



Into Elysium

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Eben had one job at Elysium—keep the barrier wall lit at all costs. As a Dusk Guard, he was safe from the war raging across the country, from the rebels, and the new world. He was safe from the laws that would see him dead if they knew his one secret. But after being called inside Elysium to watch over one of the rebel prisoners, every wall he'd created to protect himself comes crashing down.

Cale never thought he'd survive the virus that turned the world dark and threw his country into chaos. He never thought his last days would be drawn out inside a cell in one of the most notorious prisons in the west.

Elysium was a place for the dead.

But in the pitch of night, the one person he'd thought he couldn't trust becomes his savior and so much more.

Into Elysium is a M/M Dystopian, Hurt/Comfort Romance Novella/Pre-quel with heart, hope, and a touch of suspense.

Total Pages (Source): 13

EBEN

As one of ten Dusk Guards, I walked the perimeter of Elysium, soaking and lighting the logs inside the large metal lanterns situated along the path. The bright beacons our only source of light at night since the world had gone dark a year ago. The kerosene burned the tips of my fingers as it seeped into the small cuts in my skin. I lived in the guard camp south of the prison and worked every evening. Each shift started with the lanterns, then clearing the trash from the daily windstorms, and if I was lucky, by midnight, I'd have enough time to eat before checking the fires again. It was monotonous, lonely work, but lately the isolation was welcome. The longer I was stationed here, the harder it would become to hide the truth.

I would've preferred working in the west camp, but men were not allowed to work the women's prisons anymore. The northern militias were known for their brutal behaviors. Rape and nonconsensual polygamy had run rampant for months after the US military fell to the so-called freedom fighters. Women were not safe from men. Not anymore. Maybe they never were in the first place. But me. My kind. If anyone found out about my predilections for men, I'd be hanged in the street and used as an example.

Too many things had changed, the world as I'd known it was gone, and it had only gotten worse over the last year. We had no real understanding of how it all had happened. The virus, the wars, the shifts in power. The weak veil of democracy fell as fast as the people died in their beds from fever. And when we lost all electricity, the last shred of humanity we'd been holding onto vanished along with it. There were no more hospitals, no more cars, no more easy communication. All that was left was war, uncertainty, and a fight to simply exist.

The things I'd seen and done. I was only twenty-five years old, but death was a shadow I couldn't shake.

"He won't make it a day on the front lines." The doctor removed the stethoscope from his ears. "He's useless."

"I don't know about that." The prison guard grabbed my chin, turning my head back and forth with his rough fingers. I could smell the smoke and kerosene on his skin and my stomach turned. "He could easily light the perimeter."

"A Dusk Guard?" the doctor laughed. "With the weight he's lost... it will take double rations for a month to keep him alive." He shook his head, his cold black eyes staring through me. "Better off in the furnace, if you ask me."

I didn't say a word, my mouth dry with terror and hope. Death seemed too easy. I wished for it as much as I feared it.

"He's been pardoned..." The guard dropped his hand, his upper lip curling tight as he spoke. "Though, I wonder if you're right... I guess only time will tell."

I'd survived the pandemic, but I had been wounded.

Useless.

According to the militia doctor, my lungs had been too weak to fight in their war. And what I'd first thought had been a blessing, had become my curse. I was stuck here. Surrounded by temptation and death and pain.

"Eben," Dorel called my name, out of breath as he ran toward me. He handed me a small brown bag. The bottom wet and torn as he set it in my hand. A sour smell filled the air. "Captain said you're to report for guard duty in the east sector."

“But I’ve just finished lighting the lamps, what about—”

“You’re going to argue?” He raised his brow as a dangerous smirk lit his features. Shorter than me with a paunchy stomach that hung over his belt, he rolled his shoulders and stretched as tall as he could manage. “I’ve been called up to the Boulder front. Said they grabbed about a dozen NEA fighters. Some of them women.” The way he licked his lips, the scent emanating from the bag wasn’t the only thing making my gut churn. “I leave in twenty, get your ass to the east sector. Captain doesn’t like to wait.”

“What’s this bag for?” I asked and he laughed.

“That’s for prisoner 192. A gift for his good behavior.” Dorel’s jaw pulsed. “Make sure he gets it.”

I made my way toward the front gate, trying my best to ignore the stench. Some of the other Dusk Guards gave me pitiful glances as I passed by. Working the perimeter was a highly coveted position. No one wanted to work the halls of Elysium. It was easy to see your own reflection in the face of the prisoners. We were all one accusation away from sharing a cell with those we guarded. Once inside, there was always a chance you’d never leave. Experience had taught me that.

I was lucky, they’d said when they’d left me here to die. My window was a luxury some of the other prisoners didn’t have. But that window, and the sun creeping its way across the concrete floor, were nothing more than a reminder. A reminder that everything I had was gone. It was a carrot dangling in front of a starving horse. The sun with a promise of heat, a warmth that never truly saturated my skin. The sun with its memories of snowcapped mountains behind my house back home, and the smell of sage and Mom’s Sunday pot roast. But the night sky. The stars. They haunted me the most. If I stared at them long enough, I could remember fireflies and camping trips and hiding away in tents to steal a kiss from that boy I once knew. If I stared at them

too long, the hunger I'd tried so hard to ignore would hollow its way through my bones, and the taste of bile would drag me back to the smell of my own filth and the feel of my ribs on my fingers, more prominent every day. If I counted those stars, those specks of memories, I'd never forget, and forgetting was my only escape. Remembering was a punishment worse than death, and I prayed every night for my heart to stop beating.

The iron bars echoed as they closed behind me, each door heavier than the last, each door a memory I tried to repress. The deeper into the labyrinth I traveled, the darker it got. Much worse than where I'd been held. The east sector was for the worst offenders. The leaders and officers of the NEA, North Essential Army. Traitors of the state. The rebels. The darkness here was like a lead weight. It didn't budge. It laid like a blanket on a humid night, suffocating and overly warm.

"Those who join the NEA are destined to die," my father had said to me before he'd gone to the Boulder front in Colorado to fight with the freedom militia.

He died two weeks later. Hung by his own commanding officer for refusing to take part in the punishment of a woman prisoner. My mother had already succumbed to the virus by the time word of his death found its way back to our small encampment south of Salt Lake. That was the day I was sent here, sent into Elysium. A prisoner for two months before I was pardoned for my father's crimes and given the position of Dusk Guard. Another small mercy.

"Eben... what took you so long?" Captain stepped from the shadows and handed me his candle. The acrid smell of body odor and piss assaulted me, reminding me how close I'd come to this very fate. Caged like an animal for life. "Get lost in the dark?" he laughed. "Nah... You're familiar with the ins and outs of this place, aren't you? Never in this deep, though, lucky for you... you had a forgiving judge."

I placed the candle in the metal holder attached to the stone wall. "I'm grateful to

serve the freedom militia, sir. Any way I can.”

“Grateful?” he asked, exposing his gray teeth with a sneer. “Grateful and lucky are not the same thing... watch yourself... or you’ll wind up back behind bars.” He nodded to the package in my hand. “Down there, third cell on the left.”

“Thank you.”

He grunted before lighting another candle. “I’ll be back in a couple of hours. Do your rounds, hall A, B, and C until I get back. Not too many prisoners in the east sector, shouldn’t be too hard.”

“Yes, sir.”

Relieved, I exhaled a weary breath when Captain disappeared into the darkness of the stairwell. With the stinking bag in my hand, I followed the low light down to 192’s cell. The light was virtually nonexistent this far down the hall, and when I approached the small chamber door, I couldn’t see anyone inside.

“Hello?” I asked and a loud scuffled noise made me jump. “Stand where I can see you, prisoner.”

I waited and he did not appear.

“Dorel said to give this to you. That you earned it for good behavior. Come into the light.”

Another shift and scrape, and when I thought he wouldn’t show his face, a pair of icy blue eyes pierced through the darkness. His hair was inked black, his skin pale, the aristocratic lines of his nose and jaw sharp and delicate. He was painfully beautiful, even here, in Elysium, where men come to die.

CALE

Every step I took hurt, my bones ached, and my muscles pinched. The deep cold of this place had made a home inside me. Thirty days, or was it thirty-two? I'd lost count. There was no daylight this deep into Elysium, only candles when the guards were gracious.

"Who are you?" I asked without regard for my own safety.

Elysium, according to the old Greek myths, was a place of peaceful death. The irony was not lost on me. There was no peace in death here. Only days that stretched forever into nights that wouldn't end. I'd beg for death, but in doing so I'd only prolong my suffering. Begging for death only assured a torturous and long life.

"Eben... but it shouldn't matter to you." His eyes were warm and brown, almost soft and benevolent in the low candlelight. A perfect deceit. Kindness did not exist here. "Take this," he said. His voice gruff as he shoved the bag he held in his hand through the cell bars. When I didn't reach for it, Eben sighed. "I won't hurt you," he whispered and leaned closer. "I'm... I'm not like the others. I'm a Dusk Guard."

I didn't know what the difference was between him and the likes of Dorel, but I didn't care. "A guard, nevertheless."

Eben pulled his hand back and opened the bag. His face contorted as he retched. "What the hell?"

The bag fell and hit the ground with a quiet, wet thud.

"Why would they send you rotten apples?" he asked as he wiped his hands on his pants.

I couldn't find it in me to laugh at his naïveté. "My family used to own an orchard in Vermont before... everything. The militia killed my father and sold my mother to one of the officers."

"But... they said you've been good, and..." He ran a big hand over his shaved head. "I didn't know."

As if that excused it. "Now you do."

I stepped back into the shadow and waited for him to leave. Eben stood still, staring into the cell like he could see me, see my eyes—like he understood.

"What's your name?" he whispered.

I almost quoted the number given to me by the prison, but something, some type of longing, or maybe it was loneliness, twisted inside of me, and I spoke without thinking.

"Cale."

"I'm sorry, Cale."

Cale.

The sound of my name, sad, and husky on his lips, made my hands shake. It was too human. Too real. Too palpable.

After a minute of silence, he walked away.

This had to be a test. Dorel had sent Eben as a test. Did they know about me? Surely, they'd have executed me by now if they knew. Maybe I should've told them. Told

them I'd had a boyfriend once. A man not unlike Eben, tall and muscled, and tan, and sweet. I should've told them about Seven, told them he used to fuck me in the orchard house my father and I had built with our own hands, the same one they'd burned down the day they'd sold my mother. Maybe then I'd get the peaceful death promised to me. Fast and easy. Every day I was dying, but they'd draw it out. That was the whole point.

"I'm not sorry," I said to the darkness before I lay down onto the hard pallet, covered in hay, like a pig in a barn, and fell asleep, dreaming of cider and cinnamon.

"Hey..." Drowsy, I sat up. The pain along my spine, hardly bearable. "Are you awake?" Eben asked.

He held a candle in one hand and an apple in the other. With the light close to his face, I could see how handsome he was. He had a strong chin with a dimple in the middle, his skin a deeper brown than the sun could create on its own. The hair on his head was clipped short like the other guards. A protection against lice. The prisoners were not afforded such luxury. But it was the wrinkles around his eyes I liked the most. A mark of happiness lost. No one smiled enough for laugh lines anymore. Maybe in another life he was good. Still, I didn't trust him.

"This is for you." He held up the shiny red apple.

"Why?" I sat, unmoving.

"I don't need it... I packed too much to eat and you look hungry."

Too much food? That was a lie. Everyone was rationed.

"Why do you care if I'm hungry? I'm a traitor, haven't you heard?" I rubbed the back of my neck. The headache I had earlier resurfaced, pounding behind my eyes. The

apple in his hand tempted me. I'd only had a bowl of broth for breakfast and a small piece of bread. My suspicion kept me seated. "How do I know you won't say I stole it?"

His lips broke into a small, almost friendly smile. "Steal it? How would you manage that from in there?"

He was mocking me.

"Keep the fucking apple, I don't need your charity."

His lips flattened into a thin line. "You should watch your mouth."

I managed a smirk. "Don't you have rounds to do?"

He leaned down and set the apple on the concrete floor just inside the cell door. The light of the candle trickled across the small space, and it was then I saw the small tattoo on his wrist. I stared at the numbers on my own wrist. 192.

"You were a prisoner?" I asked before I could stop myself.

Eben stood, pulling the sleeve of his uniform down. His eyes met mine, the rise and fall of his chest faster and faster with each passing second.

"Eat the apple. Take the small mercies." His throat bobbed as he stepped back. "We've all lost something."

What had he lost? Why had he been imprisoned? How did he get out?

"Tell me," I said and stood on wobbling legs.

He turned to look down the hall and then settled his eyes on my face. “I was a traitor too. But I was pardoned.”

“How?” I asked, impulsive and eager. If I could get out of here. If I could make it back to the front. Everything I had was gone. My family. Seven. But If I could fight, if I could find a way back to the way things used to be—hope was a dangerous drug.

“I was punished for something my dad did, and the judge hearing my case... He was kind.” Eben spoke in fast, whispered sentences. “Said I’d suffered enough, and my imprisonment would do nothing for the militia’s constitution. I became a guard. They own me, but I live. I breathe.”

“Are you NEA?”

He shook his head. “No.”

Hope drained from my limbs, and I couldn’t find the strength to continue standing. I sank to my knees, my eyes on the apple. I wouldn’t eat it. I wouldn’t be bought.

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CALE

Every day for three weeks, he'd set an apple outside my cell door. Dorel had not returned, and every night, Eben stood watch. The first week, he'd offered me no words. Just another fucking apple. I'd thought it was a taunt. Another game to amuse the well-fed kings of Elysium. But on the night of the second week, when Eben had stared into the darkness of my cell with disappointment hanging on his limbs, and said, "Please... eat something," I'd started to believe he might actually care. Had he offered gifts to everyone? Nothing in this world was without motive. Nothing was given for free. Nothing was given with love.

The other two prisoners in my hall had been executed this week, and I wondered what they'd been accused of. Did they get caught accepting one of Eben's gifts? How many others still drew breath inside these walls? How long would it be before my heart stopped beating? The silence that had come with their death hissed in my ears, while the pitch-black air suffocated my lungs. I sat with my back against the cold stone wall and stared at the apple I wouldn't eat. Wishing for and dreading Eben's next round. As hard as I'd tried to convince myself that I didn't want or need his attention, I'd been relieved when he'd continued to show up every day. He'd tell me mundane things about his day, about the weather, about the way he missed the night sky and lighting his lamps. He'd talk about how much he missed reading and sometimes muddle through stories I'd never heard only to get frustrated with himself for speaking out loud at all.

He'd talk and I'd listen, envying his freedom, grateful that I had a window through his eyes. I'd started to crave his company, knowing hope was dangerous, knowing that his voice, his stories were comforts, a debt to be paid by only my blood or my

sanity.

My stomach growled as I watched a rat sneak across the floor toward yesterday's apple. Sneaky, it sniffed, then circled the fruit before nibbling away at the pink skin.

A chuckle escaped me. "At least one of us will go to bed with a full belly."

"Why won't you eat?" Eben asked, his thick, rich voice filling the vacant space of my cell, and the rat scampered into the black hall.

The candle Eben held flickered, casting odd shadows across the floor. His warm eyes narrowed, seeking me out.

He was here.

Finally.

I didn't move.

"Why should I eat while others suffer?"

He exhaled and leaned his tall, broad frame against the cell door. "You think others would not eat if offered the same opportunity?"

"It's not my business what other people do."

"It's your business to survive," he said, his irritation leaking into his words.

"I do not wish to live. Why not offer me death instead of useless fruit?" I licked my dry lips. "Your apple would only prolong my torment."

“How old are you?” he asked.

“Why does it matter?” Eben ran his hand over his head and started to walk away. “Twenty-four,” I blurted and regretted my desperation. He held a power over me that I hadn’t planned to give him. It unnerved me. “You?”

He set the candle into the wall sconce, making it difficult to see his face. Despite my reservations, I’d come to trust his eyes.

“Twenty-five.”

He seemed older. Tired.

A small sigh parted his lips. “They told me you’re not eating in the mornings.”

“I have broth.”

“That’s not enough to—”

“What about the men who were executed? What about the men in the other halls? What compassion have you offered them?” I asked, my ire stealing my breath, twisting it into a sharp, painful cough. My ribs strained with the movement, and the ache of it radiated through my fragile bones.

Eben pressed his forehead against the bars and closed his eyes.

“I can’t change the way things are, I can only do what I can,” he whispered and the defeat in his voice, in his posture, had unwelcome guilt pooling in my stomach.

“Don’t waste your kindness on me. I’m already dead.”

“I...” Eben turned to look down the hall before he whispered, “The Boulder front is falling.”

“What?” I asked, my heart in my throat. “How do you know that?”

“Dorel... he wasn’t allowed to come back. They need as many men as possible.”

If this was true—the thought made me dizzy. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not. They sent three more guards this afternoon. It’s why I haven’t returned to my post as Dusk Guard. It’s why...” He took a few, slow breaths, and when he spoke again, the disgust in his voice was the most honest thing I’d heard in months. “It’s why they executed the two men in your hall, and another four in the west sector. There aren’t enough guards... and too many prisoners.”

For the first time, death terrified me. I didn’t want to be disposed of, not when the front was falling, not if there was actually something left to fight for.

“Why would you tell me this? They will hang you if they—”

“I’ll die here or on the front.”

“You’d fight with them?” I accused and held my breath.

His answer shouldn’t have meant the world, but it did. I wanted to believe in those truthful brown eyes. I needed something to hold on to. Some bit of decency. Some scrap of the hope I’d thought I’d lost.

He shook his head. “No... I wouldn’t.”

It took some effort, but I stood. Eben stared as I moved closer to the cell door.

“Would you fight against them?”

I was close enough I could smell the soap on his skin, cedar, and lye. I wrapped my fist around the iron bar below his hand, the heat of his body drawing me in. A small fraction of his skin brushed along the edge of my finger, and I shivered.

The muscle of his jaw feathered. “If able... I would.”

“Able?” I asked, my eyes trailing over his wide chest and muscled arms. “You seem able enough to me.”

Eben’s grin was crooked, the easy curve of his lips reminding me of an easier time. A time when the very thought of kissing his smile wouldn’t have landed me in a pyre.

“The virus... it scarred my lungs.”

“Never judge a book by its cover?”

“Exactly.”

A laugh scratched in my throat, and it echoed through the darkness. My eyes widened and I covered my mouth with my hand, shocked at the loud sound of it. I couldn’t remember the last time I had truly laughed. Eben let go of the bars and stepped back. We both stood like statues, waiting to be discovered. Seconds ticked by, and a fast-moving heat bloomed along my spine, over my chest and face as Eben held my gaze.

“Cale—”

“I don’t think they heard us,” I interrupted and stumbled back.

A man hadn’t looked at me like that since Seven. It frightened as much as it thrilled

me. Yesterday I would have entertained the idea. Hitting on a guard would be the quickest path to death. But there was too much to lose now. If the front was about to fall, if there was a way to win back the real constitution, I had to think with my head and not my heart.

EBEN

“Don’t be afraid,” I said, the panic in Cale’s clear blue eyes threatened to steal the last vestiges of heat from my skin. The ghost of his touch on my finger remained even in the cold pitch of Elysium, and I rubbed the spot with my thumb, committing the feel of his skin to my memory. Another piece of his puzzle for me to work over while I fought sleep like I had every night since I’d met him. I wanted to know him, wanted him to trust me, wanted to have one person I could trust too. I wanted him to eat the fucking apple. “You’re the only one left.”

