantage of the situation and rushes me. He gets two steps in before I pull the trigger. The gun causes my ears to ring. The bullet hits the officer in the center of his forehead. The officer drops to the floor. Several screams around the market assault my ears.

I turn to the kid who is now sitting on the ground motionless next to Reika, who has just uncuffed him.

"Get up. Let's go," I yell at the boy.

I extend my hand to pick him up from the floor. Reika rushes to the officer's body and starts searching him. I pull the boy to his feet.

"Do you know who I am?" I ask staring into his wide eyes.

"I-I—" he starts to say something but stops.

"You don't need to be afraid. I won't hurt you, but if you want to get out of here, you need to come with us," I say as Reika rushes back to us.

He nods in response as distant sirens erupt into the air.

"We gotta go!" Reika yells.

I look around the market to see that it has emptied out. No security, no officers, and no military. We still have a few minutes.

"Come with me," I say to the boy.

"Might as well grab some supplies," I say to Reika as I enter the medical surplus store with the boy.

When we pass through the entrance of the store, we are met by one of the stores employees. He freezes in place when he sees me with the little boy.

"Get what he wanted!" I yell at the man.

"What?" he says.

"You heard me! Go bag up what this child was trying to take! I want you to grab ten times what this kid was after," I yell at the man.

The worker stands motionlessly as if he didn't hear me.

"Unless you want to die, go NOW!" I yell at him.

We follow him to the back of the store where he grabs a large plastic bag and fills it with medicine.

"Is that what you need?" I look at the boy.

He nods.

"Hand me the bag, then lay on the floor, and you won't get hurt." I say in a calm tone.

The employee hands the bag to me, then ducks below the counter and onto the floor.

"We're gonna have to run now," I say, looking at the boy as we start jogging towards the exit of the store.

As we reach the exit, an officer with his gun trained on us yells, "Freeze!"

We stop a few feet from him. Where the hell did he come from? I still have the gun, but I don't think I can get a shot off before he can.

"Nineteen?" the officer asks.

How does he know my name?

"Yeah?" I reply.

"I thought that was you. You shouldn't have shot him, now they have a reason to come after you publicly."

"What? Who are you?" I ask.

"No matter. You need to get the hell outta here." He says ignoring my question.

"But—" I start to object out of confusion.

"We'll fill you in later. Get outta here," the officer says, lowering his gun.

What the hell is going on? Did he really just lower his gun and tell us to leave? Is this a trick? Should I shoot him while we have the upper hand? Or do I trust him and run? What does he have to gain by letting us go? How does he know my name?

"Nineteen!" Reika yells, trying to provoke a response from me.

I hope this isn't a mistake.

"Thanks," I say to the officer.

"Let's go! Exit route," I shout at Reika.

She nods and we take off running around the curve of the second floor.

"There should be a hallway over here that leads to a back stairway and the room with a change of clothes," I say as we run.

I see officers rushing through the entrance of the market as we turn down the hallway indicated on the map. We run to the end, push open the gray double doors, and take the stairway down. There is a blue sign that reads 'exit' with an arrow pointing to another doorway. We go through the double doors and end up in a small white hallway that leads to a parking garage.

"That's it!" I say, pointing to a white door on the left side of the hallway.

We head through the door and into a small white tile room that is filled with cleaning supplies. I drop the bag of medical supplies to the floor and hand Reika the gun.

"There's the sign. Watch the entrance," I say, pointing to a tile wall that has a black 'DD' written on it.

I walk over to the wall and punch the DD as hard as I can. A small part of the wall collapses. I reach into the hole and feel something taped along the inside of the wall. I use both hands to rip it away from the wall and out from the hole. Out comes a bundle of clothing.

I set the bundle of clothes on the floor and begin to pull it apart. Neatly placed inside a scarlet and black striped suit are two guns. One of the guns is a small black revolver with three fifty seven rounds. The other is a silver nine millimeter. After examining the guns, I unfold the rest of the clothing.

"Shit! There's only one suit."

Maybe this is a good thing. It'll give me a reason to split up from Reika. Then I can act without having to worry about dragging her into another risky situation.

"What?" Reika asks.

"You need to take the boy and go. Here's the map. Go to the getaway car and get outta here. It should be right outside."

"I'm not leaving you." she yells back.

"Look, there's not much of a choice. It's going to take me a minute to change and there's only one pair of clothes. I'm also the person who shot him and more than likely the only person they're going to be looking for.

"Shut up and change already. I'm not going anywhere!" Reika yells back at me.

"Fine!" I shout, stripping as fast as I can.

We shouldn't be too far from the Gates building, but how can I convince Reika to take the kid and leave me behind?

"Let's go," I say, tucking the nine into an extra pocket on the inside of the suit.

"Can you carry this for me?" Reika hands the bag of medical supplies to the boy.

The boy nods and takes the bag from Reika.

We run out of the room and into the garage.

"How do we get downstairs to the car?" Reika asks as we run into the middle of the garage.

"Over there! That has to be a stairwell," I say, pointing to a gap in the wall on the left side of the garage.

We run to the stairwell and down the stairs to the street outside of the garage. I freeze as I hit the sidewalk, scanning for the silver vehicle that is supposed to be awaiting us.

"There," Reika says and begins speed walking towards a silver truck parked across the street.

As we approach the truck the door opens and a man dressed in all black hops out.

"Hurry up, everyone in!" the man says, ushering Reika and the boy into the back seat of the cab.

They pile in and the man shuts the door, motioning for me to hop in the front passenger seat.

"I'm not going with you. I have some unfinished business to take care of," I tell the man who looks at me puzzled.

"Wait, what?" Reika says angrily from the backseat of the cab.

"Reika, get the supplies and that boy to Kisin. There's something I have to take care of while I'm here," I yell to her as the man hops into the driver seat.

She tries to object but I yell over her objections. "Trust me! Take care of the kid! This is something I need to do alone."

"We need to go!" The driver jumps into the conversation as two policemen exit the garage and begin working their way down the block.

"I'll call Kisin and inform him of what's going on," I say to the man as he shuts his door.

I walk around the vehicle to the sidewalk. I can hear Reika yelling at me angrily from inside of the truck as it pulls off.

Now, which way is it to the building that bastard works in?

I walk around the corner and begin searching my pockets for the cell phone Kisin gave me. I press the disk to my ear and press the button, causing it to wrap around my ear like it did the first time.

“Nisik,” I say awkwardly, feeling like I’m talking to myself.

I hear a strange ringing followed by Kisin’s voice. “What the hell happened?”

“Did your driver fill you in already?” I ask

“No, a friend did. Why did you shoot a police officer?” Kisin asks in a calm tone.

“It’s a long story. Reika and a boy are on the way to your place.”

“A boy?” Kisin asks.

“Yeah, if you can get the boy home safely you can take the extra medical supplies we took as a payment for doing so. Well, the majority of them at least, the child needs some for his mother,” I say, trying to avoid the reason I shot the officer.

“And what makes you think I’m willing to safeguard a child for medical supplies?” Kisin asks.

“It’s the only thing I can offer as payment.”

"Interesting. Seeing as how he's already on the way to my house, there's not much I can do but accept. Where are you with my package?"

"Reika has your package. It will be delivered as promised. I'm taking care of something personal so you don't need to worry about my transportation back."

"You're going after Mr. Gates I take it?"

"Maybe."

"Well, while you're at it, he has a code that will benefit the both of us."

"A code?" Just as the words leave my mouth, someone grabs my left arm, causing me to jump to the side ready to attack.

"Calm down, it's just me," Reika says.

"It's just you? I told you to go with the kid."

"And I told you I wasn't going to leave your side again!"

"Is that Reika?" Kisin's voice rattles in my ear as I start walking again.

"Yeah."

"Yeah, what?" Reika asks.

"I thought you said she was on the way here with the package?" Kisin asks.

"Yeah, nothing. I'm on the phone with Kisin."

"Oh," Reika says.

"I thought she was," I say.

"Are you talking to me now?" Kisin asks.

"Yeah, you know what, let me call you back after I figure out what's going on," I say.

"Okay, make sure that package is safe! You have no idea how important it is to me!" Kisin yells in my ear.

"Got it. I'll call you back," I say before pushing the button on the phone to hang up and disconnect it from my ear.

"Where's the package?" I ask.

"With the kid."

"With the kid! Where's the kid?"

"He's on the way to Kisin. Don't worry, I put the package in the bag of medical supplies. I told the kid that to get home, he would have to hand the bag over to Kisin when the car stopped."

"And you're trusting the kid to accomplish this?" I ask critically.

"He'll be fine. He's too scared to do anything else."

"It's not him I'm worried about! It's the driver."

"Why would you be worried about him? He's Kisin's man, isn't he?"

"Yeah, but one of the reasons Kisin recruited us was because he didn't trust his own men with that package."

"Oh, sorry. No! You know what, I'm not sorry. You coulda explained that to me at any time! And even if you did, I still woulda bailed on the package and come after you!"

I chuckle. "Yeah, I guess I could've told you. But you still should've trusted me enough to believe that there was a reason for my decision. It doesn't matter. The only thing we can do now is hope the package gets there."

"It's not that I don't trust you—I told you, I'm not leaving you alone! Just because you blame yourself for Natalie and Logan, doesn't mean I'm gonna let you disconnect from me to go sacrifice yourself. I know you're planning something and I'm not gonna let you do it by yourself. Where are we going anyway?" she continues to shout as we walk.

My gut stirs at the fact that she read my motives so well. Am I really that transparent? Back at the arena she figured out what was going on in

my head before anyone else. Each time she does it, I don't see it coming. Can she read me better than I can read her?

"There," I say, stopping on the sidewalk, pointing to the Gates Building.

"We're going after Natalie's father, that's his building," I continue.

Reika looks at me with sorrowful eyes. For a second it seems like she wants to object.

"Okay, let's go," she says.

"Follow my lead," I say as I take off towards the entrance of the building.

A sick feeling rushes through me as I open the doors to the lobby. A vision of Natalie and Logan walking through the doors flashes through my head. I take a deep breath and walk to the golden counter as we did the first time.

"How... may I help you?" The woman starts her sentence normally but hesitates on the last half.

Does she recognize me?

"I'm here to see Mr. Gates," I say with as much authority as I can muster up.

The woman eyes me in a peculiar manner then glances at Reika and makes a decision.

"Yes, go right up. He's on the eighth floor," she says with a hint of uneasiness in her voice.

Something's not right.

"Thank you. What room?" I ask.

"Eight twenty. The elevators are just behind me and to the right," she replies, this time sure of herself.

We walk around the counter and into a large hallway that is filled with elevators. Reika walks over to an arrow and pushes it. We get inside and I press the button for eight before the doors close.

"I think she might have recognized me. We have to be careful. Here, take this," I say, handing Reika the revolver from one of my pockets.

"Okay," she says, looking like she wants to ask me how the lady recognized me.

We reach the eighth floor and exit the elevator into a hallway that has golden floors and black walls. We walk past the first room on the left, eight zero one.

"It must be in the middle of this hallway," I say as we start walking faster down the hall.

"It's really quiet," Reika says.

"You're right. Where is everyone at?" I say as we reach a large window filled room on the right side of the hall.

"Eight twenty, it's an empty conference room," I say slowly.

I take a few steps back towards room eight nineteen. The door is cracked open and just like eight twenty, it's empty. If she recognized me, then this is a trap. I look back at the elevators and see that the light above one of them is lit. I grab Reika's hand and pull her with me as I launch into eight nineteen.

The ding of the elevator goes off just as we enter the room. I turn to Reika and motion her to be quiet. She nods in acknowledgement. I look around the room in a panicked state, trying to find a place for us to hide. If this whole floor is empty, we can't close the door or they'll know something is wrong. The door! I grab Reika's hand again and pull her with me behind the door.

Pulling out the nine millimeter, I push Reika behind me into the corner and then try to calm my breathing. The sound of footsteps enter my ears, drawing my attention away from my breathing. As the footsteps grow closer, I can make out two people talking.

This is why I didn't want Reika to come. I'll never forgive myself if something happens to her.

The footsteps stop abruptly. "No sign of the target. Eight twenty is clear," I hear a woman say.

"Let's head down the hall and meet up with A?" A deep male voice shoots out.

"Yeah, if we're lucky, they're still on the floor and we can trap them in between us," the woman says.

"A, we're coming your way, going to comb the hall until we get to you," the woman says as the shuffling of footsteps start again.

I wait until I can't hear the footsteps before slowly stepping out from behind the door. I approach the doorway, cock my head to the side, and extend my ear outward in an attempt to listen for movement. No more shuffling or talking. They must've moved onto another hall. If I can peek out just enough to make sure they actually left the hall, we might have a chance of getting out of here unscathed.

I slowly stick my head out from the doorway. Near the end of the hallway, I see two individuals wearing black vests, earpieces, and hats. As soon as I spot them, I yank my head back into the room.

"They're at the end of the hall. Let's give them a minute to go to another hallway, and as soon as they do, I let's make a break for the elevators," I whisper into Reika's ear.

She nods.

"Wait, wouldn't a stairwell be better? So we can avoid the lobby?" she whispers back.

"Yeah, but I don't know where one is."

"I think there was one right next to the elevators."

"That's perfect. We'll make a break for the elevators and look for the stairwell when we get there," I whisper before sticking my head back into the hallway.

"Let's go." I whisper louder as I take a step into the hallway and start walking as fast as I can.

About ten steps from the elevators, I'm startled by someone shouting.

"Stop right there!" A man's voice comes from down the hall.

I turn to see a man at the end of the hallway pointing a gun at us.

"GO!" I shout to Reika before taking an unaimed shot at the man.

The shot does as it was intended and causes the man to duck back around the corner of the hall. I follow Reika's lead.

"There!" Reika says, pointing at a stairwell to the left of the elevators.

We race to the stairwell and she opens the door.

"Freeze!" a woman shouts as she and a man run down the hall towards us with guns drawn.

I pull the staircase door shut and we start a mad dash for the ground floor, jumping several stairs at a time. I can hear our attackers enter the stairwell after us as we continue to run down the staircase. A neon green sign at the very bottom of the stairwell marks our exit. We exit the stairs in the lobby just outside the elevators. I run into the elevator hallway, looking for a back door to escape and notice all the elevator lights are lit.

"Front door!" I shout just as the ding of an arriving elevator goes off. We run through the lobby, causing the woman at the front to duck under the desk. I tuck my gun back into my suit as I hit the golden doors.

"Hey, you two!" A man still chasing us starts yelling, but is drowned out mid-sentence as we hit the sidewalk outside.

We tear down the sidewalk as fast as possible. At the end of the block, I glance back to see if the man is still in pursuit.

"He stopped, we're good," I say to Reika, panting.

"Did he even come outside after us?" She replies.

"Yeah, he was standing in front of the building, watching us run. We should jog a little further just in case they decide to hop in cars and come after us." I say, getting ready to take off jogging down the street.

The cell phone in my pocket starts ringing.

"Kisin!" I shout.

"What?" Reika asks.

"I forgot to call Kisin back." I say as I start jogging and trying to grab the cell phone from my pocket at the same time.

"Hello," I answer breathing heavily.

"I just got the package. Why are you breathing so hard?" Kisin says.

"Good. We're running from the Gates Building. It was a trap. He wasn't there. Or at least not on the floor they said he was." I say as we make it to the end of another block.

"That's because he's not there. He's at the Saints Tower having a meeting with another Council member. But that doesn't explain why they set a trap for you, did somebody recognize you?"

"I think the woman at the front desk did. How do you know he's at another building?" I say, ending my jog in the middle of the next block.

"We keep tabs on him. Where are you? I'll send someone to get you." Why would he keep tabs on him?

"No, I think we're okay. We'll get there on our own," I reply.

"Not in time you won't. Saint's Tower is on the other side of downtown. He'll be gone by the time you walk there. Let me send one of my men to grab you. He can fill you in on why we know what we know."

If he's telling the truth and I don't listen, I'll be wasting this opportunity.

I look at the street signs on the corner. "Fine, we'll be on the corner of Potomic and Cherrywood."

"Okay, give me about five minutes and I'll have someone there."

"Okay, bye," I say, hanging up the phone.

"What's going on?" Reika asks.

"Apparently Kisin knew Natalie's father wouldn't be there. He said that there's a Council meeting taking place at the Saints Tower," I reply.

"How does he know that?"

"I don't know, but he's sending someone to pick us up and take us there," I say.

"What about the kid and the package?"

"I guess they got there okay."

"Good."

We can't just sit here on the corner waiting. If someone from the Gates Building comes looking for us, we're sitting ducks.

"We need to find a better place to wait," I say, looking into Reika's eyes.

"Yeah. Somewhere less obvious," she says, staring back.

I scan the block. Near the corner there is a man with a food cart that has a long line winding from it.

"Perfect. Let's get in line. We'll just step out when we get close to the front." I say.

As we start walking towards the line, I notice a police car driving slowly along the sidewalk towards us. My heart starts racing. Is he looking for us? We need to ignore him and act like everyone else by getting into the line. The police car stops right next to us as we join the line. I pretend not to see the car, but out of my peripheral vision I can see the window rolling down.

"Nineteen," The officer shouts from the car.

I instinctively look up at the vehicle. That's the officer that let us go at the mall. Did he change his mind and decide to come after us? I look at Reika, trying to decide whether we should run or if I should answer the man.

"I was told to pick you up. Hurry up, let's get out of here," the officer continues.

Kisin's man? That would explain why he let us go at the mall.

"Let's go," I say to Reika.

"Okay," she replies.

We head to the vehicle and start to get in the backseat when the officer stops us.

"Hop up front, Nineteen," the officer says.

I exchange a bewildered glance with Reika before nodding.

I walk around to the front of the police car, jump inside, and we drive away.

"I'm sure by now you've got a ton of questions as to what's going on. After the safe delivery of the package today and the events that unfolded at the mall, he's decided to trust you."

"Okay," I say hesitantly.

"We have about twenty minutes before I can get you to the tower and in that time, I'm going to fill you in as best I can."

"Alright," I reply.

"Kisin is not just the leader of a gang called the Deaths Disciples as he is made out to be. The gang aspect within the group actually acts as a cover for Kisin and his cohorts. Kisin is actually one of several leaders of a group that has been planning on rebelling against the Council and their allies."

"So in other words, he's trying to take over," I say.

"Not exactly. The short story is that we've unraveled this compounds true purpose. There's a reason the Council is behind the curtain pulling strings. They want to keep us fighting among each other. They want us to constantly live in fear of the outside world, so that we don't figure out the truth." He pauses.

"I'm listening."

"When the two compounds were originally built, it was claimed that the people were split randomly between the two. The truth of the matter is far from that. One compound was built to house the lower end of the wealth spectrum. Those who weren't rich, but decided to stick with the government during the revolution. That is our compound.

"There were a few people on the top end of the wealth spectrum who were placed here. These people were placed here to act as liaisons to the other compound. Nearly every person who came to power in this compound was handpicked to do so. Kisin was one of these people and was actually in the other compound before being sent here.

"Those that refused to fall into line with the overall scheme of things were ripped from power. The first two people who realized that they were being used and were vocal about it were killed. One of the two happened to be a friend of Kisin's.

"Kisin knew he couldn't openly reject the scheme of things or he would end up dead like his friend. So, he used his friend's death to begin opposing the system. He made it look as if he was depressed and unwittingly destroying himself. He made sure he was always seen drinking and gambling. They thought he formed the Deaths Disciples to pay for his vices. Eventually he was able to safely slip off the puppet strings without being considered a threat.

"The only other person to survive rejecting the council's plan was Megan. Who, as you already know, was once married to a Council member. We're not entirely sure of her motives or if the plummet from her position was genuine. So for the time being we ask that you withhold what I just told you from her."

That explains why Kisin wanted me to work for him instead of using his own men. They can't trace me back to him. I wonder if Megan might actually have ulterior motives for taking us in.

"That won't be a problem. I don't trust very easily, especially in this place," I say.

"Good. We're almost to the Tower, so on to the code Kisin wants you to get. Greg is a Council member whose company created most of our defense systems. Including a special code that can be plugged into military vehicles. This code overrides the vehicles' auto piloting, targeting, and shut off functions."

"Okay, and why do you need this code?" I ask.

"Over the years we have acquired several stolen military vehicles. Unfortunately, they can't be turned on. The second they know we have them, they'll be remotely shut off. With that code we can disable that function."

"And stage your own coup against the people in power," I add.

"With time and support, yes. Now that you understand why we have a common goal, will you help us?"

"I'll try. That doesn't mean I'll be successful."

"Well, good luck! The building is on the other side of this block," he says, stopping the car along the sidewalk.

"Thanks," I say, stepping out of the car.

I open the back door for Reika and we start walking around the block.

"Do you really think Megan is one of them?" Reika asks, examining the troubled look on my face.

"Anything is possible. I didn't trust her until I saw the pictures she had of Natalie. I might have been swayed by my feelings for Natalie rather than Megan's character," I say.

"Me too, I guess. I wanted to believe we got lucky by running into Natalie's mother. Something felt out of place the whole time though. I guess I know better than to assume something easy or lucky would come our way. It makes more sense for her to be using us than it does for her to be genuinely helping us."

"Yeah. We might have led broken lives outside, but it seems like we're the only ones left that do things without ulterior motives."

"At least Kisin told us his motives," Reika says.

"Yeah, assuming that's all he's after," I say.

We turn onto the new block and find ourselves standing across the street from a huge black tower. Half way up the tower, there is a large blue sign that reads 'Saints Tower'.

"That's it. This time, let's do this right. We're not gonna give the desk girl a chance to call security on us," I say.

Reika nods.

We walk through the black doors that mark the entrance of the building and step into the lobby. The layout is exactly the same as the Gates building. The only difference is the color scheme. The floor is black with dark blue speckles and the furniture is a shade of royal blue. The front desk matches the color of the furniture. As we approach the man at the front desk a look of fear washes over his face.

I'll bet he's on the phone with the other building. I pull out the nine from my pocket and point it at the man as we approach.

"Hang up the phone," I say in an authoritative tone.

"Please don't kill me!" the man pleads as he hangs up the phone.

"If you cooperate with us, we won't hurt you. We're not here for you," I say.

"Lock the doors," Reika demands.

The man looks at her like he's trying to digest if what she said was real or not.

"I said get up and lock the front doors. I know you have the keys," Reika continues.

"Yes, yes, okay."

The man reaches into a drawer by his side and pulls out a set of keys. He then clumsily makes his way around the front desk. We follow the man to the front doors with our guns aimed at his back.

"The second you try to run, you'll be shot," I say.

"If you help us, then we'll help you," Reika adds.

"Yes, yes, I understand," the man says as he shakily locks two of the four main doors. He walks over to the second set of doors and locks them as fast as he can before turning to us.

"Can I go now?" he asks.

"Where's Gates?" I ask.

"Mr. Gates?" he asks.

"What room and floor is his meeting taking place?" I ask.

"He-he's on the thirteenth floor suite, thirteen oh five," the man stammers out.

I look at Reika.

"Where should we put him?" I ask.

"I still have these," she says, holding up the pair of handcuffs she took off of the child at the mall.

"Perfect," I say.

"I told you the truth, please just let me go!" the man pleads.

"If you told us the truth, then you have nothing to worry about. We have no reason to hurt you. We're just going to detain you for a while," I say.

"Over there. Move." I point towards the elevators.

If this building is the same as the one earlier, there will be railings in the stairwell.

"I won't tell anyone, I swear," the man pleads again as we open the door to the stairwell.

"I'm sorry, we can't let you go yet," I say.

"Empty your pockets," Reika says.

"I don't have any money, but you can have my wallet if you let me go!" the man says.

"Enough! Empty everything from your pockets onto the floor or we'll do it for you!" I shout at the man to get the point across.

"Okay."

He pulls a few things from his pocket, one of which is a cell phone that he tries to blend in behind his wallet as he sets it on the floor.

"This, you can't have with you," I say, bending over and grabbing his cell phone.

"Have a seat," Reika says.

The man sits down on the first few steps in the stairwell. Reika grabs one of his hands and begins to cuff him to the railing.

"I'm going to set your cell phone just outside the door. You can retrieve it when we're done. As long as you told us the truth we won't come back. If you didn't, and Gates isn't on the thirteenth floor, we'll be back and I won't be able to guarantee your safety. So, if there's anything else we should know, I suggest you tell us now." I say as intimidatingly as I can.

"No, everything I said is true. If he's not in that room, then the meeting is over. It's only Sam and him meeting. There's no one else there."

"Okay, thanks for your help. Sit tight and you'll get out of this alive," I say as we start to leave the staircase.

"Wait what about the key?" The man says.

"That's right. We'll leave it on the counter outside. So whoever comes looking for you will be able to free you," I say, shutting the door to the stairwell behind me.

"I don't think I have the key anymore," Reika says.

"That's okay, that was just for his piece of mind. I'm sure they'll find a way to get him loose," I say, setting his phone outside the stairwell door.

We walk around the corner and into the hallway with the elevators. I push the button to open the elevator door and it opens immediately. We step inside and Reika pushes the button for the thirteenth floor.

"Last chance to back out and go home before you're wanted," I say, looking into Reika's eyes.

She chuckles. "I'm pretty sure I'm already wanted. Besides, it's time this asshole pays for what he did to Natalie and Logan," She says with anger leaking from her voice.

I nod and show a faint smile at her response.

"We should probably hide these for now," I say, putting my gun back into my pocket.

"Good call." Reika says tucking her revolver away.

The elevator dings and the doors open. We walk out of the elevator into a hallway that has a black floor and dark blue walls. This floor is silent just like before. Is this another trap? I reach into my overcoat pocket and place my hand on my gun as we walk into the hall. The first door I see is quite a distance ahead of us. Why are these rooms so spaced out in comparison to the other building? As we approach the first door, I grip my gun tighter, expecting some sort of trap to be sprung once we reach it.

"Suite thirteen oh one. Why are these doors spaced so far apart?" I shoot Reika a questioning glance.

"I don't know, I haven't heard of a suite before. But they have to be different than the regular rooms, right?" she replies.

"I guess so. If this is one, then five will probably be near the end of the hall," I say.

"Probably," Reika replies and we continue making our way down the hall.

"These rooms are huge." I say as we stop at the last door on the hall.

"Thirteen oh four," Reika says as we reach it.

"I wonder if that's it?" I say, looking at a door across the hall from us.

"It has to be," Reika says.

We walk to the corner and look both ways down the adjacent hallway.

"Still no one," I say.

Reika shakes her head no with a suspicious look on her face. We walk across the adjacent hall and approach a door that is open a crack. As we get closer to the door, I can hear two voices talking back and forth. I point out the number on the door. Then without saying a word, I lean forward and cock my head to the side in an attempt to hear what the men are talking about.

"The new batch will be delivered tonight."

I hold up a finger to Reika to let her know I can hear what's going on and to wait.

"Okay, I'll commence preparations." A voice that sounds similar to Natalie's father responds.

"What's our timeframe?"

"Tomorrow night we'll raid Megan's house to capture their group. Then we'll put out a press release notifying everyone that the outsiders were carriers of a virus. We'll announce that we will be releasing a vaccine to all residents as soon as possible. Then, the day after we'll put out the vaccine."

"So you're saying three days?"

"Yeah."

"We need to get this taken care of before they decide to make a move. Why don't you raid the house tonight?"

"I guess I can do that. I'll put out the press release tomorrow morning and can have the booths open the day after."

"That sounds better. The faster we do this the more likely it is to succeed."

"How many are we expecting to infect this time?"

"A hundred."

"A hundred? That's a lot more than usual."

"We need to increase the fear of the outside world. Multiple people made it in this time. If we don't infect a large number people, our residents might not buy that the outsiders were the carriers."

"True. We wouldn't want to enact option C prematurely."

The other man starts laughing. "No, we want to milk as much as we can from this situation. That time will come one day, just not today."

"Well, it's four fifty, I better get going. I have a helicopter to catch."

"Back to the other compound so soon?"

"Yeah, I have some things to attend to."

I pull my head away from the door, reeling from the conversation. There's no time to worry about what was said. Right now I need a plan of action. One of them has to be Natalie's dad and the other is obviously a Council member. A Council member who's trying to leave the compound. We may never get this chance again.

"Wait until they try to exit, then we'll force them back into the room," I whisper in Reika's ear.

She nods in response and we both take a step back from the door drawing our guns. The door opens and a man with grey hair wearing a platinum suit appears from behind it. He starts walking out the door, too busy laughing and looking to his right to notice us. By the time he realizes that we're in front of him, my gun is pushed into his ribcage.

"Back into the room," I say.

The man starts trying to turn around.

"No! Walk backwards into the room," I say loudly.

"Okay, no need to yell, young man," he says, slowly stepping backwards into the room.

"No need to refer to me with respect. I know who you are," I snap back.

The man chuckles. "I see. I take it you're scum from the outside world here to avenge you're fallen comrades," he says snidely as I follow him into the room.

The room is huge and has an entire wall of windows overlooking the city. An enormous black conference table with black chairs sits in the middle of the room and spans the entire length of it.

"Take a step back Greg!" I shout, glancing to my left at Natalie's father.

"Well, well, it seems option C may be needed if they've infiltrated us to this extent," the grey haired man says, turning to Natalie's father with an amused look on his face.

Natalie's father takes a step forward as if he's going to make a move. As he does, Reika enters the room with her gun aimed at him, shutting the door behind her.

"Have a seat, gentlemen," I say as I back the man in front of me into a chair at the conference table.

He tries turning around again using the chair as an excuse. "Stop! Use your arm to turn the chair around. If I see your back I'll put a bullet in your head!" I shout.

The man chuckles as he reaches for the chair and sits down. "You're an interesting variety of wasteland trash. You say you know who I am, but I don't think you have the faintest idea."

I ignore the grey haired man's taunt. "That piece of shit is mine. Switch me spots," I say to Reika with anger leaking from my voice.

"I see you know Mr. Gates rather well. But he's not the one you need to worry about. I'm the one who trained him you see," the grey haired man continues.

"Now." I say.

We quickly switch targets and then positions. Now able to fully focus on Natalie's father and his gold suit, I grit my teeth, trying to hold my anger in. I take a few steps closer to him, preparing to shove my gun to his temple.

"Fighting us is pointless! Ha-ha, unless you happen to be hoarding a large surplus of military nanobots, it's only a matter of time before we eradicate you! You come here trying to seek revenge, but what you don't get is that..." the grey haired man pauses briefly before shouting, "WE OWN YOU!"

Why does he keep trying to draw our attention away from Natalie's father? I stop approaching Natalie's father and start examining his position and posture.

"That's right, I said it! WE OWN YOU!" the man shouts as the sound of a gun going off rings through my head.

I instinctively turn my head towards the sound to see that the grey haired man is slumped over in his chair with a gunshot wound in his forehead.

"He tried to pull a gun," Reika says calmly.

A moment later, a gold-plated handgun falls out of the man's suit onto the floor. I shift my focus back to Greg.

"You want to end up like him?" I ask.

He smirks. "Of course I don't. But I'm civilized enough to know that it's inevitable with savages such as yourself."

"You're civilized and we're just the outside trash, is that it?"

"Basically. You came here to gather intel and you've already killed one of the people you could have got it from."

"You think I came here for intel?" I let out a maniacal laugh.

"Tell me Greg, in the civilized world what would be a fitting punishment for a man who forced his nine-year-old daughter out into the wasteland to survive on her own?"

"Oh, a lecture on morals from a savage, how riveting!" Greg replies sarcastically.

I ignore his remark and continue grilling him. "What's a fitting punishment for a man whose daughter came home after years of struggling in the wasteland, and instead of taking her in, he sentences her to death? A man who executed his own daughter because he wanted more power!" I shout.

"Everyone has a price. You would've done the same thing."

"Not true! You call us savages, but we act out of the necessity to survive! You on the other hand, act out of greed and a thirst for power! You keep your own people ignorant and in the dark just so you can maintain a false feeling of control! Those of us on the outside aren't the savages. The real savages are you people in power who sacrifice lives purely to feed your own selfish desires."

"I did what was necessary to keep savages like you at bay and outside where you belong!" Greg shouts back.

I lose my temper and rush him, shoving my gun in between his lips until it makes contact with his teeth. With my left hand, I dig into his cheek until I get a grip on his lower jaw. I press the gun as hard as I can into his upper lip, causing his head to snap back. I pry his mouth open with my left hand and shove the gun into his mouth.

"Is that what you tell yourself? You did it for a just cause? Your little girl was sacrificed to keep us away? I don't buy that one bit. We're the ones who helped raise and protect her! We're the ones who kept her safe while addicts and officers were murdering everyone they saw! That's not why you threw Natalie to the wolves. You're a selfish, power-hungry, ignorant man! And putting a bullet through your head would let you off too easily!" I say, withdrawing the gun from his mouth.

For the first time since we've been in the room, he looks as if he's finally scared for his life.

"It would be too easy for me to put a bullet in your head. That's not fitting. You deserve to suffer before you die." I continue.

I need to calm down, I'm losing it. He deserves to pay for what he did to Natalie and Logan. Yet he has no remorse for the things he's done and killing him isn't going to change that. I need to calm down. The only way I'm going to exact any type of revenge for Natalie and Logan is if their deaths aren't meaningless. I need to get that code Kisin wants. If it overrides military vehicles, then maybe I can use it to disable all the military vehicles in the compound.

"No, I'm going to make you watch as all the things you think you control burn to the ground. I'm going to offer you a way to keep your life, and you're going to take it because you're a spineless bastard."

He looks at me with a glimmer of hope in his eyes. "And how's that?" he asks, trying to regain his composure.

"Despite your misguided views about me being a savage, I'm actually a logical person. I need a code that's in your possession."

"A code?" he asks.

"Yeah, the military override code. You're going to hand it over." I say.

He lets out a small laugh. "And how do you think you're going to use that? You think you can just plug it into a vehicle that you stole and, bam, it works?" he laughs again.

"No. You're going to show me how to send it to every vehicle in the compound," I say.

"I can't do that," he says.

"It's either that or I cut a finger and a toe off for each year Natalie was outside the compound. And then after you've finished screaming, I'll put a bullet in your head," I say coldly.

"It's not that I won't, it's that I can't! I don't have the ability. The code has to be put into a military computer that's inside the wall. Then, and only then, will it work."

"Well then, it looks like you'll be showing me where the computer is, how to access it, and providing me with the code.

"If I do that, the Council will kill me themselves." He says.

"Well, I guess you'll have to find a way to hide it from the Council. Just like you're going to hide it from everyone else."

"And what's to stop you from killing me after I do all of this?"

"If you're dead, someone might put two and two together and decide to make some changes," I pause before continuing. "That being said, I'll have eyes on you until the code is used. Once it goes through, you'll be free to watch your precious compound burn," I say, bluffing.

"Hmmm." He gives a smirk. "Deal. We need to go to my office if you want the code and a map."

I stare at him, contemplating whether or not he is telling the truth.

"My office is just down the hall, it's on this floor," he continues.

"Okay, get up and lead the way," I instruct him.

Greg gets up and walks out the door with Reika and I following, our guns aimed at his back. We turn right and follow the hallway to its end before turning left onto another hall. At the first door in the new hallway, we stop.

"This is it," Greg says.

I step forward and press my gun to his back.

"Don't get any smart ideas or we *will* kill you," I say quietly.

"I don't doubt that," he says as we walk through the door and into his office.

His office is as big as the conference room we left, and just like the conference room, the back wall consists of windows overlooking the city. The wall to our right has a mural painted on it. The wall on the left consists of a large bookshelf and a huge television. We walk past a pool table and a mini golf set to an enormous L shaped gold desk.

"It'll only take a minute to log in and print out both the code and a map of the facility. Then you can be on your way." He says.

"Uh huh. Just get it done." I say coldly.

He wakes up one of the three computers on his desk and starts opening multiple screens. I try to watch what he's doing to ensure that he isn't trying to use his computer to alert someone of our presence, but I have no idea what's going on. Hopefully Reika knows, after all, she was going to teach me how to use Megan's computer.

"Here this is the part of the wall you need to gain access to in order to input the code. Either this computer here or the computer across the hall here can be used to input the code," he says, pointing at the map he has on the screen.

"Okay. And how do we get into those computers?" I ask

"Let me print this off for you real quick and I'll show you," he says, pressing a few buttons on his keyboard before he moves to a second computer on his desk.

"This is what the terminals will have on their screens," he says, showing us the monitor of the new computer. There is a small box on the screen with a blinking cursor asking for a password.

"You type in the password I'll be giving you and it will take you to a screen that looks like this," he continues as a new screen pops up that has multiple little pictures.

"You're going to click on the icon that says 'input commands'. When the program loads, you'll select 'input' from the file menu like this," he continues, clicking and a list of words drops down from the top of the screen.

"Then you'll click 'vehicle maintenance'," he says as another box pops up on the screen.

"This is the prompt where you'll need to enter the code I'm giving you. Once you type it in, all you have to do is hit 'enter' and wait until it finishes the process. You'll know it's done when it returns you to this input screen," he says.

I look at Reika with a confused expression, hoping that she understood everything.

"Got it," she says confidently.

Good thing she understood all of that. As easy as it seemed, I probably would have forgotten most of it by the time we needed to use it.

"Good. The print out should be done by now," Greg says, standing and walking toward the end of his desk.

He pulls three pieces of paper from a black object on the end of his desk. "This page has the password for the terminal and the override

code. The other two pages are the location of the terminals and how to get to them," he says, handing me the paper.

I look over them, making sure everything he claims to be on the paper is there.

"This looks like what we need," I say, looking at Reika.

"Should I show you the door?" Greg says.

"If this code doesn't work, you're dead. Just so we're clear," I say.

"It works," he replies.

"Reika, make sure he doesn't move," I say.

"Okay," she replies as a confused expression crosses Greg's face.

I flip my gun in the air and catch it by the barrel with my left hand. I swing with all my strength and hit Greg in the upper right side of his head. He falls to the floor, his head gushing blood onto the golden carpet.

"Let's get out of here before he wakes up," I say.

"You're really not going to kill him?" Reika asks with a bewildered expression on her face.

"Not yet. We need him alive if we want this to work," I say.

"Okay, let's go," she says.

I fold up the papers and stick them in my suit before we take off running to the elevators.

"Here, take these. I don't have anywhere to hide them," Reika says, handing me a gold plated handgun and a cell phone.

"From the grey haired man? I ask.

"Yeah."

"Nice," I say, tucking them into different pockets in my suit.

As we hit the lobby I expect to encounter some form of resistance, but there's not a single person waiting for us. I tuck my gun into my suit. We

NINETEEN

race past the front desk and through the front doors. A feeling of relief washes over me when we step onto the sidewalk and into the outside air.

HOME FREE

"Where should we go?" I say as we walk away from the Saint building.

"Think Kisin will give us another ride?" Reika asks.

"He might, but the question is where do we go? We gotta get everyone out of Megan's house before they raid it."

Is Megan really a traitor? How else would they know where we've been staying? My gut sinks at the thought of Natalie's mom betraying us. After my initial distrust of her, I really wanted to believe that at least one of Natalie's parents genuinely cared for her.

"What?" Reika asks, surprised.

"I haven't had a chance to fill you in on what I heard Greg and the grey haired man talking about. I will in a minute, but I need to get a hold of Kisin and find a way to get them out of the house first," I say, pulling out the cell phone Kisin gave me.

"Okay," she replies.

I call Kisin as we turn the corner and head back to the block we were dropped off on.

"How'd it go?" Kisin answers.

"We got the code, but I have a problem that I need your help with."

"What's that?" he asks.

"Megan might be working for the Council. They plan to raid her house and capture all of us tonight."

"You got that out of Greg?"

"I overheard a Council conversation. Enough to know they're not after Megan—they're after us. That's not all there is to it, but I need to know my people are safe before I fill you in."

"Okay, what do you need on my end?"

"I need a way to warn my men. And, most importantly, we're going to need a few new places to stay."

"I can work on the places to stay, but as far as warning your men, I think that's best left to you. Something tells me they wouldn't believe me if I told them. Megan's number is programmed into the phone I gave you under the name 'Nagem'. That'll give you a way to warn them. Where are you headed right now?"

"Not sure, as far away from the Saints Building as we can get."

"I'll see if I can't get my man to come pick you up again. That way you'll have a safe escort out of downtown. Hover around the place he dropped you off if you can. That'll probably be the easiest place to pick you up."

"Okay, sounds good. I'll talk to you soon."

"Good luck," Kisin says as I hang up.

"Negam," I say as soon as I hear the tone of the phone.

While the phone's ringing, I motion Reika to slow down.

"Hello," a man answers.

"Can I talk to Tank?" I ask not sure if I reached Megan's house.

"Hold on."

I hear shuffling and voices that I can't make out.

"Umm, this is Tank?" I relax the moment I hear Tank's voice.

"Tank! It's Nineteen! Who was that who picked up the phone?" I ask.

"Nineteen? That was one of the people who pretends to live here when Megan's gone," he says.

"So Megan's not in the room with you?"

"No, that guy left the room too. What's going on?"

"Good. I need you to get a message to Fox and then leave."

"Leave?" he asks loudly.

"Shh, keep it down. Someone there has given out our location to the Council. It might be Megan."

"What?" he says in disbelief.

"I don't have time to explain everything, but the Council is planning to raid the house tonight. I need you to be ready to leave as soon as I give you the word. But you have to warn Fox and his men so you can leave together."

"Okay. Where are we headed?"

"I'm working with Kisin to find us a new place to stay. I'll give you a call back in about thirty minutes."

"Okay. I'll be waiting."

"Be careful. I'll talk to you soon," I say, hanging up the phone.

"We need to find a place around here to kill time," I say.

"What about that store?" Reika says, pointing across the street at a huge sign that reads 'Smart Buy'.

"That should work. It looks big enough for us to wander around in without being followed."

As we reach the front of the store, the phone still strapped to my ear notifies me of an incoming call in a robotic voice. "Incoming call from Nisik. To answer say 'yes', to ignore say 'no'."

"Yes," I say as Reika opens the door to the store.

"Hello," I answer, walking into the store.

"My man is on the way to pick you up. Are you near the drop off?"
Kisin asks.

"Yeah, we're nearby."

"Good. My guy said he'll be there in about ten minutes. And as for your men, I've lined up a few places they can stay. In an hour, have your men walk four blocks east of Megan's house. I'll have two brown vans waiting that will take them to a safe place. For tonight at least. Tomorrow we might have to move them somewhere else."

"That's fine, as long as they're not there during the raid we should be okay. I'll let them know."

"Oh, and one last thing. The man coming to pick you up you can trust. Anything you can say to me, you can say to him. For that matter anything you want me to know, you can say to him and he'll get the word to me."

"Got it. I'll fill you in on everything once when were in a safe place," I say.

"Alright, bye," Kisin hangs up.

I look up at our surroundings and start blushing as I realize I unintentionally walked into the women's lingerie section while on the phone.

"Oops. Guess we should move to a different part of the store to kill time," I say embarrassed.

"What's wrong? Don't wanna look at lingerie with me?" Reika says playfully.

"No err not that I would mind seeing you in...ah No thanks!" I say stumbling over my words.

She laughs. "Let's go over to the dress section. We can pretend I'm looking for a dress."

I laugh. "Lead the way."

"What's so funny about me looking for a dress? I'm wearing one now aren't I?" Reika says, staring at me.

"Yeah but that's because we're in this place and it's common to wear," I say, looking away.

"Well, I actually kinda like how it looks. It feels kind of weird but..." She pauses.

"But what?" I ask, looking at her amused.

"But I don't really wear dresses." She laughs. "You got me! It's really weird when you're used to looking for clothes based on maneuverability. The women here look beautiful in them and it kind of makes me want to wear one. But I can't get used to it. It's hard to hide weapons and I can't run like I want to."

"Reika, you're beautiful no matter what you wear. A dress isn't going to change that," I say, looking into her eyes.

She shoots me a sad smile. "Thanks," she says before turning to look at a dress.

"I'm not just saying that to say it. I'm serious, Reika. If we lived in this compound, you'd be the envy of every woman here," I say scanning the store.

I can feel her eyes shift from the dress to me. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" I start to ask why, but before I can turn to her, I see two men with earpieces walk through the front doors.

"Get down," I say, squatting below a rack of clothing.

"Who's here?" Reika asks.

"I think the men that just walked in the store work for Natalie's father. They're dressed just like the people that came after us at the Gates building."

"He must've sent them to look for us," Reika replies.

"Probably, but why the hell did they decide to come in here to look? Let's work our way to the front and try to get out before they see us," I say as I creep forward while crouching.

