

**HEARTS
STILL
BEATING**

BROOKE ARCHER





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For the girls who've been told they're
too loud, too angry, too much.
You are exactly enough.

PROLOGUE

MARA

THE DARK DAYS

I watch time unfold, and a whisper reminds me I used to concern myself with it, but the voice belongs to something too far out of reach to listen to. It belongs to someone who isn't here anymore, someone I will not find again.

A new voice, the girl with dark eyes and wicked smile, is an echo, but her face is not. Her face, pressed next to another through a cloudy surface.

When I try to reach her, to rip her to pieces and erase the reminders she forces out of me, I smash into something. The faces don't disappear until the window—a word snatched from somewhere deep inside and lost as soon as it comes—is painted in a red so dark it looks black.

Her voice stays. The one I can't let go of. Her figure grows smaller, next to another familiar silhouette, until the second fades, and the girl does, too.

Then, the sound of metal breaking and the whine of a hinge. A familiar scent, lemon and salt and sweat, wafts through the house.

I am free. And so very hungry.

1

MARA

When the doctors ask what I remember, the answer they want to hear is “Nothing.” If only it were true.

Dr. Benitez clears her throat, drawing my attention away from a poster of a lion with the word *RESILIENCE* typed beneath it. The doctor’s hair is slicked back today, and she’s wearing eyeshadow, an odd eggplant color pressed into her lids. I wonder if she has a big date tonight.

I’m not sure if people date anymore. Not that it matters, not to someone like me. My romantic prospects died when I did.

“How much do you remember of your time under the virus’s influence, Mara?” She stands two feet from where I’m propped up on the rusting exam table, her brow creased in concern. I used to think her puckered expression meant something, but in my six months at the facility, I’ve come to understand Dr. Benitez defaults to anxiety the way I default to indifference.

We all had to find our own coping methods when the world ended. Some of us hardened. Some cracked. Some shattered.

I haven’t figured out which applies to me yet. I didn’t think I’d have to. I thought my time was up the moment the infected man closed his teeth around my wrist.

How much do you remember?

I shake my head. Speech was a mountain to climb in the beginning, the phrases and definitions unearthing themselves and clawing back to my tongue, so I slid into silence for my first month. It's become another default.

Dr. Benitez purses her lips, but she doesn't question me. I can't imagine I'm the first person between these walls to lie. Every single room in this building harbors monsters. Monsters with stories and secrets. Three hundred of us relearning humanity.

My heart beats on a semiregular basis and my lungs are teaching themselves to take in consistent breaths, but none of it matters.

A nasty scar traces down the doctor's neck from an old wound. The outline of a tranquilizer gun, tucked against her hip, is visible underneath her faded lab coat. I don't blame her for taking precautions. I don't trust myself, either, tossed back into this bright, loud, overwhelming world.

She jots something onto her cerulean plastic clipboard. "Dyebucetin varies in its effectiveness in the reparation of cells in the cerebral cortex. It'll take time."

Dr. Benitez isn't sure if the treatment will bring me back to life. For all the doctors know, the Altered might drop dead—really dead—one day, or grow third arms, or lose all our extremities. The last two are more my illogical fear than the doctors', but I used to think the living dead were illogical, and then I became one.

"And what about the nightmares?"

I grind my teeth. Admitting to the night terrors that have plagued me since I woke to my third life was an early day's mistake. Memories of the creature I was when the virus hijacked my body and the girl I was before.

What do I remember?

Jeans rolled up to asphalt-torn knees and four legs distorted by the pool water. The image pulses with the kick of her feet. She complains her eyes

are muddy and boring, and if I were braver, I'd tell her how the sun pulls out flecks of gold and auburn in her irises; I'd tell her looking into them is like drowning. But I am not brave.

"Stopped," I lie. "Sweet dreams on this end."

"Please," the man says, and I know the word used to mean something, but I've long stopped caring. His garbled screams are a quiet hum behind his heartbeat and the blood pumping in his veins, warm and alive.

I take his skull between my hands, slamming down, down, down, until he stops screaming.

Dr. Benitez snorts a laugh, covering her mouth with a hand. With a shake of her head, she says, "I suppose it's a positive sign your sense of humor survived the virus."

The virus. It sounds so harmless when she says it. Like Letalis Tichnosis—the Tick—was the common cold, and not an ancient disease trapped in a glacier, waiting for its chance to escape again. The virus didn't just gnaw on our brains; it chewed the world to shreds.

Instead of a response, I give her a tiny smile, because it's what she wants, and I almost mean it. She smiles back as if she's forgotten where she is, what I am. She does it often: treats me like I'm human.

I am anything but. I'm a patchwork quilt of lacerations and punctures and dry open wounds that have woken up and are protesting their existence as I shuffle back toward life.

Some time ago, I was shot straight through the shoulder, and blood oozes from the cut each time I raise my arm over my head. Three of the fingers on my left hand are gone, and until the doctors stitched it up, I'd worn the skin and muscle surrounding the bone like a gross-looking claw. To top it off, two large slashes make an X bisecting my nose. I am better off than most, and as pesky as the doctor's questions are, they are kinder than mine would be if the roles were reversed, so complaints are scarce.

"It was humor"—I pause to wrangle my occasionally rebellious tongue—"or my humanity."

It is a joke, a swing, and if it's a miss, all of our future sessions will be awkward. After another pause, Dr. Benitez smiles, rounding the desk and dropping into a peeling leather chair.

"Whatever the reason," she says, "those are the parts of you that you need to hold on to. The parts that are human." She falls silent, focusing on her clipboard long enough for my heart to thump out a soft beat.

"There's something else I wanted to discuss with you." There is no question mark, and so no obligation to answer. She sighs and continues, "I'm sure you've heard the rumors about the resettlement program."

She seems to realize I don't plan on saying anything. "It's true we intend to release some of you into the care of your guardians."

She's being cautious, circling a truth she isn't sure I'm aware of. I still say nothing, and though she takes the time to sigh dramatically once more, she doesn't press me.

"You're going home, Mara," she says. "That's what I'm telling you." She winces. "Not home, per se, but we have located some of your kin."

Home is not something that exists anymore. Not for me. The only blood I have left is my sister, if she's still alive. And she's the last person on this earth who'd want to see me.

"Kin?" I ask, and Dr. Benitez smiles, clearly proud to have coaxed the syllable off my lips, but it fades as fast as it came, and the following silence is strained.

"Your godparents. Unfortunately, your parents are—" I fix her with the coldest glare I can, and my monstrous state lends me the advantage, killing the rest of Dr. Benitez's sentence before it reaches air.

Dead. My parents are dead. And I killed them. But she doesn't know that.

"Your godparents are living a few hours south. In one of the coastal communities," she says.

Another *thump* ripples from my chest, a single beat of a bruised heart.

“Samantha and Isaac Blake.”

“I know who they are.” My words crackle like electricity. Dr. Benitez’s brows arch to her hairline, and she drops her eyes to the paperwork on her desk, chipped-paint fingers ghosting across the inked letters.

“They’ll be picking you up next Sunday. You’ll be released into their custody.”

I shake my head. “No.” Anything but this, anyone but them. It can’t be the Blakes. I’m not sure what I thought was waiting for me after all this, if I thought anything at all, but it didn’t involve them.

I twist the fraying and stained woven-string bracelet on my wrist—all I have left from my first life, and from *her*. Aurora. Her name triggers a flurry of memories, bright and bursting with life, a happier time with a better me. *Me* before everything fell apart.

I put most of my energy into keeping her somewhere I can’t see her, keeping her name locked deep in my gut, but it slips through and shrouds me in warmth. The name means remembering, which means *feeling*. It means wondering whether she survived and considering the possibility she didn’t.

“I can’t,” I say.

Dr. Benitez purses her lips again. Always scribbling on her notepad, and always pursing her lips. “Mara, you have made immeasurable progress in the last six months. The team agrees you’re ready for this.”