“I don’t understand?” His brows furrowed, but he didn’t retreat any farther.

“This hall is empty... you’re the only one here.”

Cale’s head tipped back as he closed his eyes. “There’s no time then.”

I couldn’t stop myself from staring at the smooth, pale silhouette of his neck. I wanted to blame the isolation of this place for my fascination with Cale. Every day I spent inside these walls was another day I offered up a piece of my soul. The men here were underfed and sick. Skin hanging on bones. Dirt and sweat and excrement, the scent of death, the minute I stepped inside, the fog of desperation nearly drowned me. But Cale was a flicker of light in the middle of the misery. He wanted to pretend like he’d accepted his end, but the fight that radiated from him day in and day out called to me.

“Captain left for the front this morning. All executions have been stayed... for now.”

He opened his eyes and caught me staring.

“Do you know when he’s supposed to return?”

I shook my head. “No one does.”

“Who’s in charge now?”

“Lux.”

He winced. “That’s even worse.”

Cale ran a shaky hand through his hair and my eyes followed the movement. He was weaker than I’d thought.

“You need to eat,” I said as more of an order than a suggestion.

“Did you mean it... what you said?” He moved toward the cell door and grabbed the iron bars again with both of his hands. “If able... you would fight?”

“Yes.” I took a step closer, taking in as much of his face as I could.

“Then I’ll eat.”

He was too thin and could use a shower or two, but even so, he was perfect. I could only imagine what Cale would look like in the sun. If his dark hair would shine under natural light? If those cunning eyes would see right through me? Would he be able to see it? See this growing attraction I had for him. Too much time had passed since I’d been physical with anyone. It was too dangerous. But it didn’t matter, in the sun I’d find my wits and realize I could never have a man like Cale. Not anymore.

“There are other ways to fight, Eben.” He pressed his long body against the bars, his face close enough to touch. And for a small moment, when his gaze found my mouth, I thought maybe he wanted me too. “But you already know that.”

“I don’t... I don’t know how.” My pulse thudded in my throat. Talking about any of this was treason. “I’m not like you.”

“Aren’t you? The apple... Eben? Kindness... hope... it’s how we’ll take it all back.”

Lux was at the front gate two weeks later, waiting for me when I arrived for my shift. Sweat broke out across my brow as I made my way up the path. Trying to distract myself from the fear cooling inside my veins, I watched the Dusk Guards light the first few lamps. Over the last few days, tensions had started to rise throughout the militia. Rumors of NEA infiltration spread like wildfire, with guards and soldiers on high alert. It had gotten harder to sneak Cale food, but he’d finally started to eat. If I had to, I’d split my own rations with him. Every night I’d gotten to spend with him over these past fourteen days had been like a dream. Instead of rambling to myself in the dark, Cale would make his way over to his cell door. He’d eat whatever I was able to scramble together and listen, offering me small smiles that made me feel more like the man I had been before the pandemic, and the militia, and this goddamned war. He might not have given me the entirety of his trust yet, but something was building between us. Every quiet laugh, every small detail he’d given me about his life before this place, was a keystone to something bigger. Maybe I had started to put too much of my hope inside this man I hardly knew, hope like those stars had given me through the window of my own cell, but even deep inside the humid emptiness of Elysium, Cale made it easier to breathe. He felt safe.

Safe.

Lux stared at me as I approached, his assessment calculating. “Eben... Come with me.” His command was clipped as he turned on his heel.

The soup and bread I’d had earlier turned rancid in my stomach. Had he found out about Cale? Had someone heard us? My heart took a nosedive into my stomach as I thought about the conversation I’d had with Cale last night while he’d eaten half of my sandwich.

“Tell me about your parents,” he’d asked, leaning against the bars of his cell, his stomach full, his eyes sleepy.

It had been impossible to ignore the growing need to know him, to have someone know me.

I’d told him about the cherry blossoms in my backyard and how when I was little, I’d thought the flowers looked like popcorn. I’d told him about Sunday mornings and orange rolls, and church. And how I’d often wondered if God was real, and how my family had always been so sure that He was. I’d told him about high school and football until he fell asleep, his breathing calm. Everything I’d said, every detail, was more than I’d given to anyone in years.

I shouldn’t have let him in, shouldn’t have allowed myself to care. It was selfish needing someone in times like these. My attentions could have very well been his death sentence. What if they’d executed him this morning? The thought brought bile to the back of my throat. If he died because of me, then I’d braid my own noose.

Lux led me deep into Elysium, past A, B, and C hall to the officers’ quarters. The air was heavy and static as he shut the door behind me.

“Have a seat,” he said, his dark black eyes boring through me.

I attempted to swallow past my thick, dry tongue. “Is something wrong?”

Lux sat behind his desk and steepled his fingers. “I’m afraid so.”

My heart galloped, pinching at my side like I’d run five miles without a sip of water as I waited for him to speak. His shrewd appraisal was deafening.

“Captain, Dorel... along with the small regiment we sent to the front have all perished. Ambushed.” He slammed the palm of his hand on his desk, and I jumped. “Motherfucking NEA.”

I lowered my eyes to the folder under his palm, the militia’s symbol, a raven with three stars situated like a crown, sent a cold thrill along my spine. I couldn’t bear to look at the angry slit of his lips, the deadly fire in his eyes. Lux was older. His face distorted with multiple scars. He’d fought in several of the wars I’d learned about in high school when I was a kid. He was hateful in a way that made even the most confident men piss their pants. When he was ordered to execute a prisoner, he’d take the whole day. Take his time. He was known for his inhumane tortures.

“If it was up to them... we’d abandon God’s will. Equal rights...” he scoffed. “If God wanted everyone to be equal, don’t you think He would have made us all the same? Fucking rebels and their cock-sucking President. It’s disgusting the way he parades around with his so-called husband. When we take the north, we’ll gut them both.”

My head snapped up, terror and surprise warring inside me. I knew little about the NEA and their President. When everything went dark, any news I’d had about the rest of the country faded into the propaganda served to me by our commanders and city leaders. The entirety of my existence had been reduced to a twenty-mile radius. The guard encampment and Elysium. I never questioned it, never wondered. My father dared to question, and now he was worms’ meat.

“He sleeps with m-men?” I asked with feigned judgment.

Lux laughed without humor. “I forget how ignorant you guards can be. Our country, this freedom you enjoy, dangles from the tip of a knife... if the NEA takes Boulder...” He clenched his jaw. “Taggert and Liam have been dispatched to the Front. And you’ll leave in a month with the four-forty.”

“Sir, I can’t—”

“You can and you will. We need bodies on the front line.”

“I have a medical waiver.”

Front line? I’d be dead by day’s end.

Lux scowled, his irritation more fury as he balled his hands into fists. “Medical waiver or not, you will fight for the militia’s constitution. Die for it if you have to.”

“What about Elysium, who will guard the prisoners?”

“The prisoners are of no consequence.” He signed a piece of paper and handed it to me. “They will be given the option to fight. If they refuse, before the last regiment is sent out, they will all be executed.”

An image of Cale, his blue eyes dim and lifeless, took my breath away.

“All of them?”

The east sector was small compared to the rest of Elysium. It was why only one guard was needed to man it, but there were at least a hundred prisoners housed inside the rest of these stone walls.

“If they won’t fight, then they’re taking resources we need from the front, food from our soldiers’ mouths. Fight or die. Same goes for you, Eben.” He handed me the paper he’d signed. My official deployment orders. “You have no choice.”

The same symbol from the folder sat on the letterhead, the raven, cold eyes staring back at me, the weight of the paper in my hand too heavy.

The front.

Fight or die.

You have no choice.

He was wrong.

I had a choice.

I could run.

And I knew Cale would run with me.

CALE

The day guard paced the hall, wringing his hands as he waited for Eben to relieve him. I guess even the guards were afraid to be forgotten here. A loud, familiar echo boomed through the hall. The guard sighed and stormed toward the iron gates. I sat on the cold floor, anxious to see his face. Something between Eben and me had shifted. Under his light, I was no longer a prisoner. I was a friend. The word didn't feel like enough. Maybe the stories he'd given me meant nothing. Maybe it'd been a way for him to get close to someone. The loneliness of this place was permanent, it was easy to see it in his eyes. But what if we'd stayed like this? What if nothing ever changed? Would that be enough? Him on one side, and me on the other. The trust I'd had for him bloomed beneath my skin, and I couldn't stop the warmth from sinking into my chest. I wanted more. I wanted to know what he was like before Elysium, before the pandemic. I wanted to sit beside him as his equal, at a bar or a diner, sipping coffee or beer and earn the laugh lines around his eyes, make him smile, feel a smile on my own lips too, knowing that once we left, the night would only get better. The thought drained the heat from my chest, twisting painfully inside my rib cage, making it difficult to take a deep breath. Those days were gone. Those days could never be.

My heartbeat matched the sound of heavy footfall as it neared my cell door. An orange glow crept along the wall, and I closed my eyes, praying to a god I didn't believe in anymore that it wasn't a stranger, that Eben hadn't been sent away too.

"Cale," he whispered, and I exhaled, an impossible smile lifting at the corners of my mouth.

I reached up and touched my lips. The rarity of relief spread through my limbs as I stood.

“I’m here,” I breathed and walked to the cell door. “Why were you late?”

He handed me an apple and I took a bite, the sweet juice almost too much.

“Lux...” He shifted the candle in his hand, illuminating his features in a way I hadn’t seen before. This close I could see the lack of sleep around his eyes. The weariness. The fear. “I’m being deployed.”

“When?” My voice cracked, every ounce of relief slipping through my fingers as the apple fell from my hand.

“A month.”

Maybe I’d be dead in a month. Maybe I’d be free. But at least I wouldn’t be alone. Not yet.

“A lot can happen in a month,” I said. “The militia could fail. The NEA could take control.”

“Shh...” he hissed, his eyes wide as he turned to look down the hall. “Captain... Dorel... they’re dead.”

“Dead?”

He swallowed and nodded. “Lux is sending as many men as he can...” Eben’s eyes locked on mine. “If the prisoners refuse to fight with the militia, refuse to join them, they’ll be killed.”

My spine straightened, a furious storm building inside me. “I’d rather die an honorable death than spend one minute in a traitor’s army.”

“I’m not asking you to fight.”

“Then you’re here to kill me?” I asked, lifting my chin, rising to my full height.

My voice did not waver this time.

Eben clenched his jaw and shook his head. “No. I’m here to offer you a third option.”

“And what’s that?”

“Run... with me.”

The warmth that had abandoned me returned once more in my chest, and spread, its fingers finding a grip on my heart.

“Eben, I—”

“Think about it... we have a few weeks to make a plan. I can gather supplies, store my rations and—”

“Eben.”

“Cale, I know it might—”

“I’ll run with you, Eben. I’ll fight... with you.”

“O-okay.” He rubbed at the center of his chest. “Okay.”

We were quiet, our mingled breaths an offering to the prison's ghostly silence as we stood like wraiths ourselves. We had both died here tonight. The men we used to be. Reborn again inside this small moment. Inside a promise. It felt like hope.

Eben moved, or maybe it was me, it didn't matter once his trembling fingers were entwined with mine, the warmth of his skin sent a shock up my arm. Linked between the barrier of my cell, as if the cold iron bars didn't exist for us.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he said, his eyes falling to my mouth.

"The right thing..." I sucked in another greedy breath as I squeezed his hand. The touch overwhelming and everything and not enough. How long had it been since I'd been touched? Real, intentional, heat burning and perfect. The corners of my eyes burned too as my eyes met his.

"What about the others?" His Adam's apple moved slow and hard. "It's like you said... what kindness have I shown them?"

"We can make a plan... save as many men as possible."

Eben reached for the bar with his left hand and rested his forehead against the door. "I only have keys for the east sector." The heat of his words brushed my cheek. His eyes closed and I wanted to touch his face.

This was real. He was real.

"Then we'll do what we can."

I squeezed Eben's hand, and he opened his eyes. This close, even with little light, the tiny specks of gold inside his dark brown irises revealed themselves to me. His lashes were thick and long and blinked back at me with a mix of longing and hesitation.

Desire.

Or maybe it was a projection. Maybe I was already dying, and this had all been some dream, some hopeful dream to ease my suffering.

But he didn't let go of my hand or look away. This was real. He was real. Eben held me in this limbo, where the air between us crackled with everything we both refused to say.

I'm scared to want you.

Don't be afraid.

Kiss me.

"I brought you something," he said, and let go of my hand, the moment drifting away with the warmth of his touch.

I rolled my fingers into a fist to conserve his heat.

"It's not much..." Eben pulled a small parcel from his pocket and handed it to me. He'd wrapped his gift in an old newspaper, and I rubbed my thumb across the soft paper, gazing down with wonder at the worn words, attempting to read them as my eyes blurred with gratitude.

"Well, open it," he said, a smile on his lips. "I might've stolen a few of the items, but I figured it was worth it."

It.

Me.

I was worth it.

I ripped through the paper and chuckled at the contents.

“Are you trying to tell me something?”

He rubbed at the back of his neck. “It’s not right... the way they treat prisoners. I wanted you to feel... more... I don’t know. Human, I guess?”

“Human,” I whispered.

“The baking soda works like toothpaste when it’s wet, and if you chew the mint leaves when you’re done, it kills the aftertaste.”

I sniffed the small piece of soap. Cedar and lye. Just like Eben.

My throat ached and I could barely speak. “T-Thank you.”

EBEN

He lowered his eyes, trying to hide the unshed tears I hadn’t missed. Cale rubbed the soap with the pad of his thumb, his fingers long and fragile. He swallowed and breathed and swallowed again.

“Before... everything,” he said. “My mother used to grow mint leaves in her garden. She said it kept the spiders away.” Cale’s lips broke into a sad smile.

“Was it true?”

“I think so?” He lifted his gaze. His smile was gone, replaced with trembling lips. “My... my...” Cale sighed and shook his head.

“Tell me,” I urged.

He looked down at the small gifts and back at me.

“My boyfriend found a spider web once... near one of her plants. So maybe it wasn’t true.”

Boyfriend.

I schooled my features, trying for a calm I couldn’t maintain.

Boyfriend.

The need I’d thought I’d seen in his eyes earlier. Had I not imagined it?

“What happened to him... to your boyfriend?”

“He’s dead.”

“I-I’m sorry.”

He searched my face. “The virus... When Seven died, I thought it was so unfair... but now... I realize he was the lucky one.”

The lucky one.

I didn’t want to understand him. I didn’t want to think about never having met Cale or having this small amount of something good in all of this terrible darkness.

But I understood.

I did.

And it hurt.

“Sometimes I wish I would have died... I wish my lungs would have given out.”

“Sometimes?” he asked as I stepped closer.

“There were times I didn’t think I could make it through any more pain.” I smoothed the tip of my finger over the tattooed number on my wrist.

“If you were dead... you wouldn’t be here...” Cale gripped the bar. “And if you were dead, I might be too. Is it selfish for me to think that?”

“No.” My hand shook as I lifted it to his face. He leaned into my palm, his eyes on mine. “I’m selfish too...” I said, barely able to catch my breath as I moved my hand to his waist. “Come here.”

The bars between us made it next to impossible, but as my lips pressed against his, I could pretend we were someplace else. He reached through the bar and grasped my shirt, pulling me as close as he could. Cale’s lips were dry, but soft and willing, and I would have taken a bullet right then if it meant I could die feeling like this. Like me. Like before everything had been turned upside down. Like the man I’d hoped I’d become. Alive and warm and free. He licked my lips, and I opened for him, tasting apples on his tongue. I tugged on his belt loop, a desperate attempt for more, to be closer, and he groaned.

Breathless, we broke apart, the dark and dank surroundings a slap in the face. Cold reality. I shoved away from his cell, my heart tripping over itself as I looked around, but we were alone.

“I... I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Cale’s cheeks were pink, his chest heaving as he touched his bottom lip.

He was more alive than I’d ever seen him before.

“We have to be careful... if anyone had seen. I wasn’t thinking... it’s been—”

“Too long,” he finished for me.

I dared to close the distance between us again, his kiss still tingling across my lips, and I took his hand in mine. “I’ve wanted to do that since the first night I saw you.”

“We have to get out of here,” he said, his thumb trailing along the lines inside my palm.

“We will. I promise you. I’ll do whatever I can.”

I didn’t know what I was to him. A ticket out. A person to trust. But he was important to me. There wasn’t shit left in this world to fight for. But I found myself desperately wanting to fight for him.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:38 am

EBEN

Sounds of shouting and loud footfall echoed outside my door in the hallway. Confused by the lack of sunlight, half asleep and groggy, I got out of bed. It took a second for my eyes to adjust to the moonlight spilling in from the window. My bunkmate's bed was empty, the candle usually on the dresser, missing. Running a hand over my head, I stared out the window as men in militia uniforms moved in an organized chaos. They filled wagons with weapons and ammunition lockers, while a couple of guards I recognized from my unit lifted boxes of rations into another wagon.

“What the fuck?”

I grabbed a shirt from the dresser and pulled it on before shoving my bare feet into boots.

I opened the door to find the hallway in disorder. Half-dressed guards, like me, standing with candles and sleep lines on their faces as officers ordered them to move.

“Let's go, let's go, let's go.” A short man with gray hair and green fatigues clapped his hands. His face was severe and angry as he shouted at the unmoving men.

“What's going on?” One of the guards dared to ask.

“There isn't time for stupid fucking questions. Pack what you can. Take only what you need,” he ordered.

“Pack?” I asked, realizing too late I’d spoken out loud.

“We’re evacuating! Do I need to spell it out for you jack-offs? Move !” he yelled.

Evacuating.

I stood still, my mind racing around in circles until it snagged on him . On Cale. On our kiss. On my promise.

Oh God.

“Cale.”

I didn’t think, didn’t take a moment to plan. I grabbed the gate keys, a few spare candles from the drawer of my dresser, and matches. I moved through a sea of fearful faces and uncertainty, keeping my eyes down. The stairs were packed with men, some with large bags, others, like me, still in sleep shirts and sweats. Once outside, the night air chilled me to the bone. There was movement everywhere, even the stables were surrounded by Freedom militia with torches. Shit . They guarded the horses as the rest of the encampment prepared to flee. If Cale and I wanted to escape, we needed horses and rations, and...

“Eben?” a Dusk Guard held up his hand as I approached Elysium. “Didn’t you hear? The front fell. The NEA is headed this way. We’re all leaving.”

Elysium was hardly lit. Only a few torches burned in the early morning darkness. I glanced at the prison gate, worried I’d never make it inside, terrified I had no reason to.

I swallowed, trying to come up with a plausible lie. “I was sent... I need to...”

Damn it.

He furrowed his brows, his eyes assessing my disheveled clothes, my untied boots.

“Lux sent me.” The lie sounded hollow to my own ears.

“Lux left an hour ago,” he said.

“I know.” I lowered my voice and grit my jaw. “I’m to dispatch a few of the prisoners left in the east sector.”

He laughed, the sick sound of it slithering under my skin. “Want any help?”

I forced a smile. “I think I can handle it.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Can’t leave my post anyway, not until they give us the ‘all clear.’”

