



The Flame (Sin of Duty #3)

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: The truth will set you free.

That is what I believed. Now I'm no longer so sure. Roman once said to me: Knowledge isn't good or bad, it's just knowledge. What you do with it, however, that has the potential to lead to sin.

The truth is no different. We can use it to set our citizens free, or we can repurpose it any way we like.

The Sisters of Capra have risen.

They've taken my voice and made it their own. They've taken my loyalty and turned it into betrayal.

But they underestimate me.

I am the flame, and I will bring the fire.

The final instalment of the Sin of Duty series.

The Sin of Duty series is a post-apocalyptic romance and adventure with some disturbing themes set in a dark, dystopian world. Perfect for fans who love romance with intrigue and danger and an arrogant anti-hero who may just turn out to be a hero after all.

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Roman was in bad shape, far worse than he'd admit to.

Once I'd dosed him with a double whammy of anti-inflammatory pills and pain meds, he fell into a restless sleep. If I'd found any sedatives when I raided the first aid kit, I would have thrown those into the mix as well. He was bruised and battered, but his absolute exhaustion worried me the most. Roman was young and fit, a powerhouse of strength. Despite the tumultuous events of the last couple of hours, that exhaustion did not feel natural.

I sat vigil throughout the night, cooling his forehead with a damp cloth even though he didn't have a fever. Holding a compress to his bruised jaw and eye. Checking his pulse to make sure it held steady.

At some point, my own exhaustion obviously caught up to me.

When I awoke, I was still seated on the chair beside him, my body tilted forward with my cheek plastered to the edge of the bed.

My head felt like a foggy graveyard. My limbs were entombed in iron. I groaned, curling a hand around my neck to massage the cramp as I straightened in the chair—and last night came rushing back to me.

The Foundation Ball, my face lit up on the screens, the guards chasing Roman and me through the passageways of the building...

My gaze darted to Roman, and relief flooded me when I saw the steady rhythm of his chest rising and falling.

He'd thrown off the covers.

His hair was plastered to his forehead and I felt there for a fever, but his skin was cool to the touch. Either a fever had come on and broken, or his hair was damp from the cloth I'd used to cool his forehead just in case. That had probably been unnecessary, but the gel compress appeared to have been useful. His eye was bruised, the skin already turning dark purple, and there was still some swelling at his jaw, but his face had looked a whole lot worse last night.

A sudden pounding on the front door startled me. From the furious sound, this wasn't the first time they'd knocked and they'd lost patience. Was this what had woken me?

My gaze darted to Roman, but thankfully he hadn't stirred.

I jumped up and hurried from the bedroom, closing the inter-leading door to the living room with a soft click behind me. A glance at my watch showed it was a few minutes past midday. I thought I'd only napped for an hour or so at Roman's bedside, but I'd slept the morning away. No wonder I had a cramp in my neck.

I made it to the front door before the pounding started up again. Was that really necessary? When I opened the door, my irritation evaporated.

"Jessie." I stood back so she could come in. "How did you get past the guard at the barrier?"

Jessie ignored the stupid question, and it was stupid. The Sisters of Capra had toppled the old regime last night. The councilmen and their heirs— Daniel —were being held at the Guard Station across from Berkley House. Of course there was no guard posted at the Parklands barrier—they were all behind bars. Anyone who'd resisted was locked up. Every Guard Station in Capra was probably bulging at the seams.

Jessie didn't come inside. She stood there on the threshold, hands tucked into the pockets of her bulky winter coat. "Is it true?"

I wasn't sure what part, exactly, she was asking about. It didn't matter.

"Yes," I said. "It's all true."

"But... How?" Her disturbed gaze searched mine, as if my eyes held all the answers. "Why?"

"Jessie, let's talk inside." I tugged her forward by the hand, and she didn't resist as I closed the door on the blustery chill outside. It was the beginning of December and winter had arrived with vengeance.

"We just need to keep the noise down," I said as we moved along the narrow, enclosed porch to the kitchen. "Roman is sleeping."

Jessie went to sit at the oak table while I made coffee in the espresso pot. My gaze kept darting to her. She sat forward with her elbows on the table. She'd slid her hands down her face and kept them there, dragging the skin beneath her eyes. She looked broken. That's what this truth did to a person.

The pot hissed and I prepared two mugs of coffee. By the time I joined Jessie around the table, she still hadn't said a word.

But as I pushed one mug in front of her, her eyes met mine. "Our eggs aren't rotten. We can have children."

"Not anymore," I said softly. "Up until the age of around fourteen or fifteen, maybe later in some cases. In The Smoke, they harvest the eggs of girls before that age. It's too late for us, Jessie."

“Yes, of course...” She sucked in a long, slow breath and, as she expelled it, the air of depression hanging over her turned heated. “You didn’t tell me. You never said a word.”

“I told you most of it,” I argued. I had. “And I was going to tell you the rest, I swear. But I know how much it hurts. I was just waiting for the right time.”

Her brown eyes sharpened on me. “The right time? Sure. I had to find out with everyone else, when you screened it to the whole town! You didn’t trust me? What did you think I’d do? Shout it from the street corners before you got your chance to shock Capra and use it to overthrow the council?”

“That’s not how it happened.”

I reached for her and she straightened in her chair, backing away from my touch as if I were a leper.

“Jessie.” That sharp look in her eyes was a knife cutting into my chest. “Don’t be mad.”

She shook her head so vigorously, her glossy black curls slapped her cheeks. “Do you have any idea what it felt like, seeing your face lit up on that screen, hearing your secrets spill out, and knowing how much you kept from me?”

“That’s not fair, Jessie. I told you almost everything, and the reason I held back on our eggs is because—”

“Don’t!” She slashed a hand through the air between us. “You led a revolution last night. A revolution, Georga!”

“I didn’t lead anything.” Ice shivers covered my skin. My hands wrapped the warm

mug of coffee, but nothing could shift the cold. “That was the Sisters of Capra. Geneva.”

“Our entire world up-ended last night and you couldn’t be bothered to give me a minute’s warning?”

“I didn’t know that was going down,” I said. “I had no idea what the Sisterhood had planned.”

Jessie didn’t believe me. The scorn on her face cut just as deeply as the look in her eyes and the sting of her tone. “That was you on the screens. You were speaking. You were exposing the lies and hurts. Your face. Your mouth. Your words.”

“Yes, that was me, but I didn’t know they were going to use it for that,” I protested. “And I certainly didn’t know they were going to use it last night. Do you honestly think I wouldn’t have given you some warning?”

Her brows hitched. “Yes, I honestly think that.”

Was she right? If I had known, would I have told her? Could I have said anything without betraying the Sisterhood?

“Just like you never said anything about being part of this Sisterhood,” she went on. “The Sisters of Capra.”

She said it like it tasted bad in her mouth.

My heart fell. “You’re not a Sister of Capra.”

“I’d never heard of them before last night.” Her eyes widened. “How long have you been part of this organization?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“How long?” she demanded.

“My mother inducted me into the Sisterhood when I turned sixteen,” I finally admitted. I knew this truth was not going to help my cause with Jessie, but no more lies. “I always hoped you were also a Sister of Capra, but I couldn’t ever say anything. I was bound to secrecy.”

“We don’t have secrets between us.”

“This was bigger than you and me.” Desperation weighed down every word, taunting me, testing me. I believed what I was saying, but if it was me sitting in Jessie’s chair, would I feel any less betrayed? “If word ever got out, even a rumor that the Sisters of Capra existed, there would have been a witch hunt. It’s happened before.”

Jessie said nothing. She just looked at me.

“Last night would never have been a possibility,” I continued. “Nothing would ever have changed.”

“Change isn’t always a good thing.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Don’t I?” She laughed, a hard, brittle laugh. “Yesterday I was happy. Harry and I were happy. We love each other. Maybe everything in Capra wasn’t perfect, but I knew what to expect. I was content.”

“You didn’t have a voice.” I frowned at her, seriously confused now. Had she really been content? “We were second-class citizens, forever children forced to submit to

the will of our father or husband or some man.”

“Harry wasn’t like that,” Jessie stated plainly. “He treated me like an equal. I know it wasn’t perfect, I’ve never said it was, but today everything is a mess. Today all I have is hurt and anger and uncertainty. I don’t know what this Sisterhood will do to Harry. Will he be allowed to keep his job? Will we still be living in our home tomorrow? Will he be locked up just because he’s a man?”