"Lead the way." I hear her whisper behind me.

We make our way to the front of the store, walking behind shelves and crouching to conceal ourselves. The two men with earpieces disappear somewhere into the store by the time we make it to the front door.

"You see 'em anywhere?" I ask.

"No, I think they went downstairs."

"Let's get the hell outta here!" I say, walking as fast as I can out the door.

"Look, he's already across the street," I say, looking at a police car.

"Wait, look at the end of the block," Reika says, pointing to the corner.

Four men and one woman, with the same earpieces are walking towards the police car.

"More of 'em! They can't see us hop into that police car. We gotta get outta here on our own," I say, walking down the sidewalk away from the car.

"Where do we have to get?"

"I have no idea. That officer was supposed to take us there. I'll have to call Kisin so I can find out."

We reach the corner and I pull the cell phone to call Kisin when a police car stops in front of us.

"Hurry up, get in!" A familiar voice shouts at us.

We jump inside the car and the officer pulls off before anyone notices.

"If you're here, then who the hell is where you dropped us off earlier?" I ask.

"I don't know. I saw the car parked there when I pulled up, so I decided to do a circle, hoping to stop you from walking to it."

"If it wasn't for Greg's men walking around in black suits, we would have gone right to that car," I say.

"Greg's men?" the officer asks.

"Yeah, the only reason we know what they look like is because they came after us when we were in the Gates Building."

"Oh, Greg must've hired security for his buildings."

"Where are we headed?" I ask.

"I'm going to take you back to my place and drop you off. It's the safest place we could think of."

Driving us around for Kisin is one thing, but letting us stay at his house? What does he stand to gain from this?

"You are an officer right?"

He lets out a laugh. "I prefer policeman, but yes. I know you're thinking that I'm just another crony on Kisin's payroll. But that's not the truth. I was a police officer long before I met Kisin. I actually met him while arresting him, believe it or not."

"What?" I ask surprised.

"You can only arrest a man so many times on phony charges before you start to question what's going on. I looked into a few things and, before you know it, I stumbled on to the ugly truth."

"So in other words, you want to rebel against the Council just as much as Kisin does."

"Basically. The Council is using this compound and every one of us in it to further their own agenda. Ha. It makes me wonder if this isn't the same type of thing that caused the collapse."

"History is said to repeat itself," I say.

"Yeah. Well, here we are," the officer says, turning off the car in front of a small house.

"This is your house?" I ask.

"Yep and here are the keys," he says as he pulls a few keys from his key chain and hands them to me.

His house is so small. I thought it would be huge since he's an officer.

"You're not coming with us?" Reika asks.

"No, I'm on duty for another three hours or so. I'll bring you some different clothes when I get back. Until then, the house is yours."

"Just like that?" I ask.

He laughs. "Yeah, just like that. I already trust you two more than some of the people who live in the compound."

"Thanks, for everything," I say, unsure of myself.

"You're welcome. Now get inside before someone sees us sitting here."

I open the door to get out of the car. "One last thing, what's your name?"

"I'm Carl."

"Nice to meet you, Carl," I say as I get out of the car and shut the door.

I let Reika out and we walk to the front door of Carl's house.

"It's getting dark. I guess it's time to find a safe place to sleep for the night," Reika says as I unlock the door.

I start laughing. "I guess it's been awhile since we've had to worry about that, huh?"

"Yeah, brings back memories."

We walk into the house and comb through it to ensure that there aren't any threats. After searching the house and finding nothing suspicious, we head to the living room and plop down on Carl's black vinyl couch.

"Crap, I forgot to call Tank! I hope it's not too late!" I pull out the cell phone and call Megan's phone.

"Hello," Tank answers.

"Sorry I'm late, we had some issues. You get through to Fox?" I ask

"Yeah, we're all here waiting for the word. Megan isn't home."

"Okay, in about ten minutes I need you all to leave and walk four blocks east of Megan's. There will be two vans waiting to pick you up. They'll take you to a new place to stay."

"Are you going to meet us there?"

"I'm stuck on the other side of town. I'll get to you soon though. When I do, I'll fill you in on the new plan. Oh, and once you're in a safe place, have Fox get a hold of Estabon and tell him we need all of the Ninety-nine here within two days ready to attack."

"Yes, sir. Anything else?"

"Don't get caught! I'll talk to you soon."

"Alright, midget. Stay safe," Tank says before I hang up the phone.

"Plan?" Reika asks.

"Yeah, I'm working on it. Once I have it all figured out, you'll be the first to know."

"I better be!"

"You will no worries." I laugh. "It's weird, trusting an officer to help us out," I say, trying to change the subject.

"Yeah, who woulda thought we'd be working side by side with an officer!" Reika replies.

"Hah. An officer that isn't just looking out for himself. I didn't think it was possible. I mean, I've heard that officers back before the collapse were around to help people, but I've never believed the stories."

"There's a lot we didn't know about this place. Most of the people here aren't as tyrannical as I thought they would be," Reika says.

"That little boy at the mall reminded me of myself. That's why I couldn't watch that officer haul him away. I'm sorry for dragging you into that."

"You don't need to apologize. That's who you are, that's the guy you always were before Nat. I'm sorry—" Reika stops short of what she was going to say.

"Before what, Reika? It's okay, just spit it out."

"That's who you were before Natalie and Logan died. I think losing them caused you to stop believing in yourself."

"Yeah. My choices got two of my best friends killed. Kai led us for years and didn't lose anyone until three days ago."

"I'm sorry that you lost Natalie, but you made the right choice. You made all the right choices. You just can't admit it to yourself because you lost Logan and Natalie in the process."

I grit my teeth and my eyes begin to tear up. "Hmph. I honestly never thought that Natalie and I would make it together. But I didn't think it would be Natalie who would die. I should be thankful that I'm alive, but a large part of me wishes that it was me who died that day."

“Part of the reason we chose you to be the leader is because you’re the only one bold enough to make the tough decisions. If Natalie or Logan had a choice in what happened that day, I don’t think they would change it. They knew you just as well as I do.

“If it was Natalie there today instead of you when that little boy was being hauled away, we wouldn’t have stopped it. Not because Natalie wouldn’t care, but because the safer thing to do would be to avoid the conflict. Natalie never said it to you, but it was easy for the rest of us to see. All the time she spent arguing over your decisions wasn’t because they were wrong. She knew they were right, she was just scared of losing you.

“She knew, just like the rest of us, that when a situation arises where the right thing to do involves you sacrificing your own life, you wouldn’t hesitate. You’d do it in a heartbeat. She didn’t want to lose you so she chose to argue, even if she knew it was pointless.

“And Logan, if Logan were the one with me when we went after Natalie’s father, he would’ve killed him. He would’ve killed him long before we managed to get that code out of him. Logan wouldn’t have waited and listened to the conversation to find out that Megan’s house was going to be raided. He would’ve rushed into the room and killed them both as sadistically as possible.

“I miss them both, but the reality is that you’re the perfect middle ground of all of us. You know when to act and when to restrain yourself. I can’t imagine how hard it was for you to make the decision to not kill Natalie’s father. But somehow you did, and because you did, I’m sure a lot of innocent lives are going to be spared.

“Deep down inside, I think you know these things. You just don’t want to acknowledge them. It probably feels like you’re betraying your

friends by accepting their fate. But you did the right thing, you always do.”

Reika pauses and her eyes begin to tear up. She takes a deep breath, pushes her tears away and continues. “I-I feel terrible because I can’t do anything to help you. I sit here every day by your side, watching you suffer because you refuse to do the selfish thing. I felt guilty when I made good on Kai’s promise and lectured you. I’m starting to realize that the reason there aren’t any hero’s left is because they kill themselves in the process of saving everyone else.” She stops talking and looks at the ground.

I respond, “You’ve done a lot more than you give yourself credit for. This conversation alone means more than I can express. If you didn’t give me that speech the other day, I don’t know what I would have done when I saw that kid being dragged out of the mall. And I probably would have just murdered Natalie’s father and stayed there until the Council came to kill me.

“I don’t understand how you know me so well, but I do know that the only reason I’m still me is because of you. If you weren’t here, I think I would’ve completely lost myself the day I woke up at Megan’s. So, don’t feel guilty, and don’t think you haven’t done anything to help me. In all honesty, I think you’ve had more of an impact on me in the last few days than anyone ever has. Maybe it’s because you’re different. You’re a lot like me.”

Without saying a word in response, Reika curls up into a ball and lies down on the couch. I stare at the empty fireplace. The silence between us isn’t awkward. Instead it brings warmth. Nothing else needs to be said. We understand each other. I look down at Reika who now has her eyes closed and her head on the arm of the couch.

"She's different," I whisper to myself.

A pang of guilt shoots through me as a memory of Natalie sleeping on the flight to the compound flashes through my head. I grit my teeth, lay my head back onto the couch, and close my eyes.

"Oh, look who showed up to eat!" I shout jokingly at Tank.

"Hey, somebody's gotta watch our asses while yer in here slacking!"

"Watch our asses from what? The trees? Nobody comes up this far."

"I know, that's why I'm so paranoid! I'm used to the city where something is always happening!"

"Yeah, right! You're just as glad as the rest of us that Natalie threw a fit and convinced us to stay here!"

"Whatever, midget! I think you and lover girl over there spend too much time on that couch together. It's making ya soft!"

"Will you two shut up already! Tank, go get some food!" Natalie shouts at us as she lights a match and throws it into the fireplace."

"Ya know, I'm with Tank. I kinda miss stabbing zombies for survival. And ever since you started talking to each other, you've become inseparable from that couch" Logan says, grinning ear to ear.

"I think you two are just jealous because she stole Nineteen from you. Let him be happy for once!" Reika says to Logan.

"Yeah Wolverine, stop being jealous and go read a comic book" I shout at Logan and get punched in the arm by Natalie as she lays next to me.

I lay my head back onto the sofa and look over at Natalie smiling. Who would have thought that this house that Natalie wanted to stay at would be all we needed. I couldn't imagine losing someone along the way.

"What's wrong?" Natalie says, looking up at me.

"Nothing," I say and smile.

I close my eyes, slide myself down the couch behind her, and wrap my arm around her stomach.

"Nineteen, I think someone's here. Get up." I hear Reika's voice combined with the sound of a car door shutting.

My eyes pop open. Not only did I fall asleep, but I managed to lie myself down beside Reika and drape my arm over her.

"Sorry. I was knocked out," I say, hoisting myself off of Reika and into the frigid air of the house.

As I stand up the front door opens. Startled, I swing around, aiming my nine at the door.

"Whoa, take it easy! It's only me," Carl says, walking into the house.

"And a friend," he continues as a figure in a black hoodie enters the house behind him.

"It's time we discuss what's going on." A familiar voice enters my ears.

The man turns to me and removes his hood to reveal himself.

"Looks like it," I reply to Kisin.

Carl walks over to a light switch on the wall and clicks it on. It illuminates a dining room table that sits a few feet behind the couch. Kisin

walks over to the table and pulls out a chair. I try to shake away the feeling from my dream. Reika walks over to me, staring into my eyes.

"Should we sit down?" she asks in a low voice.

"Yeah, time to create that plan I was pondering," I say and smile back.

We sit at the table across from Kisin and Carl.

"Let's start with what you managed to get out of Greg and why you decided to leave him alive," Kisin says.

"I left him alive because we need him in order to use the code you wanted. It turns out that in order to use the code, we have to gain access to the wall. We then have to plug it into one of the military terminals. That's the only way it works."

"So we can't kill him because someone might change the code. Do you have any insurance that he won't change the code anyway?" Kisin says.

"Kind of. He can't let the Council know he's given it to us or he'll be killed, or so he says. And I'm sure if he randomly decides to change the code after one of the other Council members was murdered, someone is going to get suspicious. Other than that, I lied to him. I said that we have people watching him and that if the code didn't work, he was as good as dead."

Kisin lets out a laugh. "Well, that's not as big a bluff as you think. I do actually have people watching him. Given the current circumstances, I'm sure I can spare a few more to ensure he doesn't try anything dumb," he says, smiling.

"The problem isn't going to be Greg, it's going to be getting into the wall and using the code. That's probably why he handed the code over in the first place. He doesn't think we can get in to use it," Carl says.

"Yeah, that's going to be an interesting thing to tackle. Given enough time, I might be able to get someone placed inside to use it," Kisin says.

"Let me worry about getting inside. The more important thing to address is what I overheard," I say.

"Your intel was right, the raid took place. However, we're not entirely sure Megan was involved," Kisin says.

Carl jumps in. "Turns out that there was a call placed the day you guys arrived. A woman called the police after she got home from work and found her husband with a bullet in his head. The police report goes on to say that there was a second call placed a few days later from the same woman, stating that there was a group of strange people coming in and out of a blue house one block over. In other words Megan's house."

One of the first houses we entered when we got here. He had a wife. Guilt washes over me for killing an innocent man.

"So it's our fault. We killed that man before we learned we didn't have to kill everyone here," I say looking down.

"We didn't know," Reika adds.

"While this helps Megan's case, we're still unsure which side she's on. She was taken during the raid," Kisin says, ignoring our response.

Megan was taken? Did she go willingly or did they just take her? If she is innocent and was actually telling the truth, that means I sentenced her to death for helping us. The guilt screeching through my gut grows louder.

"We're not sure if she went willingly or if she put up a fight, but we did manage to get all of your people into safe places," Carl adds.

"Okay, that's something we'll have to make sense of in time. Megan's not the reason I brought up the raid. I brought up the raid because they were planning on using us to scare people into getting vaccines."

"Vaccines? What are you talking about?" Kisin asks, turning pale.

"Yeah, vaccines, right? That's what you guys call them isn't it? I saw the booths set up in the market that distribute them."

"That's right. Every once in a while, the booths open to help inoculate the compound against illnesses that occasionally pop up," Carl says as Kisin still sits voiceless.

"Yeah, well, based on the conversation I heard, those inoculations are the very thing making people sick. I overheard Greg and a grey haired man talking. Their plan was to capture us and then claim that we brought some form of illness in with us. By the time of the announcement, they were planning to have infected at least a hundred people."

Carl gets wide eyed and looks at Kisin.

"Those fucking bastards! I should've seen it. How could I have been so blind?" Kisin yells and slams his fist on the table.

I shoot Reika a worried look.

"Sorry. My daughter got sick after the inoculations were given out last year." he says, shaking his head.

"That's why you had me picking up medical supplies." I say.

"Yeah. The meds she needs are rare. People steal them." He replies. He shakes his head.

"I had convinced myself that it had to do with the genes in our family line. My wife died from something similar." He concludes.

"They've been targeting you the whole time" Carl adds.

Nothing I can say will make Kisin feel better. It's best for me to just continue telling him what I heard.

"The man with the grey hair kept shouting that they were going to eradicate us. Which was no surprise to me. They've been trying to eradicate us for decades. But I think they've also developed a more drastic

way of instilling control here in your compound. They called it option C. I'm not sure what it is but I'm certain it won't be good for your people.

"If you're willing to help me and my men bring the compound down, I'll see to it that you and every other innocent person in here are seen as members of the Ninety-nine and not enemies."

Kisin and Carl sit silently, contemplating my offer.

"What's your plan?" Kisin finally asks.

"If that's a yes, I'll tell you," I say authoritatively.

He looks at Carl who nods his approval.

"It's a deal," Kisin says.

"We've maintained contact with the main force of Ninety-nine while we've been here. In two days' time, the day that the council is intending to distribute the inoculations, they'll be here. We've been scouting the wall for locations to place charges that will bring it down.

"When we enter the wall to place our charges, I'll get to the terminal and make sure to enter that override code for the vehicles. Not only will it give you command of the vehicles in your possession, but it will take away the military's auto piloting and auto targeting functions.

"What I need you to do is to create a distraction large enough to draw military forces away from their stations in the wall. If you can draw their attention long enough for my men to infiltrate the wall, I can promise you sizeable reinforcements."

"Hmm," Kisin sighs to himself in contemplation.

"Told you you'd be the first person to hear it," I say, smiling at Reika.

She smiles and shakes her head at me. "Gee, thanks," she says sarcastically.

I laugh. "What?" I ask innocently.

"You know what," she says, staring me down with raised eyebrows.

"Yeah," I say smirking.

"Okay, I'll try to come up with the distraction you need, however, there's a few things I'm going to need before I can commit my people to such a plan. First off I'm going to need the specifics of your operation and how you plan to infiltrate the wall."

"The details of what we plan won't be an issue. Once everything is set and ready to go I'll fill you in."

"I'm also going to need reassurance that once the Ninety-nine are inside, they won't just torch us along with the compound," Kisin says.

Kisin's request causes me to stop talking. How am I going to convince him when I don't fully trust the Ninety-nine myself?

"You know as well as I do that in this type of situation words are meaningless. Nothing I can say will convince you that the Ninety-nine won't kill you after getting inside. But if they do, they'll probably burn me and my men along with you and yours," I reply.

A confused expression forms on Kisin's face. "And what reason would they have to dispose of you after getting inside?" he asks.

"The day before we attacked your compound was the first time I ever met the Ninety-nine. I won't go into detail, but it's very possible that they could just be using us as pawns to accomplish their goals. If that's the case, it would mean we're just as disposable as you are. On the other side of the coin, if they don't view me as disposable, then chances are that you won't be viewed as disposable either."

Kisin and Carl both sit unresponsive.

After a brief moment of silence I continue. "It's taken me the entire time I've been here to realize that not all of the people in this compound are out to kill us. In fact, it seems that the majority of the people here could care less about what's happening outside the compound. If I can

convince the Ninety-nine that the majority of the people here don't have a clue about what's actually happening, then there's a chance we can save a lot of innocent lives. It'll be much easier for me to convince them if you decide help us."

"If you just met them, why would they listen to you? And for that matter how do we know they'll even show up?" Carl asks.

"As long as we have a sound plan of attack, they'll show up. They want revenge, but more importantly, they want to ensure their own safety. The best way for them to gain that is to disarm the people who keep attacking them.

"As for them listening to us, if we get them in then we can get them to listen. And if they don't want to listen, then we'll find a way to make them listen. Remember, if you're disposable, so am I. I'll be doing everything in my power to convince them we're needed."

"You're right, there's nothing you can say to convince me that they won't kill us when they get inside. But after learning that the vaccines have been getting us sick, I think it's pertinent we act before the Council does something else. I have been planning to start a rebellion for a long time. Unfortunately, organizing it takes time, and taking our time no longer seems to be an option. We need to strike before they do, or just as Nineteen said, we'll be dead," Kisin says, turning to Carl.

"I guess this doesn't leave us with much of a choice but to join you," Carl says, looking at me.

"Okay," I say, nodding. "Now that everyone's in, I'm going to need to meet with my people tomorrow to finish planning our attack."

"That shouldn't be a problem. I can drop you off on my way to work in the morning." Carl says.

"It's too suspicious for you to drive him all the way to Rosewood when the station is downtown. How about you drop him a block or so away from the station and I'll have one of my men pick them up from there?" Kisin adds.

"Wait! I don't think we should get dropped off near the police station when we have the entire department looking for us," Reika interrupts.

"She's right. I did shoot that officer," I say.

"There aren't as many officers as you think looking for you. The man you shot was in the Council's pocket. Three quarters of the department have hated him since the day he shot another cop. If anything, you did us a favor by getting rid of him."

"What about the quarter of the police that care?" Reika asks.

"They're too busy looking out for themselves to be out looking for you. The only reason they would hunt you down is if someone offered them compensation to do so. I highly doubt anyone has offered them anything. You two will be fine getting dropped off near the station."

"Okay, so you drop us off near the station and one of your men picks us up and takes us to meet with my men. Where are you going to be at during all of this?"

"I'll be running around trying to organize my men for the distraction you need. Sometime later that day, I will have to meet with you and your men to obtain the full details of your attack," Kisin replies.

"Alright, I guess that only leaves one more thing to figure out. We're going to need a place to sleep that's close to the eastern wall tomorrow night. That way when it's time for us to carry out our operation, we can ensure we get to the wall without getting stopped," I say.

"I have plenty of friends in that area. I'll take care of it," Kisin says.

"There's also this," Reika says, placing the grey haired man's cell phone on the table.

"I grabbed it just in case we might be able to use it to our advantage," Reika continues.

"Who does it belong to?" Carl asks.

"The Council member who was talking to Gates," I reply.

Kisin laughs.

"That'll actually help us a lot. I can use the police database to cross reference the numbers he's called in order to find out who they belong to," Carl says.

"It'll help us weed out potential traitors," Kisin adds as Reika slides Carl the phone.

As the word traitor leaves Kisin's lips, a feeling of guilt enters my gut. Megan. Was she a traitor or was she legitimately trying to help us?

"Anything else?" Reika asks as I'm lost in my thoughts.

"No. I think that's about it," Carl says.

"I should get going so I can start preparing for tomorrow," Kisin says.

"Nineteen?" Reika looks at me.

"No. It seems we have an understanding. I guess we'll see you tomorrow," I say as Kisin stands from the table.

"There's an extra bedroom down the hall. You guys don't have to sleep on the couch." Carl says, moving toward the door.

"Thanks, you're leaving again?" I ask, getting up from the table.

"I'm going to take Kisin to his vehicle but you don't have to wait for me to get back to pass out. You've had a long day."

"I think we might just take you up on that offer," I say, nodding my head.

"I'll see in the morning," Carl continues as he opens the door.

"Nineteen, Reika," Kisin says, nodding before pulling a hood over his head and walking out the door.

"Bye," Reika says before Carl shuts the door behind him.

"So are we actually going to sleep?" Reika asks, turning to me.

I chuckle. "I figure we can wait in the room and pretend to be asleep when he gets back. If he comes back and goes to sleep himself, then I think we'll be okay to sleep in the same house with him."

"You still don't trust him?"

"Not exactly. I feel like I've reached some kind of middle ground with him and Kisin, but that doesn't mean I trust them."

"Okay. To the room then?"

"Might as well get comfortable I guess," I say as we walk out of the living room and down the hall to the empty bedroom.

"How long have you been running that plan through your head?" Reika asks.

"Not long enough," I say, shaking my head as we enter the room.

"What do you mean?" she asks with her eyebrows raised.

"Before we left Megan's, Fox told me about how he had been entering the wall to scout it. So I guess you can say that I've been trying to come up with a plan around what Fox told me as far back as this afternoon," I say, smiling.

Reika lets out a laugh. "So you really did just piece it together." She shakes her head. "I guess I can't be mad at you for not telling me your plan before you told Kisin. Seeing as how you didn't have a plan before you started talking to Kisin!" she says playfully.

"Sometimes you just gotta wing it!" I say, smiling.

"Maybe I was wrong if you're making decisions that fast!"

"You're the one who said I have the perfect middle ground mentality to make decisions."

"Don't go getting a big head now! I was just trying to help you out 'cause you were down in the dumps," she says, trying to hold in her laughter.

I open my mouth to fake being shocked at her statement. "I don't even know what to say." I make a few sniffing noises as if I'm going to cry.

"So, are we sharing the bed?" Reika asks, looking at me.

I look down at the bed we're sitting on.

"Sure, just change the subject! Ignore my feelings, they're not important like the bed." I pretend to be mad.

"So..." she says, holding back her grin acting as if she is waiting for a response.

"I guess it's something we don't usually have to figure out. Yeah, I don't see why not," I say, caving.

"Good answer! For you that is, because if you woulda told me that one of us is sleeping on the floor, you woulda been the one on the floor!" she says with a fake attitude.

"That's cold blooded. Not only am I not good at making decisions anymore, I get the floor?" I say with wide eyes.

"Only if you had suggested it." she says back, grinning.

"Pshh. I don't even know who you are anymore. What happened to the nice quiet Reika who supported me?" I say looking into her eyes.

She smiles. "Well... um... that was before the compound spoiled me."

"Dang, I..." I draw a blank trying to come up with a witty comeback.

"What's wrong? Run out of things to say?" Reika asks.

"No, I... Yeah, I got nothin'," I reply.

She lets out a quick laugh before her face turns serious. "It's good to see you laughing again."

"What do you mean?" I smirk, taking note of the sudden sadness in her eyes.

"Ever since everything happened, you've been so serious. Even when you would joke with Tank or me, it was easy to see that it was forced. You did it trying to comfort us, not because you felt like joking."

"How do you know that's different from now?" My face grows serious as I stare into her eyes.

"Your eyes aren't cold or sad, and your face is warm all around. Before there was always a smirk while the rest of your face remained rigid and unwavering."

"That's because when I'm alone with you, I tend to tune out everything and listen to what you have to say. After I started talking to you on the porch that night, I realized there was a lot more to you than you let on. Then in the arena you noticed things the others didn't. I guess the bottom line is that I've learned to pay attention to what you say. Right now you were able to make me forget that we're fighting for our lives."

The loud creak of the front door fills my ears.

"Shit!" I jump off the bed, hit the light switch on the wall, and swing the door closed. I then jump back on the bed, and lie down to pretend to sleep. Reika takes the initiative to lie down the moment she realizes what I'm doing. We lie motionless in the darkness of the room. I hear a shuffling sound from the living room that's followed by what must be the click of a light switch. I place one hand on my pistol in case I need to use it.

"What do you think?" Reika whispers.

"I don't know yet," I whisper back.

I hear another click followed by footsteps into the hallway. I grip my pistol tighter waiting for Carl to appear and attack us. The footsteps seem to fade down the hallway in the opposite direction of our room.

"I think he might have gone to his room," I whisper.

"Want me to check?" Reika asks.

"No, I got it," I say, getting off of the soft mattress.

I creep towards the door and open it. I stick my head out. It's pitch black. He must've turned the light off and gone to his room. He didn't check on us. Does he actually trust us that much? Hmm. His reasoning doesn't matter I guess, just means we can sleep a little less cautiously. I turn the doorknob quietly and push the door shut before slowly releasing the knob.

"Looks like we can go to sleep," I say, lying back down on the bed.

"Does that mean you're actually going to sleep tonight?"

"I've been sleeping," I say.

"Maybe the last few nights because of the pain killers. But I know how you are, you don't have to keep yourself awake to watch over me. I'm a light sleeper, I'll wake up at the first sound of trouble."

"Why would I do that? That would imply that I care about you," I say, smiling in the dark.

She lets out a laugh. "It's too late to pretend, you've already admitted to that."

"No such words have left my mouth," I say, growing drowsy.

I must be more tired than I thought. This bed feels amazing.

"Well, actions speak louder than words. But your words give you away from time to time too," she replies with a hint of playfulness in her voice.

I smile in the darkness. My mind jumps to waking up on the couch with my arm wrapped around her. The sudden desire to hold Reika creeps over me. I grit my teeth and ball up one of my fists. What am I thinking? I need to stop. The last time I started thinking like this about someone, she was killed. Guilt seeps in as I remember kissing Natalie in the arena.

"No witty denial this time?" Reika asks at my lack of response.

"Night, Reika," I say painfully.

"Okay, night," she says with a hint of sadness in her tone.

It hurts to shut her out. Why does it hurt? I take a deep breath in. It doesn't matter. I need to sleep so I'm ready for tomorrow. Envision the plan and nothing else. I imagine how tomorrow's events will unfold. Eventually I give in to the softness of the bed and pass out.

REUNION

My eyes pop open and my heart starts racing as I hear a noise in the living room. My eyes scan the room frantically. That's right. I'm in Carl's house that's probably Carl waking up for the day. I start to roll onto my back when I realize Reika is pressed closely to it. She must have gotten cold during the night.

I turn my head enough to see that she's huddled in a ball, pressed to me for warmth. We're not used to having sheets on a bed to cover ourselves with. We didn't even peel back the sheets we're lying on. It wasn't too bad last night, but now it's a lot colder.

I slowly work my way off of the bed, trying not to wake Reika. Should I wake her? No, this is probably the best sleep we're going to get for a while. I peel back a corner of the bed sheets and slowly try to slide them from under her. I get half way down her legs when her eyes pop open.

"Lift your legs," I whisper.

She rolls halfway onto her back, uncoiling her body as she lifts her legs from the bed. I yank the sheets from beneath the rest of her body.

"Okay," I say.

She puts her legs back on the bed, shooting me a confused drowsy look. I pull the sheets over her.

"I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?" she asks in a low voice.

"I'm gonna go see how much time we have before we need to leave."

"Okay," She says non-combatively.

She must have been more worn out than me. Usually she'd force herself up as soon as anyone in our group is awake. I walk to the living room and see Carl in the kitchen making food.

"You're up already?" Carl says, surprised.

"Yeah. I heard you get up. How much time do we have before we need to leave?" I ask.

"We have about two hours before we have to head out. So you can go back to sleep for a while if you want. I can wake you up when it's time."

Feeling exhausted, I cave in to his offer. "Okay. I'm gonna go lie down for a little while longer then."

"Oh, and I forgot to give you those last night," he says, pointing to a plastic bag on the table. "The change of clothes I promised you. We can't have you two walking around in the same clothes you shot a Council member in."

"That's right, I forgot about the necessity to change here. Thanks," I say, grabbing the bag and heading back to the room.

Reika is lying under the covers wide awake, staring at the doorway.

"Is it time?" she asks.

"Not yet, we still have a while to relax," I say, throwing the plastic bag of clothes onto the floor before crawling into the bed next to her.

REUNION

I lie on my side facing away from Reika and pull the covers over myself. This morning seems so serene. Too bad it won't last. I feel Reika press to my back again.

A craving to abandon our attack on the compound floods through me. If I don't attack this compound maybe we could find a way to fit in here and live like this. After all, this is what we've been fighting to find.

Ha, I wish. It would only be a matter of time before the Council hunted us down. Still, this feels amazing. I close my eyes and doze off.

"It's about that time to get moving guys."

I pop up from the bed to see Carl standing at the door.

"Alright we'll get ready to go," I say groggily.

Reika pries herself from the pillow and stands up next to the bed. Following her lead, I force myself to stand and grab the bag of clothes that I threw on the floor.

I dump out two pairs of blue jeans, one white shirt, and one dark green shirt onto the bed. Reika grabs the green shirt before I make a move towards anything. I grab the white shirt and the larger pair of jeans from the pile and turn my back towards Reika so I can get dressed,

"You know, it's safe to change in separate rooms now," Reika says.

"Huh?" I start to turn my head towards her, stopping short just in case she's changing.

"Least that's what we've been doing since we've been here," Reika says.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't know that's what you've been doing. If you want you can change in another room," I say, turning to her.

I freeze as I catch a glimpse of her shirtless back and then force myself to turn away from her. She started changing anyway?

"No, I'm fine changing here with you. I just wanted to give you crap!" she shoots back.

I continue to take off the rest of my clothes. "It's too early to mess with my head. My brain's not on yet." I reply.

"Just get dressed and stop staring at my back," she says nonchalantly.

"That was an accident! I didn't know you were changing."

She starts laughing. "I was joking! But you really were staring at my back huh?"

"It was an accident, sorry," I say, blushing.

"Well then, I'm gonna sit here and stare at yours as payback!" Reika says firmly.

I burst out in laughter. "Go for it. You won't get to see much because I'm already dressed," I say, sliding the new shirt on.

"I saw enough."

"Does that mean you're dressed and I can turn around now?" I ask.

"Maybe."

I turn around. Reika is standing with her arms crossed and a grin on her face.

"Let's throw our old clothes in this bag and get outta here," I say walking over to Reika with the plastic bag in my hand. We cram our old clothes inside and walk to the living room.

"Looks like the Council still found a way to scare the public into taking the vaccines," Carl says, sitting on the couch in front of the TV.

"How?" I say, looking at the TV.

A news bulletin is flashing across the screen.

"Apparently when they raided Megan's house, they chose some surgeon to use as a scapegoat. They're claiming he was helping the outsiders and is now deathly sick because of it."

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A picture of Mark appears on the upper right hand side of the screen.

"That's the surgeon who saved me," I say, staring at the screen.

"He was fine yesterday." Reika says.

"And now he's supposedly deathly sick. The Council is pulling strings to ensure that people get the vaccines. They expect to have the vaccine available tomorrow morning for the entire compound."

"I guess that means we don't have a choice but to succeed tomorrow."

"Pretty much. And I think I know where to create the distraction."

"Where?" Reika asks.

"The vaccine booths. If they were planning to kill a hundred people originally, who knows how many they might kill now that a Council member is dead."

"Should we get moving?" I ask.

"Ah, I actually made you both breakfast, it's on the table. Eat and we'll get moving," Carl says.

On the table there are two overflowing plates of food and two glasses of water.

"It's not much. I just whipped up some pancakes and bacon for you when I made my breakfast."

"Pancakes?" I say, walking over to the table inspecting the plate.

"Oh, that's right, you probably don't have pancakes outside the wall. Sorry. They're pretty good. Try them, they'll fill you up."

"Where's yours?" I ask.

"I've already eaten. As soon as you're done we'll head out. I assume these are your old clothes?" Carl asks pointing to the bag.

"Yeah," I say, handing him the bag.

"Eat up," Carl says, leaving the living room with the bag.

I shoot Reika an inviting look and sit down with one of the plates. I take a bite of a pancake, not knowing what to expect.

"It's actually really good!" I say, nodding at Reika.

Reika takes a bite of hers. "Not bad!"

After our test bites turn out decent, we inhale the breakfast Carl created for us.

"What do you guys think?" Carl comes back into the living room just as we are finishing the last few bites on our plates.

"It was really good. Thanks," I say with a mouthful of food.

"Very good," Reika says.

Carl laughs. "Looks like it! You finished it fast enough."

"We're used to eating on the run," I say smiling. "We gotta get going anyway, so it's a good thing right?" I reply.

"Good point. Does that mean you're ready to go?" Carl asks.

"Yeah." Reika and I say simultaneously.

"Okay, let's get moving," Carl says, putting on a jacket next to the door.

We follow Carl to the police car parked in the driveway and hop inside. We pull out of the driveway and drive down the street.

"So I'll be dropping you off about two blocks from the station. A dark green SUV will be parked near the corner waiting for you. The driver will take you to where your men spent the night."

"Do I just call Kisin if I need to get a hold of him?"

"You can if it's an emergency but Kisin said he'll try to arrive around noon. He wanted to go over the plan with you and help you attain anything extra you may need to complete your part."

"Okay. That works. What about you?"

"I'll be hatching my part of the plan through the police department. I won't see you again until everything takes place."

"Through the police department?" I ask.

"Yeah, you'd be surprised how many policemen know about the Council. Most of them just require the right push to jump into action. That's what I'll be providing."

"So you're saying we're going to have backup from officers?" Reika asks.

"I wouldn't necessarily call it backup. But they'll be contributing to the situation in their own way. I guess you can say they'll be working side by side with you."

"That's definitely a change," I add.

"No kidding," Reika says.

"I guess that does sound a little strange. The policemen sworn to protect this place helping you bring it down. Haha. The reality is that the Council is trying to kill all of us. Once you know that, it becomes apparent just how badly we need to work together.

"We've been too busy fighting among ourselves to see that the Council's been pulling strings. Who knows, maybe the Council's even responsible for the original collapse." Carl stops talking somewhat abruptly as if his own suggestion caused something in his mind to surface.

What if the Council existed before the collapse? We've always been told that the collapse happened because a freak turn of events and continued due to the greed and corruption of those in power. But what if those in power did it on purpose? Would it have been possible to engineer such a thing?

I look out the window at the downtown sidewalk. It's flooded with people dressed in suits walking speedily in all directions.

These people have no idea what is about to happen to them. Their lives are going to change drastically within the next few days. I wonder if this is what it was like when the collapse took place. A country full of people, all caught up within their individual lives, never considering that their way of life could change. How does one not used to change react when it occurs?

I glance back at Reika who is staring out the window searching the buildings. I wonder if she's thinking the same thing as me? In a day, this relatively peaceful place will turn into a war zone.

"How far is the police department?" I ask, breaking the silence.

"It's just up ahead," Carl says, turning the corner.

"That dark green suburban across the street is your ride," he continues, pulling up to the sidewalk.

"Thank you. For all of your help," I say.

"No problem! See you on the other side," Carl says, smiling.

"Will do," I say, shutting the door.

"Thanks," Reika says, stepping out from the back of the police car.

As we approach the suburban, the front passenger window rolls down.

An elderly man in the driver seat shouts out the window at us. "It's unlocked, hop in and let's get movin."

I open the front door and jump onto the black leather seat while Reika gets into the back. The driver starts to pull away from the curb.

I hastily grab for the door and shut it. "We in a hurry?" I belch out in an irritated tone.

"As a matter a fact we are," the old man snaps back.

"They're looking for you and I refuse to get caught helping ya." he says, pointing out the window.

A man wearing a burgundy suit walks speedily down the sidewalk in the direction we just left.

"Who—?" I start to ask but am cut off by the old man.

"That cop you shot the other day wasn't just an ear for the Council, he was an enforcer for some very nasty businessmen."

"I see. Thank you for risking your life to help us escape," I say sarcastically.

The man starts laughing. "I'm not helping you out of the goodness of my heart. I'm helping ya because I know what you're trying to do, and I fear what's going to happen to my kids if you don't succeed."

"Kisin told you?" I ask somewhat shocked.

"He didn't have much of a choice. I'm not a man that blindly follows people."

I hope this man's trustworthy and that Kisin's not just sharing our plan with everyone.

"Ha, the look on your face says that you're not very happy that Kisin told me what he did."

"If Kisin decided you're trustworthy then I have no reason to question his motives," I reply, trying to hide my uncertainty.

"Don't worry kid, I was a necessary man to fill in. That distraction you need tomorrow, I'll be organizing a good chunk of it."

If he's one of the people carrying out the distraction, there's a reason for him to know our plan. Still, the more people who know the greater the risk of it getting out before we're able to enact it.

"So that explains why he filled you in. Figured there had to be a reason," I say.

The man smiles. "Kisin's not the type of person to give out information unless it's necessary. My names Barry by the way. I'll be meeting

with you again a little later in the day to fill you in on the details of the distractions we'll be causing."

"Did you say distractions?" I ask.

"Yep, we decided it'd be best if we cause a few different calamities to deal with rather than just one really big one. That way if the Council and military response is quick, they have several situations to keep them busy."

"That makes sense. What do we have planned so far?"

"I'll be going over it with ya later today when everything is set in stone. Besides, we're almost to the house."

"You okay back there? You've been quieter than a mouse since you hopped in," he says glancing back at Reika.

"I'm fine, just didn't have anything relevant to add to your conversation," Reika replies.

"Okay, just makin' sure. When you get to the door knock four times or they won't let ya in," Barry says as we pull in front of a large pink house with two convertibles in the driveway.

"Okay, thanks for your help," I say and step out of the vehicle onto the sidewalk.

Reika jumps out behind me and we start walking across the lush green lawn toward the porch.

"Kisin's been busy," Reika says.

"Yeah I wonder how he managed to get so much planned so quickly," I reply.

The porch consists of smooth red rocks that branch out in a spiral design from the door. I knock four times as Barry instructed. There is shuffling followed by the sound of several locks being unlatched. The

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door swings open to reveal a short man with long curly hair bunched up on top of his head.

"You must be Nineteen and Reika?" the man says, turning his head to Reika.

Before we can respond, he begins to talk again.

"Come on in, your friends are in the basement sleeping."

We follow the man into the house, both of us staring at the strange pink floor. We walk through an enormous room with very expensive looking lights hanging from the ceiling. A pink piano sits in the middle of the room surrounded by large one-person couches. As we exit the room, there is a bar with glass shelving that is filled with bottles of alcohol.

Once out of the room, we walk into a large hallway and to a dark red door.

"This leads downstairs. Your friends will be two levels down.

"In two or three hours, Kisin and the others will arrive. Until that time, you may do as you please. Anything in this house you may use as your own. Oh, and one floor down is the bowling alley if you wish to utilize it."

Bowling alley? There's a bowling alley inside this house?

"Thank you," I say monotone to the man who is now holding the door open in front of us.

"Did he just say that there's a bowling alley on the second floor?" Reika asks as we make our way down the rosewood colored stairway.

"I'm pretty sure that's what he said," I reply.

"Who the hell has a bowling alley in their house?"

I laugh. "That's exactly what I was thinking. And this house is way bigger on the inside than it looked when we pulled up."

"Definitely can't say I've seen any houses outside the compound that have two floors underground."

"Yeah, no kidding. Most of them don't even have a downstairs," I say as we reach the bottom of the stairwell.

We walk out of the stairwell and into an enormous room with a black marble floor. To our right there is a pool table that is surrounded by lounge chairs and small glass tables. To our left there is a huge television with two beds and multiple couches in front of it.

"Is that Tank?" Reika asks, pointing to the large frame of a man lying on one of the beds.

"It might be, but who's next to him?" I say as we begin to walk toward the beds.

As we draw closer I can see that Tank is sleeping next to Omni on one bed and on the other, Lotus is next to Fox. Cupid lies sprawled out on the couch to the left of the beds.

"I think it's Omni," Reika replies.

"Yeah it is," I say as we near the grouping of furniture.

Tank abruptly sits upright looking in our direction.

"Oh, it's just you two! Ya startled me!" Tank says in a low voice.

He gets up from the bed walks to Reika and gives her a big hug. Then, quite unexpectedly, he does the same thing to me.

"Missed us that much, huh?" I say jokingly.

"I didn't know what to think. I've been paranoid as hell since the day you told me to evacuate the house."

Reika looks at me and smiles. "We missed you too Tank."

"Pfft I didn't miss you guys. I was worried about you two getting yourselves killed. Without me around there's no one to prevent you from making stupid decisions!"

I laugh. "I guess I would've been paranoid too if I was the only one from our group back at the house."

"I take it we woke you?" I ask.

"Yeah, none of us slept until we arrived here a few hours ago."

"I see You guys made it back safely," Fox says, approaching us.

"Was easy," Reika says.

"You're being modest. So, what's this plan we supposedly have?" Fox asks, turning to me.

"Thanks to your research on how to get inside the wall and my nice long conversation with Natalie's father, I managed to put a few things together. And of course it was easier to sell Kisin on the idea if he believed that we had already worked it all out," I say, smirking.

"So fill us in on what we're doin'," Fox says with a huge smile.

I break down the plan the same way I explained it to Kisin the night before. After an awkward pause taken by Fox to digest the information, he launches into a speech. He explains how long each charge would take to place and what area we should place them in. After about twenty minutes of planning, we reach an agreement on what to tell Kisin when he arrives.

Fox lets out a chuckle. "Well, it looks like you put more than a few things together. If this works and we actually manage to pull this off, you'll be branded a hero."

"Ha, I'm far from that. At this point I'm just doing what's necessary to survive. Besides, Tank and Reika are the reason everything worked out. If it were just me I would have died in the mall, ha, maybe before that."

"If I wasn't around to watch over them, we wouldn't have even made it to the wall," Tank chips in jokingly.

Reika shoots Tank a doubtful look.

Fox starts laughing. "It's definitely thanks to all of you. And if you were just trying to survive, you woulda stopped helping the Ninety-nine the second your team infiltrated the wall," Fox says seriously.

"So, does that mean we're done planning for now?" Tank asks, looking at Fox and me.

"I don't think there's anything else we need to go over," Fox says, looking at me.

"Nothing that I can think of," I say.

"Good, because I'm ready to go back to sleep!" Tank says.

"I wouldn't mind a nap myself," Reika says, taking Tank's lead.

"The man who let us into the house said we have a few hours before Kisin and his men arrive. I guess we can use that time to get some rest in," I say.

"Sounds like none of us slept very well last night. You and Reika might have to share but I think there's another couch over there. I could help you move it over here if you want?" Fox asks while pointing to a couch that's along the other side of the room against the wall.

Actually, last night was some of the best sleep I've had in a while. It's strange that I feel like I could go back to sleep.

"That's okay. I think we'll be fine sleeping over there," I reply.

"In that case I think I'll lie back down," Fox says as he starts motioning toward the bed.

"I'm gonna go crash too," Reika says, looking at Tank and me.

"We can catch up later. Get some rest," I say to Tank before turning to walk towards our designated couch.

"Good. I get a little more rest before I have to start watching out for everyone again," Tank says jokingly.

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Reika and I are about ten feet away when half shouts to us,

"Oh, hold on I almost forgot."

We turn around to see Tank jogging toward us.

"We can walk and talk," Tank says as he reaches us.

"Everything okay since we left?" I ask quietly as we walk.

"I've been watching everyone a lot closer since Megan's place got raided. No one has done anything suspicious. Is there anything I should know?" Tank asks.