“Where are the other Dusk Guards?” I asked.

“Treban is on the north tower. It’s just us. Most of the prisoners were shot after we heard the news, a few left with Silas and Lux claiming they wanted to fight. I’d bet my last box of matches they’ll be dead by sunrise. Traitors.” He spat onto the gravel. “Too bad you weren’t working, missed out on some target practice.”

My heart pounded as it fell into my stomach.

Shot.

Murdered.

“I better get inside,” I managed to say. “Get it over with.”

He smirked. “Get it over with... like you won’t enjoy it.”

“Traitors,” I repeated his sentiment, robotic, numb from the inside out.

“Fuck yeah.”

I nodded and moved toward the gate, my mouth thick with bitterness and terror.

Once inside, I lit a candle and left the front gate open, but as I made my way down the dark hall, it shut with a resounding and final rattle. I passed a few guards who were too busy carrying boxes of rations to care about me. The smell of gunpowder and blood hovered over me. Each cell I passed, one, two, three, the scent of death swelled.

“No, no, no...” I muttered and started to jog.

The lack of guards in the east sector frightened me.

The place was empty.

Abandoned.

A tomb.

“Cale.” Fear grabbed at my throat as I ran down the hall to his cell. “Cale,” I yelled, the panic cracking my voice into two.

“I’m here,” he called out, and I nearly fell to my knees in relief.

Cale's eyes were wide, his lip split. A bruise colored the arch of his cheekbone in purple and blue. The skin on his knuckles was raw as he gripped the bars. "Eben," he said my name like a prayer.

"What happened?" I asked, breathless as I reached through the bars to run the tips of my fingers along his jaw.

"I got lucky," he said and coughed when he tried to laugh. "The guard sent to shoot me ran out of bullets. He hit me with the gun instead. I blacked out."

"Jesus Christ." I held his chin and slowly moved his head to the right and then the left. "You could have a concussion."

"I'll live." Cale held my gaze. "You came for me."

"I said I would."

His Adam's apple jumped. "What's the plan?"

"There's militia everywhere, loading wagons with supplies. The stables are manned... Cale, I..." He was here. Alive. In front of me. I hadn't failed him. We had a chance. "First things first... getting you out of here." I dropped my hand from the heat of his skin. "I'll be right back. The keys to the cells are in the office."

"Be careful."

"I will."

The office was locked, but I had the key. I put the candle in the sconce by the door and grabbed my keys from my pocket. My fingers trembled and I dropped the keys twice before I finally opened the damn door. The office was a mess, papers strewn on

the desk and floor, and I slipped on a file folder in front of the combination safe. Catching my breath, I turned the lock with shaking fingers.

30-56-19

The lock didn't budge.

"Come on..."

30-56-19

Nothing.

"Fuck..." I shook my hands by my sides and sucked in a ragged breath. "Thirty... fifty-six... nineteen," I spoke the numbers out loud, taking my time, and the lock finally clicked.

I exhaled and grabbed the large ring of keys. Each one was marked with the corresponding cell number. I found Cale pacing when I got back.

"Did you—"

I held up the keys and he smiled. It was small and weary, but it evened my pulse. My hands stopped shaking long enough to place the candle in the holder and unlock the door to his cell.

CALE

The heavy metal creaked as the door swung open. The air shifted around me, pushing me toward Eben. It told me I was free. It told me to run.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said, and reached for my hand.

The warmth of his skin was almost too much wrapped around my fingers. His hold too tight as we ran down the hall. Out of breath, I tugged on his arm, and we stopped.

“We can’t just run out of here, can we?” I asked.

“No... we can’t.” He let go of my hand and dug into his pocket. He pulled out a set of keys and nodded his chin. “Come on, I’m hoping some of the guards left some clothes in the locker room. If we can make it out of Elysium, I think we should be able to get back to the encampment for supplies.”

“That sounds like suicide.”

“Heading into the forest without the proper supplies is suicide. The front fell, Cale. My hope is to find the closest NEA settlement, and surrender. Maybe they’ll take us on, or maybe kill us on the spot. But I’m willing to risk it. If we stay here, we die. We have to keep moving.”

“And what about the other prisoners?” I asked, knowing that they were all probably dead.

I’d heard the gunshots. The screams. Each loud pop closer and closer, calling out to me, shouting to me, “You’re next.”

“Most are dead... some left to fight. Let’s get these uniforms, and we can see if there are any survivors on our way out.”

“Okay.”

Guilt weighed on me as I followed behind him. My hope dwindled as we passed

several quiet cells. There was no one left to save.

“This way,” he whispered and lowered the candle he carried. “If anyone is inside...”

“I know,” I said. “It’s over.”

He nodded and gripped my hand in his again before he opened the door. The room was black and silent as we stepped in. The orange glow of the candle, the only light. Eben sighed and his shoulders relaxed. He put the candle into a small sconce on the wall.

He pointed toward a row of lockers. “Let’s split up, find what you can and put it on.”

Reluctant, I hesitated but let go of his hand.

“I’ll feel better once we’re outside.”

Eben grazed his knuckles over the bruise on my face, his eyes on mine. “It’s going to be okay.” He pressed a quick, chaste kiss to my sore lips, and I wanted to believe him. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

There was no way he could keep that promise, the cracks and fissures inside my heart knew that, but there was this small part of me, these tiny points of light Elysium hadn’t stolen, that brightened under his words.

“I believe you.”

He nodded. “Hurry.”

We moved through the room as quietly as possible. I found a few uniforms, all of which were slightly too big. Settling on the smallest of the three, I stripped out of my

worn pants and shirt. The cold air spread over my skin in a blanket of goosebumps. I pulled on the guard pants first, the rough fabric itchy against my skin. I took the belt off of one of the bigger pairs of pants and looped it around my waist until the pants stayed put. The shirt was hopeless, but once it was buttoned up and hidden under the guard jacket, I figured I'd pass at a quick glance. I was grateful for the boots and heavy wool socks; they would keep me warm once we'd made it to the forest.

"If we make it," I mumbled.

I found a row of sinks and washed the blood and dirt off my hands and face. The cold, clean water a comfort I couldn't allow myself to get lost in.

"Your hair," Eben said, and I jumped. "It's a dead giveaway."

I turned and found him in full uniform, smiling. "I'm pretty sure all of this is a dead giveaway." I waved my hand down my body. "Nothing fits. I should have eaten more."

He handed me a hat. "Yes, you should have."

I slipped on the hat and tucked some of the longer strands of my bangs under the rim. "Better?"

Eben didn't answer, taking my hand in his, he led us to the locker room door. He turned to look at me as he grabbed the candle from the sconce, his dark eyes serious and commanding. "Don't speak. If we get stopped, I'll answer the questions. And... God..." He tucked another piece of my hair under the rim of my hat, his throat working as he shook his head. His eyes filled with so much fear it took my breath away. "Just keep your eyes down. Okay?" The confidence in his tone cracked on the last word.

“I’m scared too.” I reached up and held his face, my hands trembling.

He covered my hands with his and kissed my forehead. “Follow me.”

The anxiety and fear festering inside of me tried to seize each beat of my heart as we stepped into the hall.

“It’s empty,” he exhaled. “Thank God.”

I did as Eben had told me. I kept my eyes down. I wanted to keep moving, to get the fuck out of here. I didn’t dare look into the cells as we passed. There were no survivors. Every door left in our wake, instead of hope came more panic. The closer we got to freedom, the tighter the noose around my neck cinched.

“There were guards in this next corridor on my way in. They were taking boxes of rations toward the front gates. Just follow my lead... all right?”

Shivering, my bones quaked. “Yeah...”

We turned the corner, and the first sounds of life hit me like a brick. My feet stopped moving without my permission as voices carried down the hall.

“Cale?” Eben pulled on my hand. “We have to—”

“You two,” a voice commanded. “Grab some boxes. The last wagons leave in an hour. Stop standing around.”

Eben dropped my hand like it had burned him. “Yes, Officer.”

“What are we going to do?” I whispered.

“Trust me... just grab a box,” he said.

I picked up the smallest one I could find, unsure of my arms after months of starving myself.

“Take those to the wagons by the north tower,” the officer said and rested his hand on the gun strapped to his hip. “And hurry the fuck up.”

My fingers gripped the box with all the strength I had, my eyes on Eben’s back as we moved toward the front gate.

Toward freedom.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:38 am

CALE

The hem of my pants dragged and scraped along the concrete. The loud sound grating. A sure sign I didn't belong. It wasn't until the scent of mildew and sweat and blood gave way to sage and burning wood that I realized how close we were to the front gates. How close we were to the light of the stars, to freedom. The soft, cool air hit my face and tears pooled along my lashes, daring me to blink. My feet stumbled and I had to grip the box in my hand, my fingers aching.

"This way," a male voice said, and I forgot myself.

I glanced in the officer's direction, and he narrowed his black eyes.

"Wait," he ordered, and I heard Eben curse under his breath.

"Sir?" Eben stood at attention, and I tried to mirror his confidence, drowning in my uniform like a child in his father's suit.

The man inspected the box in Eben's hands, then mine. He was short and round, his flesh red from the sun. I thought if I reached out and touched him, his skin would feel like the pair of leather boots I had on my feet.

"Your box is open," he said, and my arms started to shake.

"I-Is it?" I asked, keeping my eyes down like I should have done in the first place.

"Set it on the ground and turn out your pockets."

Eben cleared his throat. “Sir... I would have seen if—”

The man dressed in militia fatigues glared at us. “Turn out your pockets too.”

I lowered the heavy box to the ground, my heart pounding like a frantic drum. I couldn't slow my breathing, too afraid to look at Eben. Afraid of what our eyes would give away. A cold layer of sweat formed on my forehead, my fingertips numb as I pulled out my pockets. The man knelt down and rummaged through the box. I watched as he stole a few packets and stuffed them into his pockets. Fucking hypocrite. I curled my fists as he opened Eben's box and took another few packets.

He leaned into Eben. “Say a word about this to anyone and I'll put a bullet in your head.”

Eben's jaw flexed. “Yes, sir.”

“Get these boxes to the wagon. There's no time to waste.”

We both watched in silence as he walked toward the barbed-wire gates of Elysium. My breath was stuck in my throat, anger boiling in my empty stomach. This box of rations would last me three months and I had to hand them over to people who would kill me if they had the chance.

“Let's go.” Eben lifted his box, and I did the same.

But instead of walking toward the caravan, he turned toward the trees.

“Eben,” I hissed. “Someone will see.”

“No one is paying attention.”

“How can you be sure?” I asked, looking over my shoulder.

“He would’ve been shot on sight. Officer or not, you don’t steal from the mouths of soldiers. It’s a death sentence. If anyone had seen, he’d be dead by now.”

“Isn’t that what we’re doing?”

“No... what we’re doing is worse.” The shade of the pines covered us. The smell of fire and smoke and fear dissipated. “We’re traitors now.”

We walked for a few minutes in silence, nothing but the sound of our coarse breaths and the faint chaos of the camp. The voices seemed to surround us even with the tall trees as cover. I was out of the prison, but I didn’t know if we would actually escape. Pressure built behind my ribs with every inch of distance, every step of my boots, black spots dotted my vision, my mind racing. Every snapped branch underfoot was someone chasing us, the pines rustling was a body ready to pounce.

We wouldn’t make it. We couldn’t make it.

We...

“I think this is far enough,” he said and lowered his box to the ground.

I set my box on top of his, the muscles in my arms burned. I shook my hands at my side. “We’ve hardly walked a quarter of a mile, Eben; this isn’t a safe—”

“I’m going back for supplies.”

No.

No. No. No.

My heart sank into my stomach.

“You mean we’re going back for supplies.”

He shook his head and stepped close enough, I could smell the sweat on his skin. Feel the warmth radiating from his body. He was whole and here, and I refused to let him go. Eben gripped my arms and leveled me with his gaze. “No. It’s too much of a risk. It’s easier this way, if you stay here, I can move faster, no one will stop me if I’m alone.”

“Eben... it’s too dangerous. You can’t... what if... Let me come with you.”

He was silent as he reached up and removed my hat. My hair fell over my forehead and his lips twitched.

“I get it,” I said, my pulse speeding through my veins. “I’m too obvious.”

“I won’t be long. We have all the food we’ll need in these boxes, but we can’t carry it all like this. We need packs. I’ll grab a few things and come right back. I promise.”

My throat felt tight. “And what if you don’t?”

I hardly knew him, but the time he’d given me, and this last month, his kindness, his heart, it was the only real thing left in my small world. My world that had been reduced to night and dread and terror. He’d given me light, and the thought of going back to the dark hours of my life, I’d rather die inside that cell having never met him at all. I’d tasted freedom in his kiss, in the air, in these woods. I couldn’t do this alone. I couldn’t do this without him.

“Then you keep walking, Cale. You find the NEA camp. You take your life back. You were never meant to die here.” Eben rested his strong hand against my face. I

closed my eyes as tears spilled onto my cheeks and stung the cracks on my lips. “I’ll be back as fast as I can.”

EBEN

Soldiers hooked the horses to the wagons and the guards, armed now, loaded the last remaining boxes as I walked out of the bunk house. I had no idea what I would find when I’d returned, figuring anything of worth would have been taken. But I’d been able to grab two sleeping bags and two backpacks from the closet I’d shared with my bunkmate. I’d filled the packs with necessities only, a few pairs of warm socks and a canteen I’d stowed away in my footlocker.

The night sky had lightened, the morning sun threatening to expose me with its pink dawn. I exhaled a sigh of relief when a few of the wagons pulled away, and with the guards preoccupied, I moved. I stepped out from the shadow of the building and was ready to bolt when I heard my name.

“Hands up.” Treban pointed his rifle at my chest. “Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” he asked, and I noticed his hands were shaking too. The two packs on my back, the sleeping bags, I was weighed down. I’d never be able to outrun him or outmaneuver a bullet.

I held up my hands, my eyes burning, my heart broken. “Tre... listen.”

“I don’t want to hear it. You were running ?” he asked disgusted. “Deserter.” He spat at the ground, some of it spraying my face. “I should shoot you right now, but we need bodies.”

He moved closer, too close.

“I wasn’t running.”

“Liar.” He pushed the barrel of the rifle into my chest, his teeth clenched. “You fucking coward. I always thought you were. You and your dad. They should have let you rot in your cell.”

I thought about Cale waiting for me in the woods, my promise. I couldn’t leave him. I couldn’t let Treban find him too. What if he died alone like this? What if he died from starvation or the cold? I killed him. I did. The phantom touch of Cale’s hands whispered over my skin, the pressure of his lips on my mouth, it was a dream, and this was me waking up. Wake up, Eben. Wake the fuck up.

It happened in the blink of an eye.

I was trapped.

I was trapped.

Trapped... Trapped.

I grabbed the barrel of the gun. There was a shout. Treban. He yelled, his face contorted, but I didn’t hear a word. I swept my foot, clipping his legs until he fell to the ground. He didn’t let go of the gun. He didn’t let go. Let go. Let fucking go. His finger was off the trigger. We fought and grappled and then I had it. I was holding the gun. The gun. I lifted it over my head, wielding it down, and down and down, and just let me go, just let me go, go, go. There was blood, so much blood, and it was quiet, he was quiet, and his eyes were open, and I was running. Drop it, drop it . I was running and the gun fell from my hands. Keeping close to the building, I had to remind myself to breathe. I could feel my pulse in my fingertips and toes, my heart punching my sternum as I broke away toward the tree line, pushing my legs to run faster, to sprint, to burn until I found myself on the edge of camp. I keeled over, on my hands, on my knees, and puked onto the dried pine needles.

Treban's bloody face. His open eyes.

Oh God.

Oh God.

Shouting, more shouting.

They were coming.

"Shit," I sputtered and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

I stood on jellied legs and moved deeper into the woods, running until the darkness of the pines swallowed me and all I could hear was the pounding of hooves. I stopped to breathe, the air like knives to my lungs, and listened to the reassuring beat of the horses moving south, until all that was left was a silence that soothed me to the core. I didn't think about what I had just done. I erased his face from my memory. I had to. I had to. Sunlight peeked through the trees, and it gave me the energy I needed to keep going.

"Eben," Cale whispered as I approached. "Jesus... you scared me."

He threw himself into my arms and his whole body quaked as I hugged him. Cale cried, and the sound of it was tired and relieved and happy, and everything that had happened washed away inside his arms. I had to. I had to. He curled his fists into the fabric of my jacket and pulled me close enough that his breath became my breath.

"It's okay... we're going to be okay."

He let go and ran both of his hands through his hair. "Were you able to find anything?"

I lifted one of the packs off my back. “This is for you.”

Cale’s smile was small and grateful. “This is for real? We’re free?”

“We are.”

I didn’t tell him what I did, too afraid, still in shock. He didn’t need to know. My sins were mine, and it was selfish to expect him to bear them with me. I did what I did, and we were here. Together. I had no idea if we’d be caught, if the NEA would take us on, but right now, together, we at least had a chance.

Though the next few days had been exhausting, we’d kept a steady course north, only stopping to eat cold beans from a can, and sleeping in shifts of two hours at a time. One of us awake, one of us on guard. I never truly slept. Too afraid of what could be following us, of losing him. Cale was the last anchor I had to my humanity, to this world, and I couldn’t fail him. But every hour, every day we went without finding the NEA, made it that much harder to move my heavy legs, to wake up, to keep my eyes open. These days seemed endless, and the small hope I’d found in the darkness, when the moonlight finally granted us cover, had started to fade as the weather turned colder with every step. The temperature tonight had dropped significantly after the sun had set, and as the wind picked up, it made it impossible to keep going.

“We should stop,” I said, dropping my pack to the ground.

“It’s too early.” Cale shivered and I chuckled.

“Come on, I’ll start a fire.”

“Is it safe to—”

“We need it, Cale.” You need it.

Cale grabbed a few pieces of fallen wood as I cleared a spot for the fire.

“You’re right... If we don’t find a NEA camp soon, we might freeze to death,” he said, handing me three small branches. “The mountains are getting close, Eben. Maybe we should have gone to Boulder.”

“Too dangerous and too far. Especially dressed as Freedom militia. At least this way, if we’re found, we’re alone and we have a better chance of pleading our case.”

He rolled up his sleeve and exposed his tattoo. “We escaped.”

I pushed up my sleeve and stared at the number on my skin. “Exactly.” I reached for his hand. His skin was cold between my palms. “You’re freezing.”

Cale laughed and pulled me into a hug. “So are you.”

“I should get the fire going,” I said, wishing we were someplace safe, a place where I could hold him like this for more than the necessity of staying warm.

With the matches in my bag and the dry pine needles on the ground, it didn’t take long to start a fire. With the wind, though, I wasn’t sure how long I could keep it lit. Cale opened his pack and was about to hand me a can of meat when the snap of a tree branch caught my attention.

“Shh,” I ordered and stood slowly. “Did you hear—”

“Put your hands up,” the woman’s voice, loud and sure, bounced off the trees.

Cale and I both obeyed as she took a step forward, her rifle pointed at us. She wore

the gray fatigues of the NEA. The signature patch over her heart, a compass with a rifle through its center.

“You boys lost? This is Essentials’ territory.” Her accent reminded me of my mother’s friend from Minnesota. Well, what used to be Minnesota.