“Of course not.” I didn’t feel half as confident as I sounded. Look at Daniel. He hadn’t done anything wrong. He hadn’t broken any law. He was locked up just because he was an heir.

Jessie sat back in her chair, her gaze dropping.

I brought my mug to my mouth and sipped. The warm liquid slid down my throat. The caffeine hit my bloodstream. My skin still felt like ice.

I didn’t have absolute faith in the Sisterhood. Not anymore. I didn’t like the way they’d blindsided me last night. I hated how Roman had gotten caught up in my fight. I was worried about Daniel. Disappointment wallowed in the bottom of my stomach and anger brushed along every nerve ending in my body. Every breath felt like a suppressed scream.

But I wasn’t prepared to accept—or go back to—the regime we’d overthrown. For all their faults, the Sisterhood had to be better than the council.

A noise from behind pulled my head around. My gaze landed on Roman, emerging from the bedroom. He’d pulled on a fresh t-shirt over the sweatpants he’d slept in. He wasn’t limping, but the effort that cost showed in the careful, precise steps he took.

“Sorry,” I said. “Did we wake you?”

“It’s about time someone did.” His halfhearted attempt at a grin was lopsided. “It’s afternoon.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Better than I look.” He reached me and dropped a kiss on the top of my head. “Hello, Jessie.”

I turned to see her wrangle a grim smile from her sour mood. That’s all the greeting he received, but her eyes softened as she took in his swollen jaw and black eye.

“There’s fresh coffee.” I made to stand, but Roman pressed me back down with a hand on my shoulder.

“I’ll get it.” He walked around the counter. “Then I’ll get out of the way.”

“You’re not disturbing us.”

“I could do with the fresh air.” Roman poured himself a black coffee and crossed the room. “My head feels like it’s wading through sludge.”

That would be all the pain meds.

He went out onto the deck, closing the glass sliding door behind him.

Jessie’s gaze snapped to me. “What the hell happened to him?”

“He got caught up in last night,” I explained. “We were both taken by surprise at the Foundation Ball. After the screening first went out, the Guard came after me. Roman fought them off. At least, he tried...”

Jessie took her time with that. Then the cracks in her outrage finally started showing. “You seriously didn’t know beforehand?”

“I knew something was in the works, but I never imagined it would happen so soon, and I wasn’t expecting a full out revolution.”

The Sisterhood had thrown me to the wolves without a lifeline. They’d used me, taken everything from me without permission—my words, my truth—they’d been prepared to take my freedom and maybe even my life if things hadn’t gone quite according to their grand plan.

I didn’t say that to Jessie, though. There was a time when I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she’d understand why I accepted it, why I’d allowed it, why I would still fight for the Sisterhood ...but now I was no longer so sure.

Change isn’t always a good thing.

Maybe she wasn’t wrong, but this change flowed through my veins. I was the spark of this change. I was the flame. And while I did not approve of all of Geneva’s methods and decisions, I found I wasn’t ready to give up on the Sisterhood.

I was borrowing from Roman’s philosophy. The system is bigger than the individual.

I still fully believed in the cause, and I’d work within the system to right any wrongs I came across—starting with the incarceration of Daniel and the heirs.

Jessie and I drank our coffee in silence. The ice between us had thawed, but she hadn’t totally forgiven me.

I’m not sure she ever would, but I would keep trying. “If you or Harry have any trouble, you know you can come to me, right?”

“Do I?” Jessie shook her head slowly, side-to-side. “We were supposed to be best friends, Georga.”

“We are best friends.”

“How can we be, when it feels like I barely know you?”

“You know me.” The hurt was a physical pain in my chest. “The secrets I’ve had to keep don’t make me who I am.”

“That’s easy for you to say.” She put her mug down and stood. “But it’s like you’ve had this second life and alternative personality all this time.”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

She cocked her head, studying me. “There are many things we don’t get a choice in. This isn’t one of them. You chose this.”

“You honestly think it was a choice?” I said to her. “You and Harry are happy. You are the lucky ones. What about Carolyn? She’s married to a man she will never love, a man she feels nothing for. Do you remember that woman we tried to help a while back?”

Jessie’s face was blank.

She didn’t remember.

I did. “Her name was Beth. Her husband was cruel. He abused her physically, mentally and emotionally. He made her feel worthless, less than human because she’d miscarried their baby. He treated her worse than a wild animal.”

“That woman who was made to stand outside the Blue Fish in the cold while her husband was inside drinking?” Jessie said, finally remembering.

I nodded. “When she tried to get help, the Guard didn’t believe her word against her husband. She had no voice and no one to turn to for help. How many other women are in the same situation? You and I, we’re both the lucky ones.”

My voice developed a tremor, but I swallowed and hardened it to steel. “So don’t tell me I had a choice.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Jessie looked at me without anger or any sharp edges, but with a kind of hopelessness—a sadness. “I’ve been living in my little bubble, happy and content and safe. My small, little life, while you’ve been risking rehab and Heaven knows what else to charge ahead, making our world a better place.”

I pushed to my feet. “Jessie.”

“No.” She walked around the table. “You’re the better person here, Georga. When I look at you, that’s what I see. And it’s great. It really is. That doesn’t change the fact that when I look at you, I see this stranger, someone I don’t really know. I don’t see my best friend...because you never let me see her before.”

With that, Jessie walked out. I wanted to run after her. I wanted to beg and plead. I’d already lost Brenda. I couldn’t lose Jessie, too.

But I didn’t.

I sank back into my chair and sat there, blinking away tears.

Jessie was right.

And so was I.

I hadn't had a choice. That's how the Sisters of Capra operated, in secrecy, in a total blackout.

And if I had to do it all over?

That's exactly what Roman had asked, when my truths had unknowingly been used to fuel the uprising. If you had known, would you have any regrets?

Today, I knew the answer. I had regrets, but I didn't see how I would have done anything differently. Because maybe what we had in Capra wasn't all evil, and maybe the Sisterhood isn't all good, but there was no scenario in which I could keep standing and do nothing.

I pulled myself together when Roman came back inside.

He glanced around. "Did Jessie leave?"

I nodded as I stood and turned to him, clocking the bruised jaw, his swollen face, that cut on his lip, the careful movements... I would have done this differently, the part where Roman fought off half a dozen guards to protect me.

Roman stepped up to me, his knuckles grazing beneath my chin, his gaze searching. "How are you doing?"

"Me?" I didn't understand. "You're the one I'm worried about. And don't tell me you're fine. You're not."

"I will be," he said. "Thank you for taking care of me during the night."

“I didn’t do much,” I protested.

“Every time I opened my eyes, you were there.”

I swallowed. “Roman, are you mad at me?”

His hand fell away from my face. “Why would I be mad?”

Jessie was, and hadn’t I done much, much worse to Roman? “I’m a Sister of Capra. I joined before graduation, before I even met you. I’ve been working with them... for them, all this time. I’ve done...things. I’ve kept so many secrets in our marriage.”

He smirked, the gray in his eyes remaining warm. “I’m a warden, Georga. I was raised on the art of keeping secrets.”

He didn’t say it. Didn’t need to. Our marriage had been riddled with secrets on both sides from the start.

But here’s the difference between us: Roman had never used his secrets against me.

I’d used Roman’s position as a warden; I’d snuck outside the walls on the back of his truck. He’d taken me to The Smoke because he’d been concerned about what I might do on my own, and I’d handed everything I’d learned over to the Sisterhood.

I’d put him in theoretical danger more than once, and actual danger last night.

It hadn’t always been a cold, calculated move, but I had betrayed his trust in me, his concern for me, the very bond of our marriage. There was no getting away from that.

And then there was the big one, the one Roman didn’t know about.

“I slipped Julian a sedative and made a biometric copy of his handprint,” I told him. “That’s how they gained access to the armory. Without that, there wouldn’t have been a revolution.”

That was my first—and only—sanctioned mission for the Sisterhood. All the rest, I’d done on my own initiative.

I watched that admission settle over Roman.

Finally, he understood who I was, what I’d done.

Thanks to his friendship with Daniel and Julian, I’d been invited into the bosom of the Edgar family. Thanks to my husband, I’d had the opportunity to get close to the councilman. That’s why the Sisterhood had chosen me for that mission.

Roman took a step back. “What are you saying?”

I braced myself. “I’m not just a passive member of the Sisterhood. They were determined to use my position as your wife, my access to power, to their benefit and I wasn’t exactly opposed to it. They used me and I used you. I used our marriage.”