I take a deep breath, lungs rattling as I finish exhaling. “And?”

“And what?”

“And if you’re wrong?”

She says my name again, in the tone of hers I don’t think is meant to be condescending but is—like I’m a toddler arguing the sky is yellow.

“We have complete faith in you,” she says.

I don’t have complete faith in me, but I don’t have the patience to debate it, either, so I settle for the silence I know digs under her skin. It’s much easier than asking questions.

She sits back in her chair, the old metal creaking. Her gaze darts to the desk and up.

“You’re not the only one being resettled on the Island. Fifteen others will be joining you. Forty more are going to other settlements.” She licks her lips. “You’re not alone in this, Mara.”

It’s a nice thought, but still a lie. I nod, and she ends the session twenty minutes early, calling for one of the nameless soldiers to escort me back to the dormitory building. The old dorms resemble their former state in a way little else does. The rooms, which resembled prison cells long before we came, are bare and grimy and depressing, but they are dry and warm, too—both things I’ve recently come to care about again.

When I reach my dorm, my roommate, Vivian, has the windows up. She leans into the thick metal bars, a cigarette she bribed off a soldier tucked between her lips. From where I stand, she looks human. At my entrance, she turns, her reflexes a hair faster than they should be, and the resemblance disappears.

Her right ear was ripped clean off, leaving a dry mess of brown and red, intermixed with tufts of dark hair. A bullet tore through one of her knees, shattering the bones and giving her an uneven gait. Her skin is as sunken and pale as mine.

She doesn’t remember much, or she’s pretending not to, and her body is far worse off than mine, but the fire in her eyes is the brightest I’ve seen in a long time. Since before everything fell apart. Most of the Altered still look empty, but Viv is wide awake.

Her bunk is stacked with a duffel bag.

“You, too?” I ask.

Viv pauses and straightens, blowing a strand of stringy hair out of her eyes. She stubs out the cigarette and flicks it past the bars. Her eyes are wild when they meet mine, like she’s been staring at something for too long and forgot to blink.

I’m not sure if we need to blink. I still do.

Viv huffs. “Yeah.”

“We have five days.”

She snorts, rolls her eyes like I’m missing the punchline of the most obvious joke in the world, and reaches down to zip her duffel closed, joints clicking as she stuffs escaping fabric through the hole. “I’m getting the hell out of here. Tonight.”

I frown.

Her heavy-lidded eyes close for a long moment. “I won’t do it. Go from one prison to a slightly *bigger* prison.”

“Viv,” I say, “you’re from Pacific Beach.”

“You can’t *honestly* tell me you want to go back to your family. Spend your days locked in the house playing solitaire. Stuck, forever. *Literally.*”

“It won’t be that bad.” I don’t believe it, but I don’t know any other way this road can go. A happy ending left the cards a long time ago, and we’re not flush with other options. “And it’s better than a year ago.”

Her eyes darken. “I’m not waiting to find out.”

On her nightstand, a box with the label DYEBCUCETIN sits unopened. I have only seen it through windows behind locked cabinet doors, but I don’t get a chance to ask how she got it before she’s rambling.

“We’ve been their lab rats for months. I’m not going to . . .” She shakes her head. “To go shack up with my cousins and play house.”

“What choice do you have?”

“Any choice I want,” she says, and the earnestness with which she speaks teeters too close to mania for my liking. “Second chance at life, right?”

“Wrong,” I say. “You’re not alive. Those meds”—I jab my stubbed pointer finger toward the box—“are keeping you from *killing* anyone with a heartbeat. Say you did make it out. Make it past the soldiers, past the electric fence, and into . . . whatever is left out there. What happens when you run out of the drugs?”

She says nothing.

“And even if you had enough for a thousand years, there’s nowhere to go, Viv,” I say.

Viv lifts her chin, using her height against me. I’m not short by any means, but Viv is nearly six feet tall and wields her four extra inches as a weapon. She steps toward me. It’s as if she’s trying to tell me something with her eyes, but I don’t understand the language, so the meaning falls flat.

“Of course there is,” she says. She sweeps a look around the room, her gaze stalling on the camera in the top right corner of the ceiling. We’re near certain it doesn’t have a microphone, but Viv lowers her voice when she continues. “There are others. Who can’t go back to their families or won’t. Who want to be free. They’re leaving tonight. Heading to the mountains. There are thousands of cabins and camp-sites without a human for miles.”

“That’s not freedom,” I say. “That’s running.”

A smile ghosts her cracked lips. “Is there a difference?”

Vivian has spoken little of her life before this, like most of the residents. We prefer to keep our skeletons in the closet, where they can’t rise and rip our throats out. Her expression, and the twisted lilt of her tone, gives me the sense her skeletons would drown her before she got the chance to shake their hands.

I consider warning her she’ll die out there, but unless she wanders into an angry human, she’ll live until her body gives up.

It could be a year or a thousand. Maybe the meds are enough, or maybe they’ll stop working in a week. Maybe if I had those answers, I’d make a different choice.

“How?” I ask the simplest question I have.

“The generator resets every night at midnight. Doors, lights, locks. For sixty seconds, this place is wide open.”

“And the gate?”

“They shut it down to conserve generator power. It’s soldiers, and

they can be avoided.” Viv shifts her weight. “You could come, too.” She shrugs a shoulder, gives me a smile likely intended to be reassuring, but it makes me tense. The Tick slumbering in my head knows danger when it sees it and senses something at the end of this road I don’t or can’t. It urges me back, away, *anywhere* but down the path Viv wants me to take.

“Be careful, okay?” I say, and I tell myself it isn’t about her—about *Aurora*—but I’ve always been as bad at telling myself lies as I am good at seeing through others’.

Maybe it’s not what lies at the end of Viv’s road. Maybe it’s the fact *Aurora* isn’t on it.

For months, she has been the smoke billowing off a car crash up the road, and the closer I get, the more I both dread and anticipate what lies ahead. If I knew she was alive, if I knew anything, I could look away.

But I don’t. So I can’t.

2

RORY

Standing at the bridge ledge feels a little bit like flying.

Not that it's really a bridge anymore. The bombs put most of the bright blue metal into the ocean and left a road ending abruptly three hundred feet in the air.

I ease up onto the dented hood of an old Toyota and stare out over the city. It, like the bridge, is not what it used to be.

Half the skyscrapers are mountains of ash and debris, burned or bombed or collapsed in the initial push to curb the spread of the Ticks downtown. San Diego was so loud before, constantly in motion and buzzing ahead at the speed of light, but it's a graveyard now.

I'm so busy staring at the charred wreckage of a dock on the mainland side of the bridge I don't notice the footsteps crunching over the uncleared debris until they are ten feet away. At one point, it would have been a fatal mistake.

I slide off the car and pull my sword from its sheath, swinging for the Tick, my brain disregarding the fact the Island hasn't had an outbreak since before I arrived a year ago.

It's not a Tick. It's something worse. Carter Knight. The sole survivor of the Knight family, three years older than me and—

Three years older than me.

Carter ducks away from the blade. I lower the sword, resting it on my denim-covered thigh.

“You know you’re not permitted to be up here,” Carter says. Each time I speak to her, which is as little as physically possible, her voice is harder, her vocab more rigid, and her posture stiffer.

Carter and I have butted heads since we met. It was as if she took one look at me and decided I was a problem, and I made no efforts to convince her otherwise. The rest of the Knights were like a family to me, but never Carter.

She’s a soldier now, outfitted in aquaflage from the base’s inventory, and while she plays the part well—inky hair pulled back into an immaculate sock bun, face expressionless, and tone authoritative—she will always be the teenager I watched projectile vomit wine coolers into the firepit in the backyard between our houses.