“We were—”

“Stop talking,” she interrupted me. “I’ll ask the questions.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Cale glanced at me, but I kept my eyes on hers.

“Are there more of you?”

“No, it’s just us,” Cale said, and her gaze jumped back and forth between us.

“My CO is checking the perimeter, if you’re lying—”

“It’s only us, we’re runaways. We escaped.” I assured her.

She narrowed her eyes. “Escaped?”

“We were prisoners,” Cale’s voice shook. “We stole these uniforms and ran. Hoping to find NEA.”

“Is that so?” A man, whom I assumed was her CO by the stripes on his uniform, stepped out from the shadows, but didn’t pull his weapon. “Lower your hands.”

His voice didn’t lack authority, but I wasn’t afraid. He was taller than me, more muscle for sure, but he had kind eyes. Pale gray and tired, but kind all the same. I lowered my hands and Cale did as well. The man checked my wrist first.

“Where were you imprisoned?” he asked.

“Elysium.”

He cringed and asked Cale the same thing, rubbing his thumb over Cale’s ink.

“Elysium, as well.”

“Put down your gun, Sammie,” he said and let go of Cale’s wrist. “These men are not militia.”

She didn’t seem sure, but she did as she was told. I probably should have kept my mouth shut, but those kind eyes held mine, and guilt bubbled up my throat.

“I was a Dusk Guard, sir.”

“Eben,” Cale warned but I kept rambling, even when Sammie raised her gun again.

“I was once a prisoner, pardoned, but I thought you should know the truth. I was a guard.”

“And you helped him escape?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?” The man waved his hand, and Sammie lowered her gun again.

“Because... I... um... I...”

“He cares... about me.” Cale’s tone was proud. “Because he cared enough to do the right thing. None of us wanted the hand we’ve been dealt, but he’s the only one in a

long time to do something about it.”

Cale threaded his fingers through mine, and I thought maybe I might have fallen for him right then and there. His pride, his confidence, I wished I had known him before the war. Before all of this had a chance to steal some of his light.

“Well, then...” The man’s smile was crooked as it reached for his eyes. “Welcome to the NEA.”

“Thomas...” Sammie stared at us in disbelief. “This is highly irregular.”

“I’m in charge, Sammie, and I say they’re in. Got a problem with it... talk to Margie. It’s cold as fuck and my balls are freezing. Let’s roll out.”

She rolled her eyes but held her rifle tight in her hand.

“I’m Thomas, Second Lieutenant, and this is Private Warner. She’s a little surly when she’s hungry, don’t mind her.”

“Eben.” I held out my hand. “And this is Cale.”

Thomas shook our hands and eventually Sammie did too.

“We’re still a few miles out from the settlement, let’s put out this fire and head back before it snows. You’re lucky we found you. You’d both be dead by morning with the storm coming in.”

“We’re very grateful,” Cale said as he grabbed his pack.

“Are you armed?” Sammie asked, and Cale shook his head. “Eben has a small knife in his bag, that’s it.”

She searched our bags and confiscated the knife, while Thomas helped me put out the fire.

“Looks dead to me,” I said, and Thomas nodded.

“Everything good, Sammie?” he asked.

She exhaled and ran a hand through her red curls with a small smile. “I hate that you’re always right.”

Thomas surprised me and kissed her on the cheek. “You can thank me later.” He wagged his brows. “Ready, boys?”

Cale and I stared at each other, his lips fighting to suppress a smile as I took his hand in mine. “Yeah. I think we are.”

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:38 am

CALE

The snow started to fall in earnest as we made our way through the thinning forest, the wind whipping through the trees and chilling me to the bone. I'd never experienced such a deep cold, not even in Elysium. I tried to stop my teeth from chattering, tried to hug my arms around my torso to conserve heat, but the heavy wet flakes of snow saturated my hair, stuck to my eyelashes, and weighed down the oversized guard uniform. The wet fabric against my skin made it impossible to stay warm.

"Here." Eben handed me his sleeping bag. "Wrap it around your shoulders. The fabric should keep the moisture off your skin."

"You need that," I protested. "What will you use tonight when this is soaked through?"

"You're freezing." He shrugged and held out the sleeping bag. "Take it. Please."

Uncertain, I held his stare. My mother used to say I was the most stubborn person she had ever met. "Worse than your father" she would have said right then if she were here. I didn't have the luxury of being stubborn anymore.

"Then you'll share my sleeping bag with me tonight."

The corner of Eben's lips twitched, and he rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah. That works."

“Will you two stop fussing over each other and hurry up, I’d like to get back to camp before dinner. Devon is making stew.” Sammie glared at us over her shoulder. “We still have quite a way to go, and if the snow keeps up, we’ll all freeze to death out here, sleeping bags or not.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Eben tucked the bag around my shoulders. “Better?”

“Thank you,” I said and linked my fingers through his. They weren’t much warmer than mine.

“You don’t have to worry about those bags of yours anyway. You’ll have a dry place to sleep at the settlement.” Thomas nodded toward the tree line. “It’s just past this ridge, down in the valley.”

“How long has the settlement been there?” Eben asked.

“Seven months.” Thomas gave us a smile. “It’s not much, but it’s ours. The cities are too dangerous. Denver is overrun with lawlessness. It’s like the wild west all over again. Gangs. Every man and woman for themselves.” He sighed. “The NEA has settlements throughout the Midwest; the East Coast is a lost cause. New York is a nightmare. People are still infected with no way to get aid inside the city. What’s left of it, anyway. Militia did a real number on Manhattan.”

“What about the capital?” I asked and Thomas shook his head.

“Razed. Fucking Freedom militia. Thank God the NEA got the President and his family out. No one knows where the President is, he never stays in one location for more than a month. Sometimes he travels with his husband and daughter, sometimes he’s alone. The other day, we heard on the radio—”

“Radio?” Eben was incredulous.

“Damn it, Thomas, shut your mouth. These boys could be spies.”

“These boys?” He gave me a once over and laughed. “Worst pair of spies I’ve ever seen.”

Sammie exhaled an annoyed breath. “All I’m saying is don’t let all the freaking cats out of the bag, old man.”

“Shit... Old man,” he muttered with a laugh, running his hand over his shorn salt-and-peppered hair. “You seemed to like this old man pretty good last night.”

Color flushed her freckled cheeks, and she clicked her tongue. “Jesus Christ.”

I tried to hold back my smile to no avail. It didn’t seem real. Jokes about sex, and people having conversations like old married couples. The world was on fire, and we were walking through a shit storm. And yet there was a smile on my face, and as I looked up at Eben, he was smiling too.

“Radio?” he asked again. “But there’s no power.”

“There’s some power. Freedom Militia likes to keep their people in the dark. Spread propaganda about how the President turned off all the lights when it was their bombs that took out the grid. Some of the settlements have solar power, some of the smaller cities too. We have some of the best civil engineers on our side. I don’t think we’re anywhere near having what we used to; hell, I’m not sure we’ll ever see the world the way we knew it once, but the President, the government, the NEA, we’re doing what we can with the little resources we have. God knows what’s going on overseas. I sometimes wonder if they’re just living the fucking life over there.” Thomas huffed out a bitter laugh. “Last I heard, the Freedom Militia had infiltrated Europe. Russia, France, UK, even Switzerland... who knows. These fuckers with their radical ideas taking us back to the dark ages. They want dictators, not democracy, Stepford

families. All this crap about God and sinning, when they're out there murdering anything they deem unworthy. It's fucking depressing is what it is."

"Amen." Sammie nudged me with her elbow. "This wind will get worse once we're in the valley. Stick close to your man, I don't think you have enough fat on your bones to last three clicks."

My man.

I turned to look at Eben, his eyes were fixed on something I couldn't see, his smile long gone.

"Hey, are you okay?" I asked and he didn't answer. "Eben?" He finally met my gaze. "Are you all right?" I asked again and he swallowed.

"Yes... yeah. I mean, yeah... I'm good. Just thinking." He gave me a half-hearted smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Are you warm enough?"

"I'll live."

His grip on my hand tightened, his gaze roaming over my face. "I hope so... more than anything."

"Eben..." I whispered his name, a sense of unease gathering in my stomach. His tone had been tinged with something I couldn't place.

Something like fear. Something like goodbye.

"What's wrong, you seem—"

"Oh, thank God," Sammie cut me off with an exhausted groan as we broke through

the trees. “They’ve got the fires started.”

From the edge of the ridge, you could see the settlement off in the distance. A soft orange glow emitted from several tents, the warm color filling the valley while smoke rose in tendrils into the snowy evening sky. As predicted, without the heavy forest around us, the wind’s bite was brutal as we made our way down the rocky pass. It didn’t help that there was a lake on the other side of the camp, creating more unwanted moisture.

“See that copse of trees, it helps with the wind, but sometimes we have to take shifts keeping the central fire going. The settlement is solid. We don’t have plumbing, but our core engineers built us a shower house. We have to fill the tanks with lake water, but it works, and if you’re more of a bath kind of guy we found a hot spring about a five-minute walk from camp. Housing is good, most of the tents are military issues. Heavy duty canvas, equipped with wood-burning stoves. Most of our materials have been scavenged, but the government does what it can to supply us.”

“Won’t the canvas catch fire?” I asked and Thomas shook his head.

“No, sir, they’re treated with fire retardant.” He scratched at the shadow of stubble on his chin. “Lucky for you we have one open. Jack left last month to fight at the front.” He raised his brow. “Unless you both want your own tent? Which would be harder to come by.”

“We’re grateful for whatever is available,” Eben said, his cheeks darkening. “Thank you.”

Food. A shower. A tent. With heat. I couldn’t seem to wrap my head around any of it. It was all too much. Like at any minute I’d wake up and smell rotting apples and hay and my own piss and excrement. But we’d finally have a safe place to sleep. To just be. Be with Eben. My heart stuttered. It had been so long since I’d shared an actual

space with anyone. Let alone someone I was... I didn't know what we were. What would happen once we were safe? When the novelty of escape wore off? His hand suddenly felt heavy in mine. Like I couldn't hold it long enough to keep him close, to keep him by my side.

"Eben, you don't have to share—"

"I want to," he said, his voice soft and low. He spoke in the same voice he'd used in the halls of hell, like we were back in that place. That dark hole where no one could know two men cared about each other. Where death was just one breath away. He let go of my hand as Sammie and Thomas walked ahead. Running his knuckles along the line of my jaw, he bent down and kissed my forehead. "We're in this together, right?"

EBEN

Cale looped a finger around the strap of my rucksack and nodded. His eyes falling to my chest, he shivered. "I would understand though, if once we got settled if this... if you didn't." He swore under breath. "You're not responsible for me."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. Is that what he thought? I was a murderer. I was complicit in his suffering for so long. Every prisoner at Elysium. I'd selfishly allowed it. I didn't deserve any of this. But him. For Cale, I would do anything. Anything and everything to make sure he remained safe, and when I confessed to what I did to Treban, I would deal with whatever the outcome. I would take accountability. As long as he was safe. As long as he was free.

I lifted his chin, staring into those icy blue eyes. His lashes were wet from the snow, his nose, and cheeks burned pink from the wind. "If I had met you before all of this... at work, or maybe at a bar, I would have wanted you then too. I don't feel obligated... my affection might be heightened because of all the shit we've been through, but I'm sure about you, Cale. I could've lit one-hundred lamps in that hell

hole, and nothing would have shone as brightly as you had the night I met you. As you do now. I can't explain it. And I've decided it doesn't have to make sense. You're not an obligation, you're my hope."

Maybe that wasn't something I should have said out loud. Maybe it was unhealthy to feel so close to him, to need him as much as I already did. But I didn't think it mattered. Not in this world, in this new tomorrow where you weren't guaranteed the next twenty-four hours, or even your next breath.

He blinked a few times, his eyes filling with moisture. "That's... I..."

He didn't finish his sentence, his mouth crashing into mine. My fingers made their way under the sleeping bag and found the back of his neck, curling in his hair, pulling him even closer. We were out in the open, and I could feel Thomas and Sammie's eyes, and instead of fear, I understood again what it meant to be free. I had no idea what was in store for us, what Cale would think of me once he found out I'd murdered Treban, what the NEA would think of it. I had no clue what was next, but I could smell the scent of wood burning in the air, and somewhere beyond the silence, I heard drifting laughter on the breeze. We were almost home. It was in the air, in this kiss, and all the death and darkness over the past year was a shadow. It lingered behind us, but it was no longer the shroud making it impossible to see.

Cale pulled away his hand on my chest as he took a deep breath. "I never expected to make it. I never thought... Eben... You're my hope too."

Thomas chuckled. "As romantic as all of this is, my balls are about to fall off, and Sammie turns into a crone if she doesn't eat before seven."

I wiped my thumb across Cale's bottom lip, the split in the skin nearly healed, my heart too amped up to suppress the smile spreading across my face. "Yes, sir. Sorry about that."

Thomas grinned and Sammie rolled her eyes. "I'm not a crone."

"Of course not, dear."

The last mile was rough, the cruel wind never relenting as we navigated our way down the rocky terrain to the valley below. Cale held his own, but that last half mile he huddled close to my side, and I held him as he fought off the violent tremors wracking through his body.

"Almost there," I said, but he only snuggled in closer.

A high, wired fence surrounded the perimeter of the encampment. Two men in gray fatigues with large semi-automatic rifles guarded the front entrance. They didn't hesitate as we approached, opening the giant gate as quickly as possible.

"Shit, sir, we thought you got lost," one of the men said. He was tall with long blond hair pulled back in a tight bun at his nape. "Found some strays?" He glared at our uniforms as the other guy shut the gate behind us.

"Runaways more like it. Prisoners from Elysium," Sammie clarified.

"What's with the fucking Freedom uniforms?" the other man asked, his dark, almost black eyes assessed us. His curious gaze lingered on Cale. "This one looks like he's knocking on death's doorstep."

"Stop gawking and call it in. I'll take them to Margie."

The blond man pulled out a walkie talkie and I stared at it in disbelief.

"How..." I shook my head. The militia had lied about so much. There was power in some places, Thomas had said. Solar energy. Batteries. "I haven't seen one of those

in over a year.”

The other guard, the stockier one with short brown hair laughed openly. He held out his hand and I shook it. “I’m Dexter and that’s Colton.”

“Eben.” I released his hand.

“It’s been a while since we’ve had a greenie in our presence. Welcome back to civilization.”

“Greenie?”

“I guess you’re not a real greenie, though.” He pointed at my green camouflage jacket. “Stolen, I’m guessing.”

I nodded, not sure if I should mention I’d been an actual guard at one point. Thomas gave me a look and I kept my mouth shut. Cale just burrowed deeper into my side. “We need to get Cale inside,” I pleaded, and Thomas waved at a third man wearing fatigues as well.

“Where’s the Captain?” Thomas was all business.

“Back bunk, sir.”

“Give me your jacket,” he ordered, and the man’s brows furrowed.

“Sir?”

“Give me your fucking jacket, Private. This man’s about to die of hypothermia and I don’t have time for explanations.”

A flash of irritation crossed his face, but he took off his jacket and handed it to Thomas. Thomas shoved it at me. “Put this on him and let’s get this over with. You both need a shower and some food, or maybe the other way around.”

“Cale.” He didn’t answer me, and I slowly extricated him from under my arm. “Put this on.” He was shivering so hard I thought his teeth would crack. “We’ll be inside soon, but I need you to put this on.”

I helped him as fast as I could, dropping his wet jacket and the sleeping bag he had wrapped around him onto the ground. I pulled up the hood and he immediately burrowed back into my side.

“Come on... Follow me.”

“Want me to take care of this?” Sammie said, lifting the jacket off the ground.

Thomas looked at it and wrinkled his nose. “Burn it.”

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:38 am

EBEN

“Thomas,” I shouted, ignoring all the curious eyes tracking our movement toward the back of the settlement, and held onto Cale as his legs gave out. “Give me a second. Shit...” I lifted him into my arms, cradling him against my chest. “I got you.”

His eyes closed as his arm wrapped around my neck. His fingers like ice against my skin raised an army of goosebumps along my spine. Panic seized a few of my breaths and I stumbled. He was too cold. Too cold and...

“Can you handle the weight?” Thomas asked and I wanted to laugh, not with humor but with horror.

Cale weighed nothing. Nothing, like he wasn’t real, like he would float away at any moment. Too fragile.

“We have to get him inside,” I said, my voice wavering with anxiety and fear.

Thomas nodded and I followed him as fast as I could manage. He led me up a small hill toward a large wooden structure. Smoke billowed from the rickety-looking metal pipe sticking out from the roof. I realized as we got closer it was one of the shower houses. Steam, humid and hot, smelling of sage and pine, seeped through the cracks of the closed doors.

“There are three stalls,” Thomas said and pointed at one of the doors on the far right. “That one looks open. Take him inside, get him cleaned up and warm. I’ll brief the captain and circle back here in twenty minutes with some clothes and show you to the

dining hall. If you need anything, if he's..." Thomas's assessing gaze swept over Cale's face. "Struggling, call out for help, there's a medic just this way." He pointed to the left of the shower house. "You can't miss it. Just look for the red cross on the door. All right?" When I didn't answer right away, he took a step closer. "Eben... all right?"

"Y-yes, sir." Cale's arm was still around my neck. His eyes still closed, his body violently trembling. The cold-stealing spaces under my skin pooled inside my head like a fog. "Medic, cross, got it."

He chuckled and shook his head. "You got this, kid. Remember, I'll be back in twenty."

A warm orange glow greeted us as I opened one of the shower house doors. A black, iron, potbellied stove sat in the corner of the small space, with stacks of wood piled high all around it. The heat pouring through the room was almost too overwhelming against my frozen cheeks, but I basked in it. The entire room couldn't have been more than eight feet by eight feet, divided into two compartments. One for the stove and wood and a small shelf of dry towels, and the other for the shower. A pipe, made out of the same type of metal as the chimney, looped up and out of the ceiling and through the wooden partition into the shower, its path ending at the spigot. A tall wooden rack sat against the back wall of the shower, filled with green and brown glass bottles, and bars of soap. Small strips of cloth hung from hooks on the rack, while the used ones overflowed out of the wicker basket by the door. I had no idea where the water came from, but there was another pipe, longer than the others that connected to the pipe of the stove and shower head. It looked as though it originated somewhere out the back of the structure. All of this amazed me, the construction and how much planning this had to have taken to create, and once again guilt pinched at my chest. I'd lived with the enemy. Ate their food. Bathed in their cold locker rooms. I didn't deserve to be here.

Cale made a soft sound, and I remembered I might not deserve this, but he certainly did.

“Can you stand for a moment?” I asked.

“I think so. I’m not as lightheaded.”

I set him on his feet, and when he swayed, I wrapped my arms around his waist. “Sit there, okay?” I helped him onto the bench inside the shower stall. “I’m going to throw a few more logs into the stove and then I’ll help you... if you want. I can give you privacy if that’s—”

“Stay,” he whispered, his eyelids drooping. “I’m not sure I won’t pass out. This heat is...”

“A lot.”

He smiled and rested his head against the wooden wall. “Feels good, though.”

“Yeah...” I returned his smile and watched as his eyes closed again, his lips lingering in a lopsided grin.