The warmth bled from Roman’s eyes as stone cold shutters came down. A mask slid over the tenderness in his expression until there was an invisible wall between us.

By now, I knew something about Roman’s masks. The careless indifference, the cool disdain, the cynical amusement. I also knew something about what lurked beneath, and not long ago, that might have soothed me.

Not today.

All those volatile emotions he was so good at masking beneath a layer of arrogant

detachment were aimed at me.

“Roman.” My voice was scratchy. “Say something.”

His voice was even, a deep baritone without inflection. “I’m going to take a shower.”

I watched him turn his back on me and walk away, and I was helpless, at his mercy in where we went from here.

I’d known exactly what my damning confession would do to us. That’s not why I did it. I wasn’t trying to sabotage us. Sure, right now I felt like I didn’t deserve Roman, but that wasn’t why I did it.

I was just done.

I was done with the secrets and lies between us.

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When Roman next emerged from the bedroom, he was freshly showered and dressed in warden black.

A hundred protests clawed up my throat. He should be resting, taking it easy. So far as I was concerned, he should be at the Medi-Center in the Quantum Zone, hooked up on IVs and monitored around the clock. He was in no shape for warden business.

“You’re going out?”

He barely spared me a look. “HQ has called an emergency meeting and I’ve been summoned.”

Roman wasn’t a senior warden. He wasn’t a High Warden. That’s what he’d aspired to, why he’d collected that blackmail material against the councilmen...just another thing I’d derailed in his life, his plans to reform The Smoke in the name of Amelia. It no longer even mattered that he’d exposed his blackmail material to the council last night to save me. There was no longer a council in Capra. They wouldn’t be voting when it came time to select the next High Warden.

I drifted behind him as he walked out, grabbing his windbreaker from a hook by the front door. “Is that normal? Meeting with the High Wardens?”

“No.” He paused, and turned to give me a proper look. “You kick-started the revolution, Georga. It was you on the screens last night, broadcasting the Sisterhood’s propaganda.”

Propaganda?

“And you’re my wife,” he finished.

Understanding hit me. “They think you have inside knowledge on what’s going on.”

“And what’s to come.”

We stood there, looking at each other, the air heavy between us. It took me a minute to figure out that he was asking me something.

“Geneva made it clear that while I might be the spark of this revolution, she’ll stamp me out before giving me any real power. I have no say in anything. She doesn’t trust me with any vital information.”

He shrugged. “If you say so.”

“For goodness sake, do you honestly think I’d have let last night go down the way it did if I’d known?” I threw a hand up, tears in my voice as I looked at his bruised face. “Do you think I would have let it all play out, watch you get hurt, if I’d known?”

Last night, Roman had believed in my innocence—or in my naivety , anyway.

Now, standing here, he wasn’t giving away a thing, but I knew. I knew he was doubting everything. I’d confessed so there’d be no more lies between us. But all that confession had done was open up a chasm of mistrust.

“Roman.” I swallowed. “I’m sorry. Do you at least believe that?”

There was no softening in his expression. “Do you regret a damn thing about anything?”

The question of the hour. Again and again. “There are things that have happened that

I regret.”

“Don’t evade, Georga.” His gaze bore into me. “You said it. You’re not a passive member of the Sisterhood. Do you regret anything you’ve done? Would you do anything differently?”

How much should I regret? What should I have done differently? My true naivety was thinking real change could come about without devastating consequences. Roman. Daniel. They were casualties of the revolution. Maybe even my marriage.

So what was I supposed to want? Roll back the revolution and return to the way things were?

I could lie.

I could say what Roman probably wanted to hear.

But no more lies.

Roman wasn’t dead. He would heal.

I would save Daniel.

As for my marriage, well, it was built upon a foundation of secrets and lies. Maybe it should break, so we could build something new based solely on our love and brutal honesty.

Without another word spoken, Roman left. He clicked the door closed softly behind him with that impeccable control.

No raging, cursing or slamming doors for Roman West.

Change isn't always a good thing. That's what Jessie had said. Yesterday I was happy. I was content. Now all I have is hurt and anger and uncertainty.

I sighed and gritted my teeth. Not from anger, but to hold back tears. What was wrong with me today? I felt like there was a well of grief pooling in the bottom of my stomach, one word or look away from spilling out.

I'd lost Jessie. I wasn't sure our friendship would ever fully recover.

There was a real possibility I could lose Roman, that our love wasn't strong enough to survive the treachery of me.

And in their place, I had the Sisters of Capra. I had Rose, who'd made it clear she wasn't my friend, that me and my loved ones were disposable cogs in the wheel of the Sisterhood. I had Geneva, who'd thrown me to the wolves, who'd stamp me out like a dying ember.

It wasn't a fair trade.

You also have yourself.

As I sat there, I started listening more and more to that little voice inside my head.

I hadn't blindly followed the Sisters of Capra like a brainwashed cult member. I believed in the cause. I was passionate about change. Most of what I'd done was not for the Sisterhood, it was for my own beliefs.

Whatever else happened, whomever else I lost, I had to remain true to myself. That wouldn't lessen the loss, wouldn't fill the holes in my heart, but if I gave up on myself, then I truly would have nothing left.

An hour later, I was cycling along the lakeside path in the Legislative District. My main destination was Berkley House, our temporary headquarters, but I wanted to check in with my parents first. Cold air stung my cheeks and I pulled the hood of my top closer around my face. The streets were quiet, but not empty. I spotted the occasional person out and about, the odd vehicle driving by.

My mother wasn't home. Neither was my father, which was a surprise. Had he gone to work? After last night, I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't for everything to continue as normal, as if the council hadn't been overthrown, as if the Sisters of Capra hadn't patrolled the streets with rifles tucked in their arms.

I parked my bicycle and walked around to the back of the house. I'd bundled myself up in jeans, a long-sleeve t-shirt and a hoodie, but the bitter wind still cut through to the bone, so I took shelter on the deck, up against the kitchen door.

Across the lake, across the forest of Capra's little nature reserve, smoke billowed from what I now knew was The Smelt, the industrial zone of The Smoke. My gaze kept drifting from the natural beauty in my backyard to the dark gray puffs in the distance. Here in Capra, specifically here in the Legislative District, I'd been born into a privileged existence. I knew that.

The Smoke was a polluted concrete jungle filled with hardships and shortages. But the people there were free. Okay, maybe not totally free, but they had a lot more freedom and autonomy than us. They had a lot more truths there.

Beyond that, outside, the wilds was ruled by Barons and cruelty. But they didn't have walls. There was a certain type of freedom in that, wasn't there?

I felt the tug, I'd be lying if I said I didn't, to run and run and maybe outrun every bad thing in this world. To run and keep going to the ends of the earth.

But life didn't work like that, and it wasn't better in The Smoke, it wasn't better in the wilds, it wasn't better in Capra.

We were born into our place and all we could do was make our little space the best it could be. Not even that. God forbid I aimed that high. I just wanted to make our little space tolerable.

I've never wanted to betray Roman but I had. I'd never wanted to hurt anyone, but Jessie felt deceived and Daniel was locked away. I saw the consequences of my actions, I accepted the responsibility, and I'd do everything within my power to make it right.

That's not what I was grappling with now. What bothered me, what kept on bothering me, were the questions. Do you regret any of it? Would you do it all again?

Now I knew.

My shoulders straightened and my resolve firmed.

I don't regret any of it.

I would do it all again.

But now that I was here, in the aftermath, I was just as committed to fixing what had gone wrong as I'd been to the path that had brought me here.

Starting with Daniel.

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The town square was a hive of activity. Teams of workers were cleaning up after last night's Foundation Day celebrations—and the revolution, of course—sweeping the cobblestones and taking down the popup stalls. The restaurants and shops were open, although given the weather, most patrons were inside rather than milling about on the square.

I could have cut through the alley on the other side directly to Berkley House, but I'd wanted to see what was happening in town. Two things pulled my eye as I wheeled my bicycle through the square.

The screen on the clock tower was still playing, although the footage looked new with Geneva addressing the population. She wore a different outfit, but the sincere, concerned expression was the same. She looked like a woman promising to sacrifice her firstborn for the good of Capra. Maybe she would, I didn't really know her that well, but she certainly wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice mine.

More importantly, I spotted my mother. She was sitting with two other women behind a table on the bandstand. Temporary canvas had been wrapped around the wooden pillars to provide shelter from the elements and a makeshift banner across the top read Information.