"It doesn't seem like the person that sold us out was inside one of our groups. Unless Kisin himself set it up, but I don't think that's the case," I say.

"That's good to hear. What did you find out from Natalie's dad?" he asks.

"The only good thing that came out of him is the code that we'll be using to disrupt the compound's military equipment," I reply.

"How did you kill him?" We reach the couch just as Tank asks his question.

I take a deep breath trying to contemplate what to say to Tank but before I can respond Reika interjects.

"He's still alive. We had to keep him that way in order to infiltrate the compound," Reika explains.

The look on Tank's face is a mixture of sadness and anger.

"We have people watching him to ensure that he can't escape. He'll pay before this is over, don't worry," I say with a tinge of anger in my tone.

"Okay. Well, I think you two can take care of yourselves now. I'll be watching over ya from a far," Tank says before faking a smile and turning around to walk back to his bed.

I shoot Reika a smile before sprawling out onto the couch. She scowls at me as I purposely stretch out over the entire length of it.

"Mmhmm and what do you think you're doing?" she asks.

"Getting ready to go to sleep, you?" I shoot back, grinning.

"Getting ready to roll you off the couch," she says, cocking her head to the side and smiling.

"That's cold blooded, why would you do such a thing?" I say, opening my mouth, pretending to be offended.

"Where do you suggest I sleep if you're taking the entire couch?"

"I dunno, the floor looks pretty comfortable," I say, barely holding back my smile.

Without saying a word, she plops down on my stomach.

I let out a gust of wind. "Okay, okay! I give! I don't wanna go out by being crushed to death!" I say sarcastically.

She turns and punches me in the arm with wide eyes and a huge smile.

"You're an ass! Now scoot back so I can lie down," she says, looking away.

Scoot back? I figured she'd make me scoot down so we each had a half of the couch to ourselves.

"You mean scoot down?" I ask.

"No! Scoot back and onto your side so I can lie down in front of you. We'll be more comfortable that way."

"Oh, okay." I say as I start to wiggle out from under her.

She slides off of my stomach and onto the couch cushion. As I press firmly to the back of the couch, Reika lies on her side and wriggles herself away from the edge by pushing her body into mine. Reika's scent overtakes my nose as she wiggles her body trying to get comfortable.

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Wrapping my arm around Reika yesterday was something that happened while I was sleeping. But now, the only thing I can think about is holding her tight.

"What's wrong?" Reika says, her head turning just enough to see me out the corner of her eye.

"Nothing—just, just worried about Tank that's all," I say, scrambling to keep the truth of my thoughts from her.

"Oh, well do you think you could do me a favor?" she asks.

"What?" I say in a serious tone.

"Could you wrap your arm around me? I'd rather not fall off the couch." she says.

I laugh.

"Sure," I say, closing my eyes and smiling.

"What's so funny?"

"You just read my mind, that's all." I blurt out before thinking.

"Oh, okay," she says, her tone changing as if she has a smile on her face.

What the hell am I doing? I need to remain focused. I can't lose her too. I have to keep her alive. All the feelings in the world won't do a thing if she's dead.

"I'm sure Tank understands your choice," Reika says, breaking the silence.

"He does. But understanding a situation doesn't make you feel better about it," I reply.

"This is the only way avenge their deaths," she pauses before continuing.

"Logan and Natalie were fighting by your side for a reason. And now you're a day away from attaining something that last week we all thought was impossible."

"What about you? Would you have been happy if we claimed some cabin in the mountains as our home?" I ask, remembering the dream I had at Carl's.

"Probably not. I have too many bad memories to settle without doing anything. And if we did, I never would've gotten the chance to get to know the real you."

"The real me?"

"Yeah. I've known the shell you wear to downplay yourself for a long time. But now I've seen the person underneath it. We would never have grown this close if we didn't take this path."

I smile to myself.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. I just wish I could've got to know you without losing people," I say, drowsily.

"Me too, but you don't have to worry about me," Reika says and then pauses as if waiting for a response.

It's too late for that. I care about you, and it seems that no matter how hard I try to deny it, it grows.

I keep my thoughts to myself.

"I can handle myself, I have my entire life," she finishes, falling asleep mid-sentence.

Giving in to my emotions, I let my head rest on hers.

"I know. No matter what happens tomorrow, at least we have this," I whisper in her ear.

As long as I can protect you, I'll die happy knowing you'll have the chance to experience this again.

BLUEPRINT

"You two look way too comfortable!" Tank's voice booms into my ears.

My eyes pop open to see him standing over us. I lift my head from Reika and see that everyone is awake.

"Does this mean we have to move?" Reika moans.

"How long have we been out?" I ask drowsily.

"Four hours or so," he says, looking amused.

"Four hours!" both Reika and I shout.

We scramble to get up and off of the couch but fail miserably. We have to untangle our bodies from one another before we can get moving.

Tank starts laughing. "Good thing we aren't under attack! I'd be left to defend by myself!"

"Damn giant! Still got jokes I see," I say, smiling, finally able to pry myself from the couch.

"You're the decoy. It's all part of my plan," Reika says to Tank smirking.

"Man, maybe you two should go back to sleep. So much anger toward the man protecting you," Tank replies.

I chuckle, shaking my head.

"Kisin here yet?" I ask.

"Not yet, but the guy who let us in told us that he'd be arriving in about thirty minutes or so. And that was twenty minutes ago. So, any minute he should be here."

"Alright, I guess we should join the others and wait," I say.

"We really slept for four hours?" Reika asks Tank as we start walking.

Tank starts laughing. "Yeah. I was actually surprised that you were still asleep when I came over."

"Did we miss anything?" she asks.

"Not that I know of. Ha, actually, I was knocked out until about five minutes ago myself. Guess I was finally able to shake the paranoia vibe and get some decent sleep with you guys here."

"Well, if nothing else we're well rested for this group meeting," I say as we reach the rest of the group.

"Finally awake I see," Fox says.

"Good to see you made it," Cupid says.

Omni, who is sitting next to Cupid, nods his head in greeting.

Lotus smiles. "Morning guys."

"Hey everybody." I awkwardly wave.

"Yep, was a good power nap," Reika replies to Fox.

"They said Kisin should be here any—" Before Fox can finish his sentence, he is interrupted.

"How's everyone holdin' up?" Kisin's voice shoots into the room from behind us.

I turn to see Kisin walking toward us followed by a group of three men. One of which is the driver who dropped us at the house.

"Good. Now that you're here, we can finally get this plan in motion," I say jokingly.

Kisin lets out a laugh. "Well, while you were all leisurely waiting for me, I've been ensuring our plan actually works," he replies in a joking tone.

"I would expect nothing less," I respond as Kisin stops in front of me.

"Judging by your size, you must be Tank?" Kisin asks, looking at Tank.

Tank chuckles. "Good guess. Nice to meet you," Tank says.

"Likewise," Kisin replies.

Kisin steps to the side of Tank to see the rest of the group. "For those of you that haven't met me yet, I'm Kisin."

One by one, each person announces their name and nods or waves in greeting to Kisin.

"Okay, now that we're all acquainted, let's head upstairs and solidify our plans for tomorrow," Kisin says, motioning everyone toward the stairs.

"Sounds good," I say, taking the lead to the maroon stairwell.

"What do you guys think of this house?" Kisin asks as I'm halfway up the first flight of stairs.

"Very colorful!" Reika says.

"It's uh, huge," I say.

Kisin starts laughing. "It belongs to the man who let you all in. He's a famous musician in the compound. He, uh, definitely has a unique taste," Kisin says, laughing again.

"That explains a lot," Tank says.

"Why's that?" Kisin asks as we exit the stairwell.

"I've stumbled across a few books about musicians and their houses. And it seemed like each one of 'em had some kind of crazy theme going on in their house," Tank comments.

"Interesting. I wonder if that's true about the others here in the compound," Kisin says as we reach a cherry oak table with maps spread across it.

"Everyone feel free to pick a place and have a seat," Kisin announces, pulling out a chair in the middle of the table for himself.

I pull out a chair a few seats away from Kisin to let his men sit next to him. Reika sits to my right and Tank pulls a chair to my left.

"So, first off I might as well launch into what I've been up to," Kisin says, looking around the table.

Everyone nods.

"Let's hear it," I say.

"Nineteen said that a distraction was needed to help you infiltrate the wall, so I spent the better part of the last twelve hours concreting numerous situations that will do just that.

"The first of which deals with the vaccine booths. Thanks to Nineteen, we know the Council has been experimenting on our population. I've used the majority of my channels to make this information known. As a result, we have been successful in organizing an enormous protest. This protest will take place outside every vaccine booth in the compound. At seven a.m., I have arranged the television stations to broadcast that the claims of experimentation are true."

"You think that will cause enough of an uproar for the military to get involved?" I ask.

"Not quite. However, thanks to Carl, the majority of the police department will have their hands full dealing with the protests. At which time three other events will take place one after another. I have arranged a staged gang war between the DDs and the EK's. Both factions have been paid to mass at two separate locations and empty their weapons

into targets that we have set up. While this is taking place, someone in the vicinity of each area will place a call to the police station saying that there is a gang war happening. This will cause any remaining police officers to be sent out. With the entire police force busy, we will be in position to draw out the military.

"In the southern-most part of the compound there are two enormous warehouses where our government has been manufacturing Z." Kisin pauses to let us soak in the information.

A surge of anger shoots through me. It's as I always thought. The government has been distributing it to the wastes.

"I convinced a soldier to place remote controlled bombs in each warehouse. Carl will be providing me with a phone call to let me know when all the police have been dispatched. After that phone call we will be detonating the bombs."

"How did you manage that?" Omni asks.

"He had a daughter who died after the vaccine was given to her. It didn't take much persuading to convince him to join our cause," Kisin replies.

Holy shit. Kisin has been busy. I knew he was reliable, but has he really managed to set up this much within one night?

"Now, the last of the distractions, will be up to your men. I suggest you send a team to place explosives on the westside where the construction is taking place. If we can detonate them around the same time as the warehouse explosives, the military will believe they are under attack from several locations and have no choice but to respond," Kisin finishes.

"Wow. You came up with all of this over night?" I ask, half impressed and half doubting that the plan is real.

"Not exactly. As I told you, I've been planning an uprising for quite some time. These were just the most effective ways to accomplish what we need tomorrow," Kisin says, grinning.

"With all of this organized, I kinda feel like we have the easy job," I say, smiling.

Kisin and a few others laugh.

"We had originally planned to set up charges along the western wall, but we don't have enough to hit both sides of the wall." I pause.

"That won't be a problem. How many more do you need?" Kisin asks.

I look at Fox.

"We have three. If you could find a way to get us three more, that would do it," Fox says.

"Consider it done," a dark haired man sitting next to Kisin replies.

"Perfect. I guess that means it's on to our part of the plan.

"There are wall tours that take place every day at seven am. Fox and his team have gone on several," I stop and look at Fox to continue.

"Each time we went, there were no more than three guards stationed at the entrance. Once inside, security is extremely relaxed. Aside from personnel walking the halls, there is nothing that would prevent us from moving freely," Fox explains.

"The tour meets at six forty-five and moves to the entrance at six fifty-five. At seven, they head inside. We would need the explosives at the warehouses and along the western wall to detonate between six fifty-five to seven a.m.. That would ensure we get to the wall before it goes on lockdown. Once inside, we'll place the charges and make our way to the control room where we can enter the code."

"The time frame won't be a problem, but even with part of the wall falling, how does the Ninety-nine intend to get in over the rubble of the wall?" Kisin asks.

"The charges we have aren't just c4. They're the charges that were developed by the government midway through the collapse. In other words, they detonate twice. The first brings the building down, the second happens two or so minutes after the rubble has settled and is meant to clear the rubble," Fox says.

"I've heard stories about those. The government decided that they couldn't leave survivors behind to fight. So they created a charge that allowed them to get in and slaughter whoever was left. I honestly thought that was just a horror story born of the war," Kisin says, looking at the table.

"They're very real. And they should clear enough debris for the Ninety-nine to infiltrate the compound," I reply.

"Alright. What about the other people going on the tour that morning? What do you plan to do with them?" Kisin asks.

"Whatever's necessary," Fox replies before I can answer.

"I'd rather not sacrifice innocent lives where I can avoid it. I think it would be beneficial if the entire group you arrive with are on our side. I'll work on getting the people who plan to attend replaced with our own men," Kisin says.

"That sounds good. Better actually," I say loudly looking at Fox.

It seems as if Fox still refuses to see the people here as innocent. I was hoping that he would be able to help me convince the Ninety-nine that the majority of the people here are just pawns.

"I think that just about covers it," Kisin says, looking to the men at his sides.

"The safe houses," the old man who brought us to the house says.

"Oh yeah, the safe houses! Thanks. I almost forgot. We thought that it would be a good idea to have a few places to fall back on incase things go awry. The map in front of Nineteen has three black circles on it—each of those circles is a different house that has been designated as a safe house. One of the circles is the house we're in now, another is Carl's house, where Nineteen and Reika stayed last night. The third is about a block away from Megan's house. In the event something goes wrong, your men can go to any of the three houses and regroup safely.

"With that said, I think that's it. Unless anyone has something to add," Kisin says and looks around the table.

"Nope, I think we're solid," I say.

"In that case, I better get going so I can work out the timing issue and get you some more explosives."

"Sounds good," I say, nodding.

"So, are we staying here for the rest of the day then?" Tank asks.

"Yeah, the place is as good as yours," Kisin says.

"By any chance is there a swimming pool?" Reika asks.

"Yeah, actually there's a huge one out back."

"Awesome!" Reika says, smiling.

Awesome? That was a strange response from Reika.

"Anything else?" Kisin asks.

As everyone shakes their head no, Kisin and the three men that came with him stand. I stand up and Kisin walks over to me with his hand extended. I give him a confused look and instinctively stick my hand out.

"I hope this works. There are a lot of lives at risk," he says, grabbing my hand and shaking it.

"Me too," I say, nodding.

Kisin and his men turn and exit the room.

"Think we can pull it off?" I ask, looking to Fox and his men.

"I know we can. Kisin on the other hand, do you believe he can deliver all that?" Cupid asks.

"I'm sure he can deliver. Just worried about him having second thoughts about taking out his own home," I reply.

"Did he give you any reason to worry about that?" Fox asks.

"No. It just seems like it would be a natural response. After all, he has lived here most of his life," I say.

"Living somewhere doesn't account for much if you're being oppressed," Omni says.

"That's true."

"Enough of this contemplation crap! Let's enjoy ourselves while we can!" Tank jumps in.

"Last day of peace celebration?" Lotus asks, looking at Tank with a smile on her face.

"Exactly!" Tank replies.

"Let's go check out the swimming pool?" Reika says, giving me a strange look.

"Sure, I guess," I say, unsure of myself.

What is with Reika's sudden fascination with the swimming pool?

"I'll go with ya. We'll meet the rest of you at the pool?" Lotus asks.

"Sure, why not," Omni says.

"I'm gonna try to get a hold of Estabon. Then I'll come join you guys," Fox says.

"What about you Cupid, you comin'?" I ask, looking at Cupid who's standing silently.

"Yeah, I might as well," he says, shrugging his shoulders.

NINETEEN

"So, he said it's out back right?" I ask, looking around the room for the ideal way to leave.

"Yep, let's go!" Reika says cheerfully, grabbing my arm pulling me with her as she starts walking.

"Don't forget your bodyguard!" Tank says as the others follow us.

CALM BEFORE THE STORM

"So, why do you want to go to the swimming pool so bad?" I ask Reika as we make our way through the house.

"I've always wanted to see one."

"You've never seen a swimming pool?" I ask.

"Well, I've seen them but never the way they should look." She pauses and I shoot her a confused look.

"Years ago, I read a book that described this huge swimming pool with endless see-through blue water that sparkled in the sun. It sounded like this amazing place where you could go relax and forget your troubles."

"Oh okay! So basically you're saying that the ankle high green sludge water in the swimming pools outside of the compound don't do it for ya?"

Reika laughs. "Yeah, and neither do the empty ones that have zombies living in 'em."

I shake my head playfully. "Gosh, I didn't know you were such an elitist Reika."

"An elitist!" she says, looking at me with her eyebrows raised and her mouth slightly opened.

"Yep, looks like the compounds spoiled you," I say, looking away with a huge smile on my face.

"It's sad really," Tank joins in from behind us.

"Don't help him!" she says, glaring back at Tank.

"I'm gonna guess it's right outside this door," I say as we reach a large glass door.

Reika's eyes light up when she sees a corner of the sparkling blue water through the door.

I hold the door open. "After you," I say, smiling.

Reika walks toward the ethereal blue water as if in a trance.

"Go ahead," Tank says, motioning me to follow her as he grabs the door.

"Thanks," I say, heading after Reika.

She stops walking and stands at the edge of the pool without saying a word. She's probably smiling ear to ear right now. I reach her side and to my surprise she's not smiling, she's holding back tears. A sinking feeling shoots through me. I don't understand, are these tears of joy? Or is she really sad? Should I have not come out here with her?

"It's beautiful," she says.

"Yeah, it is," I say slowly, still looking at her.

Her eyes make contact with mine as she realizes I'm looking at her and not the pool. The tears in her eyes disappear and she gives me a faint smile.

"You okay?" I ask quietly.

She turns back toward the pool. "That book with the pool in it, I read that shortly after joining Kai. I was still mourning the death of my par-

ents and leery of Kai and the rest of the group. The only way he could get more than a few words out of me was to ask about the book." Reika pauses and then laughs quietly.

"After my ten-minute rant about how amazing the pool was, he made a deal with me. He said that one day we would come across the biggest brightest swimming pool the world had ever seen. And on that day, I would know I chose the right path by joining him. He vowed to act as my brother and to look out for me until that day came," She says tearing up again.

I look down into the pool and give her time.

"I know that he was just trying to give me a reason to keep going at the time, and that logically this pool is just a coincidence. But somehow he was right.

"And with you here by my side, I've realized one other thing."

"What's that?" I ask.

"I think I can finally carry on Kai's tradition."

"You found your reason to live?" I ask.

Out the corner of my eye I see her head turn to look at me. I look up to meet her eyes.

"Yeah," she says, smiling.

The sadness that was written all over her face a minute ago is gone. Even her eyes look as if they're smiling.

"What is it?"

"I'll tell you after we take the compound tomorrow," she says, still smiling.

"And if we fail?"

"As long as you make it out alive, I promise I'll tell you."

I laugh and shake my head at her. "Alright, fine. It's a deal."

"You two done being all serious yet?" Tank yells from somewhere to my left.

My eyes grow wide and I turn my head in the direction of his voice. Tank, Lotus, and Omni, are all lying in the sun on fold-out chairs.

"You're still here?" I shout back playfully.

How did I just space out the fact that everyone else was behind us?

"We're here, but the better question is, are you two?" Tank says back sarcastically.

"We wanted to see how long we could ignore huge objects," Reika shouts.

Everyone laughs.

"You did a damn good job at that, but are you gonna jump in that pool you're standing by or you just gonna stare at it all day?" Tank asks.

"Well actually, we—shit!" I blurt out as Reika pushes me into the pool.

I hit the water barely holding my breath and come up for air just in time to see Reika jumping in over me. As I surface, I can hear laughter from the others.

"How's the water?" Tank asks, now standing at the midway point of the pool.

"It's actually surprisingly warm."

"That's probably just 'cause what she did was so cold," Omni chips in.

I can't help but let out a laugh.

"What are you guys doing? You just gonna stand there looking at the pool forever?" Reika shouts at Tank and Omni.

"They're comin'!" Lotus shouts as she lunges at Tank and Omni trying to push them into the pool.

Omni jumps into the pool and Tank turns and grabs Lotus' arm and pulls her in with him.

The four of us splash around, swimming and conversing with each other before Cupid and Fox come outside.

"You guys havin' fun?" Cupid asks, looking amused at the five of us.

"What. you scared of the water?" Omni says back.

"Ya know, you're supposed to take off your clothes before you jump into a swimming pool right?" Fox says, laughing and holding his head in his hand.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

Cupid takes off his shirt and has changed into shorts.

"Since swimming pools were made for leisure, you're supposed to wear shorts or swimming trunks so you don't ruin your regular clothes," Fox continues.

Cupid runs and jumps into the pool with us.

"Oh," Reika and I say simultaneously.

"Oops, too late now!" Omni says.

"We don't have any shorts anyway," Tank says.

"I guess it doesn't really matter, huh?" Fox says and laughs again.

I pull myself out of the water and walk over to Fox dripping wet.

"Sure doesn't," Lotus shouts.

"Get a hold of Estabon?" I ask.

"Yeah, everything seems to be ready," Fox says with a hint of hesitation in his tone.

"Why does it sound like you're not sure of that?"

"Well, Estabon came up with a strange request," Fox says as we walk toward the chairs.

"Request?"

"Yeah, it seemed a little off to me," Fox continues as if he's still piecing something together.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when I talked to Estabon he claimed that Oleg wanted to know which wall we plan on assaulting. It's probably nothing, but you would think that Oleg would assume that we we're still planning to attack the western wall. I don't know why he would assume anything else."

A hole opens in my gut.

"I see, you think Estabons working for the compound?" I ask looking at the pool.

"It's possible, but I was thinking more along the lines that maybe he's being held captive."

"What does that mean for us?" I say as uneasiness continues to creep into my gut.

"Nothing. I know for a fact that he got the word out the other day. So I'm confident they'll be here. I just don't know if we have to worry about a potential trap being set for us."

"Did you tell him we were going to bring down part of the eastern wall?"

"No. I told him to have all our men go to the west side just like before. Figure if they have him captive that will keep our plan safe until they arrive."

"Good catch. I'm glad to be carrying this assault out with you and your team," I say.

"It wouldn't be possible if it wasn't for you and yours. Now, let's enjoy ourselves while we still can," Fox says as he starts taking off his shirt.

"Sounds like a plan," I say.

A little after Fox and I jump back in the pool, the owner of the house comes out with bottles of purple wine and fancy glasses to drink out of. He introduces himself as Jimmy and goes on to explain how he became a famous musician. The next few hours spent in and around the pool blur together. The sun starts to set and we pack up our things to go inside.

We head inside and down to the second floor where the bowling alley is. The entire floor reflects light as if it were just waxed. It's completely different from the bowling alleys I've seen on the outside. They were always falling apart and tended to house zombies.

Not a single one of us has bowled before, and upon discovering it, Jimmy becomes infatuated with trying to teach us. One by one, we start to understand the game and how to roll the ball efficiently enough to knock down bowling pins.

I look around, realizing that nearly everything we've done today I've only read about in books. Smiles reside on every face in the room. An outsider would never guess that tomorrow we plan to start a revolution. A few more hours melt off the clock in this surreal manner. Long before we're ready, it's time to find a place to sleep.

"I call the big bed," Tank says as we enter the basement.

"You mean the floor? Last I checked they don't make beds big enough for you," I say and everyone breaks out in laughter.

Tank shakes his head. "Well, ah, you suck ya damn midgets!" Tank says and we break out into laughter again.

"I guess I'll just claim the same couch I slept on earlier," I say.

"Well, that should work just fine, seeing as how I was talking to Jimmy and made the discovery that all the couches down here are pull outs," Cupid says, chuckling.

"Pull outs?" Reika and I say together confused.

Cupid and Omni start laughing.

"That means that the couches fold out into beds. We slept on them at the house down the street from Megan's," Fox responds to Reika and me.

"Are you serious?" Omni asks Cupid.

"Dead serious!" Cupid replies.

"Well, that would have made your life a lot better last night!" Omni says.

"Tell me about it."

"In that case, I call a bed to myself!" Lotus shouts.

"What makes you think you're so special?" Cupid says jokingly.

"I'm a girl, duh!" Lotus replies.

"What's that got to do with me? I had to sleep on a couch last night! I should get first dibs," Cupid says semi-seriously as we reach the furniture.

"So, how does this whole bed couch thing work?" I ask, feeling stupid.

"You just pull it out like this," Lotus says, reaching under one of the seat cushions.

To my surprise, she pulls out an entire bed using some sort of handle.

"And since I pulled it out, I claim this bed," Lotus says, smiling at Cupid.

"Fine, I'll be nice and share a bed with Omni," he replies.

"Wow, so all of them are like that?" I ask, looking at Fox.

"Looks easy enough," Reika says.

"Yeah, the handle will be underneath the middle cushion," Fox answers.

"I take it you two are claiming the couch over there again?" Tank asks looking amused.

Reika and I glance at each other.

"Sure, have fun with the floor big guy!" I say as I turn to walk towards the couch we slept on before.

"Whatever! Don't get scared all alone in the corner!" Tank shouts at me.

Walking toward the bed is sobering as the reality of tomorrow's events bounce back into mind.

"It was a good day," Reika says.

"Yeah. Ha, I'd have to say it might have been the best day of my life,"

"Yeah, for me too. Kinda makes you feel guilty though," she says as we reach the couch.

The images of Kai, Logan, and Natalie, flash in my mind.

"It's a shame they couldn't make it here with us." I say, bending over to pull the bed out.

"It is. At least we're living how they would have wanted us to," she says as I snap the bed down into place.

"True. Well tomorrow will be Logan's day." I chuckle. "Crazy bastard would have been complaining all day about not getting to kill anyone if he were here."

Reika lets out a laugh. "Yeah, he probably would have," she says as we both get situated on the bed.

As if on the same wavelength, we both go silent. A sinking feeling sets into my gut. I'm glad I finally got to know her. But tomorrow, what happens if I lose both Tank and Reika? What would I live for? Would this plan I've devised still be worth it? I would have nothing.

Anger surges through me. I've already spent too much time in here. I'm starting to get selfish like the others in this compound. There's still an entire population struggling outside of these walls. No matter how much

I wish to back out from tomorrow's fight, I can't leave those outside behind to suffer. Logan, Natalie, Tank, and Reika all chose to fight by my side for a reason. It's like Reika told me. I need to stop second-guessing my decisions. The only plausible option at this point is to ensure that they live through this.

"Don't do anything crazy tomorrow," Reika says, breaking the silence.

"Define crazy," I say, smiling.

"Hmmm, I guess everything we do is crazy. In that case, don't go running off without backup," Reika says.

"Humph, I can't promise that. But don't worry about me, I'll be fine. I always am," I say amused.

"That's as long as you promise me to survive tomorrow," I continue in a less joking manner.

"Me? You're the crazy one!"

"Just promise me." I say seriously.

"Fine. I, Reika, promise you, Nineteen, to live through tomorrow as long as you don't go running off without backup!"

I start laughing. "I told you I can't promise that because I don't know what's going to happen. But I'll try my best to stay by your side," I say, remembering how Tank had to hold her back the day we were all separated.

"Well, in that case I can't promise anything either, but like you, I'll try," she replies semi-angrily.

I laugh. "Fine, deal. Now let's attempt to get some sleep?" I inquire.

"Already on it," she says in a quiet tone.

"Night," I say.

"Night."

There's no way I'm going to be able to pass out. We slept for most of the day. Ha, that's more sleep in one day than we've gotten in years. Being squished next to Reika was comforting to the point that I was able to sleep the entire time without waking up. Part of me wants to turn around and wrap my arm around her right now. As the thought crosses my mind, I feel Reika scoot into me pressing her back to mine.

The urge to turn around and hold her grows stronger. I take a deep breath in and exhale slowly. Doing that would just make tomorrow harder to face. I'll keep this emotion to myself until after we've taken the compound. I can feel my eyes starting to droop. Really? Why am I suddenly so tired? We barely did anything but sleep. I close my eyes and drift off into the darkness.

WEAPONS CHECK

"It's go time!" I hear Tank's voice from across the room.

I open my eyes to see a fluff of black hair in my face. Pulling my head back I look downward to see Reika nestled into my chest. My heart drops.

"I can't lose you," I whisper quietly to myself.

Come on Nineteen get up, stop worrying. I force out a spike of motivation and lift my head uncomfortably high.

"Reika," I say loudly.

She pops awake and looks up at me with her eyes wide.

"Sorry, I must've—" she starts but I don't let her finish.

"Don't worry about it. We gotta get movin',"

She rolls onto her back and then climbs out of the bed. I drag myself out of bed and we both head to the group.

"Ready to do this?" Kisin asks as we approach the others.

"He brought us some presents," Tank says, standing next to Kisin cheesing.

"Presents?" I ask.

"I managed to procure a few things after I left yesterday," Kisin says, handing me a watch.

"It's a digital watch!" Tank says enthusiastically.

"All of our watches are now synced together, and more importantly, they have a timer that allows for synchronized countdowns," Kisin says.

"And if you press this button on the side, it lights up!"

"Why would we need that?" I say looking at Tank.

"When it's dark outside, duh!" he replies.

"Whatever! What's synced together?" I ask, feeling stupid.

"They all tell the exact same time down to the second," Kisin explains.

"Ah, okay."

"Thanks to our friend Carl's connections, I managed to find out who was going to be on the tour with you. There were only two other people who signed up to take it this morning. Luckily it was rather easy for me to persuade them into staying at home."

"Does that mean you have men going in their place?" Fox asks.

"Yep, two men to replace the two that dropped out. They will be bringing a portable television so you can keep an eye on the mornings events."

"So when we see them what are we doing?" I ask.

"Jake will approach you. When you see him, one of you just needs to pretend that he's a good friend of yours," Kisin answers.

I look at Reika who's shaking her head no and then to Tank, who is giving me an un-thrilled look.

"Looks like it's between you and me, Fox," I say, looking at Fox.

"Since I've been on the tour multiple times, it'll probably be more of a convincing coincidence if it's you," Fox says.

WEAPONS CHECK

"Okay, I guess it's on me. Were you able to get us the extra explosives?" I ask.

"Yeah, that bag on the floor has your explosives as well as fake IDs for those of you who don't already have them."

"Fake IDs?" I ask, confused.

"My team was able to get a few through Megan's contacts. At the entrance of the wall you'll need them to get inside. I asked Kisin to bring them, knowing we'd need them," Fox says.

"Oh, okay that works," I say, shrugging my shoulders.

"Carl was also able to supply you with four flat packs per Fox's request," Kisin says.

Why did Fox ask for all these extra things without filling me in? And more importantly, when did he manage to ask for them?

"I asked for small backpacks. I'm assuming that's what flat packs are?" Fox says.

"Precisely. Since you need to get these backpacks under your clothing, flat packs are ideal. They were designed by our police department to help hide items that they needed to carry into dangerous situations. They're one-fourth the size of a normal backpack and have four straps allowing you to tie the pack to any location on your body. They won't hold a lot, but they'll be ideal to carry in the explosives."

Finally realizing what Kisin is hinting at, I jump in. "If we all show up with backpacks on, it would look suspicious. Which brings us to the question of how we're going to hide our weapons until we're ready to pull them out," I say.

"Hand guns are easy. Bigger weapons however might not be much of an option," Fox says.

"We could half disassemble my M16 and perhaps one other weapon to get them to fit into one regular backpack. It would take a minute or so to reassemble on the inside, but at least that way we have something with us. And if I'm the only one wearing a backpack outside of my clothes, it shouldn't look too suspicious.

"That's actually a really good idea. We could probably fit two into one backpack with a few clips of ammunition. We'll just have to use handguns for our initial entry."

"That's fine with me," I say.

"I'll bring my katana as usual. It's easy to hide," Reika says.

"Ah, no fifty cal for me," Tank says, sighing.

"Sorry big guy!" I say, smiling.

"It's settled. Kisin, please continue," Fox says, looking at his watch.

"Since we're short on time I'll jump to the last bit of business. I was able to get you two military uniforms. I figured that once you're inside, you could slip into them. They should make it look a lot less suspicious if you happen to run into other soldiers on the inside," Kisin says.

"How'd you manage that?" Reika asks.

"They're from the guy who is setting up explosives in the warehouses," Kisin replies.

"How big are they?" Tank asks.

"Not big enough for you, sorry," Kisin says, smiling.

"I don't even know why I asked," Tank says, laughing.

"And since I've been on the tour over and over again, it's best if you and Reika wear them," Fox says looking at me.

"If we had a different pair of clothes we could put the uniforms on underneath," I say, looking to Kisin.

WEAPONS CHECK

"Jimmy has an entire closet upstairs that's he's offered to let us pick from," Kisin says.

I smile and look at Reika. "Ready to go in matching purple outfits?"

Everyone starts laughing.

"Why not, I know at least one of us will look good," Reika says playfully.

"Ouch!" Tank says, laughing.

"Oh, wow, it's so nice of you to complement me like that! Thanks, Reika!" I say enthusiastically.

Reika smiles widely and then shakes her head.

"No response?" I ask.

"I got nothin'," she replies.

"Okay well, I guess we should get movin'. Where's the closet and uniforms?" I ask Kisin.

"I'll take you to 'em. And there's breakfast upstairs for everyone. We have about forty-five minutes to be ready to go so make sure you get up there before we head out," Kisin says before turning to lead the way.

"I'll disassemble the firearms and set up your backpack," Fox says as we follow Kisin towards the stairwell.

"Thanks," I reply.

After climbing the stairs back to the main floor, we make our way to an enormous room at the back of the house. In the middle of the room is a massive circular bed with clothes folded on top of it.

"The uniforms are on the bed. And that's the closet, feel free to grab anything that will fit," Kisin says, pointing to a wall with that's covered by a mural of graffiti.

Confusion stretches across my face. Just before I find the words to ask, Kisin presses a switch on the wall that triggers the mural to fold in on itself, revealing a walk in closet full of clothing.

"Oh wow," I say, shocked.

"Whoa," Reika says with huge eyes.

"There's a bathroom over there that you can change in. I'll be waiting for you downstairs. And remember, we don't have much time," Kisin says.

I look at Reika. "I guess we just dive in and try to find something that will fit over these uniforms."

"We should probably put the uniforms on first, it might make it easier," she replies.

"Good Idea. Go ahead and go first I'll look for something that might work while you change."

"K" she says, grabbing one of the uniforms.

As she heads into the bathroom, I walk up to the huge lineup of clothing. Underneath the hanging clothes are rows upon rows of shoes. I manage to make my way to a grouping of long sleeve shirts that would be ideal to wear over the uniform. I start to grab for a white one, but realize that the darker colored uniform might be visible through the white.

It looks like I'm stuck with purple after all. I slide a few purple shirts apart, attempting to pick the one that will stand out the least. I grab a dark purple shirt with a rose vine pattern on the front. It doesn't look amazing, but at least it will keep what I wear under it hidden. I continue down the line of clothing until I reach the pants. Really? They're still purple! No blue, no black, just purple! I pick the baggiest pair of purple

jeans to ensure they'll fit over the camo pants. As I pull them from the hanger, Reika exits the bathroom.

She starts laughing as she approaches me. "I think this uniform is a little too big for me," she says, holding out one of her arms.

The sleeves from the uniform hang an inch or so below her hands. As she extends her arms to dig her hands out, her sleeves dangle loosely from her body. I start laughing.

"Yeah, I hope we don't have to run anywhere because those are going to fall off at the first sign of trouble!" I say.

"Yep, I'm thinking that you're going to be the only one pulling off the legit soldier look today," she says.

"Maybe, we'll see if these clothes will even fit over it," I say, heading toward the bathroom.

"Good luck," she says, trying to eye the clothes I picked.

"You don't get to see what I got until it's on me," I yell, entering the bathroom.

I throw the purple clothes onto the bathroom counter and strip. I routinely slide on the pants and look into the mirror as I try to tighten them around my waist. I stop when I see the scar that wraps from my stomach to the right side of my body.

Logan stabbing the solder in the neck flashes into my head. Followed by the image of Natalie on the ground lifeless. Rage fires through me, and as it does, the veins on my head and face push out as if trying to lash out at the image of myself in the mirror. My eyes fill with water. I close them and take in a deep breath.

An image of my father pops into my mind. All the people who were important to me—one by one they've been killed. I take another breath trying to regain my composure. I open my eyes and remember my

conversation with Reika about being a hero. Kai's smiling face pops into my head.

"Hmph. Right up until your death you believed that we would be able to make a change in this world," I say quietly to myself.

My brain jumps to lying on the couch with Reika and how at ease the moment had made me feel. That's why I have to create a change. So that all of us have a chance to experience a moment like that. I grab the camo shirt from the floor and begin to slip it on.

"Kai, I don't know what you saw in me, or why you had so much faith in me. But today I'm going to try my hardest to prove you right."

Determination floods through me as I wrestle on the rest of my clothing. It's just Reika, Tank, and me now.

"I don't know how, but I will find a way to protect you both."

I walk out of the bathroom to see Reika sprawled out on the bed.

She pops up as I approach. "Took you long enough!"

"But don't I look stylish?" I ask.

She starts laughing. "Yep, all that purple definitely suits you."

Reika gets off the bed and walks toward me on her way back to the bathroom, but stops when she reaches me.

"What's that look for?" she asks.

"What look?"

"You have your patented, 'I'm planning to go do something really stupid because it's the heroic thing to do' look all over your face."

I shoot her a phony confused glance.

"Mhmm. I can almost make out the flames shooting from your eyes," she continues.

I smile and shake my head. "I'm just ready to do what we came here to do."

WEAPONS CHECK

She locks eyes with me as if she's trying to read my intentions. A sad look creeps across her face but she quickly smiles to hide it.

"Okay, don't do anything stupid while I'm changing!" she says and then heads past me to the bathroom.

As she walks past, I notice a pair of black pants draped around her arm.

"You found black pants!" I say, shocked.

"Yeah, you didn't see them?" she says, turning back to me as she walks.

"No," I say in a defeated tone.

Reika laughs. "There were three pairs over there. But we don't have time for you to change again, so you're stuck in that hot purple outfit." she says before closing the bathroom door.

I can't believe I missed three pairs of black pants! I look at the watch that Kisin gave to me. She's right, I really don't have time to change, it's already been twenty minutes. If I remember right, he said we had forty-five until we head out.

"Time to eat!" Reika says, emerging from the bathroom.

"That was quick. Did you speed change?" I ask.

"Nope, just 'cause it doesn't take me forever to change doesn't mean I had to hurry," she says, smiling.

"Whatever, I was mentally prepping for the day," I shoot back.

"Mhmm, sure ya were," she says, cheesing at me.

I let out an over exaggerated sigh.

"Let's go," I say, heading for the door.

We make our way back to the living room of the house, trying to figure out where everyone is gathered. Once there, we hear a burst of

laughter coming from an adjacent room. We walk into the room to see the others feasting at a rectangular table.

"Look who decided to join us!" Tank shouts.

"Of course! We can't miss our last meal before we take down the wall!" I say.

"We woulda been here sooner, but Nineteen here took forever to get dressed," Reika says, grabbing a plate of food.

Everyone starts laughing. "He looks wonderful!... Just like a, umm, a grape!" Lotus says.

"I dunno, he's pretty big for a grape. Maybe a plum?" Cupid pitches in.

I shake my head and sigh.

"It's all I could find," I say, looking at the floor in defeat while reaching for a plate of food.

"So Reika found the black pants and all you could find was purple?" Tank joins in, barely controlling his laughter.

"Basically," I say, angrily inhaling a piece of bacon.

For the duration of our short breakfast, everyone continues to make fun of my clothing. As if none of us would be risking our lives in the moments to follow, there is not a single downtrodden face. The table is full of laughter and jokes. Our last warm meal before the event fades away too fast. We split up into our prospective assault groups and strap on the rest of our gear, all the while joking and carrying on as if it's a normal day. Before any of us can fully grasp the fact that this might have been our last meal together, we are in vehicles on route to carry out our assault.

DETONATION

"Good luck." the driver says as we exit the car.

"You too," I say, closing the door.

The four of us are dropped about twenty feet from the eastern entrance to the wall. Tank, Reika, and I stop in our tracks, staring up at the enormous black wall. We haven't been this close to the wall since the day we infiltrated the compound.

"Come on, let's get moving," Fox says, snapping us out of our daze.

"Yeah," I say back.

The closer we get to the wall the wilder my heart beats. Memories of our initial run to the wall start flooding through mind. My breathing becomes faster as if we will be in the middle of a firefight any moment.

"George!"

I jerk my head up in response to the unfamiliar voice shouting at us. I shoot the stranger approaching us a confused glance before remembering my role.

"Hey! Jake! Long time no see!" I shout back, approaching the man who hugs me as if we were brothers.

"How have you been?" the man asks.

"Great! How about yourself? And what are you doing here?" I respond, trying to mimic his enthusiasm.

"Couldn't be better! Me and my friend decided we would check out this great wall tour everyone's always talking about!" he points at a man standing five feet from us in a roped off area.

"That's actually the same reason we're here! These are my friends," I introduce everyone by the fake names on the ID cards we were given.

"Hey Tom, this is George, George this is Tom. George is an old friend of mine. We go way back!" Jake says as we walk around the ropes to his friend.

"Nice to meet you," I reach out and shake the man's hand. Out of my peripheral vision I can see two guards standing around metal detectors behind the glass doors at the entrance.

"Have you heard about the craziness going on this morning?" Jake asks.

"Craziness? What do you mean?" I play along.

"Apparently some conspiracy theorists have started protests all around the city. They're claiming that our inoculations are tainted and part of some experiment or something," he says, laughing and shaking his head.

"What? And they're actually protesting such crap?" I say, pretending to be in disbelief.

"Yeah, it's all over the news! Check it out," Jake says as he pulls a screen from his pocket. He flips a switch on the side and the screen lights up with a news broadcast.

"At six fifteen today, protests began at nearly every inoculation site in the city. Police were dispatched expecting to quickly quell what was

originally thought to be a conspiracy theory,” a male news broadcaster says before panning to videos of protests and policemen around the city.

“Since then, we have received many reports from reliable sources that suggest that the claims are factual. One such source is a document that was leaked from the police department. It is a transcript of a conversation between government officials whom were commenting on the success of making residents sick. Another document appeared just five minutes ago...”

“You ready to see the wall?” A stern voice from in front of us says.

I look up to see a stubby man in military fatigues holding the glass doors open.

“Yeah! Let’s go,” I say with enthusiasm looking at the others.

“Me and Tom first since we were the first here!” Jake says with a wicked smile on his face.

“By all means,” Fox says.

I glance down at my watch and see the time change from six forty-four to six forty-five. I take a step towards the glass doors when a massive amount of gunfire erupts from somewhere in the compound. Kisin’s gang distraction.

“What was that?” Reika asks with wide eyes, pretending to be frightened.

“Oh, nothing to worry about, little lady. It came from the slums. Besides, you’re about to be in the safest place one can be in!” he says, chuckling.

“That’s true!” Jake says, turning around to look at Reika.

“Thank you, sir,” I say to the stubby man as I walk in behind Jake.

“No problem.” he says.

After Tank enters, the man shuts the door and walks around our group.

"I'm Jason. I'll be your tour guide for the day. Please hand me your identification cards."

As he finishes the sentence, we dig into our pockets and pull out our fake IDs.

As he collects our IDs, he continues with his speech.

"We have a verification system that weeds out threats from getting in the wall," he says proudly, "It will take me about five minutes to walk over to the verification system and run these. As soon as I get back, we'll start the tour!" Jason finishes enthusiastically before heading around the metal detector.

"I can't wait to see the inside," Jake says enthusiastically to Tank.

Tank carries on the conversation as I zone out looking at my watch. I take in a deep breath. Six fifty-four. We should hear the explosions any minute now. I rest my hand near my waistline where my forty is tucked into my pants. My heart starts beating wildly again, this time in anticipation of the explosions.

I look at my watch again, and as I do, I see the time change from six fifty-four to six fifty-five. This is taking forever. I need to calm down.

Two popping noises fill my ears followed by a large rumble. I look up and meet Reika's eyes. That's must be the first set of explosions. Did they go off too early? I look back down at my watch.

"Must be more disturbances in the slums, eh?" Tank says, looking at me and smiling.

"I guess," I say, trying to withhold my smile and portray a concerned look.

DETONATION

A minute later, Jason returns and starts passing back our IDs. Where is the second set of explosions? Now's the time. Did Cupid and the others not make it?

"Your ID, George," Jason says, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"Thanks," I reply.

"Now we can head on in! Please walk through the metal detector one by one."

Jason walks through the metal detector. I look up at the two guards standing watch behind the detector. Both are armed with assault rifles. I have to take them out before they can start shooting. Tom walks through the metal detector and makes an obvious attempt to stand next to the soldier on the right. Where is the second set of explosions? As Jake starts to walk through, I hear a second set of pops and rumbling. I exhale in relief.

"Sir, we'll need you to take off your backpack and run it through the machine," Jason says to me as Jake also stands near the soldier on the right.