I focused on that image, Cale smiling and content, as I loaded a few logs into the stove, instead of the guilt and shame pumping through my veins. It was easier to forget everything I’d had to do to survive while I was in the thick of actually surviving, but here, in this place where peace was palpable, I didn’t want to think about how much of myself I’d left inside of Elysium.

CALE

The hot air stung my nostrils and lungs. The tips of my fingers burning with sensation

as my capillaries came back to life. It hurt, the pain searing, but I welcomed it. I worked open the buttons on my jacket, my fingers too numb, and fumbled with every last one until I shrugged the fabric from my shoulders with a long sigh.

“Let me help you,” Eben said, his guard jacket already off, the muscles of his chest outlined under the dampness of his shirt. Of all the things to notice in such a precarious moment. But it was the most normal I’d felt in such a long time. “Can you hold up your arms?” Nodding, I did as he asked, and he stripped my filthy shirt over my head. His eyes looking everywhere all at once, started to swell with tears. “Oh God.”

I didn’t shy away from his assessment. I knew how terrible I looked. How my ribs jutted out, how my pale skin was covered in fading bruises from the beating I received on that final day. I’d been left for dead, and if it wasn’t for the heat on my cheeks, I might have thought I was dreaming. That all of this was conjured up inside my head. Some type of self-induced fantasy.

“Cale, I...”

“We made it out. This...” Finding strength in this small taste of freedom, I trailed a shaking hand across my torso. “It will heal. We can heal, Eben.” He didn’t speak, something dark building in his eyes as he stared at the ground. I shivered as I stood and turned on the faucet despite the fact that we were both partially dressed.

“What are you doing?” he asked, finally meeting my gaze.

“Washing it all away.”

The water was cool at first, slowly warming as it moved through the heated copper piping. Like tiny needles injecting my skin with fire, the water splashed against my bare chest. Eben’s eyes held mine as he lifted his shirt over his head. Neither of us

looked away as we shed away the layers of fabric, the layers of the life we had been forced to endure, until we were naked, and our blood and the dirt and the memories swirled at our feet and disappeared down the grate. Eben lifted his hand, pushing my mop of hair out of my eyes, and I forgot the emptiness in my stomach, the hunger replaced with thousands of butterflies. The indulgent flutter foreign and familiar warmed my bones. Gave me strength.

“I...” he stuttered as rivulets of water trickled down his cheeks, dancing along the line of his jaw. “I have to tell you something.” His expression grave, he swallowed. “I’m afraid... you’ll hate me.”

I placed my palm at the center of his chest, ready to tell him it didn’t matter, that the past was the past. His skin was warm and wet, and I fought myself not to lean in and bury my nose in his neck. I didn’t want to know; I didn’t want to hear it. We were here and it was over. But he looked at me like a man about to confess his greatest sin, a man willing to hang himself on the truth, his heart racing beneath my hand, and as scared as I was to hear him, I couldn’t find the words to stop him from speaking.

“When I went back,” he said, barely above a whisper. “When I left you in the woods to get supplies. A Dusk Guard caught me. H-his name was Treban.”

“Was?”

“I didn’t know what to do. He stopped me, called me a traitor, he had a gun and—”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, my voice cracking. “Eben.” His entire body shook as I closed the distance between us. Chest to chest, I held his face in my hands. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I took a life,” he argued. “I lit the lamps every fucking night knowing what was happening inside. I ate their food. I took their orders. And then... and then you... I...”

God, I didn't know what to do. I k-killed him."

"Would he have killed you?" I asked, wiping away the tears from his face as they mixed with the water from the shower under my thumbs.

"I don't know."

"You do," I said, my tone low and adamant. "He would have, or if not him, you would have died on the front, or at the hands of another guard. You did what you had to do to protect yourself, to protect me. I wouldn't be here otherwise. You lit their lamps. You ate their food. You were complicit. But when it mattered, you made the right choice."

"I killed him." He rested his forehead against mine, his hands at my waist. "And fuck, I'd do it again if it meant we ended up here like this." Eben's lips were less than an inch away, the steam gathering around us, blotting out the world, granting us privacy. "I feel like I don't deserve this. And I know... I know what you're going to say."

I couldn't help but laugh, and it was real and warm like this room, like this moment. "Oh, you do? What am I going to say?"

His shoulders relaxed, his mouth raising into a quiet smile. "That I did what I had to, that I deserve to be free." His brows dipped, stealing the lightness in his eyes. "But it's not that simple."

"Nothing is ever simple. It never has been, even before... Eben." I kissed the corner of his mouth, and his arms pulled me closer. Skin to skin, hip to hip, close, closer than I'd been to another person since the world had been torn at the seams. "You're a good man." I kissed his jaw, his stubble scratching the tender skin of my lips, igniting something base and primal low in my stomach. "You were before and you are now, everything in-between... We've all lost something."

“I don’t want to lose myself,” he said, tipping my chin up with two fingers. “Not ever again.”

“I won’t let you.”

“No?”

I shook my head. “Not ever.”

And I kissed him with waterlogged lips and with our legs and knees unsteady, and his fingers in my hair, and with bruises on my ribs. We were two men sharing a shower, a simple, intimate moment. Not prisoner or guard, or runaways. There was no guilt or shame over the things we had done to survive. There was only him and the heat and the skin on our bones dying to remember what it was like to feel. We kissed and covered ourselves with pine oil soap until every last speck of Elysium had been removed from our flesh, our history cleansed of stale prison cells, rotten apples, and kerosene lamps. The suds bubbled in my hair smelling like earth and rain, and we emptied two of the glass bottles until we were clean enough to remember the good, to smile and touch and come undone with slick hands, and mouths pressed to the other’s neck, open and desperate, with wild gasps we’d never expected to breathe again. Overheated with time forgotten, we were men again. Just men and feeling and love. And I never wanted to let go.

CALE

Dizzy from the heat and the touch of Eben's hands on my skin, I leaned my back against the wooden shower wall to steady myself. His palm slid between our bodies as his lips mapped the shape of my shoulder and my neck. Taking my cock in his hand, he kept his eyes on mine as he stroked me with slow and sure fingers. It was overwhelming, and I lowered my gaze, the view before me too surreal. I remembered then, under the hot water, inside the blanket of steam, with his perfect grip, and with the sound of my moan ringing in my ears, a time when I was someone else. Someone strong, working the orchards, with the burn of the sun on my back, the smell of sweat gathering in my lungs, and the soil under my fingers. I remembered the smell of fresh-cut grass and the feel of straw between my teeth and the days I never wanted to end.

But this wasn't then.

This was a new sky. A new sun.

And I wanted to get lost inside the heat of it too.

"Eben," his name dripped from my lips as I rose higher, and with my eyes open, I let the past go.

I let the feeling take me, the pull in my stomach, the ache inside me building, let it burn away the last year, and I reached for him. This wasn't then. And I was a new man.

Eben swallowed as I traced a line down the length of his shaft with my thumb, a quiet hiss escaping past his lips. We worked together with urgent hands, aware that our time dwindled.

“God,” he groaned, his mouth crashing into mine, his teeth digging into my bottom lip as he came with a violent shudder.

He held me as I fell apart a few seconds later, on weak knees, with his name and whispered pleas spilling between lazy kisses. With my arms wrapped around him, and his forehead resting against mine, we ignored the waning water pressure, until we were both shaking with spent need and a month’s worth of more, more, more.

“Thomas will be here any second,” I finally said once I caught my breath, and the water turned to a trickle.

“I’ll grab the towels.” He gave me a shy smile, one I’d never seen before, and I wished for the old days once again, only so that I had a camera to capture it.

I would have pinned the photo on one of those cork boards that had hung on my bedroom wall, or even better, clipped it in the visor of my car. But instead, I saved it inside a private corner just for me, for when I closed my eyes at night and touched my lips, remembering this night and how I realized I hadn’t lost myself after all.

“Here,” he whispered, and when I opened my eyes again, he handed me a towel.

Eben turned off the faucet and we dried off in silence.

“Are you—”

“Cale, I—”

Another shy smile appeared as he rubbed the back of his neck with his towel.

“Sorry,” I said. “You go first.”

“It’s... I was... I was second guessing myself again.” Taking a deep breath, he wrapped the towel around his waist. “Everything is...”

A knock on the door interrupted him and I quickly wrapped my towel around my waist as well.

“You boys finished up or... I can come back if you need a few more minutes,” Thomas hollered. “The snow’s let up, and I don’t mind waiting if—”

“It’s okay,” Eben opened the door and found Thomas standing outside with an armful of clothing. “I think we ran out of water anyway.”

“I bet you did,” Thomas gave us both a once over. “I’m sure it’s been a while since either of you’ve had a real shower.” He cleared his throat with a smirk blooming at the corner of his lips. “Get dressed, and after dinner I’ll show you how to refill the tank.”

EBEN

Self-conscious, I kept my eyes on the ground as Cale and I dressed inside the shower house. With the soft, well-worn fabric of the NEA fatigue rubbing against my skin, every sound, every sensation came with such clear precision, it made it impossible to pretend like the last thirty minutes had been a dream. I didn’t know what to say. I was wrapped up in my head, in all the what ifs. Had I pushed Cale too far? Had I taken advantage? Worry gathered like a pitch-forked mob inside my stomach as I finally raised my eyes and found him staring at me. His blue eyes were brighter than I’d ever seen them. His cheeks were colored in a deep rose, giving life to his irises. Cale’s hair

was messy and curling around his ears, and it could have been any day outside the shower house doors. Maybe some time in June and everything was right as rain, and I'd never killed a man to survive. Inside these four walls, the plague of the pandemic, the fear of the war couldn't touch us.

"You said you were second guessing yourself again." He shifted and lowered his gaze as he buttoned his shirt. Gnawing on his lip, he asked, "Do you... do you think we shouldn't have..."

"No..." He swallowed and I hurried to clarify, "N-No, I mean, I don't regret it." Cale exhaled and I reached out and brushed my knuckles across the bruise on his cheek. "I thought maybe... that maybe I might've have taken advantage—"

"You didn't." He stepped closer and fastened the last button on my shirt, smoothing his hands over my chest. "Nothing is as it should be... and I wish I was certain about a lot of things, but this." He held one hand to his heart and the other over mine. "I feel human again. I'm sure about you, Eben. With everything catching fire around us, you're the only thing that makes sense." He leaned up and pressed a soft, chaste kiss to my lips. "This... We make sense."

"We do," I said and wrapped my arms around him.

He burrowed into my chest, and we stayed like that for a few minutes, or maybe only a few seconds, but it was quiet and human.

"Not to be a killjoy, but it's not getting any warmer out here," Thomas called out, and Cale pulled away with a soft chuckle.

"We better get going," Cale said, and I gave him a reluctant nod.

If I could, I'd hide in this little hut for as long as it was allowed, away from the

prying eyes of strangers, away from all the real problems and death. But Cale's stomach grumbled, and his comfort meant more to me than anything.

"Let's go." I took his hand in mine and opened the door.

"After dinner, Margie wants to talk to you both," Thomas said as we followed him toward a large bonfire at the center of the camp. "She has questions."

"About Elysium?" I asked.

"Mostly," he lowered his voice. "There've been some reports..." He cleared his throat, turning his head, I followed his gaze toward the front gate. "She wants to ask you about being a guard, and... I don't want to say something I shouldn't. Margie has questions, son. That's all you need to know for now."

"Yes, sir, I—"

"Reports? Are we not safe here?" Cale interrupted and Thomas sighed.

He clapped Cale on the shoulder, his eyes crinkling around the corners with a soft smile. "Don't worry so much, kid. This is one of the safest settlements there is."

I squeezed Cale's hand, pretending like I couldn't hear the lie in Thomas's tone.

"It's going to be okay. We made it out, right?" I didn't care about the reports, or what Margie thought she knew about me, I'd do whatever I had to do to keep Cale out of harm's way.

"Yeah..." The tension left Cale's shoulders as he inhaled a deep breath. "We're safe now."

He held my hand a little tighter as we approached the rows of picnic tables that were scattered around the bonfire. Multiple sets of curious eyes tracked us as Thomas waved at a few people and chatted about the large metal shipping container they'd converted into a mess hall.

"Those militia idiots derailed their own train," he laughed. "Gave us enough grain to last a few years. Margie had hoped to bring a few of the emptied containers back to the settlement, but it was a son of a bitch just getting this one here."

"How did they manage it?" I asked, staring at the rusted metal box with smoke billowing from a makeshift chimney.

"The train tracks are about two miles west of here. It took an entire month and a shit ton of manpower. We had to clear rocks to make a path for the horses and this log-pulley system one of the engineers came up with." He shook his head with a humorless chuckle. "After all of that bullshit, we decided it wasn't worth all the work. We can sit inside during meals, if need be, but if the weather's good, we prefer it outside anyway." Thomas pointed at an empty picnic table. "Have a seat. I'll grab the grub."

"We can help," Cale argued, and Thomas just laughed.

"Trust me, you'll have plenty of time to help out. Now go sit your tired asses on that bench." Raising his voice, he added, "And don't worry about the nosy locals, they don't bite."

It didn't take long for some of those nosy locals to make their way over to the table once Cale and I'd sat down. Kyle, one of the famed engineers, had been one of the first to introduce himself.

"I built the shower house," he'd said, but had been quickly contradicted by his wife

Cara who claimed she came up with the heating schematic.

After Kyle and his wife moved on, more people started to brave their way over to our table, mostly to say hello on their way to drop off their dishes. People offered their names, and titles, and assured us if we needed anything, all we had to do was ask. No one had seemed hostile or untrusting, at least not on the surface. Eventually Thomas arrived with his promised bowls of stew, granting us a small reprieve of being the novelty of the night.

“Don’t eat too fast... you’ll make yourselves sick,” Thomas warned.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d eaten anything this rich, and I assumed it was the same for Cale, but we scarfed it down anyway.

We were almost finished when Sammie and two other soldiers showed up and sat down with their own bowls of food.

“Is Megs already in bed?” Thomas asked and kissed Sammie on the cheek.

“Yeah, she was asking for you.” Sammie’s gaze bounced between me and Cale. “But I told her you were still working.”

“Megs?” Cale asked and Thomas chuckled.

“Our spawn.”

“Our daughter,” Sammie rolled her eyes.

“She’s a hellion,” one of the two soldiers said, and Sammie swatted the back of his head.

“Like you don’t act up like a five-year-old half the damn time.”

“I do not,” he protested, and the other soldier cracked up. “Well, not all the time.”

I laughed even though I didn’t know any of these people. I wasn’t used to the banter, and smiles, and harmless teasing. In Elysium, every day was a fight to stay under the radar, to hide inside the dark corners where no one looked at me too closely.

“I’m Landon,” the soldier said after his laughter subsided. “And this manchild right here is Jack.”

“I’m not a fucking manchild,” he grumbled and stuffed a spoon overflowing with stew into his mouth.

Landon’s smile cracked across his face. “See what I mean?”

Jack grumbled under his breath as he took another bite.

“Eben,” I offered and reached across the table to shake Landon’s hand.

“And you must be Cale?” Landon asked, the skin around his brown eyes crinkling. “Sammie told us you were both prisoners in Elysium?”

Cale gave me a quick glance as he shook Landon’s hand. “We were.”

“That place is a shit hole,” Jack mumbled around yet another spoonful of potatoes and meat.

Jack looked like a typical soldier with his blonde buzz cut and fatigues that stretched tightly across his wide, muscled frame. Whereas Landon had a slighter build with longer black hair pulled back in a ponytail. Jack was handsome with sharp angles and

a square jaw, but Landon was definitely the more approachable of the two with easygoing eyes and laugh lines that reached to a dimple on his right cheek.

“These two will be your squad leaders. The Captain will elaborate more when you speak with her in the morning,” Sammie said, and Thomas’s brows furrowed.

“I thought she wanted to see them after dinner.”

“Something came up.” She shrugged and Landon and Jack shared a look as she stood. “She’s requested that Thomas come alone tonight.” Sammie picked up her half-eaten bowl of stew. “And Eben and Cale are to report to her quarters at 0600 tomorrow.”

Thomas didn’t ask for more of an explanation, and the heavy silence that descended turned the food in my stomach.

“What’s happened?” Cale asked, and I noticed Sammie’s hand was shaking. The slight movement barely there, but enough it made her spoon shift in the bowl.

“The Captain will brief—”

“No,” Landon interrupted her. “They have a right to know.”

“A right to know what?” I asked and Jack groaned.

“Sammie, just tell them.”

Sammie stared at Thomas for a lifetime before he nodded, and she sat down again.

“One of our scouts showed up right after we arrived here with you,” Sammie whispered and leaned in. “There’s a small regime of militia headed this way.” Her eyes met mine. “Some of them are guards from Elysium, some are soldiers they

didn't spare for the front."

"Fuck," the word rumbled low in Thomas's chest. "It's been confirmed then?"

"Yes."

"How close?" he asked.

"The storm held them up," Landon said. "But the scouts think they'll attack tomorrow night."

"Hoping we won't be prepared," Jack snarled. "Fucking idiots. We're always prepared."

"How many?" I asked as Cale's trembling hand covered my knee.

"Maybe twenty." Landon's jaw clenched. "Our scouts didn't get a full assessment before the storm blew in."

"What can they hope to achieve?" Cale's voice was barely audible as though he hadn't meant to ask the question aloud.

"Survival," I whispered, and all the shadows I'd thought I'd left behind inside the cold steel and stone of Elysium shrouded over us.

A chill chased its way through my veins until I couldn't feel the heat from the bonfire, or the steady weight of Cale's hand on my knee.

We'd escaped from our haunted prison.

But the ghosts had found us anyway.

CALE

Smoke billowed from the chimney of our tent, the thick tendrils dancing with the falling snow as I tipped my head back toward the early morning sky. A few flakes gathered along my cheeks and arms. The crystal-laced patterns of ice were a distraction from the fear gathering inside my swollen stomach, already overfilled with the food from last night's dinner. The sun hadn't yet risen, the dark shadows of the pending morning and the soft sound of Eben's snores were my only company. Taking a deep breath, I stared up at the sky, letting the moisture gather on my lashes and cheeks. Everything smelled like pine and sage, and possibility. This meeting we had with the Captain, the fight slowly making its way to the gates, I didn't want to think about any of it. I closed my eyes instead, quieting my tornado of thoughts and allowed my mind to drift, to remember how everything had changed in such a short time. I thought about the heat of the wood stove instead of the cold concrete of Elysium, and Eben's body as we'd slept huddled together in our meager bed, bundled under wool blankets. I thought about the scent of his skin, sweat and soap, and the heavy weight of his arm as he held me and gave me gravity.

Part of me wanted to float away after I'd heard the news about the militia heading our way. Maybe I should have died in that cell, without the tease of dreaming. Maybe that would have been better than to die now, knowing what could have been. The door to the tent zipped open and I turned to find a sleepy Eben staring at me. He rubbed the back of his neck, a tired smile spreading across his lips.

"There you are." Wrapping me in his arms, his chest to my back, he asked, "Did you sleep okay?"

I nodded, even though it was a lie. I hadn't wanted to sleep. Too afraid of what today would bring, and too anxious not to indulge in the last bit of peace we'd been gifted. "Did you?"

"Yeah," he chuckled. "Those bed rolls are a hell of a lot better than those rotting mattresses they had in the bunkhouses in Elysium."

"Better than the concrete floor."