Three short lines of people waited to file up the bandstand steps to the information table, mainly women but a few men as well.

It was all very orderly.

But then, that was our way.

Last night, the Sisters of Capra had seized power from the ruling council. Today everyone was back to work. New regime, same old citizens. That's how the council, and as little as sixty guards, had controlled Capra. We weren't rebellious. We wanted to work toward the greater good of mankind. We did what we were told, in the simple belief that everyone had the world's best interests at heart.

We still believed it.

Hell, even I still believed it...with a few notable exceptions.

We weren't weak people.

We were just desperate people. We didn't want the human race to end on our watch.

My mom saw me and indicated that she'd be with me in a minute, as soon as she'd dealt with the woman in front of her.

I strolled closer to the screen, to hear what Geneva was saying.

"...sacrificed so much, and now is not the time to throw it all away. The Sisters of Capra stand for every woman, man and child. We will build on the foundation on which the Eastern Coalition was born, not break it down. That is our pledge, my promise , to you."

She smiled with just the right amount of gravity, then the feed appeared to loop back to the beginning of her message.

"Citizens of Capra, welcome to the dawning of a brighter, better future for everyone. We have been blind. We have been deaf. We have been mute. But we have not been misguided. The Eastern Coalition was founded on the fundamental principles of securing the future of mankind and that has not changed."

Geneva clasped her hands together on the table she sat behind and cocked her head, taking a few seconds to stare into the camera, to stare out on the handful of people gathered around me beneath the clock tower.

“All our efforts are beginning to bear fruit. We can see it, and now we need patience and renewed commitment to stay the course, to keep on this road, and we will succeed. I urge everyone to go about their days as normal. We cannot allow Capra to falter. We are what is left of civilization, and we will triumph.”

“Georga.” My mom tugged on my arm, pulling my attention from the screen. “How are you holding up, darling? Did you sort everything out with Roman?”

Not in the least. But that’s not what she was referring to. “Yes, Geneva released him last night.”

Mom smiled. “That’s excellent.”

“What about dad?” I asked. “I stopped by the house. Did he really go off to work today, like it’s just a normal day?”

“Geneva sent out a message this morning. Everyone with an iComm would have received it.” She clapped her hands together. “Business as usual. Your father’s fine, and yes, he left for work this morning, the same as every morning.”

My gaze narrowed in disbelief. “He’s just okay with everything that’s happened?”

Mom’s smile wavered. “You know your father.”

I did, and I knew he rarely held back his opinions. “What did he say?”

“He’s concerned about you, naturally, but I assured him that you’re perfectly well,”

she said, and promptly shifted the conversation. “You and Roman should come for dinner tonight. What do you say?”

I doubted Roman would be willing to sit around a table with me for a family dinner right now.

“Maybe another night. Roman’s got a lot going on today.” I nudged a look at the bandstand. “What’s that about?”

“We’re making ourselves available to the public,” Mom said. “There’s a lot of uncertainty right now, and people have questions. We’re reassuring everyone that nothing is changing.”

“But isn’t that the point of everything?” I frowned at her. “Change?”

“The Sisterhood has great reforms in store for Capra, but all in due time.” She rubbed my arm. “We don’t want to alarm people.”

“And change frightens people.”

“People are afraid of change,” she said, nodding. “So long as it’s good change, though, there’s nothing to fear, and nothing to dislike.”

“You sound so calm about everything. Relaxed. As if everything is just going to work out.”

She continued rubbing my arm, soothing me. “I’m not deluded, darling, but I do have faith in mankind. The top one percent is usually the problem, and they’ve been ousted from power. The other ninety-nine percent? We’ve got this.”

Except we now had a new one percent. There’d always be a one percent ruling over

the other ninety-nine percent. The trick was to get that one percent right. Personally, I didn't think Geneva belonged up there.

She was off the screen now, replaced by the edited clips of my interview that had played on a loop last night. And apparently was still playing.

"It's all lies," I declared to the whole of Capra. "Our eggs don't start off rotten. We are healthy for the first couple of years, until we reach the age of fourteen, maybe a few months more. That's where Capra gets its supply of eggs from, harvested from young girls in The Smoke. It could be harvested from us. It should be harvested from us. There's no reason we couldn't have children of our flesh and blood."

"I should get back to the information kiosk," my mom said.

My gaze shot to her. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Geneva blasted me and that..." my arm flung out, pointing to the screen "...interview all over Capra last night while I was at the Foundation Ball, trapped amongst all the council members and dozens of guards. If her plans didn't work out, I'd be in rehab now. Doesn't that bother you?"

"Oh, darling." Her face crumpled and she placed a hand on my arm again, squeezing gently. "I assumed you were part of the plan and knew everything. And when I learned you'd been taken by surprise, well, it was mostly over, and you were fine."

"So her antics, putting me in that kind of danger without my consent, doesn't make you the least bit angry?"

"I wasn't thrilled," she finally admitted. "But Geneva would have had a rescue

operation in place, if necessary.”

I studied my mom’s face. She genuinely believed that. Her faith in Geneva and the Sisterhood was not shaken.

Maybe it was just me. For everyone else, even for my mother, it was a case of ‘All’s well that ends well.’

But for me, it hadn’t all ended well. Roman could have lost his life last night, protecting me. As it was, he hadn’t emerged unscathed. Daniel was locked up with the rest of the heirs, some of them still children, and Geneva had no intention of ever releasing them—not fully whole, anyway. She’d made that clear to me. The council must be stamped out in all its iterations.

I smiled weakly and said goodbye to my mother without further argument. I’d never been able to get her to question the Sisterhood’s more shady methods of operandi, and I guess that hadn’t changed.

Berkley House was across the road from the Guard Station where Daniel was being held. I was itching to cross the street, to check up on him, but I didn’t want to stir up more trouble for him. The heirs were all locked up in the same cell, and some of them resented his connection to me. Especially the Otter heir. I’d stopped an all-out brawl last night by promising to get them all out of there, but until I delivered, I couldn’t risk my presence triggering another incident.

I tried the door to Berkley House before knocking.

It opened and I stepped inside.

A hum of noise indicated people were around, busy, but I found myself alone in the foyer. I headed for the staircase, was halfway to the second level when I met Rose

descending. She was dressed in silky harem pants and a thin, full-length coat of finely spun wool, her blond hair was scraped into a bun, and she didn't seem particularly delighted to encounter me. Then again, when had she ever?

She was my contact point for the Sisterhood, my mentor and, I suppose, my supervisor. She was also a mother of three and she was somewhat involved in a network to support abused wives. Despite myself, I held a grudging respect for Rose.

"Georga." She didn't offer me a smile. "I was wondering if you'd show up."

"Why wouldn't I?" I arched a brow. "I imagine there's a lot of work to be done. I'd like to remain fully involved. I am an active member of the Sisterhood, after all."

That little reminder was pertinent. I'd stolen Julian Edgar's handprint for them. I'd brought them the candy—the truth about our rotten eggs and some other hard-hitting facts from The Smoke. I'd given them the ammunition, both literally and figuratively, to enable them to overthrow the council and instate the Sisters of Capra.

I was the spark, and the face, of this revolution. And yes, Geneva would stamp me out if I took it too far, if I challenged her authority too much, but I'd be careful. I'd play their game. And they could still get a lot of use out of me if they didn't alienate me. We were a push and pull, a delicate balance.

Rose stood there, studying me, then reached whatever conclusion she'd been deliberating over.

"I'm pleased to hear that." She did an about-turn and climbed back up the stairs. "We were hoping you remained committed to the Sisterhood. You're very important to us, you know, a vital cog in our organization."

I followed her up the stairs and to the map room, where she paused to look at me.

“You’re not just an active member, Georga, you’re a significant active member.”

My nose wrinkled. “Is that like a promotion?”

“You still report to me.” She folded her arms, her body between me and the closed door, a barrier to the inner circle. “Geneva has some concerns.”

My stomach tightened. “She wants me out of the way.”

Rose shook her head. “Not at all. We want you exactly where you are, and it’s in all our interests to keep your profile high, for the cause, but there is a hierarchy that everyone adheres to. No one is exempt. Do you understand?”

I understood fully. Geneva had ordered Rose to manage me, to make sure I knew my place and stayed there. “I report to you.”

“If you have any issues, or suggestions, those come through me,” she said. “The Sisterhood isn’t a maverick organization. We don’t act for the good of a single person. Everything is discussed at the highest level and decisions are made for the good of our cause.”