I pretend not to hear what Jason said and position my hand near my forty as I walk through the metal detector. I pass through and the alarm goes off.

"It's probably just your backpack," Jason says just before I draw the forty from my waist.

I point the handgun at the soldier on the left and rush him.

"Don't move!" I yell.

The soldier, who was obviously lost in his own thoughts, reacts to the situation far too slowly. By the time he attempts to swing his weapon around to aim, I am standing with my handgun an inch away from his head.

"We don't want to have to kill anyone, but we will!" I hear Fox's voice behind me.

"On the ground now!" Tank yells at Jason.

"Slowly take that weapon off of your neck. If you even start to point it in any direction other than the wall that it's currently pointed at I will put a bullet in your head," I say in a calm tone.

"Okay," the man says as he let's go of the rifle and slowly grabs the strap that holds it around his neck.

"Now hand the gun to my friend Tom," I hear Jake say from somewhere behind me.

The soldier in front of me is now slowly bending over to put his weapon on the floor.

"When it reaches the ground, I want you to walk over to your friend Jason and lie down beside him," I say.

"Yes sir," the man says.

An ear shattering tone suddenly fills the air followed by a woman's voice. "Code Bravo initiated! This is not a drill, I repeat Code Bravo initiated! All soldiers to field stations immediately."

An alarm starts blaring and red lights begin blinking. The soldier in front of me makes a grab for the hand gun at his waist. Before he can get it out to aim, I squeeze the trigger of my gun, sending a bullet through his left eye and out the back of his head. His body falls lifelessly against the wall and slides to the floor. I hear two other gunshots go off as I turn toward the others.

Our tour guide is lying dead on the ground with Tank standing over him. Next to Jake and Tom, completely disarmed, is a soldier sitting on the floor with Fox's gun in his face.

"So much for getting in quietly," I say.

DETONATION

"Let's move," Fox says as he pulls the trigger of his gun, hitting the soldier point blank in the middle of his head.

"Why'd you kill him?" I say in an outrage.

"It's too late to be quiet and we had nothing to tie him up with," Fox shouts at me.

He had no way to fight back and he wasn't a threat.

"Don't forget where you're from. Just because we've been inside for a while doesn't mean we're not still at war with these people," Fox says.

Memories of the outside world begin to dance through my head. Zombies, starvation, and death. I have been in here too long. I need to toughen up or I'll lose everyone. These people wouldn't hesitate for a moment to kill us if they knew who we were.

"Right. Lead the way!" I shout to Fox, looking at the dead soldier.

"Wait!" I say, grabbing the assault rifle lying on the floor in front of the soldier I shot.

Fox picks up the other assault rifle and hands it to Tank.

"This is where we take our leave. Good luck!" Jake shouts to us as he and Tom head out the front door.

"Let's go!" Reika shouts at us.

We follow Fox straight down the hall and stop before the first intersection. We approach the corner slowly, expecting to encounter soldiers.

"No one?" Fox says, peeking around the corner with a confused expression on his face.

"This is the main hallway in front of us. It connects us to each place we need to get to. The first detonation point is to the left, up two hallways, and then to the right. Since there's no one here and the alarm is going off, we might as well make an all-out sprint," Fox says, staring out into the hallway.

"Ready?" Fox asks, looking at us.

"Let's go!" I say.

We take off into the middle of the black marble floor, running at full speed with our guns drawn. The interior is rounded and the hallways have a slight curve to them. We make it all the way to the hallway where we need to place the explosives without encountering a single soldier.

"There," Fox says as we reach a bathroom at the end of a hallway.

We follow him inside a grey tiled bathroom and watch as he lifts his shirt and takes off the flat pack containing his explosive.

"I'll set the charge. You might as well utilize this time to strip your grape suit off," Fox says in a focused tone.

I'm still a grape even in the middle of combat! Stupid purple clothes! I place the assault rifle on the floor, take my backpack off, and strip out of my purple clothing.

"We ready to sync our watches?" Fox asks from under the sink.

Tank looks around at all of us. "Yeah, what's the count?" Tank asks.

"Fifteen minutes should be good enough," Fox replies.

"Fifteen set," Tank announces.

"Fifteen set," I announce.

"Fifteen set," Reika says.

"Okay, start your timers in three, two, one... now!" Fox shouts.

We hear four nearly simultaneous beeps as we all press buttons on our watches. Fox slides out from under the sink and I stuff my purple clothing into one of the bathroom trashcans.

"Ready to push to the next point?" Fox asks.

"Yeah," we reply at the same time.

"I'll head out first now that I'm in uniform," I say, pushing the door to the hall open.

DETONATION

I walk into the abandoned hallway. Still not a single soldier? What the hell is going on? Something doesn't feel right, it's too easy. They should have been on to us after we killed the soldiers at the front of the building.

"We clear?" Tank asks.

"Yeah. Still nobody," I reply.

"That's strange. It's usually pretty dead around this time, but there's always a few soldiers walking around," Fox says, entering the hallway.

"Something doesn't feel right," Reika says.

"It's too late to figure out what it is now, as long as we get the charges set and they detonate we've done our job," Fox says before he starts running down the hallway back the way we came.

We follow him past the entrance and to a hall on the left. We then run past nearly twenty closed rooms with their lights off and to the end of the hall.

"Here's the second," he says, jogging to the wall. "Someone set your charge in this corner."

I start to take my backpack off to grab my charge, but Reika stops me.

"I got this one, just guard," she gasps out in between breaths.

I turn around and stand facing the entrance of the hall to block what Reika is doing. All of us continue to gasp for air, trying to catch our breaths.

"These halls are ridiculously long," Tank gasps out.

"Where the hell are all the people? Every room is dark," I reply.

"These rooms are dark every morning I've come. But the lack of soldiers is strange," Fox adds in between his own gasps for air.

"Okay, I'm done. Everyone get ready to sync watches."

"Looks like ten minutes now right?" I ask.

"Yeah," Reika replies.

"Ten set," Tank announces.

"Ten set," Fox announces.

"Ten set," I say.

"Ready, three, two, one... now!" Reika shouts.

Just like the first time, multiple beeps are heard from our watches as we start our timers.

"Okay, so now we have a few minutes to get to the control room before we can set the final charge," I say.

"You should know where we're at from the map the other day," Fox says to Reika.

"Yeah, follow me!" Reika says, taking off down the hall toward the main hallway.

The red warning lights continue to blink as we turn left and race down the main hall.

"How much farther?" Tank asks.

"Another three halls." Reika replies.

"We gotta pick up the pace!" Fox says sprinting.

"It should be this door on the right," she says, running up to a sliding black door.

Reika walks to the door and slides it open. She takes a look inside and then looks back at us.

"This is it," she says, smiling.

We follow Reika into the room and close the door behind us.

"You still remember what Greg told you to do?" I ask Reika.

"Yeah, I got this," she says immediately jumping on the terminal.

"We have three minutes before we need to set the last charge. Will that be enough time?" Fox asks.

DETONATION

"It should. It only took about thirty seconds to get through the menus and then he said it should take about thirty more for the operation to complete," I reply.

A loud chime rips over the intercom system. "Code Bravo upgraded to code Alpha. Please adjust immediately. I repeat, Code Bravo upgraded to code Alpha. Please adjust immediately."

"What the hell does that mean?" Tank looks at me.

"I have no clue, how much longer we got, Reika?"

"I'm past the menus and starting the program now," she replies.

"Two minutes and twenty seconds left," Fox says.

I slide open the door and peek my head out into the hallway. My heart plummets as I see a group of men about a hall and a half away walking speedily in our direction. I look to my right and see that at about the same distance, there is another group of men standing in the main hall. I bring my head back in and close the door.

"How much more time, Reika?" I ask as calmly as I can.

"I don't know. I started the sequence but it's only 20% complete. It should be about done by now."

"Fox, when did you say that patrol came here every morning?" I ask.

"About three minutes or so from now," he replies.

I look at Tank and then at Reika. I grit my teeth and look at my watch. Enemies on both sides and we have less than one minute to set the final charge and find an exit. Those men heading this way are probably the patrol that Fox is talking about. They're early. If we stay in here, it's almost certain we'll all be pinned in this room when the other charges go off. If I can draw those soldiers away, it'll be okay.

"Tank," I say with a sense of urgency.

"Yeah?"

"Take care of Reika," I say, walking towards Reika.

"Understood."

"What?" Reika looks up from the terminal just before I reach her.

I can't bring myself to look her in the eyes, so I look above them and kiss her on the forehead. While she's still in shock, I turn and walk towards the door.

"Lock the door behind me and get the hell outta here when you're done!" I say demandingly as I walk out the door.

"Wait," I hear Reika say as the door slams behind me.

I pretend to turn around and lock the door knowing that the soldiers are only about ten feet away and can see me fiddling with it.

"Who's that?" I hear one of them say.

"I don't who the hell that is."

"No one should be in there right now."

I pretend to ignore their conversation. I turn in the opposite direction of them, and start walking speedily. Ahead of me is the other group of soldiers. They appear to be standing in the middle of the hall talking.

"Soldier!" one of the men behind me shouts.

"Soldier, halt!" another says as I'm almost to a hall I can turn down.

The soldiers in front of me glance up at the men behind me, who are now yelling for me to stop. I have to make a move now, or I'm not going to make it. My heart thunders through my chest.

"He locked the door!" I hear one of them say.

"Yeah?" I say, slowly turning around.

I grip the handle of the assault rifle with my right hand and begin blindly shooting towards the group by the door. I let off a few shots in their direction and then turn back to the group in the middle. I let off another grouping of while running towards the intersecting hallway. The

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solders in front of me get off a few shots before taking cover in nearby rooms. The heat of a bullet sears the edge of my right shoulder.

I hear gunfire erupt from behind me as I turn the corner and begin sprinting down the hallway. Halfway down the hall I hear the buzz of bullets fly by my head. I slide feet first, turning as I do in order to shoot back at the men. The tactic works and the men duck back around the end of the hallway for cover. I get up from the floor and let a few more shots off before turning and running around the curve in the hallway.

At the end of the hallway there are two dark rooms with oak doors. More gunfire rings out from down the hallway. The sound causes me to instinctively jump into action. I take aim at the door handle on my left and let off a few rounds. I kick the door with all my might which causes me to fly through the doorway and fall onto the floor. I scramble to a crouch and stick the muzzle of my gun into the hallway. I let off another two shots before my gun clicks.

I back away from the door, drop the rifle, take off my backpack, and pull the handgun from my waist.

I start unzipping the bag with my right hand while leaning into the doorway and using my left to shoot into the hallway. With the backpack open, I pull out an extra clip of ammunition and try to insert it into the assault rifle. To my horror the clip refuses to fit. Different type of rifle!

"Fuck!" I shout.

I reach into my backpack in the darkness of the room, trying to fish out the charge. I get a hold of it, set it on the ground, and then crouch next to the corner of the door. I lean out of the door and see a soldier positioning himself twenty feet or so away on the other side of the hallway. I aim at the man and squeeze the trigger three more times before

ducking back in. Before I can bring my head into the room I feel a burning sensation across the left side of my face.

"Shit! I'm not going to last long like this, I need to set the charge," I say to myself.

I scoot farther into the dark room. I hit the button on my watch that illuminates it. Ha, I guess Tank was right, this is useful. Only four minutes left before this is supposed to go off. I use the watch to illuminate the charge so I can start setting the timer. As I turn on the device, the neon numbers that activate on the display cause the room to glow green. I take a sporadic shot at the doorway, hoping that it will hold the soldiers off a few moments longer.

I finish setting the timer on the charge to three minutes and forty-five seconds and place it on the floor behind me. They have to be almost to the door by now. I crouch and creep to the door. Sticking only my hand out of the door, I squeeze the trigger about five times before bringing in my hand. Four more bullets left. I scoot into the far corner of the room away from the charge hoping that its glow will act as a distraction to the soldiers who enter. Once in the corner, I realize how pointless the tactic is.

In two and a half minutes, that device is going to go off. And there's nothing any of those men out there can do to stop it. Even if they kill me, my job is done. And if they don't kill me, I'll die when that thing goes off. This is it. I sit in silence for a moment listening to my own breathing. I can feel blood dripping down my face onto the rest of my body. I reach up with my left hand to feel my right shoulder. It's soaked with either blood or sweat, I can't tell which.

Kai, is this the hero you envisioned me to be? Dying in some dark room after failing to carry out a plan to take down the compound? At

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least I tried. I guess. To try and fail is better than giving up without ever fighting.

The same blaring voice from before comes on over the intercom. "Immediate evacuation mandatory for all personal. In sites A two, A three, A four, and A five. Explosive device located. I repeat, immediate evacuation mandatory for all personal. Sites A two, A three, A four, and A five. Explosive device located!"

I feel a smile reach across my face. I get off of the ground and make my way closer to the door.

"Yeah, you heard it! You stay here with me, we're all gonna fucking die!" I shout out the door.

"Come get me I dare you!" I shout, aiming at the entrance to the room.

An eruption of gunfire fills my ears. I can hear the bullets landing above me on the other side of the room. I guess they're not scared of the explosion either. I look over at the charge timer. A minute and a half left. Guess my fate is sealed after all. I listen to the men in the hallway, waiting for them to make their push on the room.

"We need to pull out. That man in there has already set several bombs. He probably has one with him. No use in loss of life to take out one man who has already planned to take himself out," I hear someone shout at the soldiers.

I faintly make out a few men say, "Yes, sir."

Is this a trick? Maybe they're just trying to get me out of the room so they can disarm it. They may have the capability to do so. I hear a shuffle of footsteps and then silence. I watch the timer wind down as I listen for any sign of soldiers outside of the room. Thirty-five seconds left on the

timer and it's dead silent. I get up from the floor and peak my head out of the room into the hallway.

No gunshots, no noise. I walk out into the hallway with my handgun aimed in front of me. No one. I could make a run for it, or try. I hear shuffling from down the hall and immediately head back into the room. Someone's waiting for me to leave. They can either kill me out there or I can die here. I walk over to the timer. Fifteen seconds.

I sit down in front of the timer to watch the countdown. Logan, Natalie, Kai—their faces flash through my head. My eyes water as I take in a deep breath, trying to accept my fate. Sorry Kai, I couldn't be the hero you wanted. A deafening rumble overpowers my ears. It's so loud that it feels as if the floor itself begins to shake. That must've been the first bomb. The timer continues to count down... five seconds... four seconds. Another over powering rumble, this one much louder. I can feel objects falling around me as the room shakes violently. Two seconds. My last encounter with Tank flashes into my head. One second. I close my eyes and a crystal-clear image of Reika comes into view. I feel a wicked grin stretch across my face.

SEPARATION ANXIETY

A roar exceedingly louder than the first two explosions rips through my eardrums. The floor, the walls, and the very foundation of the room shake violently. The grin on my face begins to withdraw as I await the pain that should have already overtaken my body.

Reika's image disappears the moment my surroundings stop shaking. Am I dead? I didn't feel anything. My ears are still ringing. I open my eyes and it's pitch black. I squint, desperately trying to pick up any light but there's nothing. Am I blind? Or am I dead? I should be dead. Some-things' not right. I don't remember feeling anything.

I reach out in front of me to where I placed the charge and feel a slick object sitting where the charge should be. I feel around the item, attempting to figure out what it is when my left hand makes contact with something cold. I place my fingers on the cold part of the object. It feels like it's a row of metal hoops. I grab hold of a few of the hoops and use them to lift the object. Green light shoots out from under the object the moment I raise it. As the green light leaks out, I'm able to make out a grouping of pens and pencils on the ground behind it.

A notebook? I toss the notebook to the side, allowing the charge to illuminate the room. Staring at the timer on the charge, a mixture of relief and failure surges through me. All zeros. Why didn't it go off? As my eyes begin to adjust to the low light, I notice a variety of office supplies scattered around me on the floor. I glance toward where the door should be, looking for the light in the hallway but there is none.

If that second noise wasn't my charge, then it must've been the second detonation from one of the others. That still doesn't explain why my charge hasn't gone off. I look back at the blinking lights on my explosive. Should I shoot it? Images of Reika and Tank flash through my head accompanied with a strong urge to see them. I wonder if they made it out alive? I sit staring at the blinking lights on the bomb.

I envision each of my steps to set the bomb. I did everything right. I guess it's a dud. The promise I made Reika on the bed last night floats into mind. Since I couldn't keep my promise, she might not care to keep hers. I need to get to Tank and her before that happens. If the charge isn't a full on dud, it might still go off. I should try to get moving before it does.

I have one bullet left in this forty. If I can make it to brighter light, I can assemble one of the M16s from my backpack. I scramble around in the dull neon light, raking my hands across the floor for my backpack. Midway between the charge and where I estimate the doorway to be, I find the bag. I feel my way to the zipper on the side and zip the backpack back up before putting it on. I flinch when my right shoulder makes contact with the backpack strap.

I take a step towards the door with my hands out in front of me to ensure I don't hit a wall. My hands make contact with the cold metal on the doorframe. I continue to walk forward and feel a layer of dust cover-

ing the doorframe. I step through the frame into the pitch-black hallway. A dusty substance make contact with my face. My initial reaction is to swat at the air in front of me. As I do, a chalky dirt-like smell invades my nostrils, making me sneeze.

With my sneeze comes a strong taste of metal. The chalky substance that invaded my nostrils now engulfs my entire body. My eyes begin to sting. I try as hard as I can to focus my eyes in the dark. I take another step forward into the darkness, feeling as if I'm walking into an even thicker cloud of dust.

This must be the debris kicked up from the collapse of the building. I begin coughing as I take another step forward into the darkness of the hallway. Okay, I should be nearing the middle of the hall. I grab my shirt by the collar and stretch it over my mouth and nose. Now I can breathe a little better, but I still can't see. My eyes are burning uncontrollably. I close my eyes and do a ninety-degree turn in the middle of the hallway. I should be pointing toward the main hallway now.

If I can make it back to that hallway, I might be able to find some light. I extend my left arm in front me to use my hand as a feeler. Slowly, step by step, I make my way down the hall. I pour all of my concentration into my arms and legs as I continue to walk blindly. My heart races and my ears are still ringing.

My eyes shoot open as my left hand makes contact with something cold. I stagger backwards, staring into the darkness, now gripping the forty tightly with both hands. Squinting as hard as I can, I look desperately into the darkness, forcing my eyes to stay open despite their burning. It's no use, I can't see a thing. Adrenaline continues to surge through me as I stand in the darkness awaiting an attack. What was that? A body would have been warm. My heart calms and I smile in the darkness

realizing that I just hit a wall. I take a step forward to where I was before and reach out in front of me.

My fingertips slide across the cold rough texture of the bricks that make up one of the hallway walls. I smile again and shake my head in the darkness. I'm an idiot. I was standing here ready to shoot the wall. Keeping my left hands fingertips on the wall, I begin moving down the hall again. The burning in my eyes subsides, allowing me to open them fully.

"I still can't see a thing," I whisper to myself, chuckling.

As I walk, I can't feel the dust hitting my skin anymore. I wonder if the debris has finally settled, or if my body is just so caked with it that I can't feel it anymore? I come to the corner of the wall and turn to my right. I squint into the darkness, hoping to catch at least a small glimpse of light. Nothing. This should be the main hall. The control room where I left Reika and Tank should only be a little further down this hall on the left side.

I begin my blind plunge into the hallway. After about fifteen or so carefully placed steps, I start to see a faint red glow emitting from the left side of the hallway. With my left hand still touching the wall I cautiously make my way closer to the red light. I slowly step into the light and realize that it's coming from inside of the control room.

My heart jumps at the thought of seeing everyone again, especially Reika. The reality of my situation reaffirms itself as I walk into the silent room. I squint to make out where the red light is coming from and notice that every computer screen has large red boxes on them. I lean in closer to one of the screens. The on-screen text reads 'system failure'.

"They must've made it out," I whisper to myself.

SEPARATION ANXIETY

Why isn't that comforting? It's a good thing. I take a deep breath.
"Time to get moving"

I place my forty on the ground in order to pull off my backpack. Using the red glow from the computer screens I reassemble one of the M16s. After putting the weapon back together I grab one of the two clips from my backpack and slide it into place. It clicks signifying the ammunition was inserted properly.

"Just in case I need a lucky shot." I say to myself as I grab the forty from the floor and tuck it into my waistband. Time to find a way out. I zip up my backpack and slip the straps around my arms and into place. As I stand up the ringing in my left ear finally subsides. I take a step toward the door, then halt abruptly when the ringing in my right ear ceases and I pick up the sound of muffled gunfire. Upstairs? No, it sounds like it's coming from the hallway.

I creep into the hallway. Sensing no immediate danger I follow the sound to my left. After about five steps my left foot makes contact with something along the ground. Stumbling forward I take my left hand off of the M16 and reach outward to brace myself for impact. Surprisingly my knee hits before my hand does leaving me upright. My hand hits much higher than I expect and I finding myself grasping onto a cold concrete textured object.

I move my hand off of the cold surface and begin feeling around in the dark. There wasn't a wall here before so what is this? My hand makes contact with several uneven objects before I reach a slab of something that's covered in dust. More debris?

Did the other bomb really take out that much of the building? My thoughts immediately bounce back to Reika and Tank. Did they have

enough time to fight their way out? Did I draw away enough soldiers for them to get out without fighting?

I didn't hear that explosion until my charge was nearly at zero. They're probably fine. I need to stop worrying about them and focus on getting myself out.

Okay, obviously I can't get out this way. My only option is to go further in and hope I can find an exit before running into soldiers. I push off from the rubble, stand up, and begin walking back the way I came. I keep my m16 pointed into the darkness in front of me and speed walk down the hall.

The compound wall is a huge circle and since this is the main hallway it should lead me to the rest of the wall. If I'm lucky I can get to an exit and slip out without provoking a shootout. I start laughing. There's probably a squadron of soldiers with their guns trained on this hallway waiting for me to appear.

Another thirty or forty blindly placed steps into the hallway and my right elbow hits the wall jerking my shoulder. "Shit!" I say flinching as a burning sensation shoots through my shoulder. I speed up as my urge to get outside increases. A few more hastily placed steps and I begin to see a grey haze in front of me.

Light shoots out from the upper left side of the hallway. As I continue curving down the hallway it increases. An uneasy feeling invades my gut. I grip my gun tighter ready to shoot at the first sign of movement.

Ten feet from me there is an object blocking the hall with dull yellow light leaking around it. What the hell is that? I cautiously approach the object. It looks like a wire fence with some sort of tarp filling in the gaps of metal. I nudge the object with the nozzle of my weapon.

"Dude. Hurry the fuck up! We gotta go!" A deep voice fills my ears.

SEPARATION ANXIETY

My heart rate spikes.

"Calm down you know this is probably just another drill."

"So what! If we get caught in here were gonna get reamed," the deep voice answers back angrily.

"And if the C.O. finds this alcohol in here, he'll turn the whole platoon against us! We'll be doing shit duty for weeks. Not to mention this wouldn't have happened if your ass woke up on time!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, but what if this is the one time it isn't a drill? I'm tellin' ya, I swear a rumble woke me up."

"That's why that Hesco barrier is set up, ain't nothing getting through that."

"Yeah, but it's not even filled. It won't stop shit."

"Just more proof that this is a drill! Okay, I got it all. Let's get the hell outta here!"

"We going out the A door?"

"Yeah, the whole area is barricaded. After A, we should be able to get out without anyone noticing and then we can rejoin everyone at B."

"Alright, let's move."

A Hesco barrier, huh? I wonder how heavy it is. One of those men on the other side said it wasn't filled. Maybe I can move it. When the shuffling from the other side of the barrier ceases, I use my left hand to push into the barrier in an attempt to move it forward. The barrier flexes but stays in place. I lean in closer to the barrier squinting to gain a better image of its consistency. Amidst the horizontal wire there are places that have thicker vertical wiring. There is a crease in the cloth behind each area with vertical wiring. I wonder if this folds up.

Using my left hand I apply pressure to an area with vertical wiring. Sure enough the furthest part of the barrier to my right begins folding inward.

I push the crease in two inches and look to the side of the barrier. It barely moves. That's definitely not enough room for me to squeeze through. I lower my left shoulder, wedge it into the fold, and use my legs to push the crease inward another five inches. That should be enough to squeeze through.

I peer around the corner of the barrier to see into the hall behind it. No noise or sign of movement from any direction. If I can figure out how to get to the door those soldiers were talking about, I might be able to escape without being seen. I inch my way past the barrier and slowly proceed into the yellow light of the hallway. I take two steps into the hallway and stop. It's dead silent. My heart beats like a war drum as I try to keep my breathing to a minimum.

I take a deep breath and start making my way down the hall. This section looks significantly different from the hallways where we entered. It's filled with black doors. Each one next to its own grouping of white numbers that run vertically down the wall. I pass a door on my right that is partly open and see two neatly made beds stacked on top of one another. Living quarters. That explains why they left the area so quickly, there's nothing of importance to defend.

I round a curve in the hallway and reach an intersection. Straight across from the intersection in front of me there is another set of Hesco barriers blocking my continuance down the hall. I inch forward to the corner of the wall. I peak around the corner to the right and to see a small corridor that has a single door at the end. No windows or descriptive markings, just a door which is painted the same color as the wall. I look

SEPARATION ANXIETY

at the barriers in front of me and then again at the door. I hope this is it. I walk to the door and place my left hand on its flat metal handle.

I pull the door as hard as I can, aiming my rifle out the door as it swings open. Sunlight and the sound of distant gunfire assault my senses. I use my left leg to prop the door open and scan the outside for enemies. I walk out the door half blind as my eyes attempt to adjust to the sun's rays. I hear someone shout to my left and instantly swing my rifle in that direction. A hundred yards away I see soldiers grouped together near a set of doors that look nearly identical to those we used to enter the wall. Two men in camouflage are facing outward toward an oncoming single file line of four soldiers.

From this distance they won't be able to tell whether or not I'm one of them. I walk down a small set of concrete stairs and survey the parking lot in front of me looking for an exit. The lot is filled with parked cars. It is separated from the rest of the compound by a large metal fence. If I can find the break in the fence where the cars are allowed to enter I might be able to make a quick exit.

I begin walking into the parking lot and have nearly reached the first row of cars when I hear someone to left of me shout. "Soldier!"

I pretend not to hear the voice and walk faster toward the row of cars in front of me.

"Soldier! We're at war get your ass over here on the double!" A much louder voice fills the air.

That was too loud for me to ignore. They're going to realize something's wrong any moment. No time to look for the easy exit. I just need to make it to the end of this row and I can try to hop that fence and make a run for the houses. If I start climbing without responding they'll have a

huge opportunity to shoot me before I make it over the fence. And I can't climb that chain link with my gun in hand.

I reach the end of the row and execute a one hundred and twenty-degree spin while raising my M16. I fire two bursts in the general direction of the men and duck down behind a red car as they return fire.

Waiting for a lapse in their shots, I look to the row of cars behind me. That SUV should provide better cover. I pop up from behind the car and fire two more bursts before crouching and backpedaling as fast as I can toward the SUV.

While backpedaling I continue to take poorly aimed shots in the direction of the soldiers. The soldiers who are standing a few feet from the walls entrance have nothing to duck behind for cover. As a result, one of the men begins making a sprint toward the entrance, while the other provides cover fire. I stand and take two more shots at the men and then turn and run as fast as I can toward the large white SUV.

I hear the hum of bullets whipping by my head and see holes appear in the windshield of the SUV as I reach the left side of it. I run to the back of the vehicle and duck down before the rumble of a distant explosion fills my ears. Is that the western wall? I thought those charges already went off?

I stand and peek through the back windshield of the vehicle trying to catch a glimpse of the soldiers. Did they make it inside? I creep alongside of the vehicle to the front hood and then pop up taking aim. They must've made it inside, it's time to go.

I turn around, sprint past a row of vehicles, and cut to my left before running at the fence. "I hope this is far enough." I mutter to myself as I eject the clip from the gun and shoot to my left to empty its chamber. Just before I reach the fence I slow down and use both hands to launch my

SEPARATION ANXIETY

gun over it. I leap onto the fence expecting to be shot before I get the chance to scale it. No pain, I'm good. As soon as my torso is above the top of the fence I lean in and flip myself over it. I land a little roughly but on my feet.

Without looking back, I scoop up my rifle and continue to sprint as fast as I can across the street toward a cluster of houses. I jog around the side of the first house I reach and make my way to its front porch. I nearly fall over from a sudden bout of lightheadedness as I crouch on the porch trying to catch my breath. I inspect the white chalky substance that coats my body as I continue to gasp for air. I guess this is the crap was I was walking through in the hallway.

"I gotta keep movin'. I gotta find the others," I say trying to motivate myself between gasps for air.

I slide my backpack off and remove a second clip for my rifle from it. I insert the clip into my gun and notice the damage it took when I threw it over the fence. It's pretty badly scraped up but should still work fine. I zip up my backpack and throw it over my shoulder when the sound of several explosions startle me. That sounded close. Are they using mortars? "I gotta get the hell outa here."

I jog down the block and cross the street heading deeper into the neighborhood. The safe house should be northwest of... A large booming wave of sound nearly knocks me on my ass. Searching for an answer my eyes desperately scan the street in front of me. The front half of a corner house at the end of the block has been caved in. What the hell? As I try to figure out what caused the damage an all-black tank rolls by the house heading in the direction of the eastern wall.

"Shit!"

Fear shoots through me and I make a break for the nearest backyard. I jump the fence, run through the backyard, and jump another fence into the adjacent house's back yard. I continue running until I reach the next block. I have to get across that street the tank was on in order to continue north toward the safe house. I head across the street and run through the front yards of three more houses in order to make my way up the block without encountering the tank.

Two houses from the end of the block I hear the roar of a diesel engine. A large camo green military truck comes into view and is driving down the same street as the tank. I drop to my stomach on a front lawn and impatiently wait for the vehicle to pass. That street must be how they're getting reinforcements to the wall. I don't think there's a way to the safe house that doesn't involve crossing that street.

Well, I can either lie here on the ground waiting for someone to realize I'm here or find a way across that damn street to meet up with the others. I jump to my feet and begin running for the end of the block. Another camo green vehicle enters my vision as I step foot on the corner house's driveway. I turn to my left, run up the driveway, and around the left side of the houses yellow garage.

I peek around the corner of the garage to make sure the truck has cleared the block. Not seeing the truck, nor hearing the sound of any other approaching vehicle, I dart out from the side of the garage. I head through the front lawn of the house to the end of the block. As I reach the corner I peer down the street to my left and see that the next vehicle is still a few blocks away.

"No time like the present," I shout to myself as I sprint across the street.

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I pass the first two houses on the block, run towards the third houses fence, and jump into its backyard. I collapse as I hit the ground and press my back to the fence in order to catch my breath. Hopefully they'll just think I'm one of theirs since I'm still dressed like them. I rest for a few minutes listening for approaching vehicles and soldiers.

I push myself off of the fence and to my feet. All right time to go. If I keep going north I should eventually reach the downtown district. I weave my way through the streets and backyards of the neighborhood while gunfire and gun smoke continue to fill the air. After jogging close to twenty blocks at various speeds I reach a block of houses that precedes the downtown district.

At the end of this block should be the street I walk along until I reach the sign that says Anaheim. Then, if I remember right I just have to walk into the neighborhood for a block or two and I should see that musician's house. I hope. I casually walk the rest of the block trying to regain some energy.

I pause on the corner looking at the buildings across from me. A group of figures wearing desert fatigues catch my eye as I scan the buildings to my left. My heart jumps to full alert. Too tired to run I take a few steps back and crouch examining the group across the street. Ten or so men in camouflage are walking cautiously toward one of the downtown buildings.

Desert fatigues, did the Ninety-nine make it this far in already? Wait, those two look familiar. One of them is huge, and the other is wearing a compound military uniform that doesn't fit her. Tank and Reika! My eyes widen and my stamina is renewed. A huge smile shoots across my face. I start jogging toward the group of soldiers who are now making their way down a side street towards an enormous skyscraper. As I get closer I see

who I believe to be Tank and Reika drop back from the rest of the soldiers. I'm surprised they haven't turned around and seen me running toward them yet. They're usually much more on guard than this.

I slow my jog. The dark-haired woman and the enormous man stop by an alley while the rest of the soldiers continue walking. Is that really Reika and Tank? The woman glances down the alley at the same time that one of the soldiers wearing desert fatigues turns around. He looks at the woman then jerks his head directly at me but strangely doesn't acknowledge my presence. Instead he focuses on the man who resembles Tank. Something's wrong. I stop in the middle of the street.

"Now!" the desert fatigued soldier yells.

My eyes widen as the desert fatigued soldiers all turn and open fire. I strafe to my left while aiming in the general direction of the soldiers. The man who resembles Tank is strafing toward the alley on his left and is in my direct firing line so I refrain from squeezing my trigger. I clip the bumper of a parked car with my hip and as I do I see the big man drop two feet from the alleyway. I spin around the bumper of the car and crouch behind it.

"What the fuck is going on?"

That woman was providing cover fire for that man to get to the alley, and from the back they resemble Reika and Tank, but why would the Ninety-nine fire on them? If the Ninety-nine turned on them they should have shot at me as well but they didn't. Why? I'm dead sure that's the Ninety-nine, or at least I think I am. A brief pause in gunfire allows me to hear the shouts of the soldiers down the street.

"We got yer cover! Just get Oleg into that building securely!"

"Alright. Go! Go! Go!"

SEPARATION ANXIETY

The hell? Then, that's not Reika and Tank? I pop up from behind the vehicle and take aim at the woman peeking out of the alley taking pop shots at the soldiers down the street.

I hear Reika's voice.

"Hold on Tank. I'm gonna get you out of here!"

I look at the man on the ground and the gut wrenching feeling of betrayal rips through me as the situation sinks in.

Three men are in the street shooting toward Reika while the rest run toward a building. Rage surges through me. I take several steps away from the car before firing my first burst. I see the soldier's head whip back and body begin to fall as I switch targets.

"The fuck!" I hear a soldier shout as I aim at the next man in the middle of the street.

Out the corner of my eye I can see the man on the left aim at me instead of Reika. My anger overwhelms any sense of self-preservation and I continue up the middle of the street. My first two bursts miss and I hear bullets whiz by my head. Reika pops out from the alley and unloads into the soldier on the left causing the man in the middle of the street to turn and begin running.

Anger continues to surge through me. I chase the soldier down the street taking shots at him every few steps. My gun clicks signaling that I have no more ammo but I continue standing in the middle of the street pulling the trigger as if I do.

Reika's voice snaps me out of my delusional shooting. "Nineteen! We're only two blocks from the safe house!"

I drop my empty weapon to the ground and run over to one of the dead soldiers. I pry the M16 from his hands and claim it as my own. I then run to Reika who has wrapped one of Tank's arms around her

shoulders and is waiting for my help. I wrap his right arm around the right side of my neck and over my right shoulder while positioning my left arm behind his back.

"On three," I say, looking at Reika.

"One, two, three!"

We both let out grunts as we start dragging his body down the street in the direction of the neighborhood. We barely reach the corner of the block before we have to stop.

"He's so big," Reika says, letting out a gasp.

I begin to see stars.

"Fuck, we can't stop. Come on, we got this. This is nothing," I say in between gasps, still seeing stars.

"Ready, go," I manage to spout out.

We make it three quarters of the way across the street toward the houses before having to stop again.

"We gotta go about two more blocks that way," Reika says, pointing to the west.

"Okay. Let's go," I say as we start dragging him again.

I stop after about five more feet and stare at Tank's blood soaked chest. Tears start to well up in my eyes. You can't die Tank! I can't lose you too. You were supposed to take care of Reika for me!

"What's wrong? Are you hit?" Reika asks, looking at me.

I glance at her, shake my head back and forth, and look again at Tank's chest.

"I... I dunno Reika. Look at him. I don't know if he'll survive us dragging him that far."

She looks back at me with a horrified expression on her face. "Don—"

I interrupt her. "Think about it, look how much blood he's already lost. If we keep dragging him like this that wounds gonna get worse. He... he's gonna bleed a whole lot more. He'll be dead long before we get there," I muster out.

She looks at Tank's chest and motions as if she's going to talk but nothing comes out.

"Let's move him onto the sidewalk and make a run for the safe house. Maybe we can get somebody to come to him, it's his only chance."

"Okay." Reika's response is drowned out by the sound of screeching tires.

We both turn in the direction of the noise. My heart drops as I see a convoy of military vehicles turning a corner a few blocks up.

"Okay, new plan," I say, looking at Reika. "We're with them, I doubt they'll recognize us."

"There's no way in hell they won't figure that out."

"We don't have much of a choice. If we get in a shootout with them, we're not getting away alive. And even if we did, there's no way we're saving Tank."

Reika nods in agreement. A green and black truck with a fifty cal machine gun mounted to the top screeches to a stop a few feet from us. I grit my teeth and pull Tank's arm from my shoulder to greet the enemy. Doors on both sides of the vehicle open and two tall men step out.

The one who exits the driver side door looks me up and down before talking.

"You wouldn't happen to be Nineteen, would you?" he asks.

"What?" I reply, gripping my gun preparing to start shooting.

"Take it easy, we're with Kisin," the man says while lifting his palms to us to assure us he's not a threat.

"He told us not to shoot at groups of three or four men, just in case you were on route to the safe house," he explains further.

Relief washes over me.

"Yeah, I'm Nineteen. We need to get him to the safe house," I say.

The man looks down at Tank.

"Gimme a sec. I'll call a truck to take you back," the man says before reaching into his vehicle.

"Hey Charles, can you make room for three?" he says into a walkie-talkie.

There's a response but I can't make it out.

"Okay, good. I need you to head up here and take Nineteen back to the safe house. After you drop him, we can reconvene at attack point B." I hear him continue.

I stop listening to the conversation and begin putting Tank's arm around my shoulders.

"Charles will take ya back," the man says, emerging from the truck.

"Okay, thanks," I say, nodding.

"Oh and thanks for following through," the man says, turning around and signaling the men with him to get back in the truck.

"Following through?" I ask.

"We wouldn't have this opportunity if it wasn't for you," he says before jumping in and closing the door.

Opportunity?

A much smaller vehicle with a green tent over the truck bed pulls out from the line of vehicles and parks in the street next to us.

Four men hop out of the truck bed and approach us.

"Bring him back here," one says as the other three help lift Tank by grabbing his legs and torso.

SEPARATION ANXIETY

We carry Tank around to the back of the truck. Two more men are standing inside the truck bed and help transition Tank into the back of the vehicle. We hop in the back with Tank and the truck makes a U-turn before speeding down the street.

We reach the safe house and Kisins men hop out to help take Tank inside. We rush past the red rocks of the porch and into the house. Kisin and two men wearing surgeon outfits greet us and direct us into the piano room. The room which this morning contained a piano and chairs, has since been transformed into a medical facility. A thick layer of plastic has been placed on the floor over the carpet and the room has been filed with stretchers and medical equipment.

We lay Tank on one of the stretchers.

"We'll take it from here," the taller of the two surgeons says.

"Do whatever is necessary," Kisin's says to the surgeons.

Both surgeons nod. A short woman wearing light blue scrubs walks up to me and escorts me toward the kitchen.

"Let me get you cleaned up," the woman says, sitting me down at the rectangular table where we had breakfast.

"Maggie here should be able to patch you both up," Kisin says.

I nod in response.

"Aside from the obvious, how did it go?" Kisin asks calmly as he and Reika sit at the table.

A replay of Tank getting shot runs through my head.

"We brought the wall down," Reika replies.

I set my gun near my feet and take a deep breath trying to calm myself down. We can't tell him the Ninety-nine betrayed us. Or can we? The Ninety-nine are already inside the compound. If they're truly out kill us,

then Kisin is our only ally. I need to talk to Reika in private to try to figure out what the hell just happened.

"What's wrong?" Kisin asks, looking at me.

I look at Reika and then glance at Kisin. It doesn't matter we're all in this together now. I open my mouth to talk and then flinch at the sudden stinging of my right shoulder.

"It looks like you were lucky. All the blood on you is from flesh wounds," Maggie says rubbing something into the bullet wound on my shoulder.

"Yeah, lucky," I reply under my breath.

I look back at Kisin. "A lot is wrong."

Kisin might as well know. He's in the same boat as us.

"What the hell just happened with the Ninety-nine, Reika?" I ask, looking down.

"We ran into Oleg and his troupe while trying to make it here to regroup. There's no way they should have been able to make it so far in so fast. We didn't believe it was them at first but..."

"Where were they?" I ask, looking up into Reika's eyes.

"They were entering the first block of the downtown district. It seemed as if they were waiting for us to show up, but when we approached them the whole group's demeanor seemed off. We couldn't quite place why, but we noticed something was wrong almost immediately."

"Did they say why they were there?" Kisin asks.

"Oleg approached us and said that there was a very important building that they needed to get to. He claimed that if we could reach it in time we could cripple the communications network inside the compound. We didn't have much of a choice but to believe him so we agreed to head

with his group toward the building. After about a block or so of walking things got worse," Reika continues.

Fox was with them, why haven't I seen him?

"Wait, where's Fox?" I ask.

"That's why it got worse. Fox decided to cut off from us so he could head farther west in an attempt to meet up with his men. Oleg and the demeanor of his soldiers drastically decreased after Fox left. A block or two after he left we knew we were being led into a trap. So we started looking for a way to make an escape."

Fox left and Oleg's men got worse. The mixture of anger and betrayal fill my gut to the point where I begin to feel nauseous.

"Where's everyone at? Wait is that Tank?" I hear Fox's voice shout from the other room.

Rage shoots through me and I can feel the pressure of it leaking out of every vein on my face. Reika and Kisin say something to me but the words are scrambled as anger takes full control. I snatch my gun from the floor and rush into the next room.

Fox is standing next to Cupid, Omni, and a man in a police uniform when I enter the room. The moment I recognize his face I practically run at him. He turns his head just before I make contact. I jam the nozzle of my M16 under his chin and into the crevice slightly above his Adam's apple. He starts coughing. I use my left foot to kick his legs out as I push the nozzle of my gun into his throat. I grab the back of his shirt with my left hand and fall with him ensuring the nozzle of my gun stays pressed to his throat.

We both hit the floor. I mount Fox and shove his head to the floor by pressing the palm of my left hand into his forehead. I keep my gun pressed into his throat.

"What the fuck did you do?" I shout at the top of my lungs.

I feel two guns press to my head, one on the back of my head and the other on my right temple.

I ignore the placement of the guns and my anger continues to flow. "We just fuckin' pawns to help the Ninety-nine eradicate everybody? Huh?"

Fox mutters something but begins coughing again.

"Calm the fuck down!" Cupid's voice enters my right ear.

I hear Reika's sword leave her sheath after Cupids demand.

"Pull that trigger, I'll take off your head," Reika says.

"Talk or I'll blow yer fuckin' head clean off!" I yell again.

"Do it and you go with him," I hear Omni say as he points a pistol to the left side of my face.

I let out a semi-maniacal laugh before growing extremely serious.

"And you think I care?" I say.

BETRAYAL

"We need to get information from him, and he can't talk with your gun in his mouth," Kisin says calmly.

He's right. I need to calm down and pump him for information. I shift my weight putting more pressure on his forehead and slowly withdraw the barrel of my gun from his throat. Fox coughs a few times. As he regains his demeanor I gently rest the barrel of my gun back on his throat.

"What the hell is going on?" Fox finally chokes out.

"That's what I want you to tell me," I say in a much calmer manner.

"Why did you leave me and Tank?" Reika asks angrily.

"I told you, I went to regroup with my men," Fox replies.

"That's strange seeing as how Lotus is still missing!" I say angrily.

"She's dead! Lotus died setting up the last bomb along the western wall!" Fox says growing angry.

Did he really lose one of his own? Or is this a bluff?

"How?" Kisin asks calmly.

"They were waiting for us. The whole western wall was being patrolled," Omni replies before Fox.

"Somehow the military got wind of our attack on the western wall. As we had planned, an officer made the call to the military after the warehouse bombs went off. When he called, he was told that it was already being taken care of. He was also told that he should keep all other officers away from the western wall," Carl's voice shoots out from behind me.

"On our way to the wall we noticed a large number of soldiers hovering around. The closer we got to the wall the more soldiers we saw. We managed to get within a few blocks of the wall without being seen, but it became obvious that there was no way we could plant the explosives as we planned," Cupid says.

"There were tents, tanks, and who knows how many soldiers stationed in the area," Omni adds.

"I don't know what happened with you and Tank, but I had nothing to do with it. Someone tipped them off to our attack and I lost a soldier because of it," Fox says angrily.