His smile faded. "Cale... I—"

"Don't apologize." I turned in his arms and kissed his cheek. "Don't feel guilty. You were a prisoner too, remember?"

He nodded and I pressed my cheek to his shoulder as his hand trailed up and down my back, warding away the slight shiver making its way under my sleeves. We were both wearing the long johns Thomas had given us last night before he'd shown us to our tent and gave us direction to the bathrooms. "Bathroom" he'd said, "is just a fancy name for the compost toilets." But the small outbuildings had sinks that were set up like shower houses. Better than anything I'd had access to in a long time, so I hadn't complained.

Everything here was so much more than I could have hoped for, and the thought of a few rogue militia coming here to pillage and destroy it set my teeth on edge.

"It's going to be okay," Eben whispered, his fingers working at the new knots that had formed below my shoulders. "This place... everyone here... They have to have a plan."

"I guess that's what the Captain wants to talk to us about?"

Eben's hands stilled and he took a step back, the cool air chilling my skin again. "I think the militia know I'm here, and after what happened with Treban—"

"You don't know that," I argued. "This place is a sanctuary compared to what's out there. They need supplies. This has nothing to do with us."

He stared over my head in silence, and I turned to see what had caught his attention. The flurries had dissipated, making it easier to see the ridge of the mountains where they kissed the pale purple sky. The first rays of dawn had shown themselves, and with the morning scattered among the lingering stars it was hard to imagine anything more beautiful.

"It doesn't look real," he said.

"It's like a painting."

The valley emerged as the sun rose higher in the sky, revealing itself with more brushes of that perfect purple-gray of first light. It had to be close to the time we were supposed to meet the Captain.

As if he'd read my mind Eben said, "We should get ready. Thomas will be here soon."

We stared at the sunrise for a few minutes longer than we had intended, and by the time we were dressed and back from the bathroom, Thomas was waiting for us outside of our tent.

"Put out your fire and let's get going. She doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"Yes, sir," Eben and I said at the same time and Thomas laughed.

The Captain's yurt was at the back of the settlement, which gave us an opportunity to see more of our new home and our new neighbors. Most of the people awake were soldiers, already dressed in the same fatigues we wore. A few of them I recognized from last night, but the majority of them were new faces. Men and women all with smiles as they saluted Thomas.

"You'd think these idiots would be more worried," Thomas grumbled as he waved at an overeager soldier who couldn't have been much older than eighteen. "They all want to be fucking heroes."

"I thought you said we shouldn't be worried," I reminded him, and he cleared his throat.

"Well, conflict in and of itself is worrisome. This shit heading our way, though," he scoffed. "I'm not worried, but all these damn kids, they're too keen for glory and gunfire. I just want to eat, sleep, and fuck my wife. I think I've earned it."

My eyes widened and Eben barked out a laugh. "I'd love to know what Sammie thinks about that statement," he whispered, and I held back a laugh of my own.

"Hell, she'd agree." Thomas puffed out his chest and held out his arm, pointing toward a row of yurts. "Head that way; you can't miss it. The Captain's yurt is the last one at the end of the lane."

"You're not coming with us?" Eben asked.

"I have orders." He gave us a nod before heading back toward the shower houses.

"Shit." I took Eben's hand in mine. "I'm scared."

"Me too," he said. "But I'll do whatever she wants, answer anything as long as it

keeps you safe.”

“Keeps us safe. Your safety matters too. You’re going to volunteer to fight?” I asked, knowing I was right even though he didn’t answer. “Eben?” He still didn’t answer, his grip in my hand tightening as he pulled us down the lane. “You’re not trained, and what about your lungs?” I yanked my hand free from his, and he stopped. “Eben, you can’t.”

“I was a prisoner,” he said, his voice cracking. “But I was selfish too. I could have run away, could have done more than I…” He shook his head when I started to argue, silencing me. “I want to fight for something good, Cale. I have to.”

The words were a vow, and my hands shook at my sides as he turned and stormed down the path with terrifying determination.

EBEN

I didn’t dare look back. If I took one look at Cale’s face I might change my mind. I didn’t deserve any of this. This place or its kindness or its people. I wasn’t militia, but I had been complicit for far too long. I wanted to earn my place here, a place in Cale’s heart. He thinks I saved him, but he saved me.

“Eben, wait.” Cale was out of breath when he caught up to me, and another pinch of guilt twisted my stomach. “Look at me.”

All the air in my lungs seized as I stared at the wetness on his cheeks. I held his face in my hands, brushing my thumbs across his cheeks as he spoke. “You don’t have to fight. You don’t have to prove anything to—”

“Are you boys going to come inside, or do you plan on wasting more of my time?” A tall woman dressed in NEA fatigues glared at us. “Get your asses in here, I don’t have

all damn day.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I dropped my hands, and she rolled her sharp black eyes.

Everything about her was sharp, her chin and pointy nose all made to look more severe by how tightly her salt-and-pepper hair had been pulled back into a bun, as if the tanned skin on her face was being stretched beyond its capability.

I swallowed and followed her into the yurt with Cale right behind me.

“Have a seat. We have a lot to discuss, and I don’t want to miss breakfast.” She watched us carefully as we did as she ordered, something like a scowl blooming at the corner of her mouth.

She reminded me of my third-grade teacher who used to yell at me every time I had to use the bathroom.

“Breakfast is the only thing I look forward to these days. Which makes me feel old.”

I couldn’t tell how old she was, but the mottled colored spots on her hands made me think she had to be over fifty.

“Captain, I—”

She waved me off. “I’ll do the talking.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.” She gave us both a half-hearted smile as she smoothed her hands over the top of her desk. “I take it you’ve both settled in. Got everything you need?”

“Yes, thank you. We’re lucky to be here,” Cale said, the frustration in his tone unmistakable.

She raised her brow and narrowed her eyes. “I suppose you wanted me to be like one of those mother types, all soft welcomes, and serve you cookies and milk while you tell me about your nightmares?” She huffed out a humorless laugh. “Why? Because I’m a woman?” she asked, her Midwest accent more apparent with her anger. “Because that’s what women do? At least that’s what the militia would have me doing. I’m too old to be a breeder, and God forbid anyone with a vagina get a gun. We might revolt.” A real smile graced her lips. “Well, guess what? I got a gun, and that’s exactly what I fucking did.”

“And some of us were imprisoned,” he said. “We’ve lost in this war too.”

“I suppose you have.” She raised her chin, her words softening. “Forgive me. Thomas says I should be more trusting. I guess I always think the worst of people. Occupational hazard.”

“We’re not here for trouble,” he said, and she stared at me.

“What about you? You didn’t lead the militia here?” she asked, and the knot in my stomach gave a painful lurch.

Nauseous, I stammered. “I-I don’t think so.”

“You don’t sound so sure,” she said, any softness she had afforded us disappeared behind her black knowing eyes. “You were a Dusk Guard in Elysium, were you not?”

“I was, but I was a prisoner first.”

She held up her hands. “So, I hear. Though, I find it convenient we have freedom

fighters making their way to our doorstep right after you two get here. Did you stir up a hornet's nest escaping? Or are you spies?"

"Spies?" Cale asked, his voice raised. "He nearly died getting me out. Tell her, Eben. Tell her what you had to do."

The Captain chewed the corner of her lip, again with those assessing eyes seeing through me. Anxiety and fear gripped my throat as I spoke. My words scratchy as I admitted to murder. I told her everything I'd done as a prisoner, as a guard, as a man who had fallen for Cale and hope, as a man who'd killed to be free from the shadows of it all. She listened quietly, her eyes never leaving mine. I wanted to be strong, to show her despite it all I was ready to be more. For him, for me, for the war. But I broke down, the exhaustion of everything, the last few days, few months, this guilt, all the time I'd given to fear, it spilled over, and I couldn't stop the tears. I couldn't stop any of it.

"You fought for what you believed in," she said, and there was a trace of that motherly tone she had rejected earlier. It was there in her eyes too, more brown than black now, under the firelight of her stove. It didn't do much to soothe me. "There is no shame in that. We all had games we played to get through this shit. To live another day."

"He saved me," Cale said. "He didn't have to, I know that. But he still seems to think he owes us all something."

"Cale," I warned, but he shook his head.

"He's going to ask you to let him fight today, and I'm—"

"You don't want him to," she surmised.

“No, ma’am.”

“That’s my choice,” I argued, but the Captain had other plans.

“I will always ask the willing to fight, but you boys would serve us better if—”

“Captain, I can do this. I can fight.”

“You’re not ready, Eben. And Cale certainly isn’t, and something tells me he’d go anywhere you go.”

“I would,” he said, the two words drumming a defiant beat. “I will.”

“See what I mean. You’ll get yourselves, or one of our boys, killed, trying to keep your asses out of trouble.” She sat back, tapping her fingertip on the top of her desk.

“No... you’re not ready for the front line. You want to fight? You want to earn your spot. I can respect that. And you still can.”

“How?” Cale asked before I could.

“With intel.”

“Intel.” I repeated.

“Tell me what you know about these so-called freedom fighters, about the guards, about Elysium. You tell me everything I need to know about those fucks...” Her lips parted as she smirked. “And I guarantee you and Cale a spot here for as long as you want it.”

EBEN

The Captain scribbled furiously as I spoke. I gave her what I could, even though it didn't feel like enough. The ins and outs of Elysium, the weaponry, the armor, the supplies they'd hoarded in the basement of the bunk house. I told her about the horses and how the militia had fled, and about the dead prisoners. I told her how there was nothing left but an empty shell made of stone and darkness. It was useless; the information I had was nothing more than a recollection of my time there, whispered conversations between guards, no real intel that could help the NEA.

"And what of the women's prison? The west camp?" she asked, her sharp eyes narrowing when I shook my head.

"I have no idea. I assumed they killed the prisoners there as well. Maybe they fled too? The men... The male guards were not permitted to guard the west camp."

"That's the first lie you've told." She set down her pencil and leaned back in her chair. "Who guards them then? Women soldiers?"

Confused, I nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Her head tipped back as she laughed without humor and Cale squeezed my knee. "He's not lying."

"Oh?" She raised a dark brow. "And you can confirm this how, Cale? You were in a cell." She shook her head and rested her elbows on the desk, pinning me with her glare. "Women are not permitted to join the militia."

“We were told—”

“You were lied to.” The Captain sighed. “High-ranking officers guard the women.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” I said, and she laughed again.

“Doesn’t it?” Her smile thinned, disgust curling at the corner of her lips. “Women are nothing more than breeders, and if that’s not an option, they’re a hole. They send their soldiers to die while they stay behind and rape the women.” Her fingers trembled as she stared beyond me, remembering horrors I’d hope I’d never have to witness. “I was a prisoner once too. They lied, Eben... and I’d bet every last bag of grain we have they’re still there now. You thought Elysium was well guarded, you have no idea what lengths they’d go to keep the west camp from failing.”

“They let the Boulder front fall?” Cale asked and she nodded.

“Some of the top brass of the militia are housed in the west camp. None of them were at the front. Boulder may have fallen, but this is far from over.”

“Are we... Is it s-safe here?” Cale asked, his grip on my knee tightening.

I rested my hand over his. “I will keep you safe.”

A quiet chuckle turned my attention to the Captain. “Not today.”

“I can—”

“You can’t. You’re a guard with a medical waiver. You’ve never trained. Landon and Jack are your squad leaders. They will train you both when you’re ready. But tonight...” She stood up and I followed her lead, slipping my fingers through Cale’s as he stood and took my hand. “Tonight, you’ll do what Thomas says. You’ll stay in

your tent unless otherwise ordered to evacuate.”

“Evacuate?” Cale whispered, his voice breaking.

“If that happens, follow the others past the lake to the other side of the valley and wait for further instruction.” She nodded. “You’re dismissed.”

She held up her hand and gestured for the door.

“Captain?” I tried and her jaw flexed.

“You will get your chance, Eben.” She stared at me for a breath. “So eager to die... all of you young men are. There are other ways to fight.” Her gaze fell to the way Cale’s hand clasped mine. “Your love is resistance. What you did, do for each other... it’s enough. Don’t be so ready to throw your life away... your life and how you live it, here, and hopefully in the future, that kind of love, you never know...” she smiled then, real and soft. “It could help heal a nation.”

“Love?” I said the word and turned to look at Cale.

His cheeks were stained with tears as his gaze met mine.

Love.

It was a word I’d never thought I could feel. But I did. It wasn’t like it once was, that slow-growing ivy that twined its way around your heart with first kisses and flushed cheeks in bar bathrooms, and late nights with someone you could maybe see yourself with three years from now. No, what I had with Cale was a deeper love. A new type of love, born from hope. Born from survival and dark nights, where his eyes had become the stars I’d grown up with, and all I wanted was a place to rest my head only so I could listen to him breathe. Our love wasn’t slow. It was this bold, couldn’t catch

my breath, where did it come from, fast-growing thing, like a field of wildflowers grown overnight.

Whatever happened next, I couldn't deny that she was right. I'd fallen for Cale. I loved him more than anything. Loved him enough to fight for him, to die if it meant the light in his blue eyes never had to dim again. It scared me, how much I wanted to belong to him, to someone. I'd never had that before. Before everything had changed.

"Eben..." He traced a shape inside the palm of my hand with the tip of his thumb. I wanted to ask him what it was, but the Captain cleared her throat.

"I believe you were both dismissed," she ordered, the softness in her tone long gone.

"Yes, ma'am." I nodded as I turned for the door.

Once we were outside and a good hundred yards from the Captain's yurt, Cale pulled me into a hug. "I'm sorry," he whispered into the crook of my neck.

"Sorry? For what?"

Leaning back, he kept his hands on my waist. "I know you wanted to fight tonight, but I'm glad, Eben. I'm glad she said no, and I can't feel bad about—"

I kissed him, with the orange sun spilling over the mountaintops, and the morning frost stinging our cheeks, and everything the Captain had said resonating inside my chest. Our love was resistance. It didn't lift the burden of my guilt. That guilt I had from taking another life, for months of complicity, but I was here now, fighting, and I made a vow through this kiss, with my hands tangled in Cale's hair, to never stop.

CALE

“You were right,” he said, his lips brushing gently over mine before he pulled away. “I’m not ready to fight... I’m... I’m glad she said no too.”

“Really?”

The skin around his warm eyes crinkled as he gave me one of his shy smiles. “What she said... all that stuff about love.” He cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand.

“Yeah?” I traced another heart into the palm of his other hand. “She’s right about that too. My mom, before...” I took a breath, the memory hitting me hard in the chest. “The day before she was taken, she said something like that. Said we had to stay kind, that being kind in the face of hate was the only way we’d remember who we are. I forgot... or maybe I didn’t want to believe her. But then there you were, with that apple. Your kindness, Eben, it saved me.”

He turned my palm face up. “Was that a heart you drew?” he asked, and I nodded as he traced his own heart in the center of my hand. “Our love is resistance.”

My breath caught in my throat.

Four words instead of three, but the meaning felt the same.

“It is,” I whispered, my eyes following his finger in my palm as he drew another smaller heart. “Or it can be.”

He tipped my chin up with his thumb and finger. “It is.”

It was a promise.

“I never thought I would have this again, after Seven died I... I just didn’t think it

was possible.”

“I’ve never... I mean... I’ve never been serious about anyone before.” He took my hand again as his gaze drifted toward the mess hall. “I thought it was supposed to happen over time. Love was supposed to be this gradual thing; at least, that is what my parents always said. I never thought it could be... like this. I never expected... you.”

“I certainly never expected you.” Smiling, I kissed the corner of his mouth.

“I do, though... love you.” His cheeks darkened. “I know everything is fragile, and maybe I’m out of mind, but I feel it, Cale. There’s nothing gradual about the way you make my heart rattle around inside my chest. And maybe this love... this love is different, but I want it. I want to feel something good in all this chaos, and I hope...” He bit the corner of his lip. “I hope you do too.”

“Eben...”

“I know you loved Seven, and I know it’s not the—”

“I love you, too,” I blurted and smiled at the dumbstruck look on his face.

“You do?”

“Even if it took me time to trust you, part of me knew that day, when you looked inside that bag, filled with rotten apples. Your face, the shock and utter disgust, and then you brought me a fresh apple every day. You were the kindness I’d been looking for, the kindness I didn’t think existed anymore.” I rested my hand on the side of his neck, brushing my thumb along the line of his strong jaw. This man who had saved my life. This man who had killed to make sure we could be free. How could I not love him? “Gradual... fast... when you know you know. And I know. I know I want

to fight alongside you, love you, for as long as I can.”

Eben pressed a kiss to my forehead, and I closed my eyes. I ignored the soft chatter of voices drifting on the chilled breeze, and the smell of bacon coming from the mess hall down the hill, and focused on him.

“We’re going to get through this,” I said.

He leaned back and I opened my eyes. “You’re always so sure.”

“I have you.”

He huffed out a laugh.

“And I have you.”

“Then we’re good.”

After breakfast, Thomas had given us orders to meet with our squad leaders at the supply yurts near the north corner of the settlement. Landon and Jack, along with a handful of other soldiers, were already there and were busy packing rucksacks by the time we’d found them.

“Don’t be shy, Greenie, grab a couple of bags and get to work.” Jack laughed as he tossed a rucksack at Eben. “You too, princess.” He threw another at me, and I grabbed it before it hit me in the face.

“Don’t be a dick.” Landon rolled his eyes. “We need about thirty of these filled with supplies, all right. We’ve got a unit heading out at noon, so we need to hurry.” He

glared at Jack. “No fucking around.”

Jack’s cheeks turned crimson as he shoved a foil-looking blanket into the rucksack he was working on. “Yeah, all right.”

Landon shook his head with a quiet sigh. I tried not to stare as Eben and I made our way over to the table, but there was something about the way Landon’s gaze lingered over Jack. He lightly elbowed him.

“Hey, I’m sorry, okay?” Landon whispered. “I wasn’t trying to—”

“Power trip... sure.” Jack picked up his bag and started to leave.

“Jack...”

“I know... sometimes...” Jack looked up and caught me staring, the rose of his cheeks deepening. “Never mind.” He took his bag to the other end of the table, leaving a space for Eben and me to stand.

“Don’t mind him,” Landon said with a small smile. “He always gets a little cranky before a mission.”

“He has to fight tonight?” Eben asked.

“We all do.” The soldier next to me handed me three packs of MREs. He was shorter than me with dark hair and bushy eyebrows. “It sucks. I was supposed to have dinner with Zara.”

“Dinner.” A girl across from me laughed. “Is that what we’re calling it these days?”

“Last I heard, y’all were just fucking.” The blond guy we met last night at the gate,

Colton, I think, smirked. “Better be careful, might catch feelings.”

“Fuck you, Colt.”

“Been there, done that...no, thanks.”

Eben’s eyes widened and I couldn’t help the smile spreading across my face. Landon noticed. “Aw, did you think you were the only queer rebels in the NEA? In case you missed it, our President is gay.”

“And so is his husband,” Colt laughed at his bad joke, and the guy next to me snorted.

He held out his hand. “I’m Nadim.”

“Cale,” I said and shook his hand. “This is—”

“Eben...yeah, we know,” he said, giving Eben a lazy, salacious smile. “Captain briefed us, welcome to the squad.”

“Oh God, look at you.” Landon chuckled. “What about dinner with Zara?”