“I get it,” I said. I really did. That didn’t mean I liked it.

“Excellent.” She opened the door and we entered the map room, formerly a private library that had been repurposed into our strategy hub.

A few women sat at the long tables stamped with reading lamps, some pouring over documents, others jotting down notes. I recognized some faces, but the only one I could place a name to was Mrs. Saunders, Carolyn’s mother. Huh. That meant Carolyn was also a member of the Sisterhood.

I scanned the other women milling about, disappointed when I didn't see Geneva. I wasn't supposed to confront her directly, and I wouldn't, but I wanted to know what was happening with the heirs.

"Where is Geneva?" I asked Rose, making sure I sounded casually curious.

"She's at the Foundation Hall," Rose surprised me by answering. "She has meetings scheduled all day with the heads of the various departments and institutions. Our primary goal for the moment is to ensure we keep Capra running as normal."

That made sense.

"We're also moving our headquarters to the Foundation Hall." Rose gave me a pointed look. "But most of our operational activities will be run from here."

So that's why she was so forthcoming with information. She wanted me to know that I'd be based here, at Berkley House. That our leaders were removing themselves from easy access.

That was not ideal.

"You've been allocated an iComm." Rose ushered me over to the enormous oval table on the other side of the room, and picked out one of the iComms from the pile. "Have you ever used one?"

"No."

She spent a minute tapping buttons on the thing, then she made me speak into the device to activate it for my voice.

Most instructions were voice-controlled.

Open new messages.

Open all messages.

Call xxx.

In order to connect to someone, I used their Citizen Number. I could speak directly to them, or leave a message, and I could also save their Citizen Number in a list of contacts under their name. She'd linked my iComm to my own Citizen Number, with a trailing 'F' to distinguish it from my husband's number.

"Despite the revolution, despite the Sisters of Capra now being in control, I'm still an extension of my husband." Maybe that was unfair. But it was the truth.

Rose's harsh veneer cracked slightly. Her eyes softened. "Elevating women to be equal partners in their marriage is right at the top of our agenda."

I thought of Carolyn. And Beth. And all the other women out there who'd been less than fortunate in their graduation choices. "What happens when someone doesn't want to be in that marriage at all?"

"We're committed to maintaining the family unit, Georga. That's one of the founding principles of the Eastern Coalition. But we can still make a difference."

Some of the mutiny inside me shook loose. This was where it had all started for me, after all. I wanted to make a difference. "What can I do?"

"We're concentrating on our three top priorities." Rose pointed out a woman I recognized from my first meeting with Geneva. "Eliza has been appointed Captain of the Guard and we're recruiting new trainees. We have a signup sheet in the information kiosk in the square. Everyone is welcome to apply."

I wondered if Jessie would be interested. Maybe she'd be more forgiving if she started experiencing the positive changes in our society. Then again, I didn't see Jessie in guard uniform. She had rebel fire in her belly, even if she didn't always show it, even if she wasn't currently playing for either side.

Rose gestured to a woman seated at the lamp table. "Janice is supervising the Center for Reform and Rehabilitation and she's looking for three or four volunteers. But I feel you're particularly suited to my team and I would love to have you," she added with emphasis. "I'm in charge of our brand new social welfare program and we're setting up our first center in the Bohemian District."

That was exactly where my heart belonged, but I was pretty sure Daniel would end up in rehab. That's where I needed to be.

Rose wasn't delighted with my choice. But was she suspicious? She wasn't easy to read. After unsuccessfully trying to talk me out of it, she introduced me to Janice Clearwater and left us alone to talk.

Janice was a striking woman with strawberry-blond curls and sharp blue eyes. Either she'd aged extremely well, or she was in her late twenties, maybe early thirties. She carried authority, though. It was there in the rigid set of her shoulders, in those sharp eyes, in the well-worn look turning down the corners of her mouth.

"I'm afraid Rose isn't quite correct," she said. "I'm not looking for volunteers. The Rehabilitation Center is a sensitive area and I'm handpicking candidates."

My smile was appropriately sober. "What are you looking for in candidates?"

"I'll know when I see it," she stated flatly.

I wasn't giving up that easy. "The Rehabilitation Center—or should I say, the fear of

rehab—has shaped many of us. I’ve always wondered about that. Is it a deterrent, a threat, a punishment, or is it actually a radical reform that adjusts citizens to fit back into their lives in Capra?”

I had her attention.

“You know what I’ve done,” I continued. She had to recognize me, although she hadn’t given off any signs of it. “I’m not daunted by ‘unusual’ situations. I went outside the wall, despite the risks. I discovered a lot of truths and handed everything over to the Sisterhood. I’m loyal, and I’m not afraid of the ugliness in this world.”

A watchful silence fell between us.

What more could I say to convince her?

While I was racking my brain, Janice slid a form and pen toward me. “Very well, I will keep you under consideration. Fill out the form.”

Thank you!

I turned the form around and picked up the pen. There wasn’t much to fill in, just my name and citizenship number, my address, and a brief summary of why I thought I was suitable for the role. I wrote down everything I’d just told her, then added a few lines praising my own character. This wasn’t the time to be demure, or completely honest.

When I was done, Janice took the form, barely glancing at it. “If you don’t hear from me, then your application wasn’t successful.”

“Thank you for considering me,” I said politely and left it at that, making my way out the map room and down the steps to the ground floor.

One of the doors leading off the foyer stood slightly ajar. A whirring sound drew me closer. Since the door wasn't closed, it wasn't like I was intruding on anyone's privacy. I pushed the door a little wider and peered inside.

Two men sat with their backs to me, hunched over their keyboards by a bank of computers set up against the far wall. I was surprised to see them, here in the heart of the Sisterhood, but their presence made sense. It wasn't like we had any technical expertise amongst us. Or any specialized skills, for that matter. The social structure of Capra had seen to that.

The whirring noise came from two giant printers spitting out pages. Lisa Bickens stood there, gathering batches from the printer trays, squaring the pages and stacking them on a table.

She didn't notice me until I stepped deeper into the room.

Her ice-blue stare locked on me. "Georga."

"Hey." I didn't smile with the greeting. Neither of us would have appreciated it. "How's your father?"

She mangled her bottom lip as she crossed the room to me. "They haven't allowed me to see him. He had surgery last night. They had to amputate his leg, just above the knee, but I think that's the worst. At least, that's what they say."

"I'm really sorry." It wasn't a total lie.

Lisa's father was General Bickens, the old head of the Guard and a horrible man. The last time I'd seen him, the purple veins around his nostrils had been pulsating with his fury—all about to be unleashed on me—so no, I wasn't absolutely gutted that Geneva had shot out his knee. But he was still Lisa's father, and I knew how I'd feel if

anything happened to mine.

She folded her arms tightly and looked like she was about to say something, then decided against it and pursed her mouth instead.

I gave her a few moments, then glanced around the room. “What’s going on here?”

“This ...” She unwrapped her arms and shifted to stand beside me. “This is our news center. My mother is in charge and she’s enlisted me to be her aide. I call it the propaganda machine, but don’t quote me. If anyone asks, I’ll deny it. I’m super excited to be doing my little bit for The Sisterhood.”

Her tone was clipped, perched between amusement and frosted scorn, but you never could tell with Lisa. She could be secretly thrilled by her prestigious assignment.

There were only two ways to get important announcements out in Capra—the public screenings and newsletters. My stomach had always turned a little watery whenever that yellowish paper was slipped beneath our door. When it came to the council, the news was rarely good.

I looked to where both printers were still churning out pages, filling up their multiple trays. “We’re sending out a newsletter tomorrow?”

The reminder sent Lisa over that way to clear the trays before the pages spilled over onto the floor.

“It’s just a general statement,” Lisa said. “Geneva wants it delivered in the morning.”

“That’s a pretty big responsibility.”

She smirked as I joined her by the printer. “You know I don’t actually get a say in

what's printed, right? Geneva sent the layout straight to the computer and those guys are making sure the magic happens. They're teaching me the ropes, but for now I merely get to stack and pack and make sure the parcels are collected at the crack of dawn for delivery."

My neck twisted as I tried to read off the top page of a stack.

Lisa saw and laughed. "Help yourself. It's not classified."

I rolled my eyes at her. Obviously not, since they'd be delivered to each and every home in the morning.

I was curious, though, so I did exactly that before I left Lisa to her duties.