Every time he mentions Lotus I can see anguish in his eyes.

"It wasn't the compound military who attacked us, it was Oleg," Reika says angrily.

"What?" Fox, Omni, and Cupid all say simultaneously.

All of them genuinely sound surprised. The look on Fox's face is not one of guilt, but one of shock. Out the corner of my eye I see Omni lower his gun.

"That means we all share the same problem," Omni says.

"I'm sorry about Tank, I knew something was wrong when we ran into Oleg. I just didn't know what it was," Fox says.

He really has no idea. I glance to my right and see that Cupid has also lowered his gun. What does this mean? I suck up my anger and with-

draw my gun from Fox's neck. I stand and offer Fox my left hand. He grabs it and I help him to his feet.

"Where is Oleg now?" Fox asks, staring into my eyes angrily.

"They entered some building a few blocks away," I say.

"Let's go find out what the hell is happening?" Fox says.

"Is that wise?" Kisin asks.

I hear Reika sheath her katana as I turn to address Kisin.

"At this point it's probably the best way to figure out what's happening," I say.

"Why? You'd be walking into the mess you just left," Kisin replies.

"Oleg shouldn't have been able to make it that far into the compound that fast. The rest of the Ninety-nine would have only been a few blocks inside the wall. Even if he was with the first wave of the invading forces from the eastern wall, he shouldn't have been capable of getting downtown before we did," Fox says.

"And the Western wall was covered in soldiers. There's no way in hell he would have been able to enter there," Kisin says, understanding the situation.

"Did you tell Estabon about our plan to infiltrate the eastern wall before the attack commenced?" I ask Fox.

"No, I didn't because I had suspected that he might have been captured remember?"

"That's right."

"His capture would explain the soldiers waiting for us along the western wall. But not how Oleg got downtown," Fox replies.

A memory of the tank I avoided and the other vehicles I saw on my way downtown flashes through my head.

"I ran into a tank near the eastern wall when I was making my way here. I didn't think anything of it at the time, but assuming they were stationed along the western wall with the rest of the compound soldiers, they would have had to drive through the entire complex. I couldn't have been in the wall more than fifteen minutes after the explosion," I say.

"Our tanks aren't that fast. They had to have known before the explosions. That is assuming it came from the western wall," Kisin adds.

Something isn't adding up. What is Oleg's involvement? The memory of Tank hitting the ground flashes through my head.

"We can figure it out when we catch Oleg," I say, anger leaking from my voice.

"How long ago did he head to the building you're talking about?" Fox asks.

"It's been at least twenty minutes since we were there," I say, looking at my watch.

"He's probably long gone by now." Carl says.

"He said he had to be at another building downtown by noon" Reika adds.

"All the more reason for us to hunt him down. We know he's still downtown," I say.

A burst of static erupts from the walkie-talkie on Carl's shirt. "All units be advised incoming helicopters are not friendly. Incoming helicopters are firing at civilians and military, take cover accordingly." A man's voice emits.

"Sir, there's something you should see," Maggie says to Kisin as she enters the room.

We follow Maggie into the next room to a television. On the screen is a male reporter standing across the street from the vaccine booth in the

market. A purple and green mixture of smoke creeps over the street in front of the booth. Within the smoke cloud are several groups of people who are coughing and covering their faces as they make their way down the street.

Is this part of the protest Kisin had planned?

"As we reported earlier, the western wall was said to be under attack from ..."

The reporter begins coughing as the smoke reaches him. He swats at the air in front of his face and moves off the street and onto a nearby sidewalk to escape the smoke.

"The western wall was said to be under attack from outside sources so we believed the helicopters were a military response to the attack. However, as the helicopters reached the crowd of protesters here at the market they started shooting some sort of tear gas or—" He begins coughing again.

Gunshots erupt from the television speaker and people begin running past the reporter. "They're shooting, they're shooting at us!" the reporter yells, while running out of the camera's view.

The screen shifts to the left and upwards toward where the reporter was looking. Men with gas masks are dangling from a helicopter on ropes while firing assault rifles into the crowd. The cameraman curses and the picture on screen goes out of focus just before cutting out.

"Why would the military make the vaccine booth protesters a priority target now?" I ask looking at Kisin.

"They wouldn't, it wouldn't make sense for them to do so," Kisin replies.

A woman with black hair inside a studio appears as the television broadcast comes back on. "Multiple informants are calling in reporting

that the two helicopters which were just seen attacking civilians originated from beyond the northern wall. Similar sources are reporting that the wall defenses did not attack them as they flew into the compound."

"If they were from the ninety nine, why didn't our northern defenses attack them? Why were they opening fire near the market?" Carl says, thinking aloud.

"Did your men have a supply of our helicopters?" Kisin asks, confused.

"That isn't us," Omni replies.

"Our current target is your military. It wouldn't make sense for us to fly in and attack your citizens while your military is still a threat," Fox says.

"A second set of helicopters is now flying over the northern wall! We're going to Michael Schu who is covering the area," the reporter says as the image on screen switches to a live view of the northern wall.

"If it isn't the Ninety-nine..." Kisin says, thinking out loud.

The memory of our encounter with the grey-haired Council member replays in my head.

"Why would our military shoot at the protesters in the middle of Ninety-nines attack?" Kisin continues thinking aloud.

That grey-haired man said he'd eradicate us all unless we had military grade nanobots.

"Do you have access to any more of those military nanobots?" I ask Kisin, turning to him.

"What?" Kisin asks, turning the television down.

"That injection of military nanobots you gave me to fix my leg, do you have any more?"

"A few doses, why?"

BETRAYAL

"Get 'em and secure more if you can. I have a feeling we're gonna need them," I say.

It looks as if a lightbulb goes off in Kisin's head.

"The helicopters are from the northern compound," he says.

"Why would they come all the way here just to attack the protestors?" Carl asks.

"I don't know. But the Council's responsible for our inoculations. So it would make sense that they would try dismantle any opposition to it," Kisin says.

"Kill the protestors and blame it on the invading force," Fox says.

"Perhaps. Ah and the nanobots, I'm on it." Kisin nods and pulls out his cell phone.

He walks off while activating it.

"Why do we need nanobots?" Fox asks me.

"Option C?" Reika says, looking at me.

"That's what I'm thinking," I reply.

"What's option C?" both Fox and Cupid ask.

"I'm not sure, but one of the Council members was talking about it before we killed him. He said that it was only a matter of time before they killed us all," I reply.

"Hmm," Carl mumbles in contemplation.

"What is it?" Fox asks, turning to Carl.

"That smoke. It didn't look like tear gas. The tear gas we use is white or a shade of gray and white. I've never seen it any other color," Carl says, looking at us.

He abruptly grabs the walkie-talkie from his chest and walks into the other room.

"I guess this postpones our plans to hunt Oleg," Fox says.

"I don't see why," I respond coldly as an image of dragging Tanks bloody body flashes through my head.

"What about option C?" Omni asks.

"What about it?" I say, looking at Omni. "We don't know what the Council's put in motion, therefore we don't have a way to counter it."

"What about the nanobots?" Cupid asks.

"That's just a guess at how we survive."

"How do we use them?" Omni asks.

"I don't know," I reply.

Reika jumps in. "The Council member we killed hinted that we would all die unless we had large amounts of those nanobots. He didn't take the time to elaborate before I killed him."

"Look, Kisin is gathering as many nanobots as he can which leaves us with nothing to do. I'd much rather be hunting down Oleg then standing here having this discussion," I say.

"I understand you're pissed and want Oleg's head on a platter. For all I know he could be the reason we lost Lotus, so I'm on the same wavelength as you. But the Ninety-nine is invading the compound as we speak! If there's some sort of attack coming, our priority should be figuring out how to defend against it. There are thousands of men and women out there risking their lives based on our Intel. I don't want thousands of corpses on my conscience because I decided to try to track down one piece of shit." Fox says shouting as his anguish escapes him.

"We should be trying to hunt down that other Council member, the one you didn't kill," Fox says in a much calmer tone.

Natalie's father. We could pump him for information. I look at the ground in an attempt to think rationally. I'm sorry Tank I can't go after him just yet. Fox is right. I grit my teeth.

"We can ask Kisin where he's at," Reika says.

I glance up at Reika as she answers for me. I'm flooded with the memories of past decisions amongst our group and look back at the ground in contemplation.

"Natalie's father?" Cupid asks.

"Yeah. Kisin said he'd keep tabs on him for us, I think," Reika replies.

Logan would be siding with me to go avenge Tank if he were here. And Natalie. Sadness pushes out the leftover anger in my gut. Natalie would be on Fox's side. She'd be calling me stupid for trying to go after Oleg. Tank would just be cracking jokes. I look back up at Reika.

"Nineteen?" Fox asks.

It's just us now. If I don't get my head straight we might die, and this whole endeavor would be for nothing.

"Nineteen, didn't Kisin tell you he'd watch Natalie's father for us?" Reika asks.

Snapping out of my thoughts, I start to reply but am cut off by Kisin.

"I did, but we have something more pressing to deal with at the moment."

"What is it?" I ask, turning around to face Kisin.

"I'm having the two doses of nanobots I have left brought to us and I was able to get a hold of my contact who originally smuggled them out." Kisin pauses before continuing.

"He said that there's about thirty doses sitting in a military compound. They were meant to be administered to military personnel this morning. When the warehouse explosions went off and the military went into high alert, the distribution was cancelled. The nanobots were never given out," Kisin explains.

"Looks like that's where we're headed," Fox says.

"That's not all. My informant said that the building next door is the holding area for suspected Ninety-nine sympathizers."

Megan.

"So we get to free allies at the same time," Omni says.

"And Megan," I say.

"Exactly. There's only one problem—" Kisin starts but is interrupted by the sound of a doorbell.

"Do any of your contacts know where this house is?" Kisin asks, looking at Fox and his men.

"No," Fox replies.

"None of my contacts would ring the doorbell," Kisin says, looking at Reika and me.

"My men are accounted for," I say as the doorbell rings a second time.

After a brief pause and a few confused glances Kisin starts shouting.

"Everyone prepare for a raid!"

"Tank is still here. I'm fighting," I say.

"We all are, they'll have to take this house by force," Fox adds.

Carl jogs into the room. "There's a group of soldiers at the door and judging by their fatigues, they're Ninety-nine."

I look at Fox.

"Let's go," Fox says, looking me in the eyes.

"Did you give them our location?" I ask as we head out of the piano room and to the door.

"No, I didn't want to give up our location," Fox replies.

We reach the door and Fox looks out the peephole.

"Shit! Hold on soldier!" Fox says, raising his voice mid-sentence.

BETRAYAL

"Open the door and put your hands in the air! This area is now under the control of the Ninety-nine! As long as you cooperate you will not be harmed," a man shouts from outside.

"Hold on! You're speaking to Fox from the Wolfpack. If you're Ninety-nine, state your commander's name," Fox shouts back.

"Fox? The Wolfpack! Oh shit! Guys, we found the Wolfpack! They're still alive!" We hear the soldier outside say.

"I'm Xavier. My commanders name is Rudolpho! We secured the gardens at the arena!"

I look at Fox to see if he knows the name. Fox looks at me and shrugs his shoulders. I take a step back to give Fox the go ahead to open the door.

The door opens to reveal a group of three soldiers. The first man stares at me wide eyed before words fumble out of his mouth. "N-N-Nineteen? The Undesirables survived too?" The man who I now identify by his voice as Xavier asks.

"Why are you dressed like a compound soldier?" the tall man next to Xavier asks.

The shock of being recognized by a man I've never met before causes me to shoot Fox a concerned look.

"We've never officially met, but I watched your teams load onto the helicopters before our initial attack. Back at the arena that is," Xavier explains.

"Oh okay. Gotcha. Was kinda leery there for a second," Fox says.

"I didn't mean to startle you, it's just that we were under the impression that your teams were killed bringing down the wall," Xavier explains.

"Ah, that makes sense," I say.

"And to answer your question, the enemy fatigues are how we were able to infiltrate the wall," Fox explains.

"Oh, okay." the tall man replies to Fox, nodding his head in understanding.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, still uncertain of the soldier's purpose.

"Per Oleg's orders, we're to bring all civilians out from their houses and into the streets," Xavier says.

"In secured areas only, of course," the tall man adds.

"Secured areas?" I ask.

"For what?" Fox asks.

"Well, we've taken about half of the compound already. We've fought our way to that middle wall in most places. The only exception is a small portion of the compound in the south," the soldier explains.

They've already managed to work their way to the inner wall? That's much faster than I expected.

"Why is Oleg having the Ninety-nine bring civilians into the streets?" Fox asks.

"Those were our orders when we entered. Oleg said he'd radio a second set of orders after we've infiltrated and he was in place."

"In place?" I ask.

"That's classified, or at least that's what we were told. I have no idea where he was headed or what he's doing. Our only orders were to take over the compound in sections, and then to bring the civilians out into the streets."

"I see," Fox says, contemplating the situation.

"Well, this is perfect," Kisin says from behind us, causing me and Fox to turn around.

BETRAYAL

"They can help us get to those reinforcements we were just talking about," Kisin says, hinting at our previous conversation.

"That's right," I say, catching on.

I turn back around. "We've located a building that's responsible for holding Ninety-nine operatives captive. We were in the process of planning an attack on the building when you arrived," I say.

"Problem is that it's in the southern part of the compound, just west of the inner wall," Kisin says.

"Just beyond what we currently control. I'm sorry, who are you?" Xavier asks.

"He helped us bring the wall down. Actually, he's the reason we were able to bring it down," Fox says.

"He's one of us, as is everyone else in this house," I add in a serious tone.

"No worries, we wouldn't think of starting a fight with the Wolfpack or the Undesirables," Xavier says.

"You're the whole reason we were able to infiltrate compound. As far as I'm concerned, your word is worth as much as Oleg's," the tall man to Xavier's left says.

"And that's without considering everything they accomplished before today's attack. In all honesty, I honor their words more than Oleg's," Xavier says, turning to the man.

That means the rest of the Ninety-nine wasn't told to kill us. Why did Oleg's personal squad attack us then?

"In that case, you ready to help us carry out an attack on that building?" Fox asks.

"We can't leave this area, but I can get you transportation. And I can put you in communication with the troupe responsible for assaulting that part of the compound," Xavier says.

"That should work," I say.

"Well, come on in so we can get moving," Kisins says.

Xavier looks at his fellow soldiers.

"Go ahead and work your way down the block. I'll meet back up with you after I get everything coordinated here," Xavier says.

"Yes sir," two men say simultaneously.

"Meet at the completion point?" one asks.

"Yeah," Xavier replies.

"It was an honor to meet you," the taller of the two men says before they both turn and continue their way down the block.

Xavier follows us into the house shutting the door behind him.

"I have a map of the compound on the dining room table," Kisin says.

Kisin leads us into the room that we were in before Fox's arrival. He then walks to the far end of the table and begins unfolding a map.

"Now's as good as any time I guess. It wasn't tear gas they were using," Carl says as Kisin continues to unravel the map and place it onto the table.

"What was it?" I ask alarmed.

"I don't know. The officers I spoke to said the gas didn't have the attributes or the symptoms that teargas typically does. It's strange though, I don't understand why they used the smoke in the manner they did," Carl says.

"Maybe there was something in the booth they were after?" Fox adds.

BETRAYAL

"It's possible I guess, but it doesn't make sense. They could have walked right past the picket lines and removed whatever they needed with much less trouble," Carl says.

"Maybe it's just an attempt to make it look like the Ninety-nine doesn't want the citizens to get vaccines? Just another way to cover things up," Omni says.

"I could see that happening if the Ninety-nine didn't breach the walls. But now that the compound has been infiltrated, it's a waste of resources. Why go through the trouble of staging such a thing when they could use those helicopters to fight the invading forces," Carl says.

"Were the people exposed to the gas affected at all?" I ask.

"No. They were seen by medical personnel after fleeing the scene and every last one of them checked out fine," Carl replies.

"Hmm," I mumble looking down in contemplation.

What are we missing?

"Nothing else we can do about it now. We just need to focus on getting the nano... err getting our men out of that building," Fox says.

Fox doesn't fully trust the Ninety-nine either. He purposely omitted the other half of why we intend to hit that building.

"You're right let's concentrate on the task at hand and get our men back," I say.

Kisin looks at me, and then at Fox, silently understanding the information we are withholding.

"This is where the building holding our men is located," he says pointing at the map.

"Okay. If our forces attack this section of the inner wall in an attempt to push through, it'll serve as a perfect distraction for us to assault the

building," Fox says, pointing at a section on the map that is a few blocks north of our target buildings.

"That should cause the bulk of the military force in that area to converge just north of the building you're planning on hitting," Xavier says.

"Exactly," Fox replies.

"Okay. I don't have the authority to tell men in that area to attack, but I'm sure the soldiers in charge down there will listen if you. Give me about ten minutes and I'll have transportation in front of the house. I'll see to it that they take you to the person that can make this happen," Xavier says.

"Sounds good. Ahh, and one last thing," Fox says.

"What is it?" Xavier asks.

"Do you know if Estabon got captured during the initial raid?" Fox asks.

"Estabon... I don't think so. He was the one synchronizing our attacks on the outside with your commands right?"

"Yeah," Fox says.

"No, definitely not. I don't know how his team is doing now, but before our attack on the eastern wall, he was placed in charge of about two hundred men," Xavier Replies.

"Okay, that's a relief," Fox says.

"Friend?" Xavier asks.

"Yeah, we go back a long time," Fox lies.

"Alright, well it was an honor to be able to meet the men that made this possible. I'll have transportation for you soon," Xavier says.

"Glad we met you," I say as Xavier exits the front door.

"So, Estabon wasn't captured," Fox says.

"That leaves us with a very important question," I say, looking at Fox.

"One that we'll have to worry about later," Kisin adds.

"We'll just have to pump Natalie's father for information when we're done getting the nanobots," Cupid says.

"He's a good person to pump for information, but someone on our side is obviously feeding the compound information," I say angrily.

"More than likely. And based on what happened to your men I know what you're thinking," Fox says.

"Even if Oleg betrayed us, finding him and proving he did doesn't change the situation we're in. We need to know what to expect next, and the only other person who might know is Natalie's father," Fox continues.

Fox is right. There's no strategic value in going after Oleg first.

"Point taken. After we get the nanobots and Megan, we'll go after Natalie's father," I say.

"Then after we pry information outta him, we're going for Oleg." Reika says angrily.

"Assuming we can find him I have no problem with that," Fox says.

"I know where he's headed and when," Reika says.

"What?" Omni and I say at the same time.

"Before he attacked us, he made it very clear that he needed to be at the Worchester Building by noon. He said that he needed the entire building to be cleared of threats before then. I also overheard two of his men say something about needing to clear the way to the communications room of the building," Reika says.

"The communications room of the Worchester Building by noon," I say, looking at Kisin.

"I can have a route mapped out for you by the time you get back from getting the nanobots," Kisin says.

"Thanks," I say.

"We need a way to stay in contact with you and your men just in case something happens," Fox says.

"Now that you mention it, I think you forgot something," Kisin says, extending his hand to me. Inside the palm of his hand is the cell phone that I was using the day before.

"You left this downstairs. One of my men found it while we were prepping the house this morning," Kisin continues.

"Perfect," I say.

"What's that?" Fox asks.

"Our way to get a hold of Kisin if we need to," I reply.

"A cell phone," Cupid says.

"Ah okay," Fox responds.

"Now, how do you want to hit these buildings?" I say, glancing at Reika and then at each one of Fox's men.

"The Ninety-nine doesn't know about the nanobots yet, so I'm thinking it'd be best if my men infiltrate the building that contains them," Fox says.

"The Ninety-nine will be much more likely to listen to you if something happens to go wrong," I say understanding Fox's take on the situation.

"Exactly. There will be less questions if my men suddenly show up with nanobots," Fox continues.

"I don't know, it seems like the Ninety-nine trust you just as much as us after meeting Xavier," Cupid adds.

"Yeah. But who knows who's been ordered to attack us and who hasn't," I say, anger leaking from my voice.

"We've also been around Megan more than you and your men so it should prove easier for us to figure out if something's amiss," I continue as my anger subsides.

"Okay, so Reika and Nineteen, you'll be heading here." Kisin says as he reveals a piece of paper from under the map on the table.

The paper has a picture of a large beige building with gold numbers reading 5240 on the front.

"There's a door on the east side of the building that was recently painted, it should look much newer than the other doors. My man will be waiting just inside the door. Knock three times and he'll let you in," Kisin continues.

"How much resistance are we expecting?" Reika asks.

"Barely any. Most of the soldiers stationed in the building were recalled to fight the invading force," Kisin explains.

"Okay, easy enough," I say.

"Is your inside man coming with us or staying there?" Reika asks.

"I'd like you to take him with you. At this point he has a better chance of surviving if he's on this side of the wall," Kisin says.

"Okay," Reika says.

"Fox, you and your men will have to walk in the front door," Kisin says.

"What?" Omni replies.

"Both buildings were built to look like warehouses to conceal their military presence. You should have a main entrance that resembles that of a normal warehouse. Because they're trying to maintain the warehouse cover, the military presence at the front should be far less than it will be anywhere else," Kisin answers.

"Okay, that makes sense," Fox says.

"Since you won't have a tour guide like Nineteen, when you get inside you'll have to find a room entitled bay zero two. The room is somewhere along the westernmost hallway of the building," Kisin explains.

"Is there a specific way they're storing these nanobots?" Cupid asks.

"I have no idea. My guess is that they'll be setup in syringes since they were planning to administer them this morning. So try looking for syringes with a bluish fluid in them."

"Alright. Let's meet in the middle of the buildings when we're done?" Fox asks, looking at me.

"Sounds good," I reply.

"Well, looks like I'm confined to the house until you guys get back," Carl says, looking at Fox and me.

"We all are," Kisin's says.

"I guess this just solidifies our role as information brokers, huh Kisin?" Carl says, chuckling.

Kisin laughs. "In a sense that's what we've been the whole time."

"I think your ride is here," Maggie says, walking into the room.

"Anything else we need to know before we head out?" I ask.

"I think we've covered all we can," Kisin says.

"Let's do it," Omni says.

"You have any spare ammo?" Fox asks Kisin.

I didn't check to see how much ammo was left in this gun I picked up. I eject the clip from my weapon revealing that the clip is roughly half full.

"All that's left in the house is what's already in our guns," Kisin replies.

A half clip isn't terrible and I should still have another full clip in my backpack. I re-insert the clip into my gun.

BETRAYAL

"Alright, looks like we're gonna have to conserve as much as we can until after we're in that building," Fox says.

"Agreed," Cupid says.

"Well, I'll try this again, let's do it!" Omni says, provoking a few laughs.

"Alright, let's go," Fox says.

SYNCOPE

"Undesirables. Wolfpack. It's a pleasure to finally meet you. I'm Craig I'll be taking you to meet with Aaron and his men," a man with a long gray beard says.

"We gonna have any difficulty getting there?" Fox asks.

"We shouldn't run into much. I'll keep us a few blocks behind the front line," Craig replies.

"So a few blocks away from the inner wall?" Cupid asks.

"Exactly."

"Alright, let's get movin'," Fox says.

"Hop in." Craig says, opening one of the doors on the passenger side of the transport.

Fox jumps into the front passenger seat and the rest of us file into the back of the vehicle. The back of the vehicle has two bench like seats along each sidewall that span the length of the interior. Reika and I sit next to each other on one side of the vehicle. Omni and Cupid sit directly across from us on the other. Rubber handles dangle from the ceiling above us. I reach out and grab the door to close it just as Craig hops into the front of the vehicle.

Craig turns and yells at us, "Everyone ready?"

We all situate ourselves and grab rubber handles.

"Yeah," we yell back in unison.

"Alright, let's get moving," he continues.

I nearly fall off of the bench as Craig hits the throttle and the vehicle pulls away. The tires screech as we make a right turn at the end of the block. Fox and Craig begin talking among themselves but I can't make out their conversation due to the roar of the engine. I glance to my left and see Reika staring at the floor lost in thought. Omni and Cupid seem to be doing the same.

The scene of Tank getting shot plays in my head. I look towards the floor and take a deep breath in an attempt to push the scene out of mind. I have to stay focused on what we're about to do. We're going to meet with soldiers and save Megan. Assuming that she's there.

My train of thought is halted as a crystal clear reproduction of Logan's head exploding plays through my mind. Drops of sweat emerge on my forehead and my gut fills with nausea. I shake my head back and forth to push the scene away while attempting to project the outward appearance that I'm fighting sleepiness.

We're going to convince these soldiers to help us cross the wall so we can save Megan. Natalie's blood covered corpse flashes into my mind. I try to shake the image from my head but it doesn't fade.

"You okay?" I hear Reika ask somewhere in the distance.

Natalie's image disappears. I try to focus on the floor of the vehicle as my nausea intensifies. A variation of big and small black spots begin shrouding my view of the floor.

"Nineteen," I hear Reika's voice again.

I try to turn to face her but as I do wooziness takes over and I feel myself start to fall forward from the bench. The overwhelming urge to throw up fills my gut as the black spots completely take over my vision. I feel my right leg make contact with the floor a second before the right side of my face hits.

"Nineteen!" I hear Reika yell.

"Whoa." I hear Cupid's voice in the background.

I pry myself from the floor. Reika's arms wrap around me as she tries to help me up. I take a large breath in and the black dots begin to recede from my vision.

"Are you okay?" Omni asks.

I regain control of my body and sit back on the bench forcing myself to reach for a rubber handle.

"Are you alright?" Cupid asks.

"Yeah, I'm okay," I say.

"What happened?" Omni asks.

"What was that about?" Cupid asks.

What the hell was that? I nearly passed out.

"Nothing, I'm fine. Just really tired. Whatever you do don't fall asleep. If you do you'll hit the floor," I say, trying to turn the situation into a joke.

Laughter erupts from both Omni and Cupid.

"I was on the verge myself," Omni says.

"Another five minutes or so all three of us woulda been on the ground," Cupid adds.

The concerned look on Reika's face tells me she doesn't buy my story.

"I guess I'll have an entertaining show to watch if I stay awake," Reika says, playing along with what I said.

She'll ask me about what happened later and when she does, I'll have to downplay what I felt or she'll worry more than necessary.

"Maybe from those two, but I'ma start pinching myself every time I feel like I'm going to pass out. Can't be the second to end up on the floor," Cupid says.

"Shit, if it comes to it I'll lie down on the floor and go to sleep!" Omni adds.

"I'm glad I could set the example for what not to do. Proud of myself," I say jokingly.

I feel fine now, but that doesn't change what just happened. I wonder if one of my wounds from earlier was worse than I thought. Maybe I lost more blood than I should have?

"That's what heroes do right? Pave the way with failure so the rest of us know which way to go," Reika says smirking at me.

Laughter erupts from Cupid and Omni again.

"That sounds about right. We failed to succeed in our initial plan and yet the Ninety-nine are still touting us as heroes," Cupid says.

"Speak for yourself, I'm keeping my herodom. When this is over I'll have the choice of any woman I want because of it." Omni says.

We all break out in laughter at Omni's statement.

"I knew that was the reason you agreed to this mission!" Cupid says.

"Just remember, you can't find a woman if you get yourself killed trying to attain 'herodom'." I say.

"You would have been better off staying at the arena while the rest of the soldiers attacked. The men to women ratio would've significantly improved," Reika says.

"Crap! Why didn't I think of that?" Omni says.

"That's right, there aren't nearly as many women soldiers in the Ninety-nine as there are men right now. Still, I don't know, how many choices you'd have with that face," Cupid says.

Omni shakes his head back and forth with a big smile on his face.

"Oh that's cold," I say.

"Ouch," Reika says.

"You see what I have to put up with?" Omni says sarcastically.

"What? I'm just being honest!" Cupid says, laughing.

A large smile stretches across my face. Their demeanor is just like ours was. Maybe that's why we've been able to work so well together.

"And so you think you fair better than Omni in that area," Reika says inquisitively.

"Of course, look at how pretty my face is!" Cupid says.

"Pretty rough looking." Reika shoots back and we all break out in laughter.

"You do have a few scars there," I add.

"What these little things?" he asks pointing at two small scars on his face. "These aren't scars, they're beauty marks." Cupid says smiling.

"Ohh, okay I gotcha! I was mistaken. Sorry Omni, he has beauty marks! He has you beat," I say, grinning.

Reika shakes her head. "Something is wrong with all of the men I know."

My mind jumps to Tank's smile and memories of our crap talking to each other. A sad smile crosses my face.

"Or maybe there's something wrong with you and we're normal." Cupid says.

"No, we're weird!" Omni says.

"You're weird, I'm pretty." Cupid replies and we break out in laughter again.

I feel the vehicle slow to a stop.

"We're here!" Craig yells back to us. "Aaron is the bald guy on the corner that looks like he's made of muscle," he continues as Fox opens his door to get out.

"You're not coming with us?" I ask as I stand up from the bench and reach for the door.

"No. I'm going to pick up some supplies and head back to where we just came from," Craig says.

"Alright, we appreciate the ride," I say before exiting the vehicle.

The scent of gun smoke fills my nose and the sound of automatic gunfire causes my ears to cringe. As my feet hit the ground my eyes focus on a dead body in the middle of the street. The body lying on the pavement face down with half of its head missing, Dark red blood stains the ground around it. No military fatigues, a civilian?

"I'm assuming that huge guy is Aaron," Fox says, drawing my attention.

"That's gotta be him," I say, staring at a man that looks to be Tank's height with twice as much muscle.

The man is standing in a group with three other soldiers half way down the block.

"He's huge," Cupid says.

"And that's why I need herodom," Omni adds.

I chuckle to myself. Neither of them joked this much before. Maybe just not in front of us? I wonder if that means we've gained their trust.

"Wolfpack!" Aaron says, waving us over.

We begin walking toward the man.

"And of course the Undesirables!" he continues.

As we reach him I notice a large group of people sitting on the curb behind him. Twenty or twenty-five men, women, and children are sitting in a loose line between Aaron's group of soldiers and a second group of soldiers. I wonder if they're the families from the houses on this block.

"I'm glad to see you survived. And, umm, nice uniforms," he says as we reach him.

"So are we," Fox replies.

"They make it easier to get around in here," I reply.

"So I hear you're trying to infiltrate a building that's holding our allies prisoner," Aaron says.

"That's the plan," I say.

"Do you know where you're headed?" Aaron asks.

Fox pulls out the map Kisin gave us.

"You got your hands on a map!" Aaron says enthusiastically.

"With help from our allies," I add, trying to reinforce the idea that Kisin and his men are not to be harmed.

"That's right. Xavier told me that he found you in a compound house. They've proved very useful I see," Aaron replies.

"We couldn't have brought down the wall without their help," I reply.

"Anyway, we need to get here. The inner wall where Xavier said our troops are stationed is here just before the building we need to get into," Fox says, pointing to the corresponding locations on the map.

"Well, judging from my entry and having seen where we are in regards to the wall. We're currently here," Aaron says, pointing to a location on the map a few blocks northeast of the section of wall we need to cross.

"Okay. If your men can assault the wall here it should draw the attention we need. With the enemy's attention on your assault we should have the freedom we need to infiltrate our targets with minimum resistance," Fox explains.

"And that's why you were able to get us in here in the first place. The legendary strategy of the Wolfpack," Aaron says.

Omni, Cupid, and Fox start laughing.

"I don't know about legendary but it has helped us survive some sticky situations," Fox says.

"So can you help us?" I ask.

"Of course, I knew the plan before you got here. I just figured I'd hear it from you guys before we started carrying it out. I have a few groups converging on our location as we speak. They should be here any minute," Aaron says.

I grin. That was much easier than I expected.

"Is there anything else you need? Men? Vehicles?" Aaron asks.

"We could use something to drive around in," Cupid says.

"Something that's tall enough to help us jump the wall," Omni adds.

"No problem, anything else?" Aaron asks.

"That should be it," Fox says.

"Alright, well I'll have one of my smaller Humvees head this way."

"Sheryl, I need two Humvees to head to my location," he says into his walkie.

There is a brief pause followed by a burst of static before the response.

"Be there in one." A woman's voice emits out of the walkie.

"As soon as she gets here we can head out," Aaron says.

"Sounds good," Omni replies.

"How are we coordinating our infiltration with your attack?" I ask.

"I figure I'd start my assault on the wall as soon as possible. So about five, maybe ten minutes from the time we leave this block," Aaron replies.

"That sounds like it should be about perfect," Fox says, looking at me.

"Yeah," I say while nodding in approval.

"That was fast," Cupid says as the two Humvees pull onto the block.

"They were in the area," Aaron replies casually.

"Good luck," the soldiers standing by Aaron's side say.

"Stay safe," Aaron replies to the men as he motions for us to follow.

We walk down the street past half of the civilians before meeting the oncoming Humvees. As they stop, a driver from each Humvee exits. They approach us.

"They're all yours," one of the drivers says as the other nods.

"Stay safe," Aaron says, nodding.

The two drivers walk past us to join Aaron's soldiers. I examine the civilians who are sitting on the curb. They look frightened and on the verge of tears. All of them are silent. Even the children are dead silent.

"Shall we get moving?" Aaron asks.

Aaron's words become unintelligible as I notice three dead civilians on the front lawn of a house that the civilians are sitting in front of. That explains why they're so quiet.

"Why?" I ask.

"Huh?" Aaron responds with a confused look on his face.

"Why are we lining up civilians outside like this? What's the point?" I ask, clarifying my question.

"Oh," Aaron lets out a laugh. "I thought you were asking me why we should get moving. Ha, okay, that makes more sense. Uh, those were

Oleg's orders. I wasn't told anything more than that. As a matter a fact I don't think anyone was told why we're pulling them out of their houses. Seems to me it'd be more convenient to leave them inside. But it's part of some plan Oleg has concocted, so were doing it," Aaron explains.

"Hmm, yeah that's what we were told earlier. Was hoping you'd be able to give me more information. I don't understand the tactic either. Anyway, let's get the hell outta here," I say.

"In that case, I'll take the rear Humvee," Aaron says as he begins walking towards the farther of the two Humvees.

"Driver," Reika says as we walk to the Humvee in front of us.

"You know we're in the middle of a war now, right? Driving in the lines doesn't matter anymore," I say sarcastically to Reika.

Omni, Cupid, and Fox laugh. Reika shoots me a face that says she's not amused.

"Well if she's drivin', I guess that means you get the front seat," Fox says.

"How am I supposed to attain herodom always riding in the back?" Omni asks, shaking his head.

"You don't," Cupid says, grinning.

"Works for me," I reply.

"Stay safe out there. Hopefully we'll see each other again," Aaron yells, jumping into the Humvee behind us.

I climb into the front passenger seat and place my rifle on the floor in front of me as Reika jumps into the driver seat. Fox's team climbs into the back of the Humvee.

"Do you know where you're going?" I ask Reika as she starts to drive down the block.

"Not exactly. I know we have to turn around and go south," she says.

"Here," Fox says, handing me a map from the back of the vehicle.

I scan the map and try to find the location that Aaron pointed at. Reika makes a left as we reach the end of the block.

"Okay, we'll obviously need to turn left again so we can head south," I say.

I start counting the number of streets we need to cross in order to get to where we need to go. The roar of an explosion draws my attention from the map to the window. Between each house we pass I can see a plume of black smoke in the sky.

"It's just the ongoing fight for the wall. Tune it out," Fox yells to me from the back.

"Yeah," I reply, looking back down at the map to finish counting the streets.

"You need to continue going south for fifteen blocks, then turn to the west and go three blocks. At the end of that third block we should hit the wall," I say.

"Okay," Reika says.

"When we get there we should drive the vehicle right up to the wall." Fox says continuing to raise his voice so we can hear him.

"Won't that give away our location?" I ask.

"It might, but that way we can get on top of the vehicle to jump the wall. I don't know how else were gonna manage to get over it," Fox explains.

It is probably twelve or fifteen feet high. I don't think any of us will be able to reach the top even with a boost.

"Okay. We should stop a block before the wall to scope out the situation," I say.

"Agreed," Fox says.

"More civilians," Reika says.

We drive by a group of civilians that appear to be joining with a second group of civilians who are being led by Ninety-nine Soldiers.

"I wonder if they plan on bringing them all to one place," I say.

"That would make a lot more sense than having soldiers positioned on every block," Reika says.

"Yeah, it would. But then again, pulling them out of their houses in the first place doesn't make much sense," I say.

Reika laughs. "That's true. You think it has to do with Oleg's behavior?"

"I don't know. But at this point, I'm pretty sure Oleg worked out some kind of deal with the compound," I say.

"It could be a stipulation they set up for his defection. And that's why he hasn't given the Ninety-nine reasons for why they're bringing people into the streets," Reika says.

"That's very possible. But I can't see what that would accomplish. Other than... delaying the Ninety-nine's invading forces," I say, reaching an obvious answer that I should have seen before.

"They could use the delay to send troops from the northern compound as reinforcements," Reika says.

"We've already gone fifteen blocks?" I ask.

"Yeah I've been keeping count," she replies.

"Okay. Two more until we stop on the corner. From there we'll walk up a block in order to scope out the street the wall is on," I say.

"If that's the case what's our next move?" Reika asks.

"Get the nanobots and try to figure out how we can use them to our advantage. The only other thing I can think of would be to try to put

SYNCOPE

pressure on the Ninety-nine. Maybe we can convince them to leave the civilians alone and continue their assault," I say.

"Okay," Reika says, stopping on the corner of a block.

"We here?" Fox shouts from the back.

"Yeah," Reika says.

"Let's scope it out," I say as I lift my assault rifle from the floor.

ENEMY OF MY ENEMY

An enormous eruption of gunfire fills the air at the same time that my feet hit the pavement.

"That must be our cover," Fox says exiting the rear door.

"Must be. Think we should wait a few minutes?" I reply but the gunfire drowns out my question.

"What?" Fox shouts.

I lean over to him and ask the question much louder, "Think we should wait a few minutes?"

Reika, Omni, and Cupid gather in a group around me and Fox.

"Let's check it out first. Then make our decision based on what we see," Fox shouts back.

My heart speeds up as the sound of gunfire continues to permeate the air.

"Sounds good," I shout back.

We walk to the adjacent corner of the block.

"That shouldn't be too hard to clear," Cupid says.

"Not with the Humvee," Fox adds.

Across the street and a block down the inner wall is in clear view.

"I don't see any enemy troops," Omni says.

"One of those Ninety-nine soldiers said almost everything east of the inner wall had been taken," I pitch in.

"I don't see any of our soldiers either," Cupid adds.

"Maybe they just thought that this area wasn't important?" Reika says.

"Maybe," Fox replies.

"From my understanding this is around where the warehouse district begins. Food, clothes, and other supplies for the compound are created down here," Fox Continues.

"That would explain the warehouses a few blocks down," I say pointing further down the street.

"Well, whatever the reason, we don't have any threats to deal with so let's get going," Reika says.

"We'll stand watch if you wanna grab the Hummer," Fox says.

"Sure," Reika replies before taking off toward the Humvee.

Reika drives the Humvee to the wall and positions it so that the passenger side of the vehicle is within an inch of the wall. She turns off the vehicle and hops out while we're crossing the street to meet her.

"Who's first?" Reika asks.

"I'll check it out," I reply.

A displeased look washes across Reika's face.

"If you're first, then I guess I'll be following you," she says, motioning for me to go toward the vehicle.

I check the safety on the M16, put its strap around my neck, and then swing the gun onto my back before climbing onto the hood of the Humvee. Reika joins me on the roof of the vehicle and I make my way onto the wall.

A narrow street lies between the inner wall and the building in front of me. I do a double take after glancing at the street. An enemy soldier is walking along the wall directly below me. I motion for Reika to wait and then I take aim at the soldier who is now a few feet to my right. I get ready to squeeze the trigger when the soldier starts sprinting along the wall. I watch as he runs about thirty feet before I relax.

Aaron's diversion is working. That soldier is probably headed to reinforce the section of wall that is being attacked. I scan the street below for other soldiers and see none.

I turn to Reika and motion for her to join me. It only takes her a moment to maneuver her way onto the wall next to me.

"Looks like this side has more warehouses than our side," she says, scanning our surroundings.

"Yeah, it seems that way," I say.

"Our target should be behind this warehouse right?" she asks.

"Yeah, hopefully," I reply.

"How we looking?" Fox asks from the top of the Humvee.

"Good, we're gonna head down now," I reply, looking at Reika who has started lowering herself from the wall.

"Alright, I'm right behind you," Fox says.

I follow Reika and lower myself from the wall. I land on the street with a loud thud.

"We gonna wait for them to clear the wall or do you want to start moving?" Reika asks.

"Let's scout ahead," I say.

"I'm guessing we should head as far from our distraction as possible," Reika says, glancing back at me as she walks.

I swing my gun back around to my chest and speed up to catch up to her.

"Sure why not," I reply as I reach her.

We walk to the corner of the building and peer around it. There is a large parking lot filled with cars in front of a sidewalk that leads to the entrance of the building. The front of the building is devoid of people.

"No resistance," Reika says.

"None at all, and it looks like this is the front of the warehouse," I reply.

"This might be easier than we thought," she says.

"For once our plan has actually gone how we planned it," I say chuckling.

"That's always a plus," Cupid says from behind us.

Cupid, Omni, and Fox join us on the corner of the building.

"Looks like we can just casually walk to our targets," I say, looking at Cupid.

"That would be nice," Omni says.

"Let's get going before that changes?" Fox suggests.

"Probably a good Idea," I say as I start walking along the sidewalk.

Reika walks by my side and the rest of the group follows a step behind us. We cautiously make our way past the entrance and towards the corner of the building.

"Still nothing. I guess we can probably speed this up," I say looking back at Fox and his men.

"Lead the way," Fox says.

I grip my weapon and jog to the corner of the building. Reika and I scan the side of the warehouse and the street ahead of us for threats. Still

nothing. Across the street and past a narrow parking lot with no vehicles is the building that we need to get into to free Megan.

"That your target?" Fox asks.

"Should be. We need to head to one of the doors down there," I say, pointing to the right of us.

"You wanna break off from us and head there now?" Fox asks.

"That's probably the best thing to do," Reika replies.

"Meet here after we're done?" I ask.

"Maybe, but if things go awry for you, you'll want to put some distance between that warehouse and our location," Fox says.

"Good point. Behind this warehouse or along the inner wall then?" I say.

"Yeah, we'll head by both anyway," Fox replies.

"Alright, good luck." I say as I walk towards the street.

"Do you remember which door we were supposed to head to?" I ask Reika.

"I think he said the one that looks newer than the rest," she replies.

"And shouldn't we check the address of the building before we knock?" she continues.

I scan the side of the building as we finish crossing the street.

"There," I say, pointing to a large gold number running horizontally near the upper left side of the wall.

"Five two four zero. So which door looks newer to you?" I ask.

"I have no clue. They all look the same," Reika says as we examine the doors along the side of the building.

"Let's try each one?" I suggest.

"Can't hurt," she replies.

We jog to the first door. The paint on the door is faded in comparison to the beige on the rest of the building. There are scratches in the paint and scuff marks from objects making contact with it.

"Well, this probably isn't it," I say before we begin jogging to next door.

As we approach the door it becomes apparent that it has been recently painted. The color of beige on the door is much more vibrant than that of the rest of the building.

"This has to be it," Reika says before I can get the words out.

"I was just about to say the same thing," I reply.

"Ready?" I ask looking at Reika.

She nods.

I knock on the door as loud as I can before taking a step back and aiming at it. A moment passes and nothing happens. We wait silently for what feels like an eternity and still, nothing happens.

"Maybe this isn't the door after all," I whisper, looking at Reika.

"Let's go back and check out the first one?" Reika whispers back.

"Yeah," I reply.

We jog back the way we came.

"How is this new?" Reika says sarcastically.

I let out a small laugh. "I have no clue."

We knock on the door and wait. Nothing happens.

"Maybe it's on other side of the building," I say.

"Maybe, but that door looks really new," Reika replies.

"Let's try it again?" I ask.

Reika nods and we make our way back to the new door. I knock loudly. As my knuckles make contact with the door for the third time, the

door begins to open. Startled, I jump back and aim at the soldier who opens it.

"Hurry," the soldier says, motioning us to come inside.

I signal Reika to head in first. We make our way into a hallway that has glossy black floors and black walls to match. As the door slams shut behind us two other soldiers enter the hallway. My mind begins racing as we approach the oncoming soldiers.