“You know you’re not a *real* soldier, right?” I step back, leaning into the car door. The sun is pushing toward the horizon line, and the ocean breeze lifts the sticky hairs off the back of my neck.

Carter’s nose wrinkles, and the familiarity of the expression makes my stomach wrench.

“It’s for your own safety. And for the safety of—”

“The people and peace of the Island,” I finish. “You and the rest of Mal’s little clones should get that tattooed across your chests. Make it a bonding event. I heard some world-famous tattoo artist made it to Pacific Beach.”

Carter’s nostrils flare, and she folds her arms across her chest, showcasing an impressive belt stocked with various assorted hammers, pickaxes, ice picks, and a shiny revolver. The gun is for show, and probably doesn’t have bullets. Gunshots draw Ticks faster than anything, and even on the Island, apocalyptic taboos aren’t broken.

While Carter retorts with a comeback I don’t have to hear to know is lousy, I consider how easy it would be to get into her quarters and pocket her collection after she falls asleep. She bunks with at least fifteen other girls, old soldiers and new volunteers, but I’m sneaky. It would be worth it to see the look on her face.

The old Rory would be ashamed of me. The thought makes me want to smile. I settle for rolling my eyes.

“This stuff isn’t a joke, Au—” At my narrowed eyes, Carter clears her throat, reattempts. “*Rory.*”

“You didn’t use to be this uptight,” I say. “I mean, a little bit, but not this bad. What happened to you?”

Carter’s eyes widen to the whites, and her lips pull back to bare her canines; it is remarkably difficult not to tell her how much she resembles her dead sister with the gnashing teeth.

“What happened? Oh, I don’t know, the *apocalypse.*”

“Just because the world ends doesn’t mean you automatically shove the largest stick you can find directly up your—”

“Rory, I swear to god—”

I tuck the sword back in its sheath, stretching out a foot to kick an old gas carton, poking the toe of my sneaker through a hole in its side. The plastic whines in protest, and an ache from the barely healed injury to my left leg forces me to stop. It’s been a year since the Island’s doctor, Fatimah, pried the fragments of bullet out of my thigh, but the one piece left behind still likes to remind me it’s there. Or, really, it likes to remind me how close I came to dying.

“Like I said. Uptight,” I say.

“Even if that were true, and it’s *not*, I think I have reason to be.”

“What reason?” I ask, feigning sincerity, sweeping a hand around at the wreckage of the city across the water and the frail house of cards we’ve built on the Island.

The blood drains out of Carter’s face. Every part of her is rigid, and I can see the sentences forming and twisting around in her mouth like worms.

“What reason?” I repeat.

Carter may be the soldier here, but she made it to the Island months before I did. She knows as well as I do that, in any fight, she’ll lose—again. Like she did in the Pit. Mal’s gladiator-style fighting ring

was disbanded, but not before I was thrown in for breaking into the armory. It was a way to pay off crimes, but a way to earn prizes and show off, too; Carter was in with me for the latter.

She regains her composure, and her words are bitterly laced as she sneers, “You didn’t hear.”

Frustration pricks its sharp fingers into my sides, and I bite back the insult that flies to my tongue.

“Obviously not,” I say. “Care to share with the class?”

Her lips pull into a thin line. She may be wearing new clothes, but I grew up with the girl beneath them, and I know what a terrified Carter Knight looks like. “The list of Ticks being resettled on the Island was released.”

“How many?” Bile claws up the back of my throat, the real question I want to ask burning through my esophagus.

“Fifteen.”

“Fifteen.” I mirror her words so I don’t say mine, though judging by the way Carter can’t meet my eye, she has some clue as to what I really want to know.

She was there the last time I saw her. Carter brought me back to the house she trapped her undead sister in, and when she tried to kill her, I stopped her. She’s never forgiven me for it. I haven’t forgiven myself.

“Her name is on the list, Rory.”

I flinch as if she’s hit me.

Midnight-colored braids long enough to twirl around my finger five times, and a lopsided smile when I do. Grass tickles my thighs and calves, and at least six ant bites are cresting over my ankles, but I don’t care. I don’t care, I don’t care, I don’t care. She has her head on my stomach, and she’s humming along with the pop song on the iPod blasting out beside us, and we are teetering on the edge of a cliff, and—

Her name is on the list.

“No, it’s not,” I say, blinking past the other memories.

Carter ignores my delusions. “They’re coming home next week. Fifteen monsters, personally delivered.”

“No, they’re not,” I press. “She’s not.”

Carter frowns. “Rory—”

“She’s not—” I stop, take a breath. I am going to pass out, or throw up, or scream, or kill her, and none of those are good to do on a crumbling bridge. “She can’t be. We saw her.”

Silence hangs between us, squeezing, until Carter says, “You know what we saw. And you know what we should have done.”

“Don’t,” I say.

“You’re the reason she’s still upright,” Carter says. It’s the cut I’ve been waiting for since she broke the news, but it still breaks skin. I didn’t just stop Carter from killing her sister; I broke the lock on the door and released her, making the blood on her hands half my own. “You’re the last person who should be surprised she’s coming back.”

“How long are you going to hold that over my head?”

“As long as it’s still above the ground.”

“Why here? Your parents—” I don’t finish the sentence, but Carter flinches anyway. She knows what I’m going to say. She never told me exactly what happened to her parents, but they aren’t here, which is answer enough. “Did they make you her guardian?”

“No,” Carter says, and I swear she looks smug.

“Spit it out.”

“She’s being placed with your family. Your parents are her god-parents, and since she’s not *technically* eighteen—”

“Not eighteen? She’s dead.”

“I’m the messenger,” she snaps. “You think I’m happy about this? You think I want those things walking around here? If it was up to me, I’d throw them all in the Pit—”

“Mal signed off on this?” I ask, before she says anything else and dredges up memories I work very hard to keep at bay.

One of Carter’s brows twitches, and she shifts her weight between

her feet, a hand coming to rest on the pickaxe tucked into her belt. The motion seems more comfort-based than intimidation.

“Mal didn’t have a choice. The Island isn’t his anymore,” Carter says.

Colonel Mallory Gordon, one of the few of the original troops stationed at the base on the Island who managed to hold its perimeter, with an ego to match his vast accomplishments. Before the Island joined the Alliance, he had this island locked down tighter than the Pentagon. A pre-zombie Pentagon, at least.

“Becoming civilized again does typically mean ditching the dictator. The Alliance might frown on one.”

When it started, the Alliance was an agreement between the heads of two communities: Oceanside and Solana Beach. They’d trade what they had, and in exchange, neither community would raid the other. Then Pacific Beach joined, and Point Loma, and it snowballed. Now the Alliance is the closest thing to a governing body we have in the region. It’s the Alliance who coordinated this entire Tick resettlement program with the RPA. To stay in, every settlement had to agree.

Another twitch in Carter’s jaw. Her buttons are so easy to press; for a moment, I forget why I avoid her so much. There are so few ways of blowing off steam these days, and here she is, prime for the pissing off.

Then she sighs in a way so much like her sister, and I remember. The girl I used to be starts banging her fists against my rib cage, screaming to be released, and if I remain here, staring at the wrong Knight daughter, everything in me will finally shatter.

“Just . . . get off the bridge, Rory,” Carter says, seeming much older than her twenty years as she pinches the bridge of her nose and turns, heading back toward the old tollbooths.

As her silhouette grows smaller and smaller, the tidal wave I’ve

been keeping at bay shoves through the floodgates and smashes into my chest.

Her name is on the list. The other Knight daughter, the girl I grew up alongside, the girl I have loved longer than I had the word for it. A monster, a creature, the very thing I've spent so long running from. It is everything I wanted drenched in rot like some sick, cosmic joke.

Hushed, snarky comments whispered in the back of classrooms. A smile no one else gets to see. My name turned into a poem on her lips.

Mara.



3

MARA

In another life, this reunion might still have taken place here, in the lobby of a college dorm.