SISTERS OF CAPRA

BULLETIN

Dear Citizens of Capra,

For many of you, these may feel like uncertain, scary times. I wish to reassure you that the Sisterhood stands for all citizens, regardless of your age, gender or social standing.

The Eastern Coalition was founded on the sacrifice of women. We gave our rights, our equality and our bodies to Capra for the greater good.

Now the time has come to reap the rewards and celebrate all that has been accomplished.

We are healing.

Our eggs are entirely viable in our early years.

The women of Capra have returned hope to mankind.

The old regime, the council, tried to take that from you.

They took your hope.

They took your victories.

They took your celebrations.

Why?

That's a good question, and the answer is control. They were afraid to lose their grip on you. They were afraid that without fear, they could not control you.

But now we know the truth and the truth is liberating.

The Sisters of Capra pledge to move our society forward, towards the brighter future that the council hid with false promises.

We refuse to hide.

We will no longer remain stagnant in the past.

The time has come for change.

The time has come to embrace hope.

So far as propaganda machines went, it was good. It even had the power to jolt my

recently jaded views.

I shouldn't forget what the Sisters of Capra stood for.

I wasn't happy with some of their methods or decisions. But it wasn't all bad. Geneva's newsletter was an apt reminder of what I'd originally signed up for.

As I reached the front door to exit Berkley House, I spotted Bev moving around inside what appeared to be an office.

Another apt reminder.

Bev was an elderly woman, grandmotherly, with a permanent scowl in her eyes. She didn't talk much. Actually, I wasn't entirely sure she ever talked. According to Geneva, she'd served a six-year stint in rehab. I couldn't even begin to imagine what they'd done to her.

This was why I couldn't truly regret anything I'd done. If Roman couldn't ever forgive me, well...my heart ached, and those stupid tears brimmed just below the surface again, but this was bigger than me and Roman.

There was always a price for progress, wasn't there? Sacrifice. I didn't want it to be me, or us, but I wasn't special, we weren't special...we weren't any more special than Bev, and Beth, and countless other women who'd been paying the price of Capra for generations.

I didn't want to lose Roman.

I didn't want to lose Jessie.

I'd fight for them, I hadn't given up, but most importantly, right now, I didn't want to

lose Daniel.

Not because he was more important, but because this wasn't just about losing Daniel, or Daniel losing his freedom.

This was about right and wrong.

We were supposed to be better than the council.

We weren't supposed to randomly dictate who was a threat and indiscriminately eliminate them.

I wouldn't stop until Daniel was safe, and I knew Roman felt the same. That's one thing I could still count on. One thing that still bonded us tighter than our marriage vows.

I used the iComm to place a call to Roman. "Call RWZ."

There were three abrupt beeps, then he answered. "Hello?"

"Hi, it's Georga." My hand tightened around the device. "Um, I just wanted to let you know that they've given me an iComm."

There was a small pause, almost negligible. "That's good."

"My number is the same as yours, with an F at the end. RWZF."

"Thanks for letting me know." He didn't sound angry or hurt. He sounded formal and polite, pretty much like it had been with us in the beginning, before we'd fallen in love.

“Okay, then.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll see you later.”

“Goodbye, Georga.”

Well, that had gone just about as well as I’d expected. I sucked in another deep breath, releasing it slowly as I tucked the small black device into the back pocket of my jeans.

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I had one more stop to make before I went home.

The Edgar residence was a mansion, much like all the other estates in Parklands. The creeping arrival of winter had killed the glorious display of summer flowers in the courtyard. I preferred it this way, the gravel driveway circling a graveyard patch of dirt.

Julian Edgar and his other councilman cronies had held the power of life at their fingertips. My baby, our babies, so many babies that would never be born.

He'd used that power to destroy rather than to create.

I'd moved passed the devastating pain. When I thought of the family I should have had one day, the family I could have had, red-hot fury burnt away the pain until all that remained was this single fact: Julian Edgar had killed my unborn child.

This courtyard inviting guests into the magnificent stone mansion now reflected the nature of the owner.

Death.

I shook off the cold shiver as I propped my bicycle against the wall by the front entrance and knocked on the door.

McKinnon opened, looking and acting every bit his usual self with his neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper hair, black butler uniform and starched collar and his stiff spine.

“Mrs. West,” he greeted formally.

“Hi.” I smiled. Occasionally a smile would sneak through his prim and proper countenance. Not today. “Is Brenda around?”

“I will let her know you’re here.” He stood back, allowing me to enter before he closed the door behind me. His gaze took in my hoodie—no coat to deliver me from—and then my sneakers—no mud to be cleaned off.

He led me through to the den, Daniel and Brenda’s recreational area in the west wing, and left me there while he went in search of Brenda. The last time I’d been inside this room, I’d been waiting to see Julian Edgar, waiting to sedate him and steal his handprint. My gaze drifted over the snooker table to the bean bags, where I’d fake collapsed to stall Daniel from checking up on his father.

I wanted to say deception didn’t come naturally to me.

I wanted to believe I was an honorable, noble person.

I didn’t feel any guilt about Julian Edgar. But he wasn’t the person I’d wronged that day. Daniel had welcomed me into his home, into his life, and I’d struck like a viper. I’d poisoned his family and I’d betrayed his trust.

I’d already lost Daniel. I just hadn’t wanted to admit it to myself. But standing here, in the bosom of his family home, I knew he’d never forgive me. I would save him. I would do everything within my power to free him. And if that didn’t work, I’d do everything outside of my power.

He’d saved me once, by not offering for me. A councilman’s wife has to be perfect in the eyes of Capra.

Daniel had seen me from the very start. You're a wildflower in a garden of potted plants. How could I not see you? Your smile is trouble. You have stars written in your eyes.

I was perfect to him, but his greatest fear was that I'd end up like his mother, Miriam. That I wouldn't be able to hide my nature in the spotlight as a councilman's wife, that I'd end up in rehab where everything I was would be carved out until all that remained was an empty vessel.

Now the tables had turned, Daniel needed me to save him, and I wouldn't let him down. But I knew, with every fiber of my being, that nothing would ever bring him back to me. Our friendship would not survive this.

I turned toward the door as I heard it open.

Brenda.

She didn't look good. Her black hair was nested on her crown, as if she hadn't bothered to run a brush through it. And there was a crazy, wide-eyed look in her stare. I understood. I'd been there, after all, when Roman had been locked in that cell.

She didn't come inside the room. She stood there on the threshold, arms folded over a baggy sweatshirt that practically drowned her petite form. It had to be Daniel's. "What do you want?"

"I wanted to see how you're doing. I'm so sorry." I stepped forward. "I saw Daniel last night. He's okay, for now, and I swear I'm going to do everything I can—"

"Get out!" Her stare hardened, a drill boring into me. "Get out of my house."

This wasn't her house. Her and Daniel's house was still under construction across the

field. They were due to move in around Christmas. No doubt that project would never be completed now. Brenda and Daniel were never moving into their own Parklands mansion.

But that was all irrelevant. And she had every right to be mad at me. Daniel was locked away in a cell and it was my face, the truths I'd brought, that had put him there.

"Brenda." I took another step toward her, my heart softening with empathy. I wouldn't wish this frantic uncertainty on anyone, this not knowing what was happening with the man you love.

Brenda stepped back as I neared.

She was hurting. Vulnerable. Unsure about everything around her. I really did understand.

"Okay." I stopped moving and put a hand up. "Look, Daniel is being held at the Guard Station just off the town square, across the road from Berkley House. I'm sure they'll let you see him."

"You are unbelievable." Her tone was sharp enough to cut.

I squinted at her, my brow creasing. "I'm just trying to help."

"Help?" An ugly laugh escaped her pursed lips. "By telling me what I should be doing?"

"I'm not telling you to do anything, Brenda. I was just letting you know where Daniel is."

She wasn't listening to me. "You just couldn't stand it, could you? You still acted like Daniel was yours, even after he chose me !"

I shook my head. "That's not—"

"And when you finally realized you couldn't have him, that you'd never have this—" she flung her arms wide, encompassing the room, the house, possibly the entire town "—you made sure everything came crashing down in a vicious, jealous rage."

She'd lost her mind. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about you up there on the screens last night!" Her voice pitched, her eyes rounding even wider. "Was any of that even true? Or was it all just lies to destroy what I have?"

"Last night had nothing to do with you," I tried to reason with her. "All I did was speak the truth."