“What about her?” Nadim shrugged as he handed Eben a few supplies to put in the rucksack. “Unlike this fucker, I don’t catch feelings.”

Colton flipped him off.

“I’m free to fuck who I want.” Nadim winked.

“Um...” Eben rubbed the back of his neck, and the laugh I’d been trying to hold back slipped past my lips.

Landon pinched the bridge of his nose. “Nadim, keep your dick in your pants, the man’s obviously taken.” Landon’s eyes darted between Eben and me. “And for fuck’s sake, can you just do your job.”

“It’s not like we’re all about to risk our lives tonight or anything...” Another soldier across from me lifted his chin. “Jeff.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“He’s not gay,” Nadim whisper-shouted, and Jeff chuckled.

“You wish I was.”

“Every damn day.”

Eben looked at me as everyone around us laughed and joked like they weren’t about to set off on a possible suicide mission. With a secret smile, he squeezed my hand below the table, and for the next hour we packed rucksacks and listened to soldiers talk about their conquests and whose tent smelled the worst, and every now and then I’d catch Landon staring at Jack. Despite the looming threat of the militia, we’d carved out a small moment in time where we could be young again, where we could be—normal. We could be anyone, friends, family, in laughter, in the small touches of Eben’s hand, in Landon’s stolen glances, in the light of the warming sun, for sixty whole minutes, where the weight of the world had been lifted, we could be free.

EBEN

The log crackled as I threw it into the fire and shut the stove door. Cale's light blue eyes were distant as he stared at the floor. I watched him for a few seconds, watched the rise and fall of his bare chest as he breathed. The pale tone of his skin had already started to take on a bit of sun, his cheeks a healthy shade of rose. But his nerves, they never faltered. He twisted his fingers in his lap and chewed the corner of his bottom lip.

"Hey," I whispered and knelt down next to where he sat on the bed roll.

He raised his eyes and gave me half of a smile. "Hey."

I pushed a strand of his hair behind his ear, letting my fingers trail down the side of his neck and he shivered. "We're going to be okay, remember?"

"I-I know."

"Thomas said the unit left early so they could cut off the militia at the pass," I assured him, and he nodded. "They won't even be near the settlement."

"I know." He sighed as I massaged the knotted muscles in his shoulders. "I'm worried for everyone, though. Jack and Landon and Thomas, everyone we've met... This place feels like home now and they're like—"

"Family."

He turned his head enough to meet my gaze. “Yeah.”

We’d spent the morning helping our unit prepare to leave, and the rest of the day prepping for dinner and babysitting Megs for Sammie since Thomas had left with the squad at noon. The atmosphere in the camp was somber, quiet, the usual hum of chatter almost nonexistent. But Megs was this little exuberant five-year-old who never gave us a moment to worry about what would happen once the sun set. She was a sweet distraction, but under the cover of this dark sky, all we could do was wait.

I kissed the top of Cale’s head, the lemon scent of his shampoo filling my lungs as I inhaled.

“They’re going to be okay. I have to believe that.” I ran my hand down his back, and he leaned into the touch. “They’re prepared. They know what they’re doing, and Thomas seemed... He seemed like this wasn’t anything to be worried about?”

“I think that’s his job, Eben, to keep everyone calm.”

“Yeah, but I also think it’s his job to win, and I trust him.”

“You do?”

I hardly knew Thomas, but I did... I trusted him. He didn’t strike me as someone who would lead his squad to certain death. “I really do.” I smiled when Cale sighed again. “We should try and get some sleep.”

“I don’t know if I can.” Cale scooted to the other side of the roll and fell back onto the pillow with a quiet grunt.

His eyes tracked me as I stood and pulled my shirt over my head, roaming over my chest and down to my stomach. My pulse skipped as he wet his bottom lip, the rosy

color of his cheeks darkening when he noticed I was staring at him too. His Adam's apple bobbed, and he lifted his gaze to the ceiling of the tent. I admired the porcelain color of his skin, the fragile curve of his ribs, and the delicate muscle of his long limbs.

“Cale—”

“I...” His laugh was soft, embarrassed. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” I pulled the blankets back and crawled in next to him on the bed roll. “For what? Looking at me? I like it when you look at me like that. It feels... I don’t know, normal, like all this chaos has been set to pause for those few seconds.” Looping an arm around his waist, I pulled him closer. “Don’t ever stop looking at me, Cale.”

He turned onto his side, bringing us chest to chest. “I won’t.” Raising a hand, he rested his palm on my neck and kissed me.

Cale’s soft lips moved against mine, unhurried, like he was taking inventory of every dip and curve. My fingers trailed along the groove of his spine, to the small of his back, tucking him in even closer, until we were hip to hip, his thighs pressing against mine. His soft breath, mint scented and sweet from the homemade toothpaste we’d used earlier, ghosted across my lips as he rested his forehead to mine.

“I don’t want to feel scared anymore,” he whispered, his voice shaking. He snuggled in, sealing off any space between us. The hard length of his cock pressing next to mine. I held in a moan as he spoke. “I think... I don’t know, I just...”

He kissed me again. His soft edges melting away into something urgent and demanding. Hands and teeth and breath until I was on my back, and he was straddling my hips. His tongue dipped into my mouth on a moan as I gripped his ass. He rocked against me, his cock aligning perfectly with mine and we both gasped. He buried his

face in my neck, grinding his hips relentlessly like he had to chase this feeling, this moment, and fuck, I wanted, needed to chase it too. But the only time I'd been intimate with him was in the shower house and we had both been half delirious. For once we had time. Time to be together. To explore. To take pleasure in a moment. To cherish it.

“Cale...” I pinned him against me, stalling his movements and he whimpered. In one swift move, I switched our positions and rolled him onto his back. His blue eyes widened with surprise, his lips swollen and wet, his hair sticking in every direction. My cheeks hurt with the smile that spread across my face. I hadn't smiled like this since, I couldn't remember when. “You're so beautiful.” He pressed his lips together to suppress his own smile, his dark lashes fanning low and close to his cheeks as he blinked up at me. “You are... I... I'm so lucky—”

He covered my mouth with his hand, his cheeks the brightest pink I'd seen yet, and shook his head. “I'm the lucky one.”

I thought maybe we were both lucky.

Lucky to have this time.

To have each other.

He moved his hand and lifted his head to kiss me, but every time he tried to pick up the pace, I slowed him down. I left wet kisses on his neck and tasted the tender skin below his ear. I moved slowly down his body, leaving a wake of goosebumps behind every kiss I placed along his warm skin. The fire light glimmered, the heat of the room and from our bodies lingered in the thick air. Despite the heat, his nipples hardened as I kissed them too. He ran his fingers down my neck as I moved even lower. He bit his bottom lip, his icy blue eyes hooded as I licked into the dip of his belly button.

“Is this okay?” I asked as my fingers curled around the waistband of his thermals.

He nodded, his lips parting with a whispered “Yes.”

Outside the world was quiet, the only sounds made were here. In this tent. His raspy breath as I took the head of his cock in my mouth, the crackle of the fire, the soft swish of the blankets as Cale scrambled to grasp the fabric in his fist with a groan.

“F-Fuck,” he groaned again, and I lapped at his salty skin, teasing open his slit with the tip of my tongue, trying to taste as much of him as I could. “Eben... G-God.”

He lifted his hips, pushing deeper into my mouth, and I swallowed as much as possible. I wanted him to have this moment. Cale’s eyes were glazed, lost in the feel of my mouth. I wanted him to have this control. To feel loved and needed. I wanted him to feel powerful again as he fucked my throat. There was no sign of fear in those deep blue eyes as he gripped the back of my neck, burying my nose in his pubic bone. No terror in the way he took what he needed. No more dread. Only heat and love and the scent of him on my lips and skin.

“You’re going to make me come,” he panted as he scratched at my shoulders.

I backed off, taking a deep breath, licking a long line down his shaft, kissing the soft skin of his sack. He spread his legs, exposing himself even more. I nipped his inner thigh as he pulled his knees to his chest. I sucked on my thumb before tracing the pad of it around the tight rim of his hole.

“Yes,” he breathed, and I did it again. “Eben...”

My cock was heavy between my legs, aching to sink inside of him, to show him how good I could make him feel, to take away any lasting fear. I didn’t want him to think about anything but this. This time, where we could have been anywhere, together,

loving each other, and maybe the world wasn't really burning.

Leaning down, I circled my tongue around his sensitive skin. He held his legs up, spreading them even more, his knees almost touching his chest. His ass fully exposed.

"Christ." He was perfect. "Cale, I want to feel you..." I held his gaze. "Can I... Do you want me to—"

"Yes, Eben. I want to feel you too."

I yanked my pants down and kicked them off my feet, laughing when I bumped my head against Cale's ankle.

His smile split across his face. "Kiss me," he said, and I lost myself in the taste of his mouth.

CALE

Eben's full lips devoured mine, taking away any last shard of trepidation I had. Too much was happening around us, but I needed this. I needed to feel like a normal twenty-four-year-old guy who fucks his boyfriend. Who likes sex and smiling. I wasn't in the cell anymore, and I refused to let the darkness follow me here. This bed was ours, and in this sacred place, we owned this night.

His hands skated over my stomach and hips, his mouth mapping a hot path down my body. He kneeled between my spread legs, his curved cock jutting out, long and leaking from the tip. He was so much stronger than me. The muscles on his stomach twitching as his dark eyes appraised me, looking at me like I was the most amazing thing he'd ever seen.

"I love you," he said and placed a gentle kiss on the inside of my knee. "God, so

much.” He leaned down again and pressed another brush of his lips to my inner thigh.

“Love you,” I whispered as he spread my legs even more.

I drew my knees to my chest and my eyes rolled into the back of my head as he dragged the flat of his tongue against my hole, over and over until I was writhing with need. Need for more. More of him. I couldn’t take another second of the emptiness. This empty feeling had been building inside of me for months. Until him. Eben. He could give me what I needed. He could fill this void. My cock throbbed, my orgasm hovering below the surface as his tongue fucked inside of me. I gripped the sheets, gritting my teeth as he ate me out, adding a spit-soaked finger and God, that void, it started to fade. That black hole, that man who was lost in the dark, he flickered with the fire light, disappearing into the shadows as Eben pushed a second, slick finger inside me.

“You good?” he asked, and I tried to rasp out some sort of confirmation. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I’m good.”

He took his time, stretching me with his fingers, drawing it out. When he slipped in his third finger, a pinch of pain made me gasp. He waited, his eyes on mine. “Cale, I—”

“Keep going.” I begged. He couldn’t stop. Not now. I was almost there, to that place where I remembered who I was, who I could be again. A man who was loved and owned and a part of something more than day-to-day fear. “Please, Eben... show me how much you love me.”

White spots danced behind my eyes as the head of his cock eased inside of me. He waited again, counting each of my breaths until I adjusted, until the burn became

something more—a fever under my skin, heat flaring in my chest and cheeks as his body carved deeply into mine. With only saliva, it was rougher than I remembered, but I invited him in, inch by inch. Slow and steady and perfect.

“Jesus, Cale.” Eben’s jaw pulsed with restraint, sweat beading on his forehead. “You’re... It’s too much, so tight.” My knees were draped over the crook of his elbows. I was at his full mercy, but I trusted him.

He’d take care of me.

Eben lowered my knees and leaned down to kiss me. Our tongues tangled in a slow fight for dominance as he finally bottomed out inside of me, our mouths opened, breathing fast little puffs of each other’s air as he allowed my body the time it needed to accommodate him. We were one person, each breath the same. Skin to skin, sweat mingling, his forehead resting on mine. I slid my hands down his back, over the round curve of his ass and tugged him even closer. “I need you, Eben.”

He rocked his hips, thrusting in short, gradual waves, holding himself back with low, rumbled grunts until I couldn’t take it anymore, and my hips started to follow his rhythm. Faster and faster with every slide of his cockhead against that spark inside of me, I grew closer and closer to forgetting those dark walls that had held me prisoner. The flame burning in my belly, at my spine, became a wildfire as he fucked me harder, forgetting himself too.

“P-Please,” I said, not sure what I was asking for. “Eben, God... please...”

He moved faster, moaning when I leaned up and nipped at his chin. His tongue dove into my mouth, his teeth pulling at my bottom lip as he sucked in a ragged breath. I reached for my cock, my strokes furious as I raced toward the end, to the death of that soul inside his cage.

“E-Eben,” I cried out as I painted his chest with my release.

The overwhelming relief, it was endless. More and more, my entire body stilled, my throat closing around another moan until my limbs started to tremble again.

Eben’s strong arms scooped me up as he leaned back and fucked into me. His hips stuttered as he came with a loud groan. The neighboring tents no doubt heard everything. “Cale, fuck.” His hips jerked as my ass spasmed around the base of his cock, ripping another desperate noise from his chest.

He chuckled as I went limp in his arms. Panting, he buried his nose in my neck. He kissed my collar bone, my shoulder, and lowered me back down to the bed roll. I winced as he pulled back, his soft cock slipping from my body, and he cringed.

“Shit, are you all right?”

“I’m okay, I promise.”

He grabbed one of the smaller blankets and used it to clean us both before he kissed my stomach and snuggled in behind me.

“How do you feel?” he asked, and I turned enough I could place a quick kiss on his lips.

“Like myself... does that make sense?”

He huffed out a warm laugh and nodded. “Makes sense.”

“You remind me, Eben, that I’m still in here. I’m still me.”

He didn’t say anything at first, taking the next few minutes to paint hearts on my hips

with the tips of his fingers. It was too much, the heat of his body, the fire, the sweet ache of my muscles, my eyelids started to droop. I was half asleep when he finally said, “You’re the strongest person I’ve ever known.” I rolled over again, bringing my chest to his. He smiled, pushing my hair off my forehead, his eyes memorizing my features. “You don’t need me to remind you, Cale. You’ve done that all on your own. I’m just glad I get to watch you find yourself again.”

“You help me,” I said.

“Maybe...” His grin was quiet. “I want to take you somewhere tomorrow. Maybe the hot springs?”

“Eben...” His smile fell. “What if the squad—”

“No what ifs, all right. Not tonight.” He ran the back of his hand along my jaw. “Let’s just pretend a little longer that the world isn’t waiting for us out there.”

“Okay...” My smile wobbled as a sudden heat grew behind my eyes. “The hot springs then. We could bring lunch.”

“Hmm.” His eyes closed. “I’d like that.”

“Tomorrow then?”

“Tomorrow.”

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:38 am

CALE

Time had become a vacuum.

Sticky skin.

Sweat.

Heat.

Too warm.

The smell of smoke.

Pop... pop... pop.

My eyes blinked open, a loud shout jarring me awake.

“Go, go, go,” a deep voice boomed somewhere in the distance.

Another rapid, pop, pop, pop, and Eben sat up with a gasp, “Shit... was that—”

“Gunfire,” I answered, and we both moved.

Stumbling over our blankets and each other, we hurried to stand and get dressed. Shouts and more gunfire rattled the night outside our tent.

“What’s happening?” Fear soured inside my stomach as I zipped up my pants.

“I don’t know,” he said, pulling on his jacket. He’d gotten dressed so much faster than I had, which made me wonder how many times he’d had to wake up like this—in shock and ready for a fight. “But it sounds like they’ve breached the—”

“Eben! Cale!” Sammie called for us, her voice shaking.

“In here.” Eben unzipped the tent door as I pushed my socked feet into my new pair of boots. “What’s going on?”

She had Megs with her. The little girl’s big gray eyes filled tears.

“Another unit...” she said, out of breath and shook her head. “We didn’t know... the squad—” Her voice broke.

“Sammie,” Eben’s tone, a soft command. “Take a breath, okay. Easy...” She did as he asked, taking slow swallows of air into her lungs. “Just like that.”

I turned as more gunfire erupted somewhere in the dark, my eyes widening as I realized some of the settlement’s structures were on fire. The early morning sun was barely spilling over the mountains as smoke billowed up toward the sky. Panic gripped my heart.

They were here.

“Sammie...” Eben took my hand, stilling my trembling fingers. “Can you tell us what happened? What can we do?”

“The militia... They sent two units, one at the pass and one we didn’t know about. They breached the gates. You have to take her. Please take her... take her with you...

I can't leave Thomas. I have to help. I have orders I have to—"

"We're not leaving you like this," I said, my dread leaking into my words. "We can't abandon—"

"She needs you, please. " Sammie knelt down to her daughter's height. "Megs... you go with these nice men, okay, like you did yesterday." She thumbed away her daughter's tears from her cheeks. "Mommy will meet you at the safe place in a little while."

"I'm scared." The terror in the little girl's voice wrecked me.

"I know, baby, but you have to be brave for me, just for a little while longer, okay?"

Megs sniffled. "I don't want to."

"It's okay," Eben said. "We'll make sure she's safe."

The shouting and gunfire seemed to be fading farther from the residents' tents.

"Where do we go?" I asked, barely able to mask my own terror as I spoke.

"Head straight for the mess hall," Sammie ordered. "Colton is there. He's heading the evacuation."

"I thought he was with Thomas?" Eben asked, and Sammie shook her head as she stood.

"The squad came back. The militia... the unit they sent through the pass retreated. They were a distraction." She swallowed hard and rolled her shoulders. "Stop asking questions and do as you're told. Find Colton and head out."

“Yes, ma’am,” Eben said with a respectful nod of his head as he let go of my hand and held the girl’s instead. “We’ll make sure she’s safe.”

“Stay with them,” she said, and Megs nodded. Her red curls falling in her face. “When you get to the safe place, honey, Mrs. Bree will already be there. She’ll watch you too.” She gave her daughter a hug and Megs started to cry. More gunfire rang out and we all turned our eyes to the gate. “There’s no time...” Sammie whispered and took a step backward. “There’s no one else. They’re all evacuating as fast as they can, I’m trusting you,” she said, and the weight of her words bore down onto my shoulders.

“I promise you,” I said. “We’ll protect her with our lives.”

Megs started to cry full force, every fractured sob shaking her small body as her mother turned and ran toward the gate. “It’s okay, baby girl,” Eben whispered and picked her up. “Can you be brave like your mom said? We have to find Mr. Colton and he’ll take us to Bree, okay?”

Megs gulped the air like it was water, big shuddering breaths, and wiped her fists across her eyes. She burrowed down deeper into her winter coat. “O-o-okay.”

“I’ll grab my jacket,” I said, and Eben’s throat bobbed, the only sign of the alarm under the surface of his calm facade.

“Grab the bag we packed yesterday; we’re going to need it.”

My heart bounded, banging against my sternum like a bass drum, my hands shaking as I pushed my arms through my jacket and grabbed the evacuation rucksack we’d made yesterday “just in case.” The fire in our stove was almost out, but I doused it with a little bit of water anyway. Quickly tying my boots, I stole a glance at the tangled blankets on our bed roll. The burn on my lips and the ache in my

muscles—the only evidence it hadn't all been a dream.

“Tomorrow then?”

“Tomorrow.”

Tomorrow was the real dream, something hiding on the horizon. Unreachable.