However, in the other life, it would be my parents coming to pick me up. There wouldn't be four armed guards lining the walls. The girl sitting in the chair across from me certainly wouldn't have a stab wound in her forehead, and I wouldn't be drumming an uneven beat with finger stubs against stiff denim jeans.

"Miss Knight," barks Dr. Caldwell, buzzing herself through the front door, poking her head around the corner, and sweeping her pointed eyes around the room. She's not as sympathetic as her partner, Dr. Benitez, and perpetually upset about something, though I can't blame her for either. There isn't a person left untouched by the virus. We've all lost someone, or everyone.

The bags beneath Dr. Caldwell's eyes are especially deep today. They've been there, purple and persistent and growing, as long as I've been here, and some mornings, she looks as dead as I do. Acts it, too.

The last few days, though, she and the others have been especially rigid. Nineteen of their own medicated monsters vanished into the night, and those of us left behind won't say a word about where they went. But as uncomfortable as the interrogation was, it means Vivian and the others made it.

“Your guardians have arrived,” she says, her tone reminiscent of a regal Victorian woman in a period piece, though she’s from Idaho and not even forty.

I push off the cracking leather seat, ignoring the protest of the wound in my shoulder as the duffel strap grazes it, and don’t meet the eyes of my fellow discharges on my way to the door.

The sun swelters above us, summer setting up shop and turning its fury on those of us with sensitive eyes. I squint, stumbling after Dr. Caldwell through the path between two of the treatment buildings. All the windows are barred, the structures fortified, the roofs fitted with perches for snipers, but the buildings harbor traces of their old lives, as we do. Peeling and near-illegible stickers wrap around metal posts. Faded initials are carved into thin tree trunks. A molded poster urges attendance of an improv show this Friday at eight. Unfortunately, I think I’ve missed it by three years or so.

The only additions to the décor are the banners placed around the campus, frequent enough they are impossible to ignore. *Res Publica* written in sharp edges, the *R*, *P*, and *A* always capitalized. It means “the commonwealth,” the doctors remind us often, but it’s a slogan and a name rolled into one. We call them the RPA.

The doctors aren’t exactly forthcoming with information, but thin walls and heightened senses have made it clear the soldiers don’t answer to them. Dr. Caldwell and Dr. Benitez and the others are soldiers in their own right, with RPA badges and lab coats instead of fatigues.

Vivian and I are pretty sure the soldiers are what’s left of the National Guard and any military that didn’t end up on a ship, but I doubt they’d tell me if I asked.

The path leads to a cracked, pothole-dominated parking lot packed with soldiers. The grounds are wrapped in fencing buzzing with enough electricity to flay the skin off someone’s body.

Outside the gates, cars line up down the block, a thin trail of

designated guardians coming to collect their medicated monsters. Officially diagnosed as Letalis Tichnosis survivors. The Altered.

If my heart still did what it was supposed to, it would be hammering. I miss that feeling sometimes, the nerves looping around my intestines and squeezing, the bile burning at the back of my tongue. Physical pain is a luxury I didn't understand until I lost it. That, and my three fingers. I am already at a disadvantage, all creaky, stiff joints and tight muscles. Once upon a time, I was a musician, but now I couldn't form a chord if I wanted to.

Caldwell stops, and I catch myself before slamming into her back, forcing my attention to the lot.

On the far side of the lot, near one of the other buildings, a handful of soldiers stand with a stern-faced woman no older than her mid-thirties carrying an authority making her seem older. I've never seen her before. There are a dozen or so doctors here, and more soldiers, but I know I've never seen this woman.

The massive gate buzzes as it begins to open, but a loud whistle rings through the air.

With that single noise, the entire operation grinds to a halt. The gate slides back shut. Caldwell lifts an arm to keep me from moving forward. The soldiers around the lot stiffen, turn toward the gate.

Outside, two silhouettes are visible pushing out of the trees on either side of the road. I can make out the RPA fatigues on one of the Ticks, but the other is practically a skeleton, her skin so deteriorated it's peeling off her bones. Their attention is on the gate because it makes noise, but there are at least five cars with people in them close behind. They will notice them eventually.

This could go very, very badly.

Another whistle, this one sharper, from one of the snipers on the roof. I turn my head, craning to make out the soldier peering through his scope.

"Wait!" the unfamiliar woman yells. The sniper hesitates. The woman

steps away from the soldiers, heading for the gate. No one moves, or speaks, or tries to stop her.

I may spend all my time inside the gates, but even I know the protocol. Subdue if possible, assassinate if not.

“Thalia!” an older soldier calls, but the woman, Thalia, ignores him. She pulls a thick baton from her belt, as well as a loop of thick rope.

“Open it back up!” she yells. The Ticks on the other side of the fence jerk at her voice, pushing toward the gate. One presses into it, seemingly unbothered by the electrical current it sends through his body, only stepping back when he realizes he won’t get through.

No one moves.

Thalia stops at the tall gate. After a long minute, the gate buzzes and begins to slide back open. The Ticks rush for her.

An old anxiety, born in the ashes of this city, pricks at my insides. I don’t know this woman, but that doesn’t mean I want to watch her be eaten.

The gates begin to close again after the woman slips out, and when they clang shut behind her, she stops just outside them. She waits.

And so do we. No one makes to join her, to help her.

The soldier reaches her first. The newly turned are the most dangerous, the fastest. This one can’t have been turned more than an hour or two ago.

But Thalia is unwavering, lifting her baton and letting the Tick approach her. His fingers grasp her collar, and she shoves at his chest, sending him back a step. He recovers quickly, snarling, lunging for her, and she jumps to the side, slipping behind the Tick. She swings the baton into the backs of his knees, buckling them, and when he tries to whirl on her, she swings the baton again, this time into the back of his head. It isn’t a kill shot, but a stunner, one the Tick shakes off quickly. In the second between being hit and recovering, the woman unfurls her rope, throwing it around his neck, darting

behind him, wrapping it around his torso and pinning his strong arms tight to his sides. With a light shove, he's on the ground. He writhes and snaps, but Thalia easily sidesteps his teeth.

The other Tick, slower, gets close enough to grab Thalia's attention, and she inspects her as she approaches. Then, in a blink, Thalia materializes a wicked sharp knife from her belt, grabs the Tick by the collar of her shirt, and plunges the blade into one of her eyes.

She lets the body fall with a thud, returning to the soldier. She slips a hand around the ropes at his back, wrangling him onto his feet. Thalia couldn't be called gentle, but she's avoiding major injuries, too.

This isn't the first time a Tick has wandered too close. Through my room's window, I've seen a handful of them approach the fence, only to be wrangled with tranquilizers and cuffs. Some are taken inside. Some are killed, their bodies dragged away. The treatable, and the too far gone.

Thalia heads back for the gate, the Tick at her front, craning his head to snap uselessly at her. She doesn't need to ask for it to be opened again, and marches through.

Three soldiers from the lot break from their posts to meet her inside the gates as they creak shut again. One of them pulls out a catch pole, like those used by animal control in the old world, and loops it around their fallen comrade's neck.

The Tick is led away, and Thalia returns to her previous spot across the parking lot. She tucks the knife back into her belt, not even bothering to wipe the blood away.

And the operation carries on, as if nothing has happened. The gate buzzes open, and the soldiers wave in the next vehicle. The one carrying Isaac and Sam, who didn't flee after what they just saw, though they had every reason to.

The car pulls up a few yards from the curb. The engine sputters to a stop, sending out a plume of smoke in dissent. Predatory instincts that don't belong to me flicker to life in the pit of my hollow belly,

and I stomp them down, reminding myself *anxiety* and *danger* aren't synonymous.

For a moment, I don't recognize the two adults who climb out of the driver and passenger seats. My chipped memories of them are far brighter and shinier than the people coming to stand in front of the hood. Samantha and Isaac Blake, three years older than I remember them.