Is this a trap? Did Kisin know about this or did this soldier set him up? I start raising my gun to take aim.

"New recruits at a time like this?" one of the soldiers from down the hall says, approaching us.

That's right we're still wearing their uniforms. I point my muzzle back toward the ground.

"I know right. I don't know what the hell command is thinking," Kisin's man says, walking in front of us to take the lead.

"We have a whopping three prisoners to protect. They probably have nothing to do with the Ninety-nine, and yet they have us here hiding in this building instead of outside fighting with the rest of our people," the soldier with curly black hair continues.

"Speak for yourselves! I'm happy I'm in here and don't have to worry about bullets flying at my head," the smaller soldier next to him says as we meet at an intersection in the hallway.

"I'm Arnold by the way," the smaller soldier says while extending his hand to me in greeting.

"Uh, nice to meet you I'm... Steve," I say, trying to fit in.

"Jane," Reika says, extending her hand to the soldier with the curly hair.

"I'm Mack, nice to meet you both. You gonna take 'em on the grand tour Calico?" Mack asks the soldier with us.

"Yeah. Figured I might as well do it now, just in case we're attacked," Calico replies with sarcasm.

Both of the soldiers laugh.

"Well, have fun," Mack says before turning around and heading down the hall to our left.

"We'll have lunch sometime. Uh, assuming that we survive today," Arnold says then nods and follows Mack down the hall.

"This way," Calico says, leading us down the hall.

About three quarters of the way down the hallway he unlocks a grouping of black double doors on our right. The hall behind the double doors is so dark I can hardly see as we make our way into it. The hallway has a pungent musty aroma. Calico shuts and locks the doors behind us.

"Sorry about the lighting. But its better if no one knows we're in here," Calico says.

"Not part of the tour?" I say sarcastically.

"Definitely not," he replies, brushing past Reika and I to lead the way.

Thirty feet down the pitch-black hallway Calico stops. He turns to his left and pulls out a second set of keys while staring at the wall.

"I feel like we're in a horror novel," Reika whispers to me.

A huge grin crosses my face. "No kidding," I reply.

Calico places the palm of his left hand to the wall in front of him and begins slowly moving it around the wall.

"Looking for something?" I whisper.

"It's a lot harder to find with no light," he says, concentrating on what he's doing.

What is he looking for?

"There," he mutters before raising the keys to the wall.

He inserts one of the keys into the wall. I hear two distinct clicks before he uses his left hand to push into the wall. To my surprise the wall opens.

"A hidden door," Reika says.

"Yeah... ugh," I reply, gagging as a much stronger odor fills my mouth and nose.

"This is where they're kept," Calico says, walking through the door.

"The smell is horrid," Reika says, gagging.

"I know," Calico replies in a sad manner.

We follow him into the pitch-black abyss behind the wall. Once both of us are through the door Calico brushes by us and shuts the entrance. I hear another click and bright white light shoots into the room from above. I momentarily go blind trying to adjust to the long neon bulbs on the ceiling.

"Whoa," Reika says.

"A prison," I say, staring at the black bars of the cages on either side of us.

"A hidden one," Calico says, moving past us and motioning us to follow.

We walk past the cages on either side of us and towards the middle of the room. A crude tile walkway runs through the middle of the room and leads to each of the surrounding cages. We stop at a drain that is located at an intersection of the tile walkway. There is a depression in the floor surrounding the drain that is stained reddish brown.

"Blood," Calico says.

"Huh?" I reply.

"It's blood, the brown crap around the drain," Calico explains.

"Oh," I say, looking up into one of the cages in front of us.

To my surprise I see a person lying face down on the concrete floor in the middle of the cage. His clothes are torn to shreds and he is extremely bloody. His ankles and hands are shackled to each other and are covered in dried blood. Not far from his face there are two silver bowls, one filled with water, and one that is filled with a brown meat like substance.

"This is the Council's private torture facility. If they suspect you of plotting against them, or if you cross them, you end up here," Calico says.

"And you were helping them?" I ask with disgust creeping into my gut.

"No, I'm a soldier for the compound not the Council. I am, or rather, I was paid to keep my mouth shut and keep intruders out. That is until the key holder before me rebelled," Calico explains.

"Rebelled?" Reika asks.

"He was told to treat the prisoners like dogs. He was supposed to only give them water and dog food.

"When Council members weren't around, he brought the prisoners home cooked meals and smuggled in painkillers to help them deal with their wounds. One day the Council made a surprise visit and found some of the food. That was the day they forced me to take his position."

"I take it they killed him?" I inquire.

"You're looking at him," Calico says, still staring at the bloody prisoner in the cage in front of us.

Static erupts from the walkie-talkie on Calico's hip, startling all of us.

"Enemy soldiers are infiltrating the area. Reinforcements are inbound. We are to hold ground until they arrive. I repeat..."

"We gotta move!" Calico says over the voice on his walkie.

He starts jogging down the walkway toward a grouping of black double doors.

"What about him?" Reika asks.

"He's as good as dead. Megan's the only one capable of moving," He says, pushing through the swinging set of double doors.

Calico runs to a cage in the middle of the room and begins unlocking it. As I approach it I see Megan sitting upright against the back wall of the cage. Her eyes grow big as she sees us.

"I didn't think you'd come for me!" she says in shock.

Calico rushes into the cage and begins to unlock Megan's shackles.

"You saved me, it's our turn to return the favor," I say.

With the shackles off Calico and I help Megan to her feet.

"Can you run?" I ask.

"I'm fine. Thanks to him," she says, looking at Calico.

"What's the fastest way out of here?" Reika asks.

"The same way we came in," Calico replies.

"Alright let's go." I say letting go of Megan and following Reika's lead out of the cell and down the walkway.

We jog back the way we came not slowing our pace until we hit the double doors that originally lead us into the dark hallway.

"Should we just run all the way to the exit?" I ask Calico as we pass through the double doors.

"Might as well, as soon as they see Megan they'll know something is wrong," Calico says.

"Okay," I say, nodding at Reika to lead the way.

Reika aims ahead of her and begins jogging down the hallway. As we pass the intersection where we met Mack and Arnold I point my gun

down the adjacent hallway. The hall is empty so we continue unimpeded. Reika hits the exit door pushing it open for the rest of us. I run out the door and reach the pavement of the parking lot before what I see registers.

In between the warehouse across the street and us, in the middle of the street, is a large grouping of civilians. Mixed in with the civilians are compound soldiers. A soldier at the front of the group is holding a megaphone shouting out orders.

"Heading to our west, or what is currently your left we will proceed two blocks. You'll then go north three blocks where we will meet with another troupe of soldiers and civilians."

"They're evacuating the area," Calico says.

"And luckily not paying attention to us," I add.

"I guess we're gonna have to find a way around them and to the wall?" Reika says.

"Up the street to our left and around I guess," I reply.

A loud humming sound invades my ears and overpowers what the soldier in the street is saying. I look at the building across the street and around the area but can't see anything to explain it.

"What is that?" I think out loud.

"It's a helicopter," Calico says.

"You sure?" Reika asks.

"Pretty sure," he replies as a helicopter appears above us.

"That's really low," Calico says.

The helicopter passes over head and reaches the warehouse across the street before it abruptly shifts backwards and maneuvers into a position above the citizens.

"We need to get out of here!" I say, jogging to my left toward the rear corner of the warehouse.

The soldier speaking to the crowd drops his megaphone and picks up his weapon to aim at the helicopter. He gets a single shot off before there is a loud pop and a canister spewing dark green smoke hits the ground near his feet. The soldier stops aiming and jumps away from the canister as it bounces upward and into the crowd. A second canister lands in the middle of the crowd after hitting a man in the stomach.

I turn the corner and take cover behind the backside of the warehouse.

"Isn't that yours?" I ask Calico as he rounds the corner.

"I thought it was yours?" Calico replies.

"No. That's not us," I say, peering back around the corner to see what's happening.

"We were told the Ninety-nine procured northern compound helicopters and have been using smoke grenades to hamper our visibility," he yells back.

I watch as two men on one side of the helicopter begin shooting at the soldiers on the ground. A third man pops out and launches another smoke grenade toward the back of the crowd.

Those compound soldiers are clearly trying to protect civilians, why the hell would that helicopter take the time to attack that group? I squeeze the grip on my weapon contemplating attacking the helicopter. No, it's too risky for us to help right now. We came here for a reason and we need to make sure we accomplish it.

"That's not us. I don't know who the hell it is but they're focused on the crowd so we should be able to run across the street to the back of that other warehouse." I say pointing.

"We can't!" Reika says.

"What?" I turn toward her.

"Look," she says, pointing to a section of the wall just north east of the warehouse next to us.

Two Humvees, a tank, and a large group of enemy soldiers are making their way down the road next to the wall.

"Shit! There goes our route back to Kisin's!" I shout.

"Let's try to find Fox's team?" Reika says.

"Yeah, if we're lucky they're still near their target building," I say motioning for Reika, Calico, and Megan to follow me.

We run across the rear parking lot of the warehouse and onto the street along the warehouses west side. Scanning the building across the street I see Fox's group near the middle of the building engaged in a shoot-out with two soldiers. The two soldiers are at the front of the building intermittently shooting and ducking behind the building for cover. Cupid and Fox alternate between shooting and sprinting as they head towards Omni who is farther down the side of the warehouse providing cover fire.

"That's Fox's team." I say.

"Yep," Reika says, kneeling on the ground to take aim.

Megan crouches behind her.

To my surprise Calico kneels down next to her and takes aim. I follow suite and squeeze the trigger a few times aiming at the front corner of the building. Our shooting does its job and manages to draw attention. One of the soldier's aims in our direction before jumping behind the building.

I squeeze my trigger again but my gun clicks telling me I've used up all of the ammo in my clip. With Reika and Calico still taking shots at the

enemy, I pull off my backpack and dig for my second clip. Moving as fast as I can I replace the empty clip then reposition myself for another shot.

Omni takes note of our presence and points us out to Cupid and Fox. They stop shooting and begin full out sprinting toward the rear of the building utilizing our cover fire.

"That's a big bag he's carrying," Calico says, pointing out the clear plastic bag on Fox's back.

"Yeah, we gotta work our way across the street to them," I reply, changing the subject.

"Let's do it!" Reika says, side stepping while shooting toward the end of the block.

I follow her lead and we begin moving across the street.

"Your men have our cover let's go!" Calico shouts.

Omni and Cupid are laying down cover fire at the end of the block.

"Let's move!" I yell before sprinting across the street.

I run directly behind Omni and Cupid stopping at Fox. Reika bumps into my left shoulder as she stops. Calico dodges her ending up in front of me, and Megan stops a foot behind all of us.

"Why'd you come to us? We gotta go that way!" Fox says pointing toward the wall.

Omni and Cupid duck behind the rear of the warehouse to join us.

"We can't go that way anymore, compound soldiers have taken that part of the wall." I say trying to catch my breath from the sprint.

"We can't stay here either," Cupid says.

"We're lucky we got out of there alive," Omni adds.

"You were successful I take it." I say staring at the bag of syringes.

"Yeah. What do you think, north?" Fox asks.

"It's our only option," I reply.

"Try to get to the section of the wall Aaron was trying to breach?" Reika asks.

"It's our best bet, assuming he actually succeeded," I say.

Cupid peers around the corner of the wall and immediately ducks back behind it followed by a buzz of bullets.

"They're on their way," Cupid says.

"Let's go!" As the words leave my mouth bullets buzz by my head and Fox stumbles forward.

"Corner! Corner! Corner!" Calico yells and begins shooting at a soldier who is flanking us.

"Shit! You hit?" I yell asking Fox as he struggles to stand back up.

"I don't think so," he replies as Reika and Cupid join Calico in shooting at the soldier near the rear corner.

"This is gonna be one helluva run," Omni says looking at the neighborhood houses that are two streets and a small field away.

"No kidding! Can you hold this side for a minute?" I ask.

"Yeah," Omni replies and then heads to the corner to take a few shots down the side of the building.

"Calico!" I say running toward him, Cupid, and Reika, who are still aiming at our flanked corner.

"Sir?" he replies.

"I want you, Cupid, and Omni to go with Fox since he's the slowest. And take Megan with you. Start heading toward the neighborhood and stay as close as you can to the middle of this building." I belt out.

"Middle of the building?" Fox asks with blue liquid dripping out of the bag on his back.

"For cover. Start in the middle and trek a straight line toward that neighborhood." I say.

"You and Reika?" Fox asks.

"Reika will take that corner and I'll take this one."

Cupid fires another burst of shots toward the corner.

"We'll wait for you on the first block," Fox says.

"Yeah," I reply.

"Along the wall?" Reika asks.

"You read my mind," I say, grinning.

"Thank you." I hear Megan say before I make my way over to Omni who is still on the eastern corner of the building taking sporadic shots around it.

"How close are they?" I ask.

"About three quarters of the way to us," Omni says.

"Alright, I got this side go with Fox," I say to Omni.

"Okay," Omni replies withdrawing from the warehouses corner.

"Alright, go," I say nodding my head at Fox.

"Stay alive," Omni says before jogging to meet with Fox, Calico, and Cupid.

I touch my right elbow to the wall. With my gun aimed in front of me I walk slowly toward the edge of the building. I stop just before my barrel reaches the corner of the wall. A moment passes, my ears fill with the sound of my own heavy breathing.

A bout of gunfire erupts behind me and I struggle to not turn toward it. Reika's fine she'll easily take that soldier out. Another second or two passes and the gunfire ceases. If she weren't fine I would already have a bullet in my back. She's fine. My ears pick up movement.

"It's quiet," I make out a barely audible male voice.

"David said he saw them take off toward the neighborhood," a second person louder than the first says.

"If that's the case, we should be able to see them without turning the corner."

"Go for it I'll stay in position."

Come on. Take the bait. My heart pounds in my chest as I grow impatient. I hear a quick shuffle of footsteps and then nothing.

"They're way out there," one of the soldiers says, no longer whispering.

"Can we catch 'em?" the other says.

"If we run up a good twenty feet or so we might be able to hit them. It looks like they're all facing the neighborhood." The first soldier says sounding as if he's nearing the corner.

"Let's get these bastards!" I hear as a soldier runs right in front of my barrel.

I aim at his face. His eyes fill with surprise but it's too late for him to react, I pull the trigger. I rush to take aim at my second target who's now turning toward me with his rifle aimed high. I aim at his body and squeeze the trigger while squatting to the ground.

I hit him in the chest before he's able to pull the trigger sending his shots above me and to the right of my head. Still squeezing the trigger of my gun to ensure he goes down gunfire encroaches my left ear. I turn to see Reika letting off a few rounds into the soldier as he falls to the ground.

"We clear?"

"Yeah. There was only one on that side," Reika replies.

"Alright," I aim around the corner.

"No more on this side either," I say.

"Let's catch the others before more arrive," Reika says.

"Yeah, let's get their ammo first," I say prying the gun out from the hand of the dead soldier in front of me.

"Good idea," Reika responds as she makes her way to the other soldier to claim his M16's clip.

We put both clips in my backpack and begin jogging toward the neighborhood.

"Looks like they've already reached the houses," Reika says in between breaths.

"Yeah that little dot way off in the distance, I'm pretty sure that's them!" I say jokingly.

"We'll catch up in an hour or two," she replies.

I laugh in between breaths.

The jog seems to take forever. My paranoia of being shot increases as we continue to move in the open. We finish crossing the field and reach the street where the neighborhood begins. Fox and everyone else are kneeling on the curb in front of a house awaiting our arrival.

"Glad to see you're still alive!" Cupid shouts at us as we cross the street.

A loud crack mimicking a giant rock smashing into asphalt deafens me. I jerk to my right following the sound. Gunfire erupts honing my attention to a part of the wall just behind the point we jumped. A tank appears to have broken through the wall and enemy soldiers are pouring through the crevice into the eastern side.

"That can't be good," Omni voices.

"The Ninety-nine control everything East of the wall right?" Calico says.

"They did," Cupid says.

"I wonder if Aaron's attack was repelled," Fox says.

"Think this is the counter attack?" I ask.

"It's possible," Fox replies.

"Let's get moving," I say.

"Yeah," Fox says, standing up from the curb.

We walk to the corner of the block and begin making our way into the neighborhood.

"What made you come for me? I was under the impression you didn't trust me very much," Megan asks.

Megan's resemblance to Natalie strikes up a resurrection of sorrow that I quickly try to hide. "I didn't, but I didn't really trust anyone at the time," I reply rapidly.

"You saved his life. And your Natalie's mother, there's no way we could leave you behind," Reika responds for me.

"Well, I owe you a great deal of thanks for everything you've done," Megan says.

"No." I say abruptly. "You don't owe us anything. Natalie would've been happy knowing you're alive." I say looking at the ground.

"Soldiers!" Fox says as we near the end of the block.

I look up from the ground to see a compound soldier leading a large group of civilians down the cross street in front of us. His head jerks in our direction and as he sees us. He extends his left hand to his side signaling the group behind him to stop. We stop walking just as his group stops in the middle of the street in front of us.

After a brief moment of staring at our group a look of relief floods over the soldier.

"I'm glad you're not the Ninety-nine!" the soldier shouts to us as he begins walking our way.

"Us too, it's a relief to see a fellow soldier," Calico responds and we begin walking toward the soldier.

"Where you coming from?" he asks, still approaching us.

"40th infantry, Calico," Calico says, reaching to shake the soldier's hand.

"I'm Rick, 39th transportation corps," the soldier replies.

"We were stationed in the holding facility and the Ninety-nine attacked. We tried waiting for reinforcements but had to retreat before they arrived. We're all that's left of the facility," Calico says, creating a cover story for us.

"Where are you headed?" Rick asks.

"We were told to retreat north to help defend Gateway," Calico replies.

"Not gonna be much to defend by the time you get there. It's already falling. We have orders to clear out the civilians before it falls completely," Rick says.

"What's the hold up?" A soldier standing behind the civilians shouts.

"Ah, well we gotta get movin, stay safe! Especially if you're headed up north," Rick says to Calico before shouting back to the other soldier.

"We're going!" he says, turning back towards the group of civilians.

Rick takes three steps before I hear a loud pop. A green smoke grenade flies from a fence across the street landing near the back of the civilians. I scan the fence for threats as a second pop from the smoke grenade causes a massive amount of green smoke to gush into the back of the crowd. The civilians near the back begin pushing forward as the smoke engulfs them. Rick moves into the street and around the now forward moving crowd in an attempt to address the threat at the rear. I

instinctively follow Rick's lead and begin making my way toward the civilians.

I see the head of someone wearing a black gas mask peer over the fence as I push my way through the front of the crowd. Once through the crowd I try to take a shot at the masked individual. As I do I hear another pop. A smoke grenade shoots into the air from behind the fence in my direction. It lands about a foot to my right before popping a second time and unleashing a massive cloud of heated green smoke around my body and into my face. I turn my head and close my eyes to shield myself from the smoke. I jog forward in an attempt to escape the cloud.

I inhale a mouth full of the thick smoke and begin coughing profusely. My throat and lungs burn as the sound of gunfire fills my ears. I feel the smoke around my body lesson and squint my eyes in hopes of being able to see what is in front of me. I bump into someone and my eyes shoot open.

A woman carrying a child is trying to run past me and out of the smoke. Her left elbow jams into my stomach as she tries desperately to navigate around me. I start to strafe around her when I see her get hit. First in her right shoulder, and then in her right cheek. She collapses to the ground and as she does the crying child in her arms takes a bullet to the chest. Small bits of moisture hit my face and the scent of iron mixes with the now thinning smoke.

My eyes burn as I continue to push forward. A few more hastily placed steps and I'm finally outside of the cloud. Once fully out of the cloud I see a man in a gas mask walking toward the cloud of smoke firing relentlessly into it. Rick is on my left rushing toward the man in the mask. I take aim at the man as Rick begins to fire at him. I squeeze the

trigger three times letting out three bursts of bullets. One of the bullets from either me or Rick hits the man in the center of his mask.

I glance to my left and Rick raises a hand sign to signify that there are two more threats in the smoke to the right of us. I turn to my right and aim into the cloud but there is zero visibility. No sign of Reika or the others. A civilian man runs out of the smoke covered in blood. I nearly shoot the man as he startles me but catch myself before squeezing the trigger. The man takes off frantically down the block and I turn my attention back to the cloud of smoke.

Rick and I make our way to the back of the smoke cloud. We circle around it toward the remaining gunfire. I focus all of my attention at the cloud directly in front of me hoping to catch a glimpse of my target. Another burst of gunfire, this time to my left, startles me. Out the corner of my eye I see Rick go down.

I stop in place waiting for my opponent to appear. Another loud burst of gunfire and a figure appears from the smoke. I aim at the black figure and squeeze my trigger only to realize he's falling to the ground. A second later Reika appears from the smoke standing over the masked individual. A feeling of relief washes over me.

"Reika!" I shout.

She looks up at me and rushes over.

"This side clear?" she asks.

"Yeah," I reply, taking note of the lack of gunfire in our vicinity.

"We took out three on the other side, but I think all of the compound soldiers are dead," she says.

Cupid emerges from the smoke.

"We clear?" Cupid asks upon seeing us.

"Yeah," Reika replies.

"We're clear! Reika and Nineteen are over here." Cupid shouts.

Omni emerges from the smoke behind Cupid.

"What the hell was that?" Cupid asks approaching us.

"Not sure, but I think they're from the northern compound," I say.

"We saw a helicopter with masked men like them shooting at civilians when we left the warehouse," Reika adds.

"That's the same thing we saw on the news earlier. But why the hell would they be down here? And more importantly why hit a group of civilians?" Cupid asks.

"I don't know," I reply.

"Doesn't make sense. It's not strategic at all," Omni adds, joining us.

"There any civilians left?" Calico asks, emerging from the smoke with Fox and Megan at his side.

I look behind us in the direction that the bloody man ran. "The ones who survived ran. I saw a few take off," I reply.

"Okay," Calico nods defeatedly.

A visual of the woman and her child getting shot in the smoke replays in my head.

"Sorry," I say.

"Well, let's get out of here before more of them come," Fox says.

We all nod in agreement. We cross the street and continue our trek north into the neighborhood. Silence engulfs our group.

Why would northern troops massacre civilians? Using us as a scapegoat to attack the protestors is one thing, but this, what's the value in it? Why would you slaughter your own people? Not just soldiers, but civilians, what good can come from this?

"Civilian," Fox says quietly.

I look up from the pavement tearing myself away from my thoughts.

"You gotta get moving," Calico says, approaching a crying man on the sidewalk.

"She's my wife!" he wails in between sobs.

Sorrow shoots through my heart as I notice that he's holding a woman tightly to his chest.

"I know it's hard but the only thing you can do for her now is to continue living. And the only way you can do that, is by getting out of here," Calico continues.

"You gotta let her go," Calico says sitting by his side.

"I'm not leaving! This is my home!" he says, anger welling up inside of him.

And we came to take it. For the first time guilt for attacking the compound washes through me. This man was trying to live just like we were on the outside.

"Then go inside, you have to go inside. Here let me help you," Calico continues.

"Hand her to me," Cupid says crouching and extending his hands to the man.

I look down the block away from the man to regain my composure. A house on the corner of the next street is completely engulfed in flame. Further down the block is a house with a green smoke bomb gushing smoke into the front yard. I look into the sky and see smoke rising in every direction. Is this really the revenge we were seeking?

The man hands his dead wife over to Cupid and begins throwing up.

The memory of having to move and strip my first dead body leaps into my mind. Logan laughed at me for it. He had already been so accustomed to it.

The man stops throwing up and then tries to turn back toward his wife but Calico stops him.

"We gotta move inside," Calico says, grabbing the man and helping him to his feet.

The rest of us stand in silence as Calico takes the man inside the house.

"Let's at least move her from the front of the house?" Cupid suggests.

"Okay," Omni replies and helps Cupid carry the woman's body to the side of the house, out of view.

A moment later Calico reappears from the house rejoining us.

"Let's go," he says.

Fox nods and we begin walking down the street. Silence takes over as we walk.

Was it worth it? Even if we succeed was claiming this compound worth the lives of all the people we've lost to get here? Is it worth the lives of all the innocent civilians living here? Would we have been better off staying at the arena and defending it for our remaining days?

My thoughts jump to Tank lying on the surgery table. Tank, you have to survive. I'm not the same person. I'm numb. I used to feel nauseous around dead bodies just like that man with his wife. But now, now I feel nothing. I can't see myself getting back to the old me without help from you.

I stare at the house on the corner, watching it burn as we walk past it. No matter how much we had been through in our past, I always retained my emotions. We always had each other. But now after all this, I don't know if I can even consider myself to be human. After this, we may not be any better than the people that left us out there to die in the first place.

I look at Reika as we grow closer to the house with the smoke grenade in the front yard. At least when I look at her there is still some glimmer, somewhere deep down inside me. But I wonder if she'll be able to feel anything after today.

"Look," Cupid says, ending our silence.

Near the end of the street a group of Ninety-nine Soldiers are walking in our direction.

"Reinforcements!" Omni says.

"Finally, I can get this bag off of my back and give it to Kisin!" Fox says.

Reika starts to say something but starts coughing violently.

"You okay Reika?" I say amused.

"Yeah, I just inhaled too much of that damn smoke," she replies.

"Oh, yeah my lungs are still burning from it too," I say.

"I think we all got a hefty dose," Fox says, looking to his right at us.

"Wait, does it look like they're aiming at us?" Calico says, slowing down in front of us.

"It does! You guys have compound uniforms on," Cupid says, worried.

"It's okay," Calico says, raising his hands above his head.

"We're Ninety-nine! Don't shoot!" Cupid yells but his words are met with gunfire.

Calico gets hit in his collarbone and neck and drops to the ground. Fox dodges him as he falls.

"Go! Go! Go!" Fox yells and starts making a break for the smoke in front of the house to our left.

Cupid and Omni start shooting back while running in the same direction as Fox. Reika and I follow suit. Megan sprints as fast as she can

towards the smoke. I hit one of the four soldiers down the block and he falls to the ground.

“Shit!” I shout while running.

Another soldier drops due to our combined gunfire. The other two begin running for cover while shooting at us. I hit the grass and am nearly hidden by smoke when a bullet hits my forearm. An intense burning feeling sears through my forearm. I run towards the door looking at the damage on my forearm as blood pours out of it. Fox shoots at the lock on the door and kicks it in. We pool into the house behind him. I close the door behind me.

“Anyone hit?” Fox asks in between breaths.

“I am,” I say.

PASS THE NEEDLE

"I don't think it's too bad. We should keep moving," I say as blood drips onto the floor from my arm.

Reika grabs my arm. "Did it go through?"

"I don't know. I don't think so," I reply, gritting my teeth as the intense stinging sensation emits throughout my forearm.

"We have nowhere to go. This is where we're supposed to be," Fox says.

"Let's make it look like we left." Omni says.

"What?" Cupid inquires.

"Nineteen, bleed your way to the back door," Omni says.

"Okay," I say, unsure.

I walk towards the back door gritting my teeth while squeezing blood out of my arm and onto the floor.

Omni opens the back door while pulling a piece of cloth from his waist.

"Walk out over the porch and to the grass with me," he says.

We walk toward the tall green grass of the yard letting my blood purposely drip onto the porch.

"Anyone have alcohol?" Omni asks.

"Of course," Cupid says, removing a small flask from his back pocket.

Once I'm standing in the grass Omni takes the alcohol from Cupid and pours it over my arm. I let out a grunt as the top of my arm stings more violently than before. Omni wraps a bandage around my arm and then pulls it tight causing me to grunt again.

"Basement?" Fox says looking at Omni.

Omni shakes his head up and down in response.

We make our way back into the house as fast as we can and follow Fox to the basement door. Cupid shuts the door behind us and we all run down the stairs. The basement is dark and completely empty. The concrete floor is lit by dim light coming in from the window wells. We head to the farthest corner of the basement.

The floor above us begins to creak just as we reach the corner.

"Someone's inside," Cupid whispers.

We all nod in acknowledgement and then listen to the footsteps above us as we take knees and aim toward the stairwell. The floor creaks above us as someone makes their way to the back of the house. After a brief moment the individual moves back the way they came and to the front of the house.

"They went out the back," I make out the muffled voice of someone shouting upstairs. The front door slams and with it, the movement upstairs ceases.

"I think it worked," I whisper.

"Good idea," Reika says to Omni as we relax our aim.

"Now we have to figure out where to go from here and how bad your arm is," Fox says sitting next to the bag of nanobots.

"I'm fine. The top of it's the only part that burned when he poured alcohol on it," I say, gritting my teeth in pain as my arm hits Reika's side while trying to sit down.

Reika shoots me a suspicious look.

"Well, we do happen to have a bag full of nanobots," Cupid says.

"That's right! Why don't we just give you an injection? That should heal your wound right?" Omni says sitting with his legs crossed.

"That's not necessary! I'm fine. Besides we need those for something other than me," I plead.

"He has a point and says he's fine, so for now let's just figure out where we're headed. We can worry about Nineteen after we know what we're doing," Fox says with authority.

"Agreed," Cupid says.

"I'll call..." I start to talk but my chest starts burning and I begin coughing loudly.

"Crap," I clear my throat. "Freaking smoke! Anyway, as I was saying I'll call Kisin. Maybe he can organize a way to meet up that doesn't involve us getting shot by our own men." I say removing the cell phone from my pocket.

"Yeah, that really sucked. I'm pretty sure I just killed one of our own," Omni says.

"We didn't have a choice," Fox says while I strap the cell phone to my ear.

"Nisik," I say into the phone and it begins ringing.

"Nineteen?" Kisin answers immediately.

"We got the bots and Megan, but we need a way back to you," I say.

"I take it you couldn't cross the wall where we had planned?"

"No. Compound troops filled the area. We tried to work our way north toward the Ninety-nine's men but they think we're compound military because of our uniforms," I say.

"Where are you now?"

"About six blocks north of the warehouse district."

"Okay, I'll try to get in touch with a group of my men. If I remember right they're only about six or seven blocks north of where you're at."

"That sounds good. We'll hide out until you call us back," I reply and Omni begins coughing uncontrollably.

"Who's coughing?" Kisin asks.

"That's Omni, why?"

"You didn't happen to get exposed to any of that green smoke did you?"

"Yeah we did why? I thought it was harmless," I say, quickly running my words together.

"That's not good. I was waiting for your return to fill you in. An hour or two after those people were exposed to the smoke they started showing up in hospitals. Their symptoms are the same as my wife's before she died," he says darkly.

I pause for a moment.

"I thought they were cleared."

"They were. At first." Kisin replies.

"So, the gas is infecting people," I say hesitantly.

"What?" Omni and Cupid say at the same time.

"We're not entirely sure yet, but it seems that way," Kisin says.

"This has to be the plan the gray haired man was talking about. That's why they've been hitting the civilians instead of the troops," I say half in thought, half talking to Kisin.

"What are you talking about?" Kisin asks.

"We saw two instances where soldiers in gas masks attacked civilian groups who were being led to safety," I say.

"They're trying to infect the entire compound," Kisin pauses.

"Yeah," I say in a defeated manner.

"And they're letting the troops on both sides kill each other off," Kisin adds.

"Yeah. We have to get these nanobots to you. It's our only move now," I say.

"Yeah. I'll call you right back," Kisin says, snapping out of his shock and into a determined tone.

"Okay," I say, pulling the phone from my ear.

"What's going on with the smoke?" Fox asks as everyone stares at me.

I look at the ground composing my thoughts. The gray haired man's voice echoes in my head. 'Unless you happen to be hording a large surplus of military nano-bots it's only a matter of time before we eradicate you!'

He wasn't bluffing. He was telling the truth.

"Everyone grab a syringe of nanobots," I say.

"What?" nearly everyone says simultaneously.

"What's wrong?" Megan asks.

"Just grab a syringe of nanobots. I don't know if this will work but it's worth a try," I say.

"Okay," Fox says, pulling open the bag of syringes.

He hands one syringe to each person.

"Maybe your arm is worse than we thought," Omni says.

"Blood has already completely soaked bandage. You sure you're okay?" Cupid asks.

"I'm fine, we're going to have to take turns doing this. The shot goes next to your spine," I say.

"Okay, if I'm gonna put a needle into my spine with some kind of blue glowing goop in it, I need to know why!" Cupid says demandingly.

"Kisin says that people who were exposed to the gas are showing up at the hospital now. He said that they're experiencing the same symptoms of people that received the bad vaccines," I say, taking a syringe from Fox.

"The ones they were experimenting with?" Cupid asks.

"The ones that were killing people," Reika adds somberly.

"Biological warfare," Fox says.

"And the nanobots?" Omni asks.

"I don't know. It's a guess based on what that Council member said. If we're lucky these nanobots are the cure," I say.

"I hope you're right," Megan says.

"And if not?" Cupid asks.

"Then we have an hour, maybe two before we start getting really sick," I say.

"Shots it is! Who wants to jab me in the spine?" Cupid says enthusiastically.

"I guess we might as well have shots of some sort! Seeing as how we used all the alcohol for your arm," Omni says to me lifting up Cupid's shirt.

To my surprise everyone stays cheerful despite the news of our infection.

"Will you do mine?" Reika asks looking into my eyes as she hands me her syringe.

"Of course," I reply forcing a weak smile.

Reika sits with her legs crossed. She turns her back to me and begins to lean forward toward the floor. I lift her shirt exposing the lower part of her back and remove the plastic cap covering the needle of the syringe. I take a deep breath in. Maybe this is it. Maybe this is where we die.

"Shouldn't I be the one taking a huge breath in?" Reika says, turning her head so she can see me.

"Yeah probably." I say, cracking a smile. "You ready?"

"Yep," she says, turning her head back toward the floor.

I use my fingers to mark her spine and then position the tip of the syringe an inch the right of them.

"That's the spot?" Omni says loudly into my left ear startling me.

I turn my head toward him.

"Yeah, that's the spot," I say, amused by his reaction.

"Alright, Cupid, you're in for a treat!" Omni says, reclaiming his spot behind Cupid.

He shows Fox and Megan where the syringe needs to be inserted using Cupid's back.

"Are you serious? If we still die after this! I'm coming back to haunt yer ass Nineteen!" Cupid yells.

"Well if it doesn't work for you, it aint gonna work for me! Kinda hard to haunt a dead guy," I say back while positioning the syringe on Reika's back.

"Whatever! I'll find you and make sure to haunt you wherever you end up!" Cupid says.

I smile to myself before slowly inserting the needle into Reika's back.

"Yeah, that feels weird," Reika says.

"Right," I say.

When the all of the glowing blue liquid disappears into her back I remove the needle.

"We done?" She asks.

"Yeah. You're turn to have fun sticking a needle in my back," I say, turning my back to her as she sits up and begins turning toward me.

"Wait! That was fun for you?" Reika shouts at me.

I chuckle while removing my backpack, and then bend forward.

"I'll show you fun!" Reika says pulling up my shirt.

As soon as my shirts mid-way up my back, she immediately sticks the needle into the right side of my lower back.

I grimace. "See, it's lots of fun right?" I say sarcastically as I feel the contents of the needle burn its way into my back.

"Loads," she says happily. "And, now you're done."

Sitting up I see Cupid finish sticking Omni and Megan sticking a needle into Fox. I try thinking of a sarcastic comment to say to the group but my phone starts ringing.

"Hello," I answer.

"Hey, bad news," Kisin says.

"What?"

"I can't get a hold of my men in that part of the compound. Without them the closest contact I have to your location is at one of the television studios."

"Where's that at?" I ask.

"Pretty far north. It's just to the west of the inner wall that borders downtown."

"Well, we don't have much of a choice. Actually, where's Greg? Maybe he knows how we can use the nanobots," I ask.

"More bad news," Kisin says, as the tone of his voice grows grim. "The men I had following him were caught in the crossfire between the Ninety-nine and the compound troops. They lost him. Your best bet right now is to use some of the nanobots on yourselves and hope that they do something to counter the infection."

My heart sinks as I digest the news. I still owe that bastard for Natalie's death. And now he's our best lead on figuring out how to survive the infection. "We already did, I had everyone inject themselves just to the right of their spine like your men did to me."

"Well, that was actually unnecessary. The only reason we injected you near your spine was because your spine was the site of your injury. You can technically inject the nanobots from any point in your body and they'll make their way to your weak points. It's just faster to inject them near the site that needs to be healed." Kisin explains.

"Oh," I say while smiling uncontrollably at Cupid.

"What?" Cupid asks me.

"Nothing," I reply.

"Nothing what?" Kisin asks.

"Sorry, I was talking to someone else. You said it works either way correct?" I reply.

"Yeah. That is assuming it actually does something for the infection."

"Yeah, I know. I guess we're out of options until noon then."

"Oleg?" Kisin asks.

"Yeah. He's our only other potential source of information. Unless of course your men are able to find Greg," I reply.

"I'll use my entire network to find him but we're having a lot of complications at the moment. Those northern compound soldiers that have been spreading the gas are popping up all over the compound.

"Carl says that one of his officer's saw a group of ten or so attack and take out a Ninety-nine post. Then about an hour later, a different officer in the same area reported the same group effectively attacking a squad of compound soldiers.

"In other words, they're not just relying on the gas, they're killing anyone they see," I say as the memory of the civilian woman and child getting murdered in front of me comes to mind.

"Precisely. My acquaintances are targets just like everyone else. Most of them have begun seeking out areas with strong military presences to hide in. The amount information I can gain and the strings I can pull are shrinking by the minute," Kisin says.

"You said you have contacts at a TV station on this side of the wall, right?" I ask.

"Yeah, they're the closest allies to you," he replies.

This has to stop. "That's where we're gonna go then. I'm gonna need you to do me one last huge favor," I say.

"I think we still have some time before we can talk about our last favors, but what is it?" Kisin says.

"Not so sure about that time thing, but I need you to organize the synchronization of a broadcast," I say.

"How big and who are we broadcasting too?" Kisin asks.

"The whole compound, but most importantly the Compound military," I say.

"I don't think that's something I can manage. Even if we were able to convince all of the stations to broadcast the same thing, to get that many

military personnel to watch T.V.'s in the middle of the war would be impossible," Kisin says.

"They don't have to watch it, they just need to be able to hear it. Do whatever you can, intercoms, police radio systems, anything you can use. This message needs to find its way to the entire compound military. As for the Ninety-nine I can broadcast to their radios using ours, hopefully it'll reach the leaders of each group," I say.

"What are you planning on doing?" Kisin asks.

"I plan on broadcasting what's really happening in the compound," I reply.

"The truth?" Kisin says.

"Basically."

"Why?" Kisin asks.

"We have to fight the northern compound somehow."

"Okay, I'll do what I can," Kisin says.

"I need directions to the station," I say.

"You still have the map?" He asks.

"Yeah, hold on."

"Fox, can you hand me the map?" I shout to Fox.

He pulls the map from his front left pocket and hands it to me.

"Go ahead," I say to Kisin.

I unravel part of the bandage on my forearm as Kisin gives me directions. When he finishes I mark the location on the map using the blood from my bandage.

"Good luck," Kisin says.

"You too," I say before removing the phone from my ear.

"What's going on?" Omni asks.

"What are we doing?" Fox asks.

"Kisin's contacts in the immediate area are gone. So are the men that were set up to tail Greg. Finding him and pumping him for information is now impossible," I say folding the map up and putting it into my backpack.

"So we have no idea whatsoever where he ran?" Omni says.

"No. Kisin's men got caught in the middle of a firefight between the Ninety-nine and the compound. That however, might be one of our smaller problems," I say.

"How? We can't fight if we die from an infection!" Cupid says.

"I know, but it won't matter if the northern compound continues slaughtering every human within the compound walls," I reply.

"They're here?" Megan asks.

I nod my head. "Those men who attacked us with the gas, they're all over compound. They've been targeting our soldiers, compound soldiers, and civilians," I say.

"They're killing us while we're busy killing each other," Fox says.

"Precisely," I say.

"So we need to fight back. And in order to fight back we need to ensure we don't die from this infection," Omni says.

"Why are we wasting time broadcasting this information to everyone when we could be going after Oleg?" Cupid asks.

"We don't know where he is until noon. That's an hour and a half from now. By the time we get to him we'll either be too sick to do anything, or the shots we just took will have already healed us," Reika says.

"Like Reika said, we have an hour and a half before we can go after Oleg. I want that son-of-a-bitch dead for what he did to Tank and I don't plan to let that opportunity escape me. But right now—" I begin to explain but am interrupted by Megan.

"Wait. Sorry to interrupt, but I'm either hearing things, or you guys keep repeating the name Oleg." Megan says.

"Yeah," Reika and Cupid reply.

"Yeah, why?" I inquire.

"Really tall man with blonde hair, blue eyes, has a large gut and a scar on the right side of his face?" Megan describes Oleg flawlessly.

"How do you know that?" Fox asks.

"Why do you know Oleg?" I ask.

"He's one of the Council members I met when my husband first joined the Council," she explains.

"No. That's not possible, he's been a part of the Ninety-nine ever since I met him," Fox says shaking his head.

"It would explain why he ordered the Ninety-nine to bring all the civilians out into the streets," I say as anger builds in my gut.

"And why his personal hit squad tried to kill me and Tank," Reika adds.

"I met him for the first time ten years ago, and I remember him saying something to my husband about a plan to end the fifty year war," Megan says.

"There's no way he's the same person," Cupid objects.

"No. He would've just been starting the..." Fox pauses mid-sentence and launches deep into thought.

"...arena ten years ago. He set up the arena and recruited me around that time," he continues, still contemplating something as we sit waiting for him to collect his thoughts.

"He kept disappearing at the beginning, before the arena was completely secure. And there's that..." he says before abruptly stopping again.

"There's what?" I ask snappily.

"No way," Cupid says, appearing to recall something.

"There was a day that Cupid and I were out scavenging and we happened to stumble upon him and two of his team. From a distance it looked like they were casually talking to compound raid personnel," Fox says.

"Compound raid personnel?" Megan asks.

"The compound used to conduct raids in highly scavenged areas. The members of those raid teams wore very distinct uniforms," Cupid explains..

"And that didn't bother you?" I ask angrily.

"When we approached, Oleg and his men pointed their weapons at the raid personnel. Before we had the chance to ask what was going on he claimed that they had taken the raid team hostage.

"I challenged him to prove it. He seemed a little hesitant but he opened fire on the raid personnel and killed them," Fox finishes explaining.

"We were suspicious for months after that and watched his every move, but nothing proved he was anything other than another scavenger," Cupid adds.

"You've never told me that," Omni says.

"Oleg started placing men around me and Cupid. We were watching him and he was watching us. Our best defense at the time was to keep what had happened from the rest of you so you wouldn't act suspicious," Fox says.

"So Oleg didn't betray us, he's been our enemy from the start," I say, trying to keep my anger in check.

Fox looks me directly in the eye. "What's the best way to kill an enemy who's using guerrilla tactics? One who isn't predictable and is scattered everywhere you go?" Fox asks rhetorically, anger leaking from his eyes.

"You find a way to get them all one place and take them out all at once," I say.

"Precisely," Fox says.

"I still can't believe this," Omni says shaking his head. "If that's the case, they're killing their own people just to get to us."

"The people in this compound are just pieces on a board for the Council to manipulate. They have no attachment to us," Megan says.

Omni scoffs. "Let me get this right, you're saying this entire compound is just some big tool for the northern compound to use. And let me guess, we should feel bad for you and stop attacking because of that? Are we supposed to just overlook the fact that you've been hunting us our whole lives because this 'Council' has been manipulating you?" Omni says angrily.

Anger washes over us as Omnis speech reminds us where we came from. Memories shoot through my mind of life outside the compound.

"No, I never said that and I'm not trying to imply it either. None of you have any obligation or reason to take pity on anyone within this compound. But the truth of the matter is that our enemy is the same. I don't know much about the northern compound but I'd be willing to bet that the majority of the people living there are pawns as well," Megan shoots back.

"She's right. No matter how bad things have been for us, we only have one choice at this point," I say.

"And what's that?" Fox asks.

"If we plan on surviving today we need to ally with the compound forces," I say.

"What?" both Omni and Cupid shout in shock.

"Is that the broadcast you were planning?" Fox asks calmly.

"Yeah," I say, turning toward Reika to gauge her reaction.

Her eyes dart away from mine. Her brow crunches together and she looks toward the floor.

"There's no way in hell! You want to team up with the very people we came here to fight!" Omni yells at me.

"Exactly," I say, looking him in the eye.

"Have you forgotten where you're from? Have you forgotten what they did to your team members? Huh! Has your stay here made you forget what it's like outside? The addicts, the scavengers, and the lack of food?" Omni yells.