"The truth!" She sniggered, as if that were the most evil, vile thing she'd ever come across. "You wouldn't have been so quick to speak your little truth, would you, to blow up everything, if all of this—" her arms flung wide – "was yours to lose?"

My mouth flapped on a thousand protests, but it would be a waste of time and breath. Brenda was beyond reason.

"Daniel chose me, and you couldn't stand it." She came forward, jabbing a finger at me. "You couldn't stand it that I would be a councilman's wife, that I'd have all this, the house, the family, the prestige, the wealth, the comfort...while you had nothing."

She was so, so wrong. I had Roman. I had our house in the woods. I wouldn't willingly have traded that for a hundred Daniels or a hundred grand estates or all the

jewelry left in this miserable world.

“You couldn’t stop until you’d taken it all away,” she went on, her voice finally dropping into quiet, bitter sarcasm. “You won, Georga. You took everything from me. I don’t even have a damn house anymore. I’m...I’m like a leper in society, thanks to you. Congratulations.”

“You’re not a leper,” I said firmly.

She could hate me all she wanted, blame me all she wanted, but I wouldn’t leave her to fret in fear.

“You certainly won’t be homeless. The Sisters of Capra do not hold the wives and daughters of the councilmen responsible for anything. For goodness sake, look at Mrs. Bickens. She’s married to the General and she’s a prominent member of the Sisterhood. Both you and Miriam will be taken care of.”

“Don’t be so dense,” she snapped. “Without Daniel, I am nothing.”

“I’ll get Daniel back to you, I promise.”

“I don’t want Daniel!” Her voice soared again. “I want my councilman husband back. I want my life back!”

It took a minute for understanding to sink in.

My jaw sagged, although it shouldn’t have come as a surprise.

This was one of the reasons our friendship had flagged, after all. From the moment Brenda had become Mrs. Daniel Edgar, it was like a switch had flipped. The girl from St. Ives was gone, replaced with a pretentious, callous-hearted, self-centered witch.

She didn't give a damn about Daniel.

She'd never loved him.

And she honestly thought that I'd engineered an entire revolution out of jealousy. Jealous of her, and her and Daniel, and their possessions. It was more ridiculous than anything I could ever have imagined.

"Good luck with that," I said and stepped around her, walking out that room and straight out of the house.

A mix of self-loathing and self-righteousness rolled through me as I cycled home, forming a ball of anger, guilt and loss in the pit of my stomach.

Turns out, I had plenty of regrets.

I regretted betraying Roman and Daniel's trust. I regretted that mission, sneaking behind their backs to steal Julian's handprint.

I regretted the situation Roman and I had found ourselves in last night. I regretted Roman jumping to my defense last night and getting himself electrocuted and beaten.

I regretted the state of Daniel's future. If I couldn't stop it, Geneva would send him to rehab, and when he returned, he wouldn't be Daniel anymore.

I regretted the toll everything had taken on my friendship with Jessie.

But I did not regret speaking my truths.

I did not regret using my voice.

I did not regret the Sisterhood rising to stamp out the Council.

And I certainly did not regret Brenda losing her extravagant home and status in society.

When I got home, I busied myself making a chicken and vegetable casserole for dinner. The task didn't keep my mind from spinning. Around and around I went, spinning through guilt, indignation, self-justification and, I'm ashamed to say, bouts of self-pity.

Do you regret anything you've done? Roman had asked. Would you do anything differently?

I desperately wanted to say yes, I would do everything differently.

The problem was, I didn't know what that 'different' looked like.

What was the alternative?

Sitting back and doing nothing?

Even stealing Julian's handprint...I regretted having to do it, but if I hadn't, the council would still be in control.

I wanted a third choice. I wanted to do everything differently, but still arrive at the same place—without the consequences of course. Daniel wouldn't be behind bars. I wouldn't have betrayed anyone's trust. Jessie wouldn't be mad at me. Roman wouldn't be filled with doubts about me and us.

I'd just slid the casserole out of the oven when I received a message on my iComm. Geneva had scheduled a meeting with me for tomorrow morning, at the Foundation

Hall. It didn't sound optional, but that was okay. I wanted to meet with Geneva, too.

It was a little after seven, and Roman wasn't home yet.

At eight o'clock, I served myself a portion of cold casserole and ate dinner on my own.

Before I climbed into bed, I caved and called Roman on my iComm. After about thirty seconds of uninterrupted beeping, a robotic voice told me that RW3Z was unavailable and invited me to leave a message.

"Hi, it's me. Georga." This felt weird, like speaking to myself. Think of it as writing a letter. "I suppose you've decided to spend tonight at the apartment in The Smoke."

He'd never done it before. Even though he'd had that apartment, a second home, he'd never used it to run from our marriage.

Until today.

I cleared my throat. "Anyway, please just let me know if you're okay. I'm worried."

I fell asleep waiting for his reply. I didn't get much rest, though. I kept waking up, and each time, Roman wasn't in bed beside me, and he wasn't in the spare room.

He never came home. He would have to, eventually, but it wasn't like that would solve anything. This weight pressing down on my chest wasn't about Roman not coming home last night, it was all about the reason he'd stayed away.

Morning finally arrived and, with it, the Sisters of Capra newsletter slid under the front door of the cabin, and a message from Roman.

“Georga, sorry I didn’t get back to you yesterday. I don’t want you to worry. I’m at the warden base. I’ll probably be home tomorrow. If not, I’ll let you know.”

I tried to analyze his tone. Calm and even, although some of the depth was shaved from the usual velvety strokes of his baritone. His voice sounded thin, as if half his essence had gone missing. Of course I worried. Roman wasn’t well. He should be at home, resting, healing, but I’d driven him away.

I called him back, and I tried not to analyze the reason he let it ring out to voice message again. “Thanks for replying. I was worried. Look, I understand if you don’t want to be around me right now. But this is your home, Roman, your cabin. I don’t have to be here. I can...I guess I could go stay with my parents for a few days. Let me know.”

His response came after I’d showered and dressed for the day. “The cabin is your home, too. I don’t need you to leave.”

Of course he didn’t. He had alternatives, his apartment in The Smoke.

A beep alerted me to a new message. Roman again. He hadn’t even tried to call first. He was definitely avoiding speaking directly to me. “We’ll talk. I just need time to sort a few things out.”

Following his lead, I replied with a voice message. “Okay, just take care of yourself. Please.”

There was no response.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:27 am

I purposely arrived at the Foundation Hall with half an hour to spare. I'd visited my father once or twice at his work, so assuming he was still in the same office, I made my way up the stairs to the second floor, third door on the left. His name plaque was still in place.

I knocked and his familiar voice called for me to enter.

When he saw it was me, his grim expression lightened a fraction. "Georga, what brings you here?"

"I was...in the area," I said lamely, not wanting to launch straight into my meeting with Geneva and the new dynamics of our family.

He stood and came around the desk to engulf me in a hug. I pressed my cheek to his chest and savored the moment. My father was not a lenient man, but he was a fair and consistent man, and I'd never once doubted his love for me.

When he released me, he invited me to take the visitor's chair and returned to sit behind his desk.

He planted his elbows on the table and studied me, his brows drawn together.

I resisted the inclination to squirm. "Mom said you were concerned about me. I just want to let you know that I'm fine."

He didn't acknowledge that, but he did sit back in his chair. He was reserving judgment, and maybe contemplating how everything had gone so wrong, how I'd

turned out so bad despite his efforts, how terribly I'd managed to disappoint him.

"You don't approve of the Sisters of Capra," I said in a small voice. I couldn't help it. And what I really meant to say but found I couldn't, was that he didn't approve of me and Mom, and our involvement. "You think we've brought disaster upon Capra. You believe a woman's place is to be suppressed and under council rule."

He waved that aside with an irritable flap of his hand. "Don't speak for me, Georga."

"Then tell me what you think," I challenged, as I never would have before. Already our relationship was changed. But some things remained the same. I'd always respected and trusted my father's opinion.

I truly wanted to know. "Do you approve of the reform? Or do you think the future of mankind is doomed if we diverge from the confines of council rule?"

His brow creased deeper. "I've never aspired to politics and I would never presume to predict the best path forward. I'm a simple man."

That wasn't altogether true. "You manage the Utilities Infrastructure for Capra."

"And do you know why I'm so good at that?" he said. "It requires logic and organization. If pipes degrade, it's a matter of securing the materials and planning the work. Politics is abstract, an ideology to hold us together while we wait for our world to fix itself."