Samantha-call-me-Sam's silky black hair has faded, is streaked with gray and piled atop her head in a bun half the size it used to be. A black fabric eyepatch covers one of her dark eyes, its straps stark against her washed-out hair. Tall and gaunt, the smile I thought permanent pulled into a thin line.

Isaac's once tight, bouncy curls have lost their volume, and his face is covered in scruff. He, too, is thinner than he was, and his dark skin is littered with tiny scars. The Isaac Blake I knew had a voice that carried down the block to draw us back into the warmth of our homes on summer days as the sun dipped beneath the trees. The type of person who had something to say about everything, but it was all nice, or true, so no one minded.

The Blakes may not be my blood, but they have been family for longer than I can remember. Sam's eye slides to me, her nostrils flaring and her pale lips parting. She touches Isaac's side, and he stiffens. Though her focus is trained on me, Isaac is looking between the soldiers and Dr. Caldwell, clearly unsure how to proceed.

"Mara." Dr. Caldwell clears her throat, and I resist the urge to look back at the dorm once more before stepping off the curb and slowly crossing the asphalt.

The soldiers lining the perimeter and perched on the rooftops with their tranquilizer guns have every scope trained on me. I don't have to turn to know it. I feel it, the hairs on my neck rising, the Tick twisting in warning. In moments like this, it is hardest to cling to being human.

If anyone here had a sense of humor, I'd remind them that, if I wanted to tear their throats out, I'd have done it by now. And I don't want to. Not really. All I want is to get the hell out of here. To get away from the guns before they decide to turn on us again.

I tell myself I don't want to know if she's okay. If she's alive. She has to be alive. If anyone survived this, it was—

"Isn't that right, Mara?" I don't realize Dr. Caldwell is speaking—has been for some time—until she's fixing me with that spiked scrutiny of hers, like she wants to pry me open and look inside.

I nod without a clue as to what I'm agreeing to, eyes trained on a spot of peeling white paint on the hood of the car. I'm looking anywhere but at the Blakes. And they're looking directly at me. The monster beneath my skin scratches to be released.

"As you were informed at the orientation sessions, your settlement's designated medical professional has been briefed on the circumstances. Fatimah will walk you through the important details. Any questions or concerns can be taken directly to her."

"Thank you," Isaac says, raspier than I remember. I still don't look at them, though it's more for their sake than my own nerves.

My eyes were a deep ivy once. The Tick ate that and left an unnerving gray. Coupled with the wounds that will never fully heal and the vaguely sickly pallor of my skin, I can't be a pretty sight.

"Mara," Isaac says. "Ready to head out?"

It has been so long since someone said my name like that, like it was a name and not a knife, like it belonged to a flower and not a weed, I lift my head without thought.

Isaac doesn't flinch. He might smile, but it's gone so fast I can't be sure.

I nod, looking to Sam, who still says nothing. Her lip quivers before she averts her gaze.

"Everyone will be excited to see you," Isaac says with a little too much enthusiasm to be believable.

Everyone. I stumble, trip, fall on the word. I want to ask about my sister, about the twins, about Aurora. Memories flash behind my eyelids, bathed in light. The debris in my chest thumps once. My heart still struggles to remember to beat, but it remembers her. Of course the busted thing remembers *her*.

It is evident Isaac has more to say, but the gun barrels are making us all tense. When Isaac takes my duffel and opens the back door for me, I climb in without hesitation, eager to be *anywhere* else.

After an agonizing two minutes pulling slowly toward the gate, and a ten-second period before it opens during which I'm convinced this was all a big trick and I'm about to be wrenched from the car and stuck back inside those antiseptic-laced halls, we make it onto the rubble-littered streets surrounding the facility.

The area isn't one I'm familiar with, but the decay is worse than I remember. The buildings and homes are more rotted, the roots and weeds more overgrown. It shouldn't be a shock to see how much things have changed, but it is. All my time as a Tick, stuck in place, and the world was moving on around me. Growing and falling apart at the same time.

Isaac is the picture of calm in the driver's seat, but I'm not so easily appeased. Being outside the gates, even in a car, has the Tick squirming around my skull. Being so exposed is dangerous, to a Tick and human alike. The last twenty minutes have been a stark reminder of that.

"Is it . . . safe out here?" I ask.

In the passenger seat, Sam jumps, as if she forgot I was here.

"Under the general definition, 'out here'"—Isaac lifts a hand from the wheel to make air quotes—"is never safe. But the major routes are clear. As long as we avoid the hotspots, we'll be fine."

"Hotspots?"

Isaac nods. "There's a pretty good radius around every settlement and RPA facility scrubbed for Ti—unmedicated Ticks. Go past it, or

anywhere near a downtown, and you could walk right into a horde. But there are always the stragglers, like you saw.”

It’s like I’m a little kid, thrown into a strange world with new rules. I already feel out of touch, so I refrain from asking the dozen more questions battering around my skull.

“You won’t need to worry once we’re on the Island. The water keeps everything out,” Isaac says, and I can tell he’s trying to be reassuring. He’s feigning normalcy as best he can, but we’re so far from normal there’s no chance he’ll ever reach it.

“And everything in,” Sam says, the first time she’s spoken since they picked me up.

“Who was that woman?” I ask, images of the woman—Thalia—composed as she faced two Ticks, flickering behind my eyes.

“Thalia O’Neill,” Isaac says. “I guess she makes house calls now.”

Sam snorts a laugh, and for a minute, I can see a glimpse of the old Sam. Isaac is more or less as I remember, if not more muted, but Sam isn’t someone I recognize. Quiet, sunken, with none of the fire she was known for.

I want to ask what happened, but I already know the answer. The thing in my head is the answer.

“She’s Oceanside’s head honcho,” Isaac says. “She started the Alliance. She’s the reason the Ticks are being resettled, too. Negotiated some deal for the medical supplies the RPA was hoarding.”

This must be the Alliance the facility doctors talk about. Some agreement between the communities expanded to include Ticks when the RPA started treating us.

“From what I hear, she’s on the intense side, but I suppose you can’t blame her. Not with the weight of the Alliance sitting on her shoulders and the barrel of the RPA gun at her head,” Isaac continues. “Besides. None of us survived through serenity.”

The following silence hangs thick over the car. Isaac is waiting for me to ask more, or say something, from the way he keeps flicking

looks at me in the rearview mirror. I can't figure out how to put everything I want to know into words. None of us have good stories to tell from our time apart.

"We lost Aria two years back," Isaac says suddenly, voicing the question burning the hottest on my tongue.

Stiffening, I find his eyes in the mirror, uncaring of the intensity of my expression or how unsettling it might be. All I can think about is little Aria, running barefoot around the front lawn with her sister, Raisa. Adopted at a year old, I have known them almost as long as they have been alive.

With big eyes, dark brows, glittering golden irises, cheekbones and an attitude belonging to someone thrice their age, copper skin always covered in dirt or sand or a combination, Aria and Raisa are the closest things I have to little sisters.

I want to ask *Who else*, but emotions are still not fully acquainted with the virus living alongside them in my brain, and I don't trust them not to fumble on their way off my tongue.

And somehow, Isaac knows, glancing over his shoulder from the passenger seat.

He adds, "Raisa is ten now. And Aurora—" Another thump in my chest. Two in the span of an hour. Dr. Caldwell might actually smile if I told her. "—is still as feisty as ever."

Aurora is alive. Six billion people died, but Aurora didn't. I did, and she didn't. Maybe there is someone up there, looking after us. Or, at least, looking after her.

I clear my throat.

"My sister . . ."

Isaac's easy tone doesn't match his words when she says, "Carter is on the Island, too. You'll probably see her soon."

I may have a disease tucked into my brain, but I know a conversation ends when I hear it. Carter is alive. She may—probably does—hate me for what I did, but she's alive.