Guilt and anger rip through my gut in an uneasy mixture as images of Natalie, Logan, and Tank run through my mind.

My voice comes out dark and callous. "No! I haven't forgotten where I'm from. And I sure as hell haven't forgotten what those soldiers did to the people whom I loved. I also haven't forgotten that I'm the one responsible for their deaths. And for Tank's current condition. I'm the reason my group was here in the first place. And I'm the reason that we choose to join *your* men in this so called assault that is being led by one of the very Council members that *we* need to kill!

"But as mad as I am, and as vengeful as I feel at this moment, my anger will not be misplaced! I'm not after people who were able to live their lives like we wished we could have. I'm not after Fox who convinced me to join an army led by a council member. I'm not even after the soldiers who were given the orders to kill Natalie!"

I'm standing six inches from Omni with my fists clenched. I pause and take a breath in order to calm myself. I take a step back and sit on the floor.

"After all this time I understand who's responsible. I finally see things for what they are. If I live long enough to do so, I will personally end each and every one of those sadistic bastards that make up the Council. No taboo in this world will stop me from doing so. If the only way to stop the Council's plan is to join with a group of people whom I've had misplaced hatred for my whole life, so be it. The enemy of my enemy is my friend," I conclude angrily.

Silence engulfs the room after my rage filled response concludes. Every person in the room seems to be deep in thought.

"No one has to come with me. That includes you Reika. This decision is my own and I intend to carry it out regardless of anyone else's feelings," I add.

"You're right. It's just not an easy thing to digest after all these years of fighting," Fox says.

"I'm not too keen on being the cause of millions of women and children dying," Cupid says.

"You should know better than to think I'd let you go alone," Reika says.

Everyone looks to Omni at awaiting an answer.

"I still don't like it, but I guess we don't have much of a choice," Omni says as the forearm that I was shot in starts itching uncontrollably.

"So what are you planning to say?" Fox asks as I start removing the bandage from my arm.

"The truth," I say.

"What if they don't believe you?" Omni asks.

"I'll improvise," I say.

"And if it still doesn't work?" Cupid asks.

"The Council succeeds and we wipe each other out," I say, throwing the bandage to the floor examining my arm.

The bleeding has stopped and the nanobots have repaired my skin but there's now a large bump protruding from the middle of my forearm. I try as hard as I can to not scratch the bump but the sensation is overwhelming.

"It's better than sitting here. Shall we get moving?" Reika asks.

I glance at her and then back down at the bump on my arm. In the brief second I took to look at Reika the bump has grown almost double in size. The skin around the middle of the bump seems to be stretching out and the center begins darkening in color.

"Yeah, we should pack up and get moving," Fox says, slinging the bag of nanobots onto his back.

"Is that bump on your arm getting bigger?" Megan asks.

"It sure is!" Reika says while staring at my forearm.

"It's itching like hell too," I say as the skin in the middle of the bump continues to thin out and darken.

"That a result of the nanobots?" Cupid asks.

"Screw it," I say, placing my index finger and thumb on either side of the growing bump.

"Don't tell me you're gonna—" Reika starts to say but before she can finish I cut her off.

"Yep," I say, squeezing the bump.

The itching stops as I apply pressure. The middle of the bump pops pushing out a small golden fragment that is coated in blood. I pull the fragment away from my skin to examine it.

"Gross!" Megan says.

"Huh, it's a piece of a bullet," I say.

"I guess injecting that goop was a good thing," Cupid says.

Reika shakes her head at me. "That was disgusting!"

"Let's move?" I say, smiling at Reika.

"Let me see the map," Fox says as everyone begins climbing to his or her feet.

I hand him the map, then grab my backpack from the floor and swing it onto my back.

"Looks like we're gonna have to work our way through the middle of the warzone. Assuming they're still fighting their way in," Fox says.

"Yeah, the fastest way to get there is to go due north from here," I say.

"Why's that the middle of a warzone?" Reika asks.

"The street Aaron said he would be attacking is about a block north from where we are," I say.

"Ah, that explains the Ninety-nine's troops we just encountered."

I nod in response.

"Stealth it is," Cupid says.

"Yeah," Fox says, handing the map back to me.

We make our way up the stairs, through the living room, and to the front door.

SHATTER

"The smoke is gone and it's relatively quiet," Fox says, closing the front door and looking at us.

"Backyards?" I propose.

Fox nods his head. Megan looks at Reika confused.

"More cover to get through the neighborhood," Reika says.

"Oh, okay," Megan replies, still confused.

"Quiet could mean good or bad for us. We don't know where the enemy is. Better to be safe," Cupid says to clarify.

"Oh gotcha," Megan says.

We exit the back door and make our way to the fence on our right side.

"North it is," Omni says as he reaches to grab the top of the fence.

One by one we jump the fence and make our way into the next houses yard.

"Looks like two more houses till the cross street," Fox says quietly.

Everyone nods. We make our way over the fences before stopping in front of the last fence on the block.

"It's still quiet," Fox whispers, looking at our group to make sure no one else has heard or seen any sign of the enemy.

"Yeah, all quiet aside from the explosions and distant machine gun fire," I whisper back sarcastically.

Omni and Cupid laugh while Reika shakes her head.

"I'll go first," I whisper.

I grab the top of the fence, position my left leg midway up the fence, and then kick off using my upper body to pull me up. With my torso above the top of the fence and my legs dangling, I hold my position in order to scope out the street ahead of us. On the sidewalk in front of the fence, there are two Compound Soldiers lying in a pool of blood. Looking up from the sidewalk I see bodies scattered on the street.

"Anything?" Fox asks.

"Just remnants of a fire fight. We're safe." I say before bringing my legs over the fence and jumping down.

"Oh..." I hear Cupid say as he jumps the fence.

"This is horrible," Megan says as she lands on the sidewalk.

"It's war," Fox says.

"No worse than the outside," Omni says coldly.

"We have to speed up. We got a long way to go and not a lot of time to get there," Fox says.

"Agreed," I say.

"If you need a break, let us know, but from here on out we're not stopping," Fox informs Megan.

"Okay," she replies.

We head north two more blocks by jumping fences and cutting through backyards. As we cross the street to block number three, Megan stops jogging.

"I don't think I can jump any more fences," Megan says, panting.

"It is taking us three times as long," Omni adds.

Fox looks at me. "It's not as safe, but it would be a lot faster if we just run down the street."

"Well, we haven't encountered any soldiers so we might as well try it," I say.

"They've probably evacuated the rest of this neighborhood," Reika says.

"And more than likely they're concentrated on guarding more important areas by now," Omni adds.

"So what are we waiting for?" Cupid asks.

Fox looks to Megan who nods to signify she's ready to go. We jog around the corner of the block and then pick up pace as we make our way up the block. We move quickly down the first few blocks but as we approach our fourth block, Megan begins to fall behind and our pace slows dramatically.

"You okay?" I say, slowing down to jog with her.

"I'm not in this kind of shape," she says, gasping for air in between words.

"You just gotta keep pushing forward. Focus on your breathing," I say, breathing heavily.

"You guys are going to have to leave me behind," she gasps out, jogging slowly.

"We can't do that. If we leave you behind, there's a good chance you'll die," I say in between controlled breaths.

She nods and continues to breathe heavily. As we reach the beginning of the fifth block, she stops and everyone stops with her.

"What's wrong?" Omni asks, breathing hard.

"I can't... go... any farther. You guys, go without me," Megan says, shaking her head back and forth, still gasping for air in between words.

I look at the street in contemplation and can feel Fox's eyes on me. At this rate, we'll never make it to that station. Eventually we're going to run into soldiers, and that'll slow us down even more. We can't afford to have Megan slowing us down. But, she's Natalie's mom. I can't let her die either. My gut twists with a strong sense of uncertainty.

"It's okay, really," Megan says, slowly getting her breath under control.

"Soldiers!" Cupid shouts, looking down the block ahead of us.

A burst of gunfire causes me to jump to attention and raise my weapon. On the opposite end of the block, a group of Ninety-nines' are engaging in a firefight with another group that is out of view. The nose of a large beige transport vehicle pokes out as it parks along the right corner of the block. More Ninety-nine soldiers pour out onto the street to join the fight as the vehicle comes to a stop.

That's the solution. We need to get our hands on a vehicle. Frozen in contemplation, I stand in the middle of the street staring at the vehicle.

"Nineteen!" Reika yells, snapping me out of my thoughts.

Reika and the rest of the group are already halfway up the lawn to the nearest corner house and are making their way toward the front door.

"Wait!" I yell back, running toward them.

"What?" Reika replies.

"I have an idea," I say, looking at Fox who stops just short of the front door.

He turns around and waits for me to get closer.

"Let's take that truck!" I say a few feet from the group.

"Now I know you've gone crazy!" Omni says.

"We need transportation, but there's no way we're even getting close with you guys dressed like that," Cupid says shaking his head.

"There isn't time to argue. Reika?" I say, looking at her for backup.

Reika looks into my eyes and then nods. "Let's go," she says.

"Wait for us on the back side of this block," I shout to the group before motioning Reika to head out.

We sprint toward the firefight through the front yards on the right side of the block. The Ninety-nine's forces are making their way past the house on the left corner of the block and out of view.

I scan the area near the beige transport as we continue to make our way down the block. Three quarters of the way to the vehicle and not a single soldier is near it. We slow our sprint to a jog as we reach the second to the last house on the block.

Reika makes a zero out of her hand and points to her eyes to signify she doesn't see anyone ahead. I nod and we make our way toward the lawn of the last house. As we get closer to the truck, I notice that it's missing the shell that covers the flatbed where soldiers normally sit. In place of the shell, it has multiple black rails that run the length of the flatbed.

The firefight to our left continues as we creep our way across the lawn. The Ninety-nine's troops scatter onto the block to our left. From two blocks over, pockets of compound soldiers are peering around the corner and taking turns shooting at the encroaching Ninety-nine forces.

Now closing in on the sidewalk, I detect movement out of my peripheral vision. I halt my progression and turn to my right while signaling Reika to stop. As quietly as I can, I walk toward the front corner of the house. Using the house for cover, I peak around its side. Sure enough, crouched along the side of the house is a soldier.

As quietly as I can, I head in his direction. When I'm three feet from him, he shifts his weight in a manner that looks as if he is going to turn around. I sprint at him as he begins to turn. Before he can get a shot off, I hit him in the side of his head with the butt of my gun. He drops to the ground with a loud grunt. Reika positions herself alongside the vehicle, aiming towards the firefight in case the soldiers' grunt draws attention.

I crouch next to the unconscious soldier and search him for keys. I signal to Reika that my search came up empty. She motions for me to check the vehicle. I hastily make my way to the driver's door. The hinges creak as the door swings open. Grabbing the seat in front of me, I prop myself up into the cab and run my right hand along the ignition in search of the keys.

My hands make contact with a single metal key dangling from the ignition. I jump back out of the vehicle smiling ear to ear.

"Get in," I say confidently.

Reika looks up at my smiling face in surprise.

"Seriously?" she says with her eyes wide.

"Yea," I say, grinning even bigger.

She pushes me out of the way and jumps into the vehicle.

"Let's get the hell outta here!" she says as I make my way into the driver seat.

I hand my gun and backpack to Reika before slamming the door of the vehicle shut. While stepping on the brake, I turn the key. The vehicle hesitates but then rumbles to life. I put the vehicle into gear and step on the gas. The vehicle roars loudly but doesn't move.

"It's not moving," I say turning to Reika.

She grabs a lever near the center of the seat, depresses a silver button on the top of it, then pushes it to the floor.

"Try it now," she says.

Once again, I step on the gas pedal. This time not only does the engine roar to life, but the truck jerks forward. The tires squeal as we round the corner onto the block we came from.

"What was that?" I ask as we make our way down the block.

"Another brake," she says.

"Guess I missed the compound driving lessons," I say.

"Yeah, that was the week you had surgery. We all took driving lessons downtown," she says jokingly.

I don't slow down enough when we reach the corner. As we turn, the tires squeal and Reika slides into the passenger door.

"Maybe you shouldn't be driving," Reika says as we make a second left turn.

"There aren't any rules to follow now. We're at war," I say, smiling.

Reika shakes her head. "They're at that blue house on the left."

"Where?" I ask, scanning the houses ahead of us.

"I'm pretty sure I just saw Fox disappear down the side of that house," she says, pointing.

"Here?" I ask as we reach the blue house.

"Keep going. They're on the far side of it," Reika says.

"Okay," I drive past the house and stop the truck where its yard meets the neighboring houses yard.

Fox, Omni, and Cupid are along the side of the house aiming at the truck. I open the door and yell at them.

"Hurry up! Let's move!" Megan pops up from behind them as soon as the words leave my mouth.

Fox and his men lower their guns and begin jogging toward the truck.

"You still have that map?" Reika asks before coughing uncontrollably.

"You okay?" I ask concerned.

"Yeah," She says, recovering.

Did the nanobots not work? Or did they just not kick in yet?

"I'll pound on the roof when everyone's in," Fox shouts as he jogs past my door.

"Okay!" I shout loud enough for him to hear as he makes his way to the back of the truck.

"The map?" Reika asks again.

"Oh, yeah! It's in the small outer pocket on my backpack," I reply.

Three loud booms occur above my head as Fox bangs on the roof.

"Where are we headed?" I ask, shutting the door.

"From the looks of it, we can just go straight until we hit Gateway Road," Reika replies.

"Straight it is," I say, pushing the gas pedal half way to the floor.

The engine roars and we take off down the street.

"How far is that road?" I ask.

"Looks like it's a few miles to the north of us." She replies.

"Alright, let me know when you think we're close."

"You'll know it when you see it. I'm pretty sure it's the same road we took from Megan's to get downtown," she says.

"The one we took to the mall?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"That's not necessarily a good thing," I say, swerving to the side of the road to avoid a pile of dead bodies.

"Why?"

"That's one of the few roads that goes through the inner wall. It connects the east side to the west side of the compound."

"It's gonna be under heavy fire," Reika says, catching on.

"More than likely," I say as we drive by a smoldering pile of what used to be a house.

"There's no way around it," Reika says.

"I know. We're just going to have to hope the Ninety-nine has already pushed the fight west of where we hit that road."

"Shit!" I say as a compound tank turns onto the block in front of us.

"What?" Reika says, looking up as I slam the breaks.

She flies out of her seat and hits the dash.

"Oh, shit!" she says, eyes wide.

I put the truck in reverse and romp on the gas pedal. We fly down the street backwards. My eyes bounce between the rear-view mirror and the tank in front of us. Nearing the corner, I see the tank's muzzle elevate. With both hands on the steering wheel I whip the wheel as hard as I can to the left. The truck's rear wheels hit the street curb as we spin in a clockwise direction.

The front wheels of the truck bounce up the curb and onto the sidewalk as we complete a one hundred and eighty degree spin. I push the gas pedal to the floor. The crackling pop of the tank firing causes my heart to drop as our wheels spin. The impact rocks our vehicle as the tank round hits the street ahead of us.

Debris shatters part of the passenger side windshield. It shoots through the driver's side window into my arm and neck. Shards of glass splash over the left side of my body. We take off through the front yard and around the corner of the block. My left ear rings loudly as I swerve

back and forth across the street with the truck bouncing violently from its flight off of the curb.

I fly two blocks up before I realize that someone's banging on the roof. I look to Reika in hopes that she can make out what they want, but to my surprise she's unconscious.

"Reika!" I shout, hoping to rouse her but she remains motionless. Her body is leaning onto the door and her head is resting where the passenger window used to be.

I stop the truck on the corner.

"Go! Go! Go! Just stop around the block! We lost Cupid on that turn!" I hear Fox yell.

I pull around the block and stop in front of a house.

"Reika you okay?" I grab her shoulder with my right hand and give her a shake.

My heart skips a beat when she doesn't move.

"Reika!" I shout louder, leaning toward her to grasp her with both hands.

"Come on! Get up!" I plead, shaking her again harder than before.

"We're good. Let's go!" Fox yells.

I scoot closer and lift her head from the windowsill into the vehicle.

"Let's move!" Fox yells again, banging on the roof.

As I position her head on the seat, I realize there is an enormous amount of blood on the right side of her neck. There is a large shard of glass sticking out of her throat. My heart sinks into my chest and I start to feel nauseous. I reach out and grab the shard with my left hand.

It's not in very deep. It just looks bad. I hope. I give the shard a light tug hoping it will freely fall from her throat. The skin on her neck stretches, sticking to the shard.

"Nineteen?" I hear Fox's voice erupt from behind me.

I grit my teeth and yank the shard of glass out of her throat. I see a large hole just before blood gushes down the side of her neck. Nausea overwhelms me and black spots impair my vision. I try to make my way out of the truck but Fox is standing outside the driver side door.

"Pull yourself together soldier! That tank is gonna be here any second! If it gets here while we're here we're all dead!" Fox shouts at me as the black spots begin taking over my line of site.

I look up at Fox barely able to make out parts of his face as everything goes dark.

"SNAP OUT OF IT!" Natalie's voice rips through my ears.

Adrenaline shoots through me. I gasp for air, and my eyes shoot open clear of the black haze.

Fox is in my face, yelling and shaking me. "Snap out of it! We don't have time for this shit! Either move over or start driving!"

My brain goes into overdrive as I remember our situation.

"Get in!" I shout to Fox as I spring back to life positioning myself to drive.

Fox pounds on the roof. I push the pedal to the floor, the tires squeal, and we peel out. My eyes stay glued to the rearview anticipating the tanks appearance. I turn left at the end of the block and drive for a few blocks before heading north.

What the hell was that? I almost got everyone killed.

Flying down another block I glance at Reika and back to the road.

"I'm sorry," I say with tears welling up in my eyes. "I promise you that I'll try to save as many people as I can."

A tear runs down my cheek. "You succeeded in honoring Kai's promise."

I stare at Reika's lifeless body.

I curb check. My eyes snap back to the road and I swerve into the street.

"I'll avenge you. I swear." Tears begin to roll down my cheeks.

"All of you."

Memories flood my senses.

Logan's wicked grin.

Natalie's piercing blue eyes.

Tanks massive green bag.

My nose starts running and a burning sensation fills my chest. I start coughing uncontrollably and swerve all over the road. When I recover I see a massive cross street a block ahead of us.

I wipe the tears from my eyes. Okay I have to focus. Everyone dies if I don't keep it together. I nearly come to a stop trying to grab the map from Reika's side of the vehicle. Okay where do we go after Gateway street? I shake open the map getting blood on my shirt and hands. Northeast.

"Hang on!" I yell out the window before pressing down harder on the gas pedal.

Soldiers are crouched under a street light behind a line of sandbags near the corner. They're facing down the one way street taking turns shooting and then ducking. They're so focused on shooting at their targets that they don't notice us passing behind them.

I look down the street to our right to see that they're shooting at a massive wave of Ninety-nine troops and tanks. On our left, two blocks down, there is a sizable force of compound vehicles and men heading in our direction.

This is all bad. I press the gas pedal to the floor.

The familiar pop of tank fire fills my ears as one of the Ninety-nine's tanks unleashes its cannon. The projectile hits a group of compound soldiers who are in the street ahead of us. The aftermath causes the remaining soldiers to turn in our direction.

Two of the soldiers run from the street and into the front yard of a house on the corner. The other three stand in the middle of the street and begin firing at us. Bullets rain down on our hood and windshield. I lower my head and swerve to the right in order to run down two of the three soldiers. The truck barely registers the soldiers as we plow into them and continue to barrel onto the new block.

"You guys alright?" I yell out the window.

"Barely!" I hear a near inaudible response from Fox.

I drive for a few more blocks before slowing down to figure out the best route to take. I double check the map and place it on the seat next to me. To remain focused, and avoid looking at Reika, I shift my eyes to the steering wheel. The blood on my hands draws my attention and causes my heart to drop. I look at Reika and then the road.

"I barely knew you before Kais death.

And now that I do...

I can't imagine you not being by my side."

My eyes fill with water. I take a deep breath trying to calm myself. I have to protect those who are still alive. That's all I can do now. I can't break down. Everyone is depending on me.

I slow down as we approach the street where the news station should be and turn into a complex filled with brick buildings. How do I know which building is the news station? I drive past each of the buildings looking for identifying markings. After circling the complex and passing

four different buildings I spot a van with a purple news five logo on the side. I pull up next to it and park.

I look at Reika hoping she'll spring to life but she doesn't budge. I slowly reach over her body to grab my bag and gun. I open the door and shake the glass shards from my things onto the ground. As I jump out of the truck a few pieces of asphalt fall from the left side of my uniform. After landing, I reach for my face and begin picking chunks of asphalt out of the skin around my cheekbone.

"Could you drive any worse?" Cupid shouts, emerging from the back of the truck.

"Everything hurts! My ass, my knees, my hands! I feel like I just walked out of a pinball machine," Omni says.

"Sorry. If I had driven any slower we would've all been dead," I say.

"We're not talking about your speed! You were hitting so many bumps and swerving so much that it felt like we were bull riders in a rodeo!" Cupid says.

Megan starts laughing.

"Definitely wasn't the easiest of rides," Fox says, walking past us toward the building.

"That's putting it lightly! I fell out the damn truck when you drove through the front yard of that house and decided to ramp off the curb into the street!" Cupid says with eyes wide.

"Why are you so quiet?" Omni asks.

"Why is Reika still in the truck?" Megan asks.

"She's so shell-shocked from his horrible driving that she doesn't want to move," Cupid jokes.

"She got hit by the tank," I say.

"What?" Cupid and Omni say at the same time.

SHATTER

"They can probably help her inside." Megan says.

My eyes water. I clench my fists, look at the ground, and shake my head.

"Do you want us to take her out of the truck?" Omni asks somberly.

"Leave her, let's go," I reply coldly.

"You heard him lets go." Fox says.

We turn to Fox who is standing with his hand on the door to the building.

LONGSHOT

Fox tries to open the door but it doesn't budge. He then starts banging on the door as loud as he can. Omni and Cupid aim their guns at the door.

I hope that Kisin managed to pull off what I asked him to.

Fox stops knocking on the door and we wait. A few moments go by without anyone answering.

"You sure this is the place?" Fox asks.

"Yeah, this should be it. It's the only blood circled spot on the map," I reply.

Fox nods and gives the door another few bangs. We wait again, and again, no one comes to the door.

"I'll call Kisin," I say, reaching in my pocket for the cell phone.

An eruption of coughing comes from the truck and draws everyone's attention. I drop the cell phone back into my pocket and run to the truck. Reika steps out from the vehicle and shakes glass and debris from her body.

"What happened?" Reika asks.

I approach in disbelief looking for the hole in her throat.

"Nanobots." I say before hugging her.

"What?" She asks confused.

I let go of her and take a step back.

"You were dead." Cupid says.

Reika's confused expression grows.

"When the tank shot at us some debris hit the truck. A piece of glass from the windshield lodged in your throat. You didn't wake up," I explain.

"That explains the blood," she says barely audible.

Megan starts picking pieces of glass out of Reika's hair.

"I'm happy to have you back but we need to keep moving," Fox says.

That's right I was going to call Kisin. I pull the phone back out of my pocket and put it onto my ear.

The phone rings with no answer for quite some time.

Kisin's voice fills my ears just as I'm about to give up. "You know who you've reached. Don't leave a message, I'll get back to you when I can."

"Kisin," I say but a dial tone buzzes into my ears.

"That was weird. It was like he answered but didn't respond," I say.

"Voice mail maybe?" Megan says.

"What's that?" I ask.

"When someone doesn't pick up the phone they set up an automated response," Megan explains.

"Oh, yeah. That's it then," I say.

"So Kisin didn't pick up and nobody's coming to the door. Now what?" Omni says.

"Find another entrance?" Reika suggests still disoriented.

I shrug my shoulders.

"Let's get to lookin'," Cupid says.

I take two steps toward the side of the building and my cell phone begins ringing.

"Hello," I answer.

"Sorry I missed your call, was trying to finish what you asked me to do," Kisin says.

"We're at that station, but no one is answering the door," I say.

"The news five station?" Kisin asks.

"Yeah, we're right next to a van that says news five."

"Alright, just stay there. I'll give them a call."

"Okay," I acknowledge Kisin before hanging the phone up.

"He's gonna call the station and get them to let us in," I say.

"Assuming they haven't already abandoned the place," Omni says.

"If they agreed to meet up with us, I doubt they'd abandon the place," I reply.

"You keep forgetting they're compound residents, not Ninety-nine members," Omni shoots back.

"You don't have to be a soldier to follow through with something," I say.

"I didn't say they had to be soldiers," Omni says.

"It still doesn't make a difference," I reply.

The door shoots open.

"Which one of you is Nineteen?" A short woman wearing a dark blue suit asks.

"I am," I say, walking toward her.

"I heard you're planning to stop this war," she says.

"If you mean the fight between the Ninety-nine and this compound, then yes," I say.

"What other war would I be talking about?" she asks, glaring at me.

"The one between us and the Council," I say, looking her in the eye.

"And us?" she inquires.

"The Ninety-nine, the compound, and any other people that happen to have been misled by the Council's actions," I reply.

The woman stops talking and looks at each person in our group before looking back at me.

"Come in," she says, propping the door open.

I make my way past her and into a hallway with grey carpeting. Along the right side of the hall there is a brown door. The rest of our group files into the building behind me. Cupid enters last and after he does the suited lady shuts the door and makes her way to me.

"We're on the 5th and 6th floors of this building," she says before opening the stairwell door and nodding for us to follow.

"How much do you know about the Council?" the suited woman asks me as we ascend the stairs.

"Enough to know that they're the real enemy in this situation. And that they're the reason we're trying to kill each other today," I say.

"What about the wasteland plague?" She asks.

"Wasteland plague?" I ask confused.

"Option C," Reika says catching on.

"That's what we're calling it. Since your arrival the hospitals have been filling up with people who have become deathly ill," the suited woman continues.

"Ah, that. It has nothing to do with the wasteland or the Ninety-nine. Those men flying in with northern helicopters have been spreading it by firing smoke grenades. The plague or whatever you're calling it was engineered by the Council to wipe all of us out," I reply.

The woman stops before a door at the top of stairwell.

With anger taking over the tone of her voice she asks, "How did they develop it?"

"They've been using your so-called inoculations as trials to test it," I reply firmly.

The woman turns around to face me with tears welling up in her eyes.

"How do you know that?" she asks, gritting her teeth.

"I overheard two Council members talking about it just before we killed one of them," I explain, looking her in the eye.

She takes a deep breath and then nods her head.

"Okay," she says before turning back to the door to open it.

We follow her through the door and into a large room filled with television screens. Footage from the war is being shown on each of the televisions. Four of the eight monitors are showing soldiers wearing gas masks attacking civilians. One of the monitors shows a news reporter at a hospital morgue. Dead bodies with white cloth draped over them surround the reporter as she reports on the wasteland plague. The other three monitors are showing a variety of conflicts between the Ninety-nine and the compound military.

We walk past the monitors and toward a group of three people wearing suits. They are standing in front of a second set of monitors. When they see us approaching, they go silent.

"This is Nineteen. You're to help him and his group attain whatever they need in order to set up and film," the suited lady says.

They look at me with blank expressions on their faces.

"Yes, ma'am," the woman of the group replies after a moment of hesitation.

"Good luck," the suited woman says to me before walking away.

"You convinced her?" a woman wearing a bright red dress says with wide eyes.

"What?" I ask.

"Oh sorry. I'm Kisin's contact, Lilliana," she says, extending her hand to greet me.

I shift my gun into my left hand and reach out to shake her hand.

"What did I convince her of?"

"Her brother died a year ago from the wasteland plague. Ever since then, she's been anti anything and everything from outside of the compound," Lilliana explains.

"Kisin didn't talk to her?" I ask.

"Kisin doesn't know her. I tried my best to explain the situation but she didn't want to believe it," Lilliana says.

"We've been unearthing alarming information about the Council for years now. But exposing them would have put our lives at risk. Today, our lives are at risk, so there's not much incentive for us to keep quiet," the man wearing a gold suit says.

"We didn't want to believe it at first. But there's only so much you can purposely overlook," the other man wearing a shiny black suit adds.

"Some of that information led me to Kisin and here we are. Anyway, I know we're short on time. Kisin managed to get both of the other news stations on board with your broadcast. He also said to let you know that Carl has cop cars positioned around the city with loud speakers," Lilliana says.

"Okay, good. Do you know if he was able to gain access to your military's radio frequency?" I ask.

"He didn't say anything to me about it," she replies.

"Alright, I guess we just have to hope they get the message. How do we do this broadcast?" I ask.

"Follow me," Lilliana says.

She leads us around the monitors to a room that is behind them. Bright white lights shine downward making a large circle around an enormous mahogany desk. The desk sits in front of a blue backdrop. Multiple cameras on tripods are set up along the perimeter of the light. I nearly crash into a camera as a lightheaded sensation takes over my senses.

"You okay?" Reika asks.

"Yeah," I croak out, clearing my throat.

"Anyone else feel like their chest is on fire?" Cupid asks as we walk into the light surrounding the table.

"Here and there," Omni replies.

"Think it's the nanobots?" Cupid asks.

"I hope so," Omni replies.

"This is it," Lilliana says.

"What's that?" I ask, pointing at a small rectangular object sitting on the table.

"This is your mic," she replies, picking the object up.

"Mic?" I ask, setting my gun on the table.

"Yeah. You clip it to your uniform and it'll pick up every word you say. As for your image, you're going to need to look straight toward that camera," she says, pointing at one of the cameras.

"Okay, and the police speakers will pick up my words just by wearing this?" I ask.

"It's a little more complicated than that, but yes, you just need to clip this to your collar and talk as you normally would," Lilliana explains as I take off my backpack and set it on the floor.

I take the mic from Lilliana and use the black backing on it to clip it onto my collar.

"Are you ready?" Lilliana asks, looking me in the eyes.

"Ah, I guess. I just need to get the Ninety-nine's attention first," I say, turning to Fox.

"Walkie?" Fox asks.

"Yeah. Anyone good at making speeches?" I ask, looking around the group.

Omni laughs and shakes his head in disapproval.

"You're on your own with that," Cupid says.

I turn toward Reika.

"Don't look at me. I'm the quiet one of the group, remember?" Reika says.

"This is your plan after all," Fox says, handing me his walkie-talkie.

I bring the walkie up to my face. "Attention all Ninety-nine members. In a few minutes there will be an important change of tactics announced to ensure our success," I pause for a second trying to come up with something to say, "I am requesting all forces to momentarily retreat to safe zones in order to attain new orders." I finish and then repeat the entire statement two more times.

"Who is this? Are you speaking on behalf of Oleg?" a man's voice comes back across the walkie.

That's right! Our troops were told that they'd be given further instruction when Oleg accomplished his task.

"This is Nineteen of the Undesirables relaying your new instructions," I say, hoping to use Oleg's words against him.

"And Fox with the Wolfpack," Fox leans in to speak into the walkie.

"Roger that. What's our timeframe?" A familiar voice comes across the walkie.

"That's Estabon," Cupid says.

"They'll need some time to withdraw," Fox says.

"Broadcast of new tactics will commence in ten minutes," I say, looking to Lilliana for acknowledgment.

Lilliana nods understandingly and rushes out of the room.

"Understood." A woman's voice responds.

"Roger that. I'll spread the word," Estabon replies.

"We have ten minutes to come up with something to say that will persuade the Ninety-nine into joining the compound," I say, growing nervous.

"I thought we were sticking to the truth," Omni says.

"We are, but I could use suggestions on how I should go about explaining it," I say.

Omni shakes his head. "You realize you still have no way of getting the compound military to agree to your terms. Even if you can get our men to withdraw and agree to ally with the compound, if you don't get the compound military to agree, this doesn't work. And our men will be slaughtered thinking they can lower their guard," Omni says angrily.

"Nineteen," Lilliana says, returning to the room.

"Yeah?" I turn toward her.

"I have a commander of the compound military on the phone," Lilliana says.

"Kisin's doing?" I ask wide eyed.

She nods her head.

"Okay."

I hand the walkie to Fox and follow Lilliana out of the room.

"The commander said he was told he could reach the leader of the Ninety-nine here. Is that you?" Lilliana asks as we walk.

"No," I reply.

"I didn't think so. I'm sure that's the only way Kisin could sway him. You might have to play the role," she says as we enter an office to the left of the studio we were in.

Lilliana points at a black phone next to a computer.

I grab the phone. "Hello."

"Is this the leader of the Ninety-nine?" barks the commander.

"In a manner of speaking, yes," I reply, thinking about Lilliana's comment.

"In a manner of speaking? Are you or are you not the leader of the Ninety-nine?"

"I am," I say with as much conviction as I can muster.

"I was told that you want to negotiate a ceasefire so that your men can withdraw."

"A ceasefire yes, but your information about a withdrawal is wrong."

"We are not willing to negotiate with you under any circumstances other than a total withdrawal of your forces from the compound," he says demandingly.

"I'm requesting a ceasefire to save the lives of every individual in this compound. Your men and my men alike. If you haven't noticed yet, there's a third force infiltrating your compound. The men with the gas masks are not our men," I say, irritated.

"My priority is the protection of this compound, and unless you have some way to prove that those men aren't yours, then I have no reason to negotiate with you."

"I understand your priorities. But if you had been on the ground with your troops you would have already seen those masked men for who they are. They've been killing my men, your men, and civilians.

"So you have no proof and you're refusing to withdraw your forces?"

"All I'm asking for is a temporary ceasefire in order to get a message across to both sides. You want proof that those men aren't ours, then let me prove it. I've already issued orders for my men to pull back so that I can inform them of what's happening.

"We are *all dead*, if you don't listen to what I have to say. And I mean all of us! Every single human within this compound will be dead within a matter of days. All I'm asking for is a ten-minute window to explain. The worst thing that can happen if you comply, is a ten-minute break from killing each other. After that, if you don't like what I have to say, you can order your men to start attacking again," I explain, yelling into the phone.

The commander remains silent, but I'm able to make out a second voice. "Sir, Ninety-nine forces seem to be retreating in multiple regions. We need your orders."

"Okay, you'll have your ten-minute ceasefire. How do you plan to get your message out?" the commander responds.

"We need a radio frequency of your choice. That way I can broadcast the same message to both my men and your men at the same time," I say.

The commander mumbles something inaudible. "Understood, give me five minutes and I'll get you a frequency."

"Okay. I'll be prepping my men for the broadcast, so you can give the frequency to whomever picks up this phone," I say.

"Understood," the commander says before hanging up.

"You got him to agree?" Lilliana says, staring at me.

"I think so. Someone should be calling you with a frequency to broadcast to. Can you take care of setting it up so I can speak on that frequency when we get it?" I ask.

"Yeah, I'll have someone meet you in the studio with a walkie set to that frequency," she replies.

"Sounds good," I say before making my way back to the others.

"What's the verdict?" Cupid asks, sitting on the desk.

"They agreed to a momentary ceasefire. But only long enough for me to explain the situation," I say.

"So there's no guarantee they'll stop attacking us?" Omni asks.

"No, but if they don't believe it we're all dead anyway," I reply.

"Ha! There's no guarantee that our own soldiers will believe what you have to say!" Cupid adds.

"That's true, but it's better than not trying," Reika says.

"Your ten minutes are about up," Fox says.

"Crap! That's right, I'm going to have to postpone another few minutes until we get the frequency to the compound radios," I say.

I grab the walkie from Fox.

"Attention all Ninety-nine members. In a few minutes there will be an important change of tactics announced to ensure our success. Once again, I request that all forces momentarily retreat to safe zones in order to hear new orders," I say, hoping to postpone my speech until we receive the compounds frequency.

"Sir, can you move to the middle of this desk and face toward that camera," a younger man wearing jeans and a white shirt approaches and asks.

"Huh?" I say as he draws my attention.

Cupid hops off of the desk.

"We're getting ready for the broadcast. We have to do a few tests before you go on air," he explains.

"Oh, okay," I say.

I walk around Cupid to position myself in the middle of the desk.

"Can you move a little to your right?" A voice comes from behind one of the cameras.

"Sure," I take a step to my right.

"Is this okay?"

"Yeah, that's good.

"Okay, can you say something into the microphone for us?" the man wearing jeans asks.

"Yeah," I lower my head and begin talking into the mic on my neck.

"Can you hear me?" I say.

"Can you face forward and say that one more time?" the cameraman asks.

I repeat myself while looking straight at the camera in front of me.

"Perfect!" the cameraman says.

"I think we're ready to go," the man in jeans says.

I look to my left at Reika and take a deep breath.

"What am I doing?" I ask, shaking my head.

"What everyone needs you to do," she says without hesitation.

"I have no idea what I'm going to say. I'm not very good at speeches," I say, taking another deep breath trying to calm myself down.

"Just tell them the same way you told us," Cupid says.

"There is no better truth than the truth," Fox says jokingly.

"You can do this. Think of Kai," Reika says.

"And Natalie," Megan adds.

"If you can convince me, you can convince the rest of the Ninety-nine," Omni says, looking at the floor.

"We got the frequency and tuned this walkie to it," Lilliana says entering the room handing me a bright yellow walkie-talkie.

"Okay. Let's do this, I guess," I say, taking in another deep breath.

I look up at the camera with the Ninety-nine walkie in my right hand and the compound walkie in my left hand. I bring them closer to my face as I prepare to start the speech.

"You look ridiculous!" Fox says.

"Gimmie those. I'll transmit, you talk." Fox continues.

I laugh and hand him the walkie-talkies.

"Going live in three, two, one... you're on!" the cameraman says.

My heart feels like it is going to burst from my chest as the cameraman points at me.

"Ah, Hello and thank you for hearing me out. Um." I cough to clear my throat.

"I've negotiated a momentary ceasefire between us, uh, the Ninety-nine and the compound. This ceasefire excludes a third force. While we've been busy fighting amongst each other, a third group has been systematically killing both of our peoples." I say nervously.

"Masked troops have been attacking all of us. The gas they are deploying is responsible for what is being called the 'wasteland plague'. Despite what the name suggests, this plague isn't from outside the wall. In fact it doesn't exist outside of the wall. If you have inhaled any of the smoke than you've already been infected." I start coughing.

"These men that are attacking us are from the northern compound. They are led by a group known as the Council. And they have been

planning today's attack for over a decade." I pause to let the message sink in.

"The 'wasteland plague' is something the Council has been testing on this compound for years. They've been using your so-called inoculations as trial runs. But you aren't the only ones who were fooled" I say growing angry.

"The Council found an arena in Colorado. They helped organize the Ninety-nine. They brought us together under the premise that we would be attacking the compound that was responsible for our plight. Oleg, our... original leader is a Council member. That's right, Oleg is a member." I look at Fox.

"This is Fox from the Wolfpack. I stand behind everything Nineteen is saying."

"The reason he ordered you to bring civilians out into the streets is so the Council could infect them. The truth is that we've all been deceived. They want us here. Fighting each other so that they can wipe us out in one fell swoop.

"I've obtained information on how to cure this plague. But the only way we'll live long enough to do so is if we stand together. I know this isn't an easy thing to accept. But it's the only way we survive. Each and every individual in this compound has a choice to make. You can either accept that what I'm saying is the truth, or ignore my warning and continue fighting each other until we're all dead."

I look at the ground, contemplating if there is anything else I need to add.

"You want us to cut the cameras?"

"I vow not to fire upon any compound soldier unless fired upon first. I will hunt down and kill any soldier wearing a gas mask or firing smoke

grenades. I will fight to protect the defenseless civilians of this compound from anyone who may fire at them. Whether they be compound, Ninety-nine, or Council. And lastly, I will find Oleg and make him pay for deceiving us," I say vengefully.

"You have ten minutes from the end of this broadcast to give your responses. Radio in to join me. If I don't hear from you, I'll see you on the battle field."

I look at the camera man and nod for him to cut the feed.

"Fox sets the walkie-talkies on the table."

I take a deep breath. "That was horrible."

"For what it's worth, I liked your speech," Omni says.

Fox appears to be lost in thought.

"Kai would be proud, so would everyone else," Reika says.

I look at the ground, uneasy about the target I just put on our backs.

"That was one really long speech!" Cupid says.

"I wouldn't be surprised if half the Ninety-nine ended up nodding off during it," Omni adds jokingly.

"I liked it. It's the truth that a great many people have needed to hear," Megan says.

I look from the ground to Reika.

"You can all go your own ways if you want. I'll understand if you don't want to walk back out there with a target on your back," I say.

Reika laughs. "Yeah, right! As if I'd leave you after everything we've been through. If I don't die today, I might just start thinking I'm invincible!"

"Yea, I think it's a little late for that," Cupid says.

"I really dislike the idea of joining with the compound, but you're right, we've been misled. Who knows how much of our past is wrong," Omni says.

Fox looks up, finally deciding something. "We're with you. At least until we kill Oleg."

"I guess this is the moment of truth then," Reika says, looking at the walkie-talkies.

A HERO'S RISE

Five minutes go by and not a single Ninety-nine member radios in.

"This isn't looking good," Cupid says, breaking the silence.

"Looks like we're gonna have some really big targets on our backs," Omni says in a low tone before coughing loudly.

Omni's right, we won't get through this without the Ninety-nine's support. Maybe it was too much information to believe on such short notice?

"Nineteen," Lilliana says, entering the room.

"Yeah?" I respond, looking up at her.

"I have the Commander on the phone again," she says.

Is this his response?

"Okay," I mutter before following her back to the telephone.

"Hello," I answer.

Lilliana exits the room as I pick up the phone.

"You lied to me about being the leader," The commander says.

"I had no choice."

He groans. "It's fine, as long as they listen to you."

"They will." I lie.

"I believe what you said. I've had the pleasure of meeting a Council member or two in my day."

He's affiliated with the Council?

"I know what they're capable of and I'm not going to stand idly by while they annihilate compound. If we're going to make this work, I'll need something from you," he says.

"What's that?" I ask, trying to digest what he just said.

"I need you to pull your men back to the inner wall. That way my men can focus on securing the western side, and yours can take care of the eastern side."

"Consider it done. What happens when we secure the compound?" I ask.

"We can discuss that when the time comes. For now, just keep your soldiers on the east and I'll keep mine on the west."

"Okay, deal."

"Good luck," the commander says hesitantly.

"You too," I reply before hanging up.

I look down at the phone. If I can get the Ninety-nine to listen to me, we might be able to pull this off. My eyes widen as I realize the ten minutes they've had to respond must be up. I shoot out of the room and make my way back to Reika and the rest of our group.

"This is Estabon, we're on your side." I hear shoot out of the walkie as I approach.

"Just Estabon?" I ask.

Reika shakes her head at me, smiling.

"Right after you left, they began radioing in one after another," Megan says.

"By my estimate, close to three quarters of our forces have radioed in," Fox says.

"This is Aaron. We're awaiting further orders." Another voice spurts out of the walkie-talkie loudly.

"Now what?" Cupid says in between coughs.

"What did the commander say?" Omni asks.

I smile and grab the walkie from the table.

"We might have a chance at pulling this off after all," I reply to Omni while another soldier announces his allegiance to us.

When the soldier finishes his announcement of allegiance, I push the transmit button.

"A compromise has been reached with the compound forces. We are to fall back to the eastern side of the inner wall. Once there, we will focus all of our efforts on eradicating council soldiers on that side of the wall. The compound soldiers will be doing the same thing on the western side," I say into the walkie twice.

"So we're falling back to the east side of the compound?" Megan asks.

I turn the volume on the walkie talkie down as confirmations of my orders rain in.

"We are. You're staying here," I say, looking her in the eyes.

"Okay, these are Kisin's people right?" Megan asks.

"One of them is, but that doesn't really matter right now," I say.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Megan replies.

"How much time do we have?" Fox asks Reika.

"Thirty-five minutes," Reika says, looking at her watch.

"We need to get moving," I say.

"Wait, where are you going?" Lilliana asks, walking into the room.

"To kill a council member," I say.

"What about the cure?" Lilliana asks.

I look at Fox then back at Lilliana.

"We don't have time to get it to Kisin, so we're going to have to entrust you and Megan with it," I say.

"What? Why? I'm not a soldier," Lilliana asks, objecting.

"This is probably the safest place we can leave it," I reply.

"You're not a target, but we are. If we take it with us, there's a chance the council's soldiers will kill us and dispose of it," Fox adds.

"It'll be fine, I'll make sure it gets to the right people." Megan says.

"Let's get moving before Oleg gets the chance to finish what he's started," Cupid says.