I zipped up the tent behind me and we took off toward the mess hall in silence. Our fear was palpable, every corner we rounded was a threat, every step we took a possible trap. But Eben kept moving, Megs wrapped up tightly in his arms. Anxiety thrummed through my veins as we got closer to the center of the settlement. It was easier to see the fires once we'd made it through the residential area. To my relief, none of the tents had been targeted. There was one guard tower still burning, and off in the distance, a few NEA soldiers scrambled to put out a fire that had started in one of the supply yurts. Everything was chaos up the hill as well, with most of the residents running with their families toward the lake. Gunfire crackled constantly somewhere outside the gates in the valley. A small pang of guilt twisted through me. Who was out there fighting? Who wouldn't we see if we made it to the evacuation shelter?

“Wait.” Eben stopped abruptly, darting his free arm out to push my back into the wall of one of the bath houses. “Shit.” His chest heaved as his back hit the wall too. Megs whimpered and he gave her a forced half smile. “Shh, baby girl. We're going to play hide and seek, okay? And right now, we're hiding.” She nodded slowly. “And we don't want anyone to hear us, so I need you to be extra quiet. Can you do that?” She nodded again, her bottom lip quivering. “Good girl.”

Eben met my gaze, and the fear I saw in his dark brown eyes fell into my gut like a sledgehammer. He shook his head and started to hand Megs to me. “If I tell you to run,” he whispered to me. “You run.”

“What?” I hissed. “Eben, no. Absolutely not.”

“Shh.” He shook his head again, and I took Megs into my arms. “Please, Cale.”

I swallowed past the growing panic lodging itself inside my throat. “Okay.”

Eben reached into his pocket and pulled out the small pocketknife he’d gotten back from Thomas yesterday before the unit had left to fight off the militia.

“You two,” a deep voice rumbled, and my heart froze. Was it NEA? Militia? “Leave it, let’em fight the fire, find the CO. She’s gotta be here somewhere.”

Oh God.

Militia.

“Yes, sir,” two male voices answered in unison.

Footsteps sounded in the opposite direction from our hiding spot, and that glimmer of hope persuaded me to take a deep breath. But Eben stayed motionless. Megs started to say something, and my hand darted to cover her mouth, my pulse like a runaway train. Two deep furrows formed on Eben’s forehead, his hand shaking as he gripped the knife harder.

Footsteps.

Headed in our direction.

Slow.

One... two...

One... two...

“I can see yer shadow,” the deep voice shouted. “Show yerself, you fuckin’ cowards.”

Eben’s eyes slammed shut and a scream trapped itself inside my chest. Megs let out a soft cry that vibrated against the palm of my hand where I’d tried to silence her.

This was it.

Our promise was broken.

Tomorrow would never come, and last night had only been a dream.

“Come on now,” the man said, his deep southern drawl curling around his words. “I ain’t got all fuckin’ day.”

The smoke in the air had grown thicker as the men doused the fire with more water, and it filled my lungs, making a home alongside the panic and dread.

Eben shifted on his feet, and I barked out a raspy, “No.”

But it was too late.

“When I tell you to... run,” he said and stepped out of the shadows.

EBEN

I wouldn’t let it happen. I wouldn’t let them cage Cale again or take Megs to the west camp. I would do the right thing this time.

The guy was an officer. His rank displayed proudly on his sleeve.

His smirk turned into a cruel smile when he saw me, his cold eyes falling to my small pocketknife.

“Whatch’a gonna do with that, boy?” He laughed and lifted his pistol. “I’ll shoot yer ass dead, you understand?” He kept his gun steady. “Anyone else with you?” His keen, dark eyes trailed toward the bath house.

“No.”

“No?” He took a step, and I stood taller, gripping the small handle of the knife as hard as I could. I had to protect Cale. Megs.

“Take another step and I’ll—”

He lowered his gun and shot near my feet, and I stumbled back, almost falling onto my ass. “You’ll what, boy?”

Sweat dripped down my temple, my muscles seizing with shock. I didn’t dare look over at the bath house, hoping like hell Cale would stay put until I could distract this guy long enough for them to run.

“I-I’m just trying to—”

He shot again, this time spitting dirt onto the tips of my boots. The knife fell from my hand.

“Try’in to what?” He waved his gun. “Help yer little friends put out our fires?” He took another step and then another. I held my ground. He was close enough I could try and charge him. He wasn’t much taller than me. He was older too; his muscles

less lean. He reminded me of Lux. The way his stomach hung over his belt buckle. I could knock him down, tell Cale to run. If I was lucky, I could disarm him, if I wasn't, at least Cale and Megs would have the distraction they needed to get away and get to the mess hall unharmed.

"You hear that?" he asked and looked up at the sky. "All that gunfire... we've got you cornered."

"You don't know that," I argued needlessly, buying myself time.

"Don't I? Why do ya think this place is deserted... everyone runnin' like cockroaches." He pointed his gun at my chest. So close. I could reach out and touch the barrel. "Looks like we missed one."

"Run," I roared at the same time I bolted forward, my fist connecting with his arm.

Or maybe it was his chest? I couldn't tell. All of my focus was geared to getting him to the ground. The fabric of the man's fatigues cut into my knuckles as a loud crack sounded through the air. Two words on a timeless loop inside my head, keep swinging. Heat bloomed in my shoulder, piercing pain ripping through my left arm. I threw my fist again, meeting the air as I tripped. Another crack, not as loud, more like a snap, and more agony rippled through me, my jaw, my cheek bone exploding with fire. Hands in the dirt and copper on my lips and another crack, bone deep, my ribs giving in, stealing my breath, the air sharp in my throat and blood in the sand. Keep swinging. Knees bent, fabric in fingers, pulling at my nails. Keep swinging. The pain was a rapid, swelling with the rain, drowning me, battering me against the rocks at the bottom of the river. Keep swinging.

Another crack.

Silence.

Through gritty eyes, I stared at the sky, like blue eyes, Cale, as the river bubbled next to me. I felt the water on my fingertips, thick and warm. And Cale calling me home.

“How long till he wakes up?” Cale’s voice was thin like gauze as I opened my eyes. Bright sunlight streamed through the room and made my head hurt.

“I’m not sure,” Thomas said, and I thought I was still asleep, dreaming. I closed my eyes, the light too bright. “We’ll know more once the doctor comes back.”

A warm hand on my forehead had me opening my eyes again. “Eben?”

“Hey,” I croaked and tried to smile, his eyes were too sad. My lips cracked and I winced.

All at once, the memories flooded me. The fires. The gun shots. The smoke. The gun pointed at my chest. I tried to sit up and the room started spinning. “Megs?”

“She’s safe,” Thomas said and gave me a lopsided smile.

I inhaled a deep breath, but a sharp, searing pain threatened to split me in half.

“Fuck.”

“Fuck, indeed,” Thomas chuckled. “You tried to get yourself killed and nearly succeeded.” He looked at Cale and my eyes followed.

Cale.

Tears welled up in his eyes as he stared down at me. “The doctor will be back soon,”

he said.

“Back?” I asked, confused about what had happened and where we were. “What happened?”

Cale choked on a sob as he sat next to me. I was on a mattress. A bed? And the room was round with a tall ceiling, the smell of rubbing alcohol stung my nose and I tried another breath. “Eben...” He touched my forehead again and my eyes wanted to flutter shut and sleep for an eternity. My body, heavy with exhaustion, I did my best to stay awake.

“I’m sorry,” I said and my eyes stung.

“Shh,” he whispered and left a tender kiss on my lips. “You’re in the medical yurt. That militia pig shot you in the shoulder. You... God, you fought so hard, I thought...I thought you were d-dead.”

“Doc said the bullet went straight through,” Thomas said with what sounded like pride.

“Jesus.”

“Got a concussion too, and some bruised ribs. You really got the shit kicked out of you, kid.” Thomas’s gray gaze fell to the floor. “Thank you... for keeping my daughter... for risking your life to—”

“Thomas, I... Of course,” I said and, despite the pain and the roiling nausea in my gut, I attempted to sit up again.

“Don’t,” Cale ordered and stood. “Here.” He took a few blankets from somewhere and tucked them under my pillow, propping my head up so I could see my

surroundings better.

The room had several beds, all empty.

My shoulder screamed with pain, but I fought it. “The militia officer is he... dead?”

“Yes,” Cale said. The word trembled in the air. “I thought you were... He was hurting you, kicking you and...” His lips trembled. “I didn’t know where you’d been shot. There was so much blood. You were on the ground, Eben, and I... I had to do something, I couldn’t leave you like that.” More tears spilled from his eyes and down his cheeks as he sat next to me again. “I’m sorry.”

I reached up with my right hand and held his face. “Why?”

“I didn’t think. I shouldn’t have let you stand on your own. I should have helped you sooner, but I was scared, and I had to hide Megs in one of the residents’ tents. When I came back, you were on the ground. H-He had his gun to your head, and oh God—” A sob wracked through him, and I started to cry too. “I saw your pocketknife in the dirt. And I did what I needed to do. He was going to kill you. He didn’t know I was there; he never saw me coming... I grabbed it, t-the knife, I fucking grabbed it and stabbed him in the neck.”

“Cale...”

He leaned down and rested his forehead to the center of my chest. His fingers gripping the side of my shirt.

“I’m glad I did it,” he said. “I’m glad he’s dead. I’d do it again and again if I had to. We made a promise to Sammie, and I... Eben, I... I needed there to be another tomorrow. I need you. I can’t lose you.” His shoulders shook as he cried into my shirt, his tears pooling into the fabric and onto my skin.

I ignored the gnawing pain in my head and the sharp twinge in my ribs. I ran my fingers up and down his back and told him everything would be okay.

Over the next few days, a storm blew in and the militia's forces had been pushed back. Their lack of manpower and inexperience in the snow had led them to defeat. The NEA had been able to secure the settlement, allowing the residents to return from the evacuation location. Cale had barely left my side, and when he had, it was only long enough to shower and get us our meals. The doctor had told me I'd lost a lot of blood, but my shoulder should make a full recovery. After the medical yurt had started to fill with more patients, I thought I'd get to leave, but he'd made me stay for three full days because of my concussion.

"I'm serious," the doctor had said. "You're not to leave this room for seventy-two hours."

I had been given orders to take it easy. Drink lots of water. And to use my pain meds sparingly as they weren't sure when the next shipment would arrive since our trade routes had been compromised thanks to the militia.

"Are you sure you're feeling better?" Cale asked as he helped me tie my boots. "You can stay longer if—"

"I'm okay. I'm alive, and that's better than some can say," I whispered and stared around the room.

Cale's sad eyes found mine. Eleven NEA soldiers had been killed, including Dexter. Landon had gone missing along with two female soldiers. Guilt stabbed at my already tender ribs. I was here with Cale, and I would fight for that, for that tomorrow we'd promised each other. I would fight for those we'd lost, but it didn't make surviving

feel any more deserving.

“Don’t do that,” he said as he stood to his full height. He was stronger, sure of himself in a way he hadn’t been before the battle. “I can see it in your eyes. The guilt. You deserve to be here, just as much as everyone else.

“Do I?”

“Yes,” he said in a tone I’d gotten to know well over the last few days. It was a loving slap to the back of my head. “A life is a life.”

“But Landon, and the other hostages, and those soldiers that died, some of them were fathers, and maybe sisters or brothers, and Christ, maybe moms. Why... Why do I matter in all of this?”

“You matter to me.” He gave me his soft smile. “You saved me. You saved Megs. A daughter .” Cale didn’t back down. “Thomas said they’re making a plan to look for Landon and the two other soldiers. The Captain thinks they’re taking them to the west camp. Once we’re back to full health, we get to train. This isn’t over. We get to help make things right, Eben.”

“I want that.”

“I know you do.” He brushed his thumb over my bottom lip. “The other night, I didn’t think anyone would find us, and you needed help, and I had that officer’s blood on my hands, and yours, and all I cared about was you. I thought you were going to die, Eben. I was terrified. And then, Thomas found us, and he got help and we got you to this freaking tent. And while the doctor was working on you, all I could do was think about what ifs... what if you didn’t make it. What if I lost you?” His eyes were glassy, blue pools as he raised his hands to my cheeks. “Thomas saw me. Saw through me and he told me... He said, “ The sun is rising, and every day is a new

breath, each step we take means something .” He said, “We’ve come too far for everything to fall apart now.” Maybe he was talking about the war, or you, or his wife... But he was right. The steps you’ve taken, they’ve led you to me, and to this... I don’t think we’re lucky, or that we’ve been spared, Eben. I don’t think luck deserves that much credit. We earned this.”

He lowered his hands and rubbed his neck, a few pieces of his hair on the side of his head were sticking up in different directions. It was odd, but I couldn’t stop staring at the dark strands. It was such a regular, everyday thing. Bed head. It wasn’t bullet wounds or lost friends or split lips. It was real. He was here and safe and he’d saved my life.

“I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you,” I said.

That soft smile that belonged to me spread across his lips. “I guess that means were even,” he said and kissed me as my fingers curled around his messy strands of hair.

CALE

TWO MONTHS LATER

My breath seeped past my lips, forming a cloud of fog as I made my way back to the tent. My hair was still wet from the shower, frost clung to the ends as snow fell in fat clumps around me. It had been another hard day of training. My muscles rebelled with every step I took, but I loved it. The ache encouraged me. I was building toward something. I'd gained weight and was stronger, more like the man I'd been before the war. Confident and able-bodied. I'd learned a lot about myself over the past couple of months. I'd discovered I enjoyed hand-to-hand combat, and the satisfaction of using my body to protect myself and others around me. According to Nadim, I was pretty good with a rifle too. I was far away from the days of apple picking and cider presses. This was a new world entirely, and I was a new man.

A soft, orange glow emanated from the rows of tents as laughter and idle chatter filled the air. It was almost like the militia had never tainted these sacred grounds. These homes where people had thought they were safe from the horrors of the war. Life moved on. The guard tower and supply shelter had been rebuilt, the holes in the perimeter fence repaired. The soldiers who had perished had been burned on a ceremonial pyre, their lives commemorated, their names etched into a granite memorial near the lake, and every day the snow fell. Endless white and frigid cold.

We fought.

We survived.

But we would never forget.

Landon and the two women Eben and I hadn't met, Ida and Grace, were still missing. Taken, or dead. I'd never said it out loud, but I'd prayed for their death every night. Better dead than trapped and tortured inside a cell. Before I'd closed my eyes, I'd hoped they would find peace in death or freedom.

"Hey, Cale." Megs ran past me, her sweet voice dragging me from my darker thoughts. She jumped up and down, mashing the snow under her boots.

"Hey, Meggie." I smiled as she waved a mitten-covered hand over her shoulder.

Her cheeks were bitten pink from the frost, her gray eyes, like her father's, light with joy, no sign of the fear I'd seen the night the militia had invaded.

"Where you going?" she asked, and I pointed to my tent. "It's time for bed soon... maybe you should get ready too. I bet your parents are wondering where you are."

"Sure." She smiled and took off running down the path toward her own tent.

I watched her, making sure she found her way home.

"Megs escaped from her tent again?" Eben asked as I zipped up the door behind me.

"Looks like it." I kicked off my boots on a small canvas pad where we kept our wet shoes.

I shrugged out of my jacket and pulled off my shirt. Eben's warm arms wrapped around me, the heat of his bare chest a balm against the cold skin on my back.

"I missed you today." Eben pressed his full lips to the crook of my neck, and I nuzzled deeper into his arms.

“Did you guys find a way through the pass yet?”

“No,” he sighed and squeezed me tighter.” It’s too dangerous with these back-to-back storms. Jack is losing his mind. The whole squad is.”

“It’s personal for Jack, I know he won’t admit it, but he cares about Landon,” I said, and he hummed and kissed my shoulder.

“He’s our squad leader. He cares about everyone.” I turned to face him, bringing us chest to chest, the tip of my finger tracing the scar on Eben’s shoulder. I kissed the bumpy skin as he spoke. “We’ll find a way through. We have to.”

“The Captain seems to think so.”

“The snow has to stop eventually,” he said and shivered as I trailed my fingers up his spine. “The pass will clear, and the west camp won’t know what hit them.” Eben kissed my jaw, following his usual path until his hot breath tickled the shell of my ear. “How was training?”

“Good. Not the same without you, though.” Eben trained too, but with his guard experience, he hadn’t needed as much instruction as I had. He still trained with the unit, but the Captain felt he was better suited for recon than combat since his lungs had been weakened by the virus. But I thought maybe she kept him from training as much to protect his healing shoulder and ribs.

“I’ll be there tomorrow,” he said, and I held in a gasp as he nipped at my pulse point. “I like watching you get scrappy.”

“Oh?”

“Ah-huh.” His hands skated down my back to my ass and he pulled me against him. He was hard, and I groaned as he kissed me, his tongue licking into my mouth as I

opened for him.

On most nights, with the physical toll of training, or recon, or work around the settlement, we rarely had the energy, or the time, to indulge in each other. Sometimes we'd fall asleep naked, our intentions lost to our dreams. Sometimes we kissed until we couldn't keep our eyes open, the weight of the day lifting through the healing touch of our lips, and sometimes, on a night like tonight, we'd get home early, and take the time we needed to remember, to be whole, to find each other again under the dark sky.

Eben reached into my sweats, his hot hand wrapping around my shaft. My breathy moans filled the space between us as he stroked me.

"God, I love the way you sound when I touch you."

I reached for him, but he pulled away, dragging me down onto the makeshift mattress we'd made with our bed roll, elk furs, and old blankets. Eben's kiss consumed me, his tongue tasting mine, the heat of his breath something I'd never get used to. I'd never get used to this, never forget how hard we'd have to fight to keep this, to be free, to feel this love, to have his body like this, to give him mine without consequence.

"Take off your pants," he breathed, and I smiled against his needy mouth.

"You too."

Naked and overheated, his scent filled my lungs. Lemon soap and mint and sex.

"Oh fuck," he growled as I took both of our cocks in hand. "Cale." My name was a plea, his forehead pressed to my brow.

The brand of Eben's hand on my neck, his dirty words on my lips, he pumped his

hips, urging my rhythm, begging me to go faster. He swore as I tightened my grip, his tongue diving into my mouth. I was fast and rough, losing control. Every erratic pulse of my heart, every sweet breath he gave me brought us closer to the edge, closer to those twin flames burning, engulfing us until we were both shaking and sticky and relieved. My chest heaving, I kissed him, lazy, and with one last stroke, he shuddered. Eben ran his palm through the mess on my stomach, his kiss possessive, and I did the same, my fingers gliding over his skin.

“Love you,” I whispered, and Eben traced his finger over the curve of my lips.

I licked it, loving the salty taste of us, the taste of home.

“Love you, too,” he said and kissed the corner of my mouth.

Shadows of the snow falling outside dotted the walls of the tent, the wind rustling the canvas as the world whispered its reminder, “I’m still here.”

“I have no clue what could happen tomorrow, or next week,” he said. “Or if we’ll ever have electricity again, or if the virus is gone...” The tip of his nose brushed along the line of my jaw. “It’s all too big, but you make it better, easier... and then I feel guilty because we get to have this. We get to be together. And Landon and Ida and—”

“I don’t think the guilt will ever go away, not while things are the way they are, but hey...” I kissed the dimple in his chin. “Tomorrow, Eben. New day... new breath. Right?”

“Right,” he whispered into the crook of my neck. “Another new day. Another breath. One step at a time.”

“With you,” I said, and his warm, brown eyes met mine.

“For you.”

I kissed his brow. “For us.”

THE END