The awkward silence holds for a long minute before Isaac remembers the CD he found in the glove compartment, and then we're driving with Billy Joel to accompany us. The song is the first I learned to play on the old, scratched, and sticker-coated guitar I outgrew by thirteen. Isaac reaches out to take Sam's hand, their twined fingers resting on her thigh.

It isn't until we reach the bridge that it settles in.

I've blocked so much of it out. Especially that first month. The panic to contain the initial spread.

We think it's an earthquake at first. When the second bomb falls, Carter and I climb out onto the second-floor balcony, and we understand.

"They're blowing it up," Carter whispers, and slips her hands into mine. "All of it."

Downtown is on fire. Half the big blue bridge, too. A jet whizzes overhead, shaking the roof of the house we've been squatting in for the last two days. I've lost count of how many weeks we've spent trying to escape the city. Now all we're trying to do is make it back home. If there's a home left to return to.

"Get down!" Carter screams, as another jet darts overhead, so close my hair blows back and my lungs scream for air. She drags me down, both of us smacking the hard balcony as another bomb detonates. It is close enough the heat hits us like a tidal wave.

Four more explosions ricochet through the city before the silence falls again. When Carter and I climb back to our feet, we're dusted with ash like snow, and all we can see is fire.

No music or forced pleasant conversation can block out the reality of the last few years. The closer we draw to the water, the thicker the air in the car grows. And each time Isaac catches my eye in the mirror, he sucks in a tiny breath, like he's remembering all over again he has a monster in his back seat.

4

RORY

If Raisa notices me throwing up in the bathroom as she comes knocking on the door to let me know Sam and Isaac are back, nothing in her face gives her away. She was always the quieter one between her and her twin, but since we burned Aria, she hasn't said a word.

"Where's Noah?" I ask, exiting the bathroom, swallowing the nerves coiling like vipers in the back of my throat.

Raisa points in the direction of the living room, which is a few steps away. The Island is stocked with million-dollar mansions, but our house is small enough its surviving solar panels can power it. Before we fixed the place up, we were squashed in with five other families two blocks away, which killed the mansion vibe.

I can't complain, though. Our house, right along the water facing the cliffs, has a billion-dollar view and occasionally musters enough breeze to cool us down. Sam and Isaac made a point to pick a place apart from the residential streets a few blocks away where the rest of the Island lives. The house will always be missing a resident, but Aria never reached the Island, which makes it easier. Her ghost didn't follow us.

Others did, but after the end of the world, that's a given.

Silhouettes shift outside the front windows as I come into the living room. A beach house in every sense of the word, the walls are painted seafoam green, with still-life paintings of lighthouses and boat docks

tacked to the walls. The furniture is ancient, muddy browns and oranges, with dirty throw pillows that survived the apocalypse for some godforsaken reason. We've tossed half the decorations and furniture, but unfortunately, the room had three times too much of everything to begin with.

Noah, five years old and all gangly limbs and long, black corkscrew curls, is perched on the couch, leafing through a magazine. His personal favorite is *Seventeen*, though we have to go through and rip out the more PG-13 pages before he gets to them.

His dark brown skin is flaked with sand, and he's managed to get it in his hair, too. He knows he shouldn't be down at the water on his own, but I'm the last person to scold him for breaking the rules.

"Come on, little monster," I say, earning the gap-toothed grin I knew it would. "You heard the elders. Upstairs, with Raisa."

"Raisa isn't upstairs," Noah says pointedly, his logic unflawed. He doesn't seem to notice my shaking hands, and I'm grateful. I cross the sage shag carpeting—the same color the wooden house is painted, and ugly as all hell.

"*Raisa* is waiting for you."

"But I want to meet her," he says, pouting.

I almost tell him, *Trust me, you don't*, but he has seen enough sadness and disappointment in his life, and I hate being the one to take the goofy smile off his face. We found him, three years old, parents dead or gone, in an old grocery store. He's adopted like the rest of us, without any of the paperwork.

"You will." His smile widens. "*Later*." It dims, by a fraction, but it's still there. "Now, go. You don't want Raisa to be lonely up there, do you?"

I jerk a chin toward the doorway, where Raisa is waiting, hands on her hips, not needing to speak to pressure her brother into reluctantly joining her. They head for the stairs, Noah stomping up as he always does—he wasn't allowed to make noise for so long, now we're

here, we let him hop about like a bull in a china shop. He's broken quite a few pieces of *actual* china that were likely precious treasures, but we're all so grateful to see him having some kind of childhood we let him.

Keys jingle outside the front door, and my sword is in my hand before the lock turns. Half instinct, but half justified.

The door opens slowly, Sam and Isaac stepping through first, finding me and my blade within an instant. Isaac looks disappointed, but a rare fire lights in Sam's eyes, and she hisses, "For the love of god, Rory, put the sword away—"

I barely hear her, not with a third figure entering the room.

I had enough days and nightmares to plan a method of attack or escape in any outcome, but now she's here, and I can't think. I can't breathe, can't move.

She steps into the door, sunlight illuminating pale, washed-out skin and blue veins resting beneath the surface. I knew she hadn't aged since being bitten after she turned seventeen, but it's still odd to see, like a living photograph.

Dying has accentuated her severe features, and I think now her jawline really could slice through paper. Her face is peppered with scars: the shape of a crude X across the bridge of her nose, a line through one side of her chin. The shadows beneath her eyes are purple, like a bruise halfway to healing. Which it will never do. Her once long, voluminous black hair has been chopped in a haphazard bob, and the jade eyes I dreamt circles around are a faded, pale gray.

I think I'm going to be sick again.

"Rory, put the blade away," Isaac says, his voice muffled by the ringing building in my ears.

Eighteen years of memories, eleven of them at her side, roll behind my eyes, and the stale cereal I choked down for breakfast threatens to resurface.

Mara.

Sam steps toward me, lunging toward my hand in a surprising show of authority, and I jerk it away, taking a step toward the door. A few more steps, a thrust, and it ends.

She broke the world. My grip on the knife tightens. *Do it.*

“Aurora.”

Then my name falls off her lips, the name I don’t let anyone call me because it belongs to her, and it is scratchy and raw but clear.

The sword falls back to my side like it heard a command in her syllables, and though it’s still in a tight grip, Sam deflates, and Isaac scratches at the scruff lining his cheeks—his nervous tic. They know I’m no longer on the cliff’s edge, but Mara has gone rigid.

This is not the girl I knew. Not the witty, loyal, inquisitive girl living in my memories, but a rotted, wretched creature with her face.

My heart threatens to crack my rib cage and spill out for everyone to see.

“No one cut your head off,” I say. “Good for you.”

Her nostrils flare—do zombies *need* to breathe?—and her hands curl into fists at her sides. She’s missing three fingers.

“Aurora Elizabeth Knight,” Sam says, and the corner of Mara’s mouth twitches up.

I want to stab something. Someone. *Her.* I don’t understand how she can walk back in here, after what she’s done and what she’s become, like it’s nothing.

“Everyone, *sit down.*” Isaac’s voice isn’t loud, but it’s commanding. He looks tired, like he hasn’t slept in days. I know the feeling.

Mara and I stare at each other, neither moving as Isaac cuts across the room to stand in front of the fireplace we neither need nor use. The *sit down* only applies to Mara and me, but we’re stuck in place. Sam gets the door, turning all three locks, before retreating to a seat on the armchair, leaving the long couch for us. Like I’m sitting next to *her*.

“Sit down, Rory,” Isaac says, and this time, it’s more of a plea.

I set my jaw, dragging my feet across the living room.

Mara, still in front of the door, catches my gaze as I sink into the cushions. I narrow my eyes, lips curling back in a snarl more animal than human, like I'm the monster in the room.