Fox grabs the bag of syringes resting at his feet and drags it across the floor to Megan.

"Can you show us where the Worchester Building is?" Reika asks, pulling the map from her pocket.

Lilliana takes the shoddily folded map and opens it. After a moment of searching the map, she points to a street a few miles east of the inner wall.

"If I remember right, it's on Worchester and Sarsaparilla Street. It's only about a five minute drive from here."

"Let's go," Cupid says impatiently.

I walk over to the table and grab my backpack from the floor.

"What about the cure?" Lilliana asks as I put my backpack on.

Megan holds up the bag of syringes. "This is what we need."

I grab my gun from the table top.

"Thanks for everything," I say to Lilliana as I take the map from her.

"Wait, that's it?" Lilliana asks.

"We gotta go," I say, making my way into the next room.

As we make our way past the monitors and toward the stairwell door, Megan shouts at us. "Good luck! And Nineteen..."

I pause in the middle of the room and turn around.

"Thank you, for everything," she says, staring in my eyes.

My heart sinks. She shouldn't be thanking me, but I won't argue with her.

"I just did what had to be done," I reply, turning back toward the stairwell door.

I open the black door and we make our way down the stairwell and out to the back of the building.

"I think I'll drive this time," Reika says, grinning.

"Uh, I second that," Cupid says.

I laugh and then start coughing.

"Fine with me," I croak out, recovering from the burning in my chest.

Reika hands me the map.

"Let's go get that bastard," Fox says, heading to the rear of the truck.

"You better be able to drive better than Nineteen!" Omni says following Fox.

"At least keep us alive until we can catch Oleg," Cupid adds.

I walk around the front of the truck and jump into the passenger seat.

"You know where you're going?" I ask Reika as she closes her door.

"Yeah, for the most part. You might have to help me once we're downtown though," Reika says while backing up the vehicle.

"Okay," I reply as she pulls into the street.

"So, what happens when we kill all of the northern—I mean Council soldiers?" Reika asks.

"I don't know yet. I guess it depends on what we can get out of Oleg," I say.

"The nanobots don't seem to be working," she says.

"I know, I'm starting to feel like shit."

"You think that grey haired Council member lied to us?"

"It's possible, but I don't think he expected us to be able to get military grade nanobots," I reply.

"So, you think there's a way to extract the cure from the nanobots?"

"I hope so. Maybe if we're lucky I guess. Heh, I don't know the first thing about medical science," I say, shaking my head.

"What you mean? Out of all those novels you read, not one of them had a section on how to create a cure for a man-made plague?" Reika asks sarcastically.

I start laughing. "Nope, strangely not a single one."

The sound of my cell phone begins blaring from my pocket. I dig it out and strap it to my ear.

"Hello."

"I heard from Megan and Lilliana that you're going after Oleg?" Kisin's voice fills my ear.

"Yeah, we just left the station," I reply looking out the window.

A group of compound soldiers have their guns trained on our vehicle as we pass.

"Wow, they really didn't shoot," Reika says.

"That area of downtown is a mess. The council soldiers are having a field day down there," Kisin says.

"I wonder if it has something to do with Oleg."

"Anything's possible I guess, but I don't think so. It seems pretty unorganized. There's a group of Ninety-nine trying to get into that area right now."

"Trying to get in?" I ask.

"Apparently there was a large group of civilians seen evacuating one of the buildings. A group of Ninety-nine started heading that way to help, but before they could get there, Council soldiers set up a parameter using smoke grenades. There's a four block radius of the downtown district filled with smoke."

"How many grenades did they use?" I ask myself out loud.

"I don't know but the smoke is thick."

"You said the Worchester Building is in that area?" I ask.

"The Worchester Building and the Gates Tower."

"Well, we have no choice but to power our way through the smoke. Thanks for the heads up," I reply.

"That's why I was calling. Carl is downtown waiting to help you with that."

"I'm going to need to know where we turn any minute now," Reika says.

"Okay, where are we headed then?" I ask.

"You're going to meet him a block before Sarsaparilla Street on Sakura drive," Kisin says.

I squint at the approaching street sign to figure out where we're at.

"You need to turn left right now!" I shout to Reika.

The tires squeal as we abruptly turn the corner onto Sakura drive.

"Sorry. Change of plans." I say pulling the map from my pocket.

"Huh?" Kisin asks.

"Hold on Kisin." I say.

"Okay."

"Kisin says we're meeting Carl on Sakura drive now."

"Where at?" Reika asks.

"A block before Sarsaparilla Street. It looks like Sakura turns into it." I say looking at the map.

"Alright. So not too much further." Reika replies.

"Yea"

"Carl should be there with two other officers and a fire truck," Kisin says.

"Alright."

"There should also be a group of Ninety-nine soldiers nearby." Kisin continues.

Two blocks ahead of us, on the left side of the street are three cop cars parked behind a massive black and red truck.

"I see 'em," I say.

"Alright, good luck and keep me posted."

"Sounds good," I hang up the phone.

"Head to those cop cars," I say to Reika.

"That's a lot of smoke," she says, looking at the smoke along the right side of the street.

Reika parks behind the line of police cars. Carl walks out from one of the cars with something in his hands. Reika and I jump out.

"Nineteen. This is for you. I managed to get six of them," Carl says, extending the object towards me.

I look down at the yellow and red cylinder in Carl's hands. A grey tube extends from the cylinder and connects to a clear plastic mask. The mask resembles the masks that the Council soldiers have been wearing.

"What is it?" I ask.

"It's what firemen use to get inside houses that are on fire. This oxygen tank connects to the mask, providing you with a fresh supply of air," Carl explains.

"Oh, alright. Hold on, let me put this down," I say, setting my M16 on the ground next to my feet.

I grab the heavy cylinder.

"The oxygen tank straps to your back and this goes on your face," Carl says, holding up the face mask.

"What the crap is that?" Cupid's voice shoots out from behind me.

I turn around to see Fox, Cupid, and Omni, staring at the mask.

"It's how we're getting into that," I say, pointing at the smoke cloud.

"A gas mask, huh?" Fox says.

"Yeah."

"I have one for each of you, come on," Carl says, waving us to the follow him.

I grab my weapon, and follow Carl to the back of his police car. In his trunk are five more oxygen kits.

"Everyone grab one. I'll help you put them on," Carl says, grabbing one of the masks for himself.

"Why do we need these? Fox asks.

"The Worchester Building has been completely engulfed in smoke and the blocks around it as well," I reply, setting my gun on the ground.

"Oh, okay," Fox says hesitantly.

We watch as Carl shows us how to slip the mask on our heads.

"Once the mask is on, make sure that the nozzle part of the cylinder is pointed down and the flat side of the cylinder is pointed upward," Carl says before slipping on the cylinder.

I take my backpack off and throw it to the ground next to my gun.

"Wait, so the flat bottom part goes up towards our heads?" Omni asks.

"Yep. I know it looks weird, but it's setup that way to ensure you get all of the oxygen you can out of the tank," Carl explains as we mimic his actions.

I struggle, trying to pull the bottom of the mask around my chin and into place. Carl helps me by tugging on the top of it.

While the others are getting help setting up their masks, I walk back to the truck and throw my backpack onto the passenger side floor. By the time I make my way back, everyone is suited up and ready to go.

"Where's the Worchester building at?" I ask Carl.

"What?" Carl yells back.

He must not be able to hear me through this plastic.

"Where's the Worchester Building at from here?" I yell.

"Oh. You're going to go a block to the east of where they are and into the smoke," he says, pointing at the Ninety-nine soldiers across the street. "Then you're going to head two blocks north and you'll see an enormous grey building with a large red 'w' on it."

"Alright, anything else we should know before we head in?" I ask still shouting.

"Just that we have no idea how many of those soldiers are in there," Carl yells back.

"Okay. Everyone ready?" I ask, looking around.

"Let's go get this bastard!" Omni yells.

Time to avenge Tank.

"Let's move!" I shout, filled with determination.

Half way across the street Carl yells at us, "Hold on. I almost forgot!"

We stop in the middle of the street and he runs up to us.

"We need to turn your oxygen tanks on," he says, turning a nozzle on Reika's tank.

"That could have been bad," Cupid says.

"This is how you turn on and off your tanks. To turn them off, you turn this nozzle counter clockwise. To turn them on, you turn the same nozzle clockwise. You'll hear a hiss when you turn it on—that's just the air going into the tube," Carl explains, moving to Cupid's tank.

I grab Omni's tank and start turning the black nozzle. Finishing with his tank, I feel a gush of fresh air shoot into my mask. I turn my head to see Reika behind me, turning on my oxygen.

"Now you're good to go!" Carl says, slapping Fox on the back.

"Thanks!" Fox says.

"Everyone good?" I shout, looking at the group.

Everyone in the group nods.

"Let's go!" Fox yells.

We make our way across the street and head to the grouping of Ninety-nine soldiers. Two soldiers aim their guns at us as we reach them.

"We need to get through!" I shout so the men can hear me.

They look down at my compound uniform and back up at my face.

"They're with us now, remember?" A soldier says coming forward. He stands between us and the rest of the soldiers.

"We know, but weren't the compound soldiers supposed to be on the western side of the wall?" the soldier to the right of us asks.

"We're not compound, we're Ninety-nine," Fox yells, stepping forward.

The soldier on our left glances at Fox and then does a double take.

"Fox?" he asks surprised.

"Yeah, and this is Nineteen!" he says, elbowing me in the side.

"Oh! Sorry, we didn't recognize you with those things on!" the soldier to our right says.

"It's fine. But we don't have time to talk!" Fox yells back.

"In that case, follow me," the third soldier says.

"Thanks," Fox replies.

The soldier in front of us turns around and shouts at the group, "Clear a path!"

We follow the soldier through the group and toward the wall of green smoke on the corner of the next block. The closer we get to the corner, the murkier the air gets. The soldier leading us stops about ten feet from the corner.

He starts to say something, but begins coughing.

"Thanks! We got it from here!" I shout, patting the soldier on his shoulder as I walk past him.

Three steps past the soldier the smoke begins to hamper my vision. A few more steps and the asphalt starts to disappear. Gunfire rings out from somewhere ahead of me. I take two more steps and pause as the tip of my gun enters the wall of smoke. I turn to make sure the others are ready.

A popping noise startles me. It takes me a moment to calm down and realize that the sound was that of an exploding smoke grenade. They're still shooting smoke grenades into this? I don't have time to sit here and think all of this through. The only way to find out what's in front of me is to head into the cloud.

I lean forward and rush head on into the smoke. My vision is engulfed in rolling green clouds that seamlessly brush past my mask. I tighten the grip on my weapon as my eyes strain to make out any objects that may appear. A burst of hot air makes contact with my right shin and causes me to jerk my gun toward it. A loud hissing noise fills my ears and I realize that the warm air is coming from a nearby smoke grenade.

Someone bumps into me from behind, causing me to launch forward faster than I have been walking. The dark green begins to lighten as the density of the smoke around me lessens. I make out a dark object ahead of me, but the smoke is still too thick to figure out what it is. I take aim at the object and slow my pace.

Someone bumps into me again. The push brings the object into view. I squeeze the trigger on my gun and start running to my right. I hit the masked soldier in the chest just as I clear the wall of smoke.

Twenty feet from me, on the other side of the street, is another masked soldier. He stands, aiming up the street in front of him. I crouch on one knee and take aim at the soldier. Just before I pull my trigger, I hear gunfire to my left. The proximity of the gunfire causes me to panic and squeeze the trigger twice without carefully aiming.

Luckily, the man across the street drops to the ground. I stand up, swinging my gun toward the sound of the other gunfire. Reika, Omni, Cupid, and Fox are all standing in a group to my left. I aim back toward the street in front of me, searching for targets but there are none. On the opposite side of the street, a few feet from the downed council soldier, is another wall of smoke.

"This should be Sasparilla Street. We gotta head two blocks north from here," I shout joining my group.

"You see any other soldiers?" Fox asks.

The street ahead of us is barren aside from a plume of green smoke near the end of the block.

"None," I reply.

"I thought Kisin said this area was a mess? It's nearly desolate," Cupid says.

I shake my head. "Maybe they all went toward the Worchester Building?"

"It does sound like the gunfire is coming from that direction," Cupid says.

"There's hardly any gunfire though," Omni says.

"It actually seems to have stopped," I point out.

"That's weird," Cupid says.

"How much time do we have left?" Fox turns to Reika.

"Fifteen minutes," Reika replies.

"We don't have time to think about it, we gotta keep moving," Fox says.

"If we don't die from the Council soldiers, this plague will get us anyway," Omni says before taking a nosedive forward.

He hits the ground face first and then rolls to his side. Reika, Fox, and Cupid crouch around him. I try to walk to them, but begin feeling lightheaded and I am forced to crouch.

"Are you okay?" Reika asks Omni.

"What happened?" Cupid asks.

My nose starts running down my face as my lightheadedness begins to subside.

"I just got really dizzy all of a sudden. I'm okay now though," Omni says, climbing to his feet.

"What are you doing?" Fox asks, looking at me.

"It's nothing, I'm fine," I stand up and walk toward the group.

"Dizzy too?" Cupid asks.

I inhale a few short bursts of air through my nose, attempting to stop it from running.

"A little," I reply.

"Your nose is bleeding!" Reika says, leaning toward me to see into my mask.

It's a nosebleed?

"It's nothing. We need to keep going we don't have time to waste," I say.

"He's right, suck it up and lets move," Fox shouts authoritatively.

"I'm starting to think those nanobots didn't do jack," Cupid says as we jog down the middle of the street toward the smoke at the end of the block.

"All the more reason for us to catch Oleg," Fox says.

Reika's eyes repeatedly dart between the street ahead and my face as we make our way toward the smoke.

"I'll be fine, worry about the Council soldiers."

She shoots me a displeased look before the sound of gunfire and distant screams draw her attention. Fox holds up a hand, motioning us to stop running. Everyone stops in place and takes aim at the cloud.

A loud burst of gunfire rips through my ears just before a woman begins yelling.

"Keep running! Don't look ba—" Her sentence is cut short by another burst of gunfire.

Sporadic gunfire continues to erupt from somewhere beyond the smoke in front of us. Three people burst through the cloud of smoke, running directly at us. I instinctively pull the trigger on my gun before my brain can register that the people running at us are civilians. A bullet nicks the shoulder of one of the men, but it doesn't seem to faze him. The two people to the left of the man I shot look up with horror in their eyes.

The gunfire is now steady with burst after burst emanating from behind the cloud of smoke. A larger group of people shoot through the

smoke behind the first three. People at the rear of the group drop in sequence with the bursts of gunfire.

"They're shooting everyone!" the man I shot in the shoulder says as he makes his way toward me.

Fox lowers his hand and begins moving to the left side of the smoke cloud with Cupid and Omni. I look up at Reika and signal her to take the lead. She begins maneuvering around the crowd and heads to the right side of the plume.

Two men in gold suits run down the sidewalk to our right with blood dripping down their faces. Reika, who is a few steps ahead of me, heads into the smoke. I start making my way into the smoke behind her when she takes off running and shooting. I jump into action, running after her with my gun swinging wildly and my eyes desperately searching for a target.

I plant my right foot and then jump onto my left in order to dodge Reika as she abruptly stops. I make my way around her left side before seeing a dead soldier with a gas mask lying on the ground in front of her. After seeing the dead body, I instinctively point my gun ahead of me. I attempt to ascertain our next target, but my eyes grow wide as I take in the chaos in front of me.

Hundreds of civilians are running away from masked men in all different directions. The masked men are standing in place, firing into the crowd. Behind the crowd and in front of a skyscraper at the end of the street, there are two black helicopters parked on the asphalt.

"Why are there so many civilians?" I mutter to myself.

Snapping back to reality, I look up at the skyscraper. The building is nearly all glass. A large glowing red 'W' sits midway up the building. It

is attached to two grey concrete pillars that run lengthwise up the building to the roof. Black windows sit behind the enormous 'w'.

"That's where we need to be!" I shout to Reika before I begin jogging toward the crowd.

Reika snags my arm causing me to stop. I turn around as Fox and his men reach us.

"Is that the building?" Fox asks, stopping in front of me.

"Yeah!" I shout so he can hear me through my mask.

He nods. "Hit the helicopters on the way in?"

"Yeah," I reply.

Fox nods once more and we push down the street. As I run, I loosely aim at a masked soldier twenty yards in front of us. People are crisscrossing in all directions between the soldier and I, hampering my chance at a clear shot.

Another soldier further down the street, directly in front of the helicopters, takes notice of our approach and fires a smoke grenade in our direction. It lands a few feet in front of me. The popping sound it makes when it hits draws the attention of the soldier I was aiming at. Smoke from the grenade pours onto the street in front of our group, concealing us from my target as he takes aim.

"Split up! We'll meet you at the entrance," Fox yells into my left ear.

"Okay!" I reply as he and his men take off running toward the sidewalk on the left side of the street.

"Looks like it's me and you!" Reika yells.

I nod in response. That soldier won't expect us to cut right through the middle of this smoke like they do. He'll be aiming at the sides.

"I'm going straight through!" I tell Reika.

"Okay!" she replies.

Gun muzzle pointed straight ahead, I run full speed through the cloud of smoke. Clearing the smoke, I take aim at the soldier. He's shooting at something to my left. I stop and drop to one knee in order to aim more accurately. I wait for a woman who runs in front of me to clear my line of fire before squeezing the trigger. I send two bursts of bullets at the soldier. A split second after my shot, I hear Reika's gun fire to the right of me.

Scrambling to my feet, I scan the street for a new target. I see a soldier heading to the left side of the street. I take a hastily placed shot in his direction before standing up and heading toward him. I get about five steps in before my eyes are drawn to two civilians who are running in my direction.

I stop dead in my tracks. The flow of time seems to stop with me as my focus on the man and his daughter increases. Natalie's father is running with Natalie's sister, directly toward me. I watch as Natalie's sister trips and falls, her hands sprawl out in front of her as she hits the asphalt. Greg slows his pace when she falls and cautiously looks around. As soon as he sees the soldier on his left, he takes off at full speed, leaving Natalie's sister on the ground behind him.

Anger surges through me. I shift my aim from the masked soldier to Greg, squeezing the trigger angrily. On my second pull of the trigger, my gun clicks. Greg is still racing toward me at full speed. I throw my M16 to the ground as an image of Natalie's bloody body flashes through my head. I can feel my nostrils flare as I walk toward him.

Five feet from me, he starts saying something that I can't make out. I reach into my waistband for my forty caliber and its one remaining bullet. I grip it tightly in my right hand as Greg's left foot hits the ground two feet in front of me.

"...goodness for the compound military!" I hear the end of Greg's sentence while I pull the forty from my waist.

The expression on his face changes from relief to horror. I pull the trigger sending a bullet into the center of his forehead.

I stare coldly at the expression on his face as his body falls to the ground. I'm tackled from my right side. Before I hit the ground, I make out a Council soldier shooting in my direction. I hit the pavement shoulder first. My head slams into the ground.

My eyes close as my head hits. Upon opening them I watch the Council soldier who was shooting at me fall to the ground. Reika pulls herself from my side and stands up. I scramble to my feet and scan both sides of the street. No threats left.

"You have any more ammo?" Reika asks.

"I'm completely out," I reply, looking out over the street for Natalie's sister.

"Me too."

"She's gone," I say out loud to myself.

"What?"

"Never mind, let's secure some ammo," I say.

"Council soldier," Reika says, pointing to a dead soldier a few feet from us.

"Yep," I say.

I pry the gun out from under the soldier's arm and hand it to Reika.

"Thanks," she says.

A burst of gunfire startles me. Fox and his men are standing near one of the helicopters, firing into the cockpit. A smoke grenade flies over the top of the helicopter and lands behind Fox and his men, spewing smoke.

"There's still someone left," I shout.

She nods in response and takes aim in the direction of the helicopters.

"Cover me," I say, pointing at a dead Council soldier to left of the helicopters.

"Go!" Reika says.

I take off. I jump over two civilian corpses and then accidentally step on a third. My left foot makes contact with the calf of the corpse and I nearly fall. I manage to regain my balance and continue to sprint as fast as I can. Reika opens fire to the right of me. I reach the soldier and begin rolling him onto his back.

An assault rifle is exposed as soon as I finish rolling him over. I snag the gun from the ground and spin to my right to face Reika and her target. I sidestep to my left a few times, trying to peak around the helicopter where Reika is aiming. Reika takes another shot at the front left side of the helicopter.

An explosion of gunfire erupts from behind the helicopter. I continue sidestepping to my left and see a Council soldier walking backwards while firing at something in front of him. I take aim at the soldier's upper back and squeeze the trigger. The man falls forward as the bullets make contact, dropping him face first to the ground. I continue aiming, waiting to catch a glimpse of the target the soldier was shooting at. Fox and his men emerge from the backside of the second helicopter and begin shooting into the cockpit of it.

"Clear!" I yell loud enough for Reika to hear.

She walks over to me.

"It's Fox," I say.

The gunfire stops and Fox and his men begin walking toward us.

"We took out the pilots and shot up the control panels in both helicopters," Omni says as we meet near the rear of the first helicopter.

"Alright, good. What about ammo, you have any left?" I ask.

"Yeah, we pulled some from a few of the soldiers," Cupid replies.

"Time?" Fox asks.

"Five minutes," Reika says.

"He should be here any minute," Omni says.

"How do we know he's not already inside?" Cupid asks.

"We don't. Let's head in," I say.

"Yeah," Fox replies.

I turn to my left and look up at the massive building. We're coming for you, Oleg.

"You coming, or you just gonna stand there all day?" Cupid asks sarcastically as everyone looks back at me from the sidewalk.

"I'm comin'," I reply.

IVORY TOWER

I walk from the street to the sidewalk and carefully step over another civilian body as I make my way toward the others at the front of the building.

We make our way to the entrance of the lobby. Aside from two doors on the far right side of the entrance, every glass door has been shattered. We cautiously make our way over the glass and through a set of shattered double doors.

"It doesn't look like there's anyone in the lobby," Fox says as we reach a second set of glass doors that connect to the interior.

"Maybe they're not here yet," I say.

"Or they've already set up shop upstairs," Cupid says.

"They were heading for the communications room of this building. It's possible they've already reached it," Reika adds.

"The communications room it is then," Fox says, pushing the door in front of him open.

We make our way into the lobby and onto the scarlet tile floor. The lobby is completely devoid of furnishings. There is a single silver counter located about ten feet from a silver wall at the back of the room.

"I'm taking this crap off before we go any further!" Cupid says, pulling his mask up over his head as we reach the silver counter.

"I second that!" Omni says, following suite.

"Don't need it in here, that's for sure," I say, removing the oxygen canister from my back.

Fresh air rushes to my sweating face as soon as I remove the mask. Sighs of relief shoot out across the room as we toss our equipment to the floor.

"Alright, so we get to figure out which floor the communications room is on," Fox says.

Nausea fills my gut and black spots begin popping up throughout my vision. A substance that burns my throat rushes up toward my mouth. I scramble to my feet and take a few steps away from the group before throwing up on the floor. My insides burn as the substance gushes up my throat and out of my mouth.

"You okay there, Nineteen?" I hear Cupid's voice behind me.

I drop to my hands and knees on the floor and spit to remove the excess fluid from my mouth and throat. A hand makes contact with my back as I take in a deep breath to try and calm myself. A cold sweat pours down my face as my stomach convulses again, causing me to gag. I clench my fists on the floor in an attempt to withstand the feeling. The hand on my back begins moving up and down. I take one more deep breath, sit on my knees, and then work my way to my feet.

"You okay?" Reika asks, helping me up.

"Yeah, I just feel like crap."

"You're not the only one," Fox says.

I look up and see both Omni and Cupid on all fours.

"I guess injecting the nanobots wasn't the cure, huh?" I say jokingly.

"Apparently not," Fox says, making his way around the counter.

"What are you looking for?" Reika asks.

"A floor directory," he says, looking down with a confused expression on his face.

"What is it?" I ask, approaching the counter so I can see what he's looking at.

Without responding to me, Fox grabs a chair from the center of the desk and rolls it toward the wall.

"Please don't hurt me!" A voice screeches out from under the table.

"We aren't here for you. Come on out," Fox says while looking down.

A scrawny looking man wearing a silver and red suit crawls out from under the desk.

"You're with our military? Oh, thank goodness! A group of them went upstairs!"

Fox looks up at and me and Reika.

"The Ninety-nine's soldiers went upstairs?" I ask.

"Yeah, yeah. They stormed in and began shooting people in the lobby. I wanted to run out, but there were men outside with guns too. So I just hid," the scrawny man says.

"He's already here," Fox says.

"What floor is the communications room on?" I ask.

"Communications room? We don't have a communications room. The closest thing we have to one is on the top floor. It connects to the roof, but it's more of a conference room than anything," the employee says nervously.

"Looks like that's where we're headed," Cupid says, joining the conversation.

"Alright, you're free to go if you want. The street outside is clear of troops for the time being," I say, looking at the man.

"Just make sure you stay away from anyone wearing masks," Reika adds.

"And try to steer clear of the smoke," Fox says.

"Okay. Thank you!" the man says before he takes off around the desk and runs out the front doors.

"On to the elevators, I guess," I say.

"They're over here," Omni says, pointing to the far right corner of the room at a small white and red sign.

"I see you managed to hold down your breakfast," I say to Omni as I watch him struggle to his feet.

"Barely. I'm still a little dizzy but the nausea is gone," Omni replies.

"Better than yakking everywhere like *someone*," Cupid adds jokingly.

"I was just getting rid of my extra, unneeded, weight," I say as we walk to the back corner of the room.

We make our way into a silver hallway filled with eight sets of red elevator doors. There are four elevators on each side of the hall. To the right of each of the elevators are small silver and white buttons. Fox stops in front of the first button on our right side and pushes it. The doors open immediately and we crowd inside.

"Looks like the last floor is the thirty-second floor," Cupid says, pushing the button that says 'thirty-two'.

The doors close and we begin our ascent.

"I'm going to guess they'll aim at the elevators as soon as they open. I think you and Reika should hug the walls of the elevator and wait to exit," Fox says looking at me.

"Why?" I ask.

"Oleg's soldiers have already openly attacked your men. They probably have orders to shoot you on site. It's possible that he's issued the same orders for me and my men, but I doubt it. It'd be much harder for him to convince his men that my men are traitors, given our history with the Ninety-nine," Fox explains.

"That makes sense. We just exiting after you then?" I ask shuffling to the left corner of the elevator.

"Give us a few seconds to scope the area and pick targets before you and Reika exit. If they're aiming at the elevator as I'm thinking they will be, I'll try to appeal to them as an ally until you two exit," Fox continues as Reika makes her way to the right corner.

"Okay," I say.

"Do we know how many men are with him?" Cupid asks.

"He had eleven the last time I saw him," Fox replies.

"We killed three of them," Reika says coldly.

"So eight left. Easy," Omni says as the elevator chimes.

Fox takes the lead and steps out of the elevator followed by Omni and Cupid.

"Take it easy, fellas! I'm Fox with the Wolfpack. I'm here to speak with Oleg," I hear Fox say loudly.

Someone responds to Fox, but I can't make out what they are saying. My heart skips a beat as the doors begin to shut. I push the open doors button and make my move. As I take a step out the door, gunshots ring out.

Ten feet in front of me is a large glass wall with doors that lead outside. There are three soldiers blocking the doorway. They are standing in front of Fox and his men, firing their weapons. To my right and left side are more of Oleg's soldiers aiming at Fox and his men.

I take aim at the closest soldier on my left side. I squeeze my trigger, hitting the soldier in the face. I take aim at the next soldier on my left. He starts turning toward me, but I let off three carefully placed bursts into his chest and throat. As he goes down, I walk forward, scanning the room for my next target. Silence.

I look around the room for more enemies before realizing that Fox, Cupid, and Omni are all on the floor. I run to Cupid who is directly in front of me, lying face down. Seeing bullet holes in his back, I grab his shoulders to turn him over.

I glance at Fox's body as I begin rolling Cupid over and freeze. Fox's face is no longer recognizable. Blood pools on the silver tile floor surrounding the skin that makes up his right cheek and the back of his head.

Stars begin to fill my vision and my breathing ceases. Immobilized by the sight of Fox's lifeless body, I feel as if I'm going to pass out. I snap out of my immobility when I feel Cupid's body shake in my arms. Cupid's coughs fill my ears and I finish rolling him onto his back. I look down at his chest, desperately searching for blood but there is none.

"I guess this," Cupid gets out before coughing violently, "thing was good for something after all," Cupid finishes.

I pull down the top of his shirt, exposing his bulletproof vest.

"I'm so glad they didn't aim high!" I hear Omnis voice to the right of me.

I look up to see Reika kneeling over Omni who has blood smeared on half of his face.

"Me too! Except I think one of 'em nicked my balls or something. It's really tingly down there!" Cupid says.

I glance down at Cupid's legs.

"Looks like they got your left leg," I say.

"Fox, you still kickin'?" Omni asks, coughing.

I look back at Fox's dead body.

"He's gone," I say.

Cupid starts trying to sit up to see Fox's body and starts hacking again.

"No!" Omni says, trying to roll onto his side in order to see Fox.

"You make that motherfucker pay!" Cupid chokes out with tears in his eyes as he sees what's left of Fox's head.

"Yeah," I say, standing up gritting my teeth.

"There's only one left. I counted seven," Omni coughs out.

I look around the room and count seven soldiers on the floor.

"Hurry up and go get his ass!" Omni yells at me.

"Let's go!" I shout to Reika, looking out the doors in front of us. She nods.

I carefully step around Fox's body and make my way toward the door. His mangled face sends a shiver up my spine. Images of Natalie and Logan's deaths shoot through my head. I see myself carrying Tank's bloody body as I push open the glass doors to the rooftop.

A murderous rage creeps over me as I make my way through the doors. To our right, in front of a black wall, is a small white stairway leading upwards. I walk past the stairwell to scan the rest of the rooftop. As I reach the end of the black wall, I peer around its corner and spot one of Oleg's men lying on the ground.

I motion to Reika that I have eyes on an enemy. I turn the corner and approach the soldier with my weapon trained on him. The soldier is lying face down along the edge of the building's roof. I approach him silently, waiting for my chance to kill him. I position myself to fire at the soldier when I realize that he's soaked in blood.

I walk closer to examine him. He coughs and lifts his head. His eyes make contact with mine.

"Hurry up! He's about to get away!" the soldier croaks out.

I cock my head to the side, fighting the rage that's telling me to shoot him.

"Oleg, you're after Oleg right! That bastard shot me and pushed off the helipad!" the soldier continues to croak out.

A loud humming fills my ears. I look at Reika.

Her eyes widen. "Shit!" she says as we turn and make a mad dash toward the white stairwell.

The humming grows louder as we run up the stairs. Five steps from the top, a huge gust of wind nearly sends me tumbling. Reika pushes into me to keep me from falling and then begins shooting upwards at the helicopter rising above us. It begins moving away from us and across the top of the building.

I muster out a rage filled shout and run up the last few stairs onto the helipad.

I open fire, running across the helipad, hoping to hit something vital. I barely stop at the ledge and nearly fall off while shooting at the helicopter. Reika and I both stand on the ledge, emptying our weapons.

I lower my empty M16, gritting my teeth with tears in my eyes. Defeat meshes with rage and rips through my body. I watch the helicopter disappear into the horizon.

I feel Reika's gaze on the right side of my face. Not wanting to talk, I look out over the chaos that has become the compound. Buildings are engulfed in flames. Patches of green infectious smoke are rising into the air. The large 'v' shaped hole in the compound wall smolders.

"What now?" Reika asks, breaking the silence.

Rage overpowers my sense of defeat. My eyes begin losing focus. Sunlight blurs with the green smoke clouds creating a watercolor image of the compound in front of me.

"We hunt him and the rest of the Council until each and every one of them has paid for what they've done," I say angrily as black spots begin to overtake my vision.

The cell phone Kisin gave me rings. My head tilts upwards as I feel myself fall backward. My nose gushes and I hear a muffled version of Reika's voice calling out to me. It feels as if my back makes contact with the clouds and everything fades to black.

Someone's pulling me. I have to open my eyes.

"Is he okay?"

"I don't know. His nose started bleeding and he passed out."

I force my eyes open. Two blurry figures are holding my feet, dragging me. My eyelids grow heavy. Darkness.

The chime of an elevator startles me. I can feel my arms wrapped around two people. One on either side of me. They're carrying me. My eyes are too heavy to open.

"What the hell does he eat? He's heavy as shit!"

"Kisin! We're in the Worchester Building. No, he got away but that's not why I'm calling! Nineteen and Cupi..."

NINETEEN

My chest feels as if it's on fire. The burning drowns out the voices. I try coughing the fire out of my lungs but it only seems to enhance the feeling. Darkness.

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I spring awake gasping for air. Neon lights and medical equipment surround me. I scan the room for Reika. The moment I realize she's not there I jump out of bed. My feet touch the floor, the room spins, and I collapse.

"I'm glad you're awake. But you're not ready to go anywhere."

I look up from the ground to see a nurse standing at the foot of my bed.

"Where am I?"

"You're at Holmes hospital," she says helping me off of the floor.

"Your friends dropped you off."

"Where are they?"

"They're in another section receiving treatment."

"Treatment?"

"For the plague."

"The nanobots worked?" I ask sitting on the bed.

"The nanobots in your body kept you alive, but we administered the antidote."

"I need to see my friends," I say urgently.

"You'll be able to see them tomorrow. When you're discharged."

"Discharged?"

"Three days after the antidote is administered patients can leave."

"Three days?!"

"You've only been here two and a half." Carl's voice draws my attention to the curtain behind the nurse.

"What the hell happened?" I ask.

"I can take it from here." Carl tells the nurse.

The nurse nods and walks away.

"You collapsed. Your friends got you out of that building and then they collapsed. And then my men picked you up and brought you all here," Carl replies.

"So the antidote was in the nanobots?"

"Yes and no."

I shoot Carl a confused glance.

"The nanobots keep you alive long enough for the antidote to counteract the plague."

"How did we get the antidote then?"

"One of the bioengineers that created the plague was still in the compound when you gave your speech. He reached out to us."

"He was just hoarding a bunch of antidote?"

"He had ten vials of the antidote. And he knew how to recreate it."

"Sorry. I think I'm still a little woozy from whatever they have me on. You were able to create and distribute it to the whole compound in three days?"

Carl looks at the ground.

"Kisin chose nine people," Carl pauses and takes a deep breath.

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"He chose nine people to give the first round of the antidote to. You and your men were among those nine. The nanobots were distributed on a first come first serve basis," he continues to look at the ground as he talks.

"We have quarantine tents set up throughout the compound. Some hold people who weren't exposed. Others however," Carl pauses to gain his composure.

"Others however weren't so lucky. The bioengineer told us that the chances of survival without nanobots are extremely low. He said that if you were given medical treatment at the exact time of exposure, your chances of surviving would be around ten percent."

They still succeeded in wiping us out.

"Sorry to interrupt but it's a little past nine thirty. I wanted to give you two some time to talk but I still need to administer another round of meds and check your vitals."

"It's okay. I was just getting ready to leave for the night," Carl replies to the nurse.

"When you gather your things to discharge give me a call," Carl says motioning to leave.

"Wait, what about Tank? Is he here too?" I ask.

"He's still in the safe house. But he's stabilized. When you discharge tomorrow I'll take you to see him."

"Okay." I nod not knowing what else to say.

Carl leaves the room and the nurse approaches me.

"Can you lie back on the bed for me?"

"Sure."

The nurse switches out my nearly empty IV bag and then proceeds to check my vitals.

"How are you feeling?"

"Everything seems a little fuzzy. But other than getting dizzy when I stood up I feel fine."

"That's good. You're going to be fatigued for the next few days. Try to keep sudden movements to a minimum."

"Is that IV stuff supposed to make me drowsy?"

She smiles. "Yea. It will hydrate you and help you sleep while your body repairs itself."

"That explains that." I say slurring my words.

"I'll be back in the morning to help you get discharged."

"Thanks." I say laying my head on the pillow watching the nurse disappear thorough the curtain that enshrouds my bed.

Kisin saved us. He could have saved more of his people but he chose us. Why? The medicine overpowers my sense of thought and I fade into my pillow.

I feel a nudge on my left shoulder.

"Your friends are getting ready to discharge."

I groggily open my eyes and look around. The IV has been removed from my arm and the drip bag it was attached to is no longer next to my bed. The nurse is standing next to me holding a pile of clothes with a gas mask on top.

"Okay. Thanks for waking me up."

"Carl wanted me to give you these."

"Is that a gas mask?"

"Yea. We're still not sure if you can catch the plague a second time."

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"So I need to put that on before I go outside?"

"Actually, you should put it on before you walk through the set of doors at the end of this hallway." She says pointing in the direction I need to walk.

"Okay. Umm, do you have a phone that I can use to contact my friend before I leave?"

"Carl had to meet with Kisin this morning. But one of Kisin's men is outside waiting to give you and your friends a ride to the safe house."

"Alright. Thanks."

She hands the pile to me and walks away.

I work my way out of bed and put on the blue jeans and red t-shirt. I stare at the gas mask for a moment before taking it in my hand and making my way through the light green curtains. I enter a long hallway. I walk past groupings of green curtains in the direction the nurse told me to go. The hallway is eerily quiet. Near the end of the hallway I can see two people in wheelchairs and a third standing next to them.

Is that Reika? My focus intensifies on the woman standing to the left of the two individuals in wheelchairs. I pick up my pace as I realize the figures at the end of the hall are watching me approach. My heart beats to life as I approach Reika, Cupid, and Omni. Without saying a word I walk up to Reika and hug her. I nod at Cupid and put my hand on Omnis shoulder.

"Safe house?" I ask.

Everyone nods in agreement. We put on our gas masks and make our way through the double doors in front of us. We enter a desolate lobby. Blood is smeared on the floor and on sections of the beige seats. There are bullet holes in the glass windows. To our right is a nurse in a gas mask

standing behind a counter. She points to a set of doors that lead outside. We exit the building.

A black SUV is waiting for us a few feet from the door. A man in a gas mask sees our approach and opens the rear passenger door. He then goes to the back of the vehicle and pops open the trunk. Reika and I help Omni and Cupid into the vehicle. Our driver folds the wheelchairs and places them in the trunk. Reika hops into backseat next to Cupid and I hop into the front passenger seat. We pull away from the hospital without saying a word.

As we drive down the street in front of us I realize that we're surrounded by skyscrapers. We hop onto a large street and start speeding down it. A few moments later we are forced to stop when two men in gas masks abruptly enter the street. They are carrying a body across the street to a large military truck. The back of the truck is filled with bodies.

"They still haven't cleared this area of bodies," the driver says as we wait for the men.

My brain jumps to our firefight in front of the Worchester building.

"Has the fighting stopped?" I ask as we start speeding down the street again.

"What do you mean?"

"The northern compound. Have they stopped attacking?"

"Oh. Yea. We shut them down the day we joined forces."

We pass a series of large white tents as we reach the edge of the downtown district.

I think about the silence at the hospital.

"Where we the only ones in that hospital?"

"In that section maybe. The area you were in was sectioned off for people with nanobots."

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Carl said people without nanobots had a ten percent chance to live.
How many people are left?

"So there was another section for the rest of the people."

"Probably."

We turn onto the street where Reika and I dragged Tank when he was shot.

"Did the nurse tell you that Carl will be meeting you at the safe house?"

"No."

"After his meeting with Kisin he'll come here to fill you in." He says as we pull up.

We unload and maneuver over the red rocks and into the house. We are met inside by one of the doctors who worked on Tank.

"Tank has been in and out of consciousness today. But he's made it past the worst of it."

"Where is he?" I ask.

"Follow me." The doctor says leading us through the house.

We stop at the stairwell.

"We moved him to a more comfortable location after his 2nd surgery."

I look down at Cupid who I have been pushing.

"It's okay we can see him later," Cupid says looking at Omni.

"Yea. You two go ahead," Omni adds.

"Thank you." Reika says.

We make our way up the stairs and to the door of the room where Reika and I changed the morning we entered the wall.

"He still needs his rest. So try not to wake him. I'll be downstairs if you need me." The doctor says.

Reika motions for me to go first. I stare at the handle of the door before heading inside. Tank is lying on the massive bed. Multiple drip bags and a patient monitor are set up next to him. My heart rate increases as I approach his side. The image of dragging his blood covered body down the street plays through my head. My eyes water as I watch his chest go up and down.

I clench my fists as images of Logan and Natalie's death flash through my head. Black spots start to encroach my vision. I feel Reika's hand grab my left fist. I unclench my fist and hold her hand. I take a deep breath and the black dots recede.

A loud noise erupts from Tank startling both of us. He snorts a second time and then begins snoring. I start to laugh and wipe my eyes as a few tears fall from my face.

"Let's let him sleep." I whisper to Reika and we leave the room.

We head down the stairwell and into the living room. I follow the sound of Carl's voice to the kitchen. Carl is sitting with Cupid and Omni at the table where we ate breakfast a few days before.

"I was just filling them in on Megan's condition." Carl says as we enter the room.

"Is she okay?" I ask.

"She received antidote from the second batch and is currently in a quarantine facility. In another day or two she'll be released."

"That's good to hear" Reika says.

Carl nods.

"I have some not so good news to share" Cupid says.

Omni shoots Cupid a confused glance.

"Before we were discharged I was able to get in touch with Estabon. While we were attacking the compound there was a raid on the arena. He

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said that a few groups made it out. He thought that Clue was leading one of the groups, but the rest of the compound was slaughtered."

"There weren't any soldiers left! They killed all the families?" Omni asks.

Cupid nods his head and looks down.

"They wanted all of us 'savages' dead," Reika says.

I shake my head and look down.

"Unfortunately I have some more bad news," Carl says.

"I take it your meeting with Kisin didn't go well?" I ask.

He lets out a sigh. "Well, he's been working to establish himself as an integral part of the new hierarchy. And." He pauses.

"Well there's no easy way to say this. Even though you aren't the leader of the Ninety-nine, you became the face of the Ninety-nine after you gave that speech."

"Okay," I reply waiting for the bad news.

"Basically there are people who want you executed for the role you played."

I look down at the table.

"But, Kisin was able to cut a deal. He told them that you were the one who infiltrated this compound. That you single handedly brought down the wall which allowed your forces to get inside."

"That's not a good thing." Cupid says.

"In this case it is. He told them that if you could do it here, then you could do it in the northern compound. He was able to get them to pardon you if you agree to assemble a unit to hunt the Council."

"So. I leave the compound to hunt the council, or they execute me?"

"Yea," Carl replies.

"When does he need my answer?"

"Now."

I snicker and shake my head.

"Can I have a few minutes?"

Carl nods.

I stand. "I need a few minutes alone with Tank and I'll give you my decision."

"He needs it in person."

"That's fine." I walk away from the table and head to the stairwell.

Kisin saved us with the first batch of antidote. I bet he wouldn't have wasted it on us if he knew this would happen.

I enter the room and stand next to Tank.

"If I let them execute me, do you think they would allow you and the others to live here peacefully?" I say softly.

"I'm so tired of fighting."

I take a deep breath.

"I thought maybe we deserved the first batch of the antidote. After all, we've been fighting since we were kids."

My eyes fill with water.

"I'm sorry brother. I got us here. But I can't stay."

Tank's eyes open and he looks at me. "Well obviously I'm not going anywhere." He says slurring his words.

"Your awake!"

"Did we win?"

"Kind of."

"Then what's wrong?"

"They want me dead."

"What else is new?" He says closing his eyes.

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I laugh.

"Yea. I guess that is normal."

"Fuck 'em," Tank says before snoring as if he had been asleep the entire time.

I chuckle.

"Yea. Fuck 'em."

I head back to the kitchen and walk up to Carl.

"I want Oleg dead." I say demandingly.

"Alright. Let's go see Kisin," he says standing from the table.

We head toward the living room.

"Nineteen," Reika calls out to me as I'm leaving the kitchen.

I look back.

"Count us in," Cupid says.

I nod.

"Of course.

COMING SOON

NINETEEN
BECOMING WHOLE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Jay Moyer is a poet, novelist, and a lover of language with a degree in linguistics. His current focus is on his new dystopian action adventure series, 'NINETEEN'. Past projects have included: 'Even A Rose Has Thorns' and 'The Unknown Poet: introduction to society'. Erin has traveled through Guatemala and Honduras to record speakers of the Ch'orti' language. He spent two years living in Japan and teaching English. He has recently returned to America to pursue a career as a novelist and a software engineer.