"No one here is going to pretend things haven't changed since you last saw each other," Isaac says. I open my mouth to speak, but Isaac interrupts. "And yes, your oppositions to all of this have been noted, Rory." He looks to Mara. "I can't begin to imagine what you've been through in your time away—"

A snort busts out of me before I can stop it, but the irritated twist to Mara's lips almost makes it worth the exasperated sigh from Sam across the room. Not participating, but judging nonetheless. Isaac, ever the mediator, clears his throat.

"What I'm trying to say is no one expects this transition to be easy. But we're in this together, like we were before."

"Before Mara started chomping down on brains, you mean?" I hiss.

Isaac takes a long, deep breath.

"I'm fairly certain I wasn't picky with body parts," Mara says, voice low, not looking at me. It's the second time she's spoken, and it's like a cheese grater against my composure. I can barely see past the blood on my hands, and Mara is joking about her own, like they weren't really people. Maybe they aren't to her.

Sam's eyes are saucers, and I am swimming in anger, when Isaac does something none of us expect.

He laughs.

I make the mistake of looking at Mara, and the stitch between her brows and slight purse of her lips hauls me back in time to a fifteen-year-old with knobby knees and long braids and summers of sticky popsicles and secrets we kept from ourselves and each other—

"Look, I know this isn't ideal," Isaac says. "We're all going to have to make some sacrifices. Rory, that means the—"

“If you say *the sword*, I will—”

“—sword. I’m not saying you have to get rid of it, but keep it in your room when you’re home.”

“Not a chance in hell.” I consider pushing to my feet, but it isn’t worth the show of weakness to Mara. “I am not sleeping in the same house as *her*”—a finger jabbed at Mara—“without something sharp next to my head.” A tap on the sword I’m still gripping like a lifeline. “And no, it’s not negotiable,” I mimic.

“Mara is sleeping in the basement.” Isaac looks to her. “It’s not as bad as it sounds. It’s more spare bedroom than basement, but with a hefty lock on the steel door.”

I set my jaw. A lock on a thick door. Because locks and doors were so helpful the first time around.

“I don’t care,” I say, standing and shoving the sword back into its sheath. “I’m keeping my sword. If you want it, you’ll have to take it off me. Who’s gonna do that?”

Isaac sighs.

“Rory—” he starts.

“No,” I snap. “And when she tears out Raisa’s or Noah’s throat like Aria, and I have to take care of it myself *again*, you’ll be glad I have it.”

Sam curls into herself, making a choked, painful sound. She shuts down like I’ve yanked her plug. Part of me knows I went too far, but I can’t find any guilt.

Mara jerks. The twitch in her brow makes me think she’s going to speak, but as quickly as it came, the emotion clears from her face.

I don’t wait for the inevitable lecture or outraged responses, storming toward the door and out into the cool evening night. But I don’t make it out fast enough to miss Mara’s flinch as I pass.

5

MARA

She would have killed me.

The thought cracks against my skull over and over. Aurora would have killed me.

If Isaac and Sam weren't there, she'd have killed me. Swung the blade and put me down the way she has clearly put down so many others.

And I would have deserved it. No one could say I don't. At the facility, one of the doctors' favorite mantras was we weren't responsible for what the Tick made us do, but it was clear they didn't believe it. There were moments I caught Dr. Benitez staring at me as if she regretted ever stepping foot in the building.

The Aurora of my memory wouldn't have touched a weapon if her life depended on it, but the girl who lifted the sword wielded it like a fifth limb. It wasn't my Aurora I found standing in the living room, but a strange facsimile. And one who hated me.

Isaac attempted pleasantries for a few minutes after Aurora left—how they fixed up the house themselves, and eventually, I'd be moved into the bedroom down the hall—but the bitter reunion seemed to have shattered whatever spell we'd found in the car. He went first; if he didn't go check on the kids, he said, they would come searching.

"They want to see you, but I think for tonight, it's best we play it safe. In case . . ." He hadn't finished, but he didn't need to.

In case Aurora came back, saw, and decided to finish the job she started.

And with Isaac gone, Sam was left to shift her weight and clear her throat until she finally retreated, too, with barely a glance my way. She hasn't looked at me for more than a few seconds since they picked me up, and I can't help but wonder if all she sees in my eyes is the monster who killed Aria.

As horrible as it is, I'm glad when she leaves, too. The look in her and Isaac's eyes is somehow worse than Aurora's white-hot rage. The curiosity combined with grief, the questions they want to ask about what I've done or what I remember are bulldozers on a door I keep locked.

Instead of going down to the basement, like it's clear I'm meant to, I head for the front door and slip out into the night. Neither Isaac nor Sam told me not to leave, though it was certainly unspoken. Dr. Benitez warned us all reception from residents might be varied.

I was given my dose of Dyebucetin by the facility this morning, and don't need to visit Fatimah, the Island's doctor, in the infirmary until tomorrow, but I feel trapped in the house. Meeting the woman who'll be giving me the drugs keeping me conscious is as good a distraction as any. It's far better than sitting and waiting for Aurora to return.

I pull out the folded map made by Isaac, scrawled in Sharpie on the back of the cover page for an old book. The page is faded and ripped at the edges, but the drawing is clear.

The Island is shaped like a mushroom, four miles all the way around. The beach on the left, and the bay and docks on the right. The wide half of the Island is marked as uninhabited—the old military base. There are a few buildings and streets marked with little stars: the residential streets and Main Street, the infirmary and the school. According to the crude map, the infirmary is inside the police station on Main, alongside the armory.

It's a quiet walk away from the Blakes'. Despite the residential streets two blocks away, the Blakes seem to be the only people living on the street along the ocean side.

We made it over to the Island a few times before, for beach days or trailing up and down the block to browse overly expensive boutiques and bike shops. When the street curves—the historic and now half-ash Hotel Del to the right—the idyllic town is a wasteland. I expected as much.

What I didn't expect were the hints of regrowth. Debris shoved off parts of the streets or piled in old storefronts. Obvious efforts at rebuilding some of the shops. Completely different than the mainland.

A pile of objects in a small park draws me to a stop. At first, I think it's more debris, but the pile is too organized. Like every item was placed with care. Everything from toys to backpacks to dusty, cracked photograph frames.

A shrine.

Some kind of pressure builds in my chest, enough to be noticeable, and fades away. I lift a hand to my heart like I can will it to beat.

I wonder if any of my parents' things are in this pile. Any of mine. I don't know if Carter left with anything but the clothes on her back when she fled.

Carter. Thinking about her makes the pressure return to my lungs.

It was different when I didn't know where she was, when she was too far for it to matter. After what I did, I can't imagine she wants anything to do with me, but I make myself a promise to find her tomorrow. My apologies might not be worth anything, but I still have to make them.

I don't see anyone for the next few blocks, even as I approach the old police station. With the infirmary and armory in the same building, and the school and the old theater where town hall meetings are held a block away, this is the new center of the Island, according to Isaac's map.

The front lights for the large, beige stucco building have probably been burned out for years, so I approach the station in the dark. Though I'm allowed to be here, it still feels odd to walk around without supervision. At the facility, we had to be accompanied at all times, but right now, not a soul knows where I am. It's a giddy thought after so long under people's eyes.

The big doors creak as I pull them open and slip into the building. The front hall is lit by a few hanging lanterns, casting menacing shadows over old photos of the Island posted on the walls. Smiling faces of long-dead residents watch me as I pick my way toward an open door at the end of the hall with soft light spilling out.

As I draw closer, a tune carries out into the hall—someone is humming a song, and I can almost remember what it was called. I come to a stop outside the door, listening, but before I can identify it, the humming stops.

"Hello?" a voice calls. I chew on the inside of my cheek, about to turn around and abandon this little trek altogether when a woman steps into the doorway. She's on the shorter side, round and soft, with dark skin and hair down to her shoulders. She's wearing a pair of mismatched scrubs, blue on top and yellow on the bottom. Her eyes are kind when they meet mine.

This must be Fatimah, the Island's doctor. She is immediately not what I expected. Not hard-faced and stern like most of the RPA doctors, but like someone's mom.

"Oh, hello. You startled me." Her lips pull up. "I'm usually the only one here this late."

If I could blush, I think I would be.

"I'm sorry. I was . . ." I clear my throat. "I wanted to meet you." Technically, I wanted to get the hell out of the Blake house, but this isn't a lie. "You're Fatimah, right?"

"I am." Fatimah steps forward, wrapping an arm around my shoulders as she guides me into the infirmary. "Come on in. Let me find

your file.” I’m so shocked at the voluntary touch I can do nothing but follow without thinking. She tosses a glance over her shoulder, into the hall, like she’s searching for someone or something, before releasing me and pulling the infirmary door shut behind us.

“What’s your name?” she asks, moving over to her desk. The room is small, with a dozen cots, and clearly used to be some kind of boardroom.

“Mara,” I say.

“Mara Knight?”

I nod.

At her desk, Fatimah flips through a stack of papers before stopping on one, tapping it with a finger.

“Ah, you’re staying with Isaac and Rory.”

Isaac and Rory. Not Isaac and Sam. Not the Blakes. It raises the question that came to life when Sam and Isaac picked me up. The way Sam moves around like a ghost, the way she shrank into the living room as Aurora and Isaac argued.

The Sam I remember was confident and controlled. If Aurora or the twins got in trouble, it was Sam who leveled out punishments and lectures. Sam was the authority. I’m unsure what she is now.

I nod. I expect Fatimah to press and ask why I’m here now, but she doesn’t. Instead, she pushes her papers aside and smiles at me.

“So, you’ll need to stop by each morning for your dose. Once a week, you’ll need a nutritional injection, as well, as your digestive system is still out of commission. I’m always here, but if for some reason I’m not, or you’re unable to reach me—” She pauses, tossing a glance at the closed door like she’s expecting someone to walk through it. Once she’s satisfied no one is, she tugs open a desk drawer and pulls out a small plastic case. She unzips it to reveal five vials with bright purple liquid inside. Dyebucetin.

“There are six emergency doses in here. Don’t lose it.” She swallows. “But keep it between us, yes?”

I want to ask why, but one thing I've learned since waking up in the facility is that sometimes, if you pretend not to care, people volunteer the answers themselves.

Sure enough, after a few seconds of silence, Fatimah continues, "There have been a few town hall briefs by an RPA doctor for the Island's residents about your arrivals, but let's just say public opinion is still varied."

Translation: some of the people here still want me dead, and eventually, they might try and do something about it.

"But they agreed to let us in?" I ask.

Her brows twitch.

"That's the thing about compromise. Everybody wins a little, but everybody loses a little, too."

The scales seem skewed to me, but I suppose I'm biased. No one is as familiar with my monstrosity as I am. And if I were still human, a resident on the Island, I don't know which side I'd come out on.

"I hate them," I say softly.

"Hmm?" Carter hums.

"I hate them," I say, louder. "The Ticks. Does that make me a horrible person?"

Carter looks up from her perch on the windowsill. She has a water-stained book, found in a gutted Target, spread open on her lap, but she's been staring at the same page for the last ten minutes. She sets the book aside, not bothering with a bookmark, and jerks a chin at the spot beside her.

I join her on the sill, drawing my knees to my chest.

"Hating the monsters who killed everyone we ever knew? No, it doesn't make you a horrible person. It makes you sane." She stretches out her foot to poke me in the sneaker, giving me a smile.

"But they weren't always monsters. They were people," I say.

Her smile flattens. "They're not now."

"But we don't know—"

"Mara . . ."

“We don’t. What if they’re still in there, trapped?”

Carter huffs a breath. “You’re right. We don’t know.” She shrugs a shoulder. “But it’s not like we can afford to find out.”

“I don’t understand,” I say, not realizing I’m speaking aloud until Fatimah responds.

“Well, the RPA has medicine stocks beyond the Dyebucetin used to treat you. Things like antibiotics. The only way to get them is to allow Altered to settle in the communities, clearing up space for more—”

“No,” I say. “I mean . . . I don’t get the whole thing. Why put so much energy into treating us? What happened to finding a cure?”

“They tried.” Fatimah purses her lips. “How long after the fall were you turned?”

“About a year,” I say.

I remember the first news story about a random, violent attack came in March of freshmen year. A massacre at a research station in Antarctica. By May, there were dozens of stories throughout Asia and Europe. The infection hit Los Angeles in June, and after, I stopped counting the days. Carter tried to keep track, and she thought we were somewhere in July of what should have been the summer before junior year when I was bitten.

Fatimah makes an approving hum.

“So you remember the beginning,” she says. “The calls for epidemiologists and research scientists to report to the CDC.”

The PSAs and emergency broadcasts ran all day, every day, until one day, they stopped altogether. I remember.

“But that was to find a vaccine.”

“It was.” Fatimah gives me a sad smile. “From my understanding, the scientists and researchers at what we now call RPA facilities exhausted every resource they had. Which, granted, weren’t near as expansive as they were before. Every possible combination of compounds was tested.”

She doesn’t go into how all these drugs were tested, but she doesn’t

need to. Once or twice, before I turned, my family and I ran into Ticks with boils all over their skin, or worse, skin that seemed like it was melting right off. One's skin was an odd green color—after the green Tick's blood had splattered on Carter's face, she spent an hour spraying herself off with a broken fire hydrant and made jokes about radioactivity. Now, though, I don't know if it was a joke. Experimenting on Ticks is the only way to figure out how we, well, *tick*.

"It was an accident," I say, not a question.

Fatimah looks pleased I've come to the conclusion on my own, and says, "Yes."

"They weren't trying to treat us."

Something about it makes a phantom ache pulse inside me. I'd believed the treatment came out of a drive to save those of us infected with the virus—to bring us back. But it was never about saving us. It was about preventing *more* of us.

"No." Her smile falters. "They've yet to be successful in finding a vaccine, and it's unlikely they ever will be. But with the Dyebucetin, there's at least hope of a future. Perhaps not a future any of us imagined for ourselves, but a future still."

So, the other Altered and I are the consolation prize for the apocalypse.

Since Dr. Benitez told me I was being sent to the Island, I've wondered if it would be better to stay at the facility forever, where I can't hurt anyone ever again. Where I wouldn't have to face the people I've hurt and the things I've done. Maybe it would be better for everyone.

Instead, I'm here. Staring down the barrel of a future I don't think I deserve.



When I return to the house, I linger on the front porch, reveling in the quiet. I don't want to risk a run-in with Aurora.

The facility was never silent. Even in the middle of the night, the generators hummed or churned. Footsteps clicked down the hallways as the soldiers patrolled. Sometimes, screams and moans filtered through the vents from wings with new Ticks.

Minutes pass, and the wind carries the salty smell of the sea up the sand and across the street. The night air pricks with a chill that skitters over my skin; it's not cold, exactly, or uncomfortable. Simply there. An unnecessary instinct for warmth draws me to pull an old hoodie left on my chair over my head.

Before I turned and after the world ended, when my nights were spent huddled in abandoned apartments or decrepit stores with Carter and my parents, I ran myself ragged wondering about Aurora. Wondering if she made it out, if the rest of her family was okay, if she was thinking about me.

I don't know what I expected her to be when I learned she was alive, but it wasn't this.

Anger or frustration are what I should feel, but instead, I am sad. Sad this is what we are now. Because if anyone has changed, it's me. I'm the nightmare she has every reason to fear.

A thick, heavy ache sweeps through my chest. It's so sudden, so unfamiliar, so painful I think it's some side effect of the Dyebucetin, but then motion catches my eye—a blond girl approaching the house—and I realize it's Aurora.

She hurt before. Stubborn as ever, she still manages to hurt now.