"But surely you must care about who's in charge?"

"With regards to the future of mankind?" He shrugged. "Some days I'm not sure it makes much difference. The fate of the human race lies in the hands of our scientists or our God, or perhaps both, but not in the men—or women—who govern this town."

His words didn't match the reserved, almost defeated, look in his eyes.

I didn't understand. "You're not angry with Mom for belonging to a secret organization all these years? You're not disappointed in me?"

He scratched at his jaw, watching me, not answering.

"You're obviously not happy about something," I pointed out.

"The only job I've ever really cared about is providing for my family and keeping them safe. That meant keeping my head down, and ensuring you and your mother never publicly defied the rules of society or drew unwanted attention. Clearly, I failed."

"You don't have to worry about that anymore," I said. "That's what the Sisters of Capra are all about."

"Georga, these Sisters of Capra have made you their figurehead."

"Hah," I scoffed. "Trust me, I'm not their figurehead."

"No, you're their pawn," he said, his voice filled with deep-seated concern. He wasn't mocking me. "But you're also their public face. If there's any retaliation, it will be aimed at you. This is Capra, my dear child. If you push your head above the ground, you are not safe."

If the only way to remain safe was to remain invisible, then I'd rather be dead. I didn't say that, though. My father wasn't angry. He wasn't disappointed. He was worried, and he blamed himself for any danger I might have put myself in.

"Geneva is slowly and steadily edging me out of the limelight." As I spoke, I realized

it would become the absolute truth.

She'd eagerly threatened to stamp me out if I became too demanding. She wouldn't risk keeping my profile high. As soon as the dust settled, she'd started fading me out.

I leaned forward, offering my father a smile I wasn't feeling. "Geneva is our leader and our figurehead, and it won't be long before she makes sure everyone forgets about me."

My father sighed, unimpressed with my reassurances. "Do you have any idea why last night's coup went so smoothly? Why mostly everyone is back at work today, supporting the Sisters of Capra instead of protesting on the streets and causing mayhem?"

"Most of them are like you and don't care who's actually running Capra?" I stabbed a guess.

"Many of the men are like me, and like me, they're appalled at their own lethargy," he said. "We placed our trust in a higher power, the council, and blinded ourselves to the reality. We didn't agree with the restrictions placed on our women, but at least they were safe. They were cared for."

"Except when they weren't," I said heatedly.

"Except when they weren't," he agreed gruffly. "We all thought we were doing okay, doing the best we could. What more could we do? It took a young girl with no power, authority, higher learning or protection on her side to show us the truth. You had the courage to push through our boundaries, climb our walls and venture into the unknown to discover what lay beyond. Then you came back and defied the powers that be to make that truth known."

The pride in his voice floored me. A thick block of emotion stuck in my throat.

“Whether you meant it to be or not, you are the hero of this story,” he said.

“I’m not the hero,” I said. “Geneva put me on those screens without my knowledge or consent. If she’d asked, I wouldn’t have agreed. I’m not that brave.”

“I’m not so sure about that, but telling your story is only one part. You lived that story and brought home the truths.” The pride fell out of his voice, replaced with that heavy concern. “Heroes are not easily erased, Georga. You’ll be remembered long after your face disappears from our screens. And heroes make easy targets. If you want to undermine a movement, the first step is to take down their hero.”

“I’m not in any danger.”

“So long as there’s anyone out there capable of restoring the council, you’re in danger.”

Geneva had already taken care of that. The councilmen and their heirs were locked up. She’d never release them. Well, not until they’d been wiped clean and carved out into empty shells.

I spent another five minutes convincing my father that I wasn’t in imminent danger. The old council wasn’t a threat. I was pretty sure Geneva had neutralized the Puritans, too.

Then I had to excuse myself, if I didn’t want to be late for my meeting with Geneva.

When we said our goodbyes, my father’s mood seemed marginally less grave than when I’d arrived. He didn’t need to know that the heirs weren’t going to stay locked away. They weren’t going to be wiped clean or carved out. Not if I could help it.

Geneva had claimed a corner office on the top floor of the building for herself. Two walls of windows and a stately desk that looked out over the pavilion between here and the town square.

She didn't bother with small talk.

"You've requested a position at the rehab center," she said while I was still walking toward her desk.

That sounded like I'd called in a favor. Seriously? It was laughable. As if I'd ever been given the option of calling in favors. Both Rose and Janice had made it clear that I shouldn't expect any preferential treatment.

"I didn't request anything." I stood behind one of the pair of visitor chairs, curling my fingers over the leather back-rim. "I applied for the role by filling in a standard form."

"Hmm." Her gaze searched mine, her gray eyes narrowed and hard as steel.

She had a way of looking at you that felt like she was hunting through your thoughts. I couldn't be sure how much she saw, but probably more than I wanted her to. I'd never been as good with masks as Roman was.

"Is there a problem?" I asked when the silence dragged on too long.

"I'll be frank," she said. "I'm not sure you're a suitable candidate for such a sensitive role, Georga. The last time we spoke, you were reluctant to accept that sometimes one has to make difficult, impossible decisions."

She was referring to her decision about Daniel and the heirs. The council must be stamped out in all its iterations. We didn't execute people in Capra, we sent them to

rehab. I was more convinced than ever that my instincts were correct. I needed this role, so I could be in place when Daniel was transferred.

Geneva wasn't a stupid woman.

She'd seen straight through me.

"I didn't outright agree with your decision. That doesn't make me emotionally soft." I looked her in the eye, daring her to search deeper, all the way to where I buried my real truths.

Because I knew the heirs were a threat.

I wasn't an idiot.

"I don't like it, but I understand why you wouldn't simply release Daniel and the older heirs without taking precautionary measures." I did understand. That didn't mean I liked it, or would accept there wasn't another way.

I couldn't pull off a complete U-turn, though. "The younger heirs, however. That still disturbs me, if I'm honest. They're only children."

Geneva steeped her fingers beneath her chin, and gave a slow nod. "The younger boys have already been released back to their families. The Sisterhood has been received more warmly than we'd anticipated, and our foothold in Capra will be sufficiently established by the time they're old enough to be of any value to dissidents. I try my best to be pragmatic, Georga, never cruel."

I accepted that with a thin smile, then pushed my advantage home. "I betrayed my husband and my friends to bring you Julian Edgar's handprint. I know all about making difficult, impossible decisions."

“You’ve certainly proven yourself,” she conceded. “Very well, I’ll let Janice know that I’ve approved the request.”

Just like that?

My heart thudded so loudly, I wasn’t sure how she couldn’t hear it. But she dismissed me without further interrogation. I wondered if my father was right, and if Geneva knew it, too. It wouldn’t be as easy to snuff out my flame as she’d threatened it would be.

I walked out the building with renewed confidence and strength. I hadn’t realized how much I’d been cowering beneath defeat and self-persecution until it started to lift from my miserable soul.

I wasn’t perfect. I’d never pretended to be. But neither was anyone else. I wasn’t always happy about it, but I was always prepared to accept the consequences of my actions. That didn’t mean I wouldn’t fight to change the consequences. That also didn’t mean I had to accept everything thrown at me.

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Jessie lived on a pretty street of white-washed terraces just off the town square. I parked my bicycle against the picket fence and rapped on her door. Across the street, a woman flung open her window and shook out a blanket. Farther up, a mother pushed a stroller on the sidewalk.

I pulled up the collar of my coat against the chill and knocked again. The curtain across the front window twitched. I didn't knock again. Jessie could take as long as she wanted, but I knew she'd answer.

It was another minute before she opened the door, dressed in a full length coat and winter boots. She tucked a loose curl behind her ear as she looked at me, saying nothing.

"Can we talk?" I said.

Her usual smile was nowhere to be seen. "Actually, I was just on my way out."

"This won't take long."

She pulled a face, and didn't move to let me inside. She could be stubborn when she got an idea into her head. But I wasn't some imposter posing as her former best friend. It was just me. It had always been just me.

"Jessie, please."

With a sigh, she finally stepped back.

I pressed forward and closed the door behind me. “Jessie, my mother is a Sister of Capra. I never knew about it until she inducted me into the Sisterhood when I turned sixteen. We’re sworn to secrecy. I seriously thought—or at least, I hoped—you were also in the Sisterhood.”

Jessie folded her arms, not looking me in the eye. She was listening, but I wasn’t sure she was hearing.

“Anyway, the first contact I ever had with the Sisters of Capra was after we’d graduated. Until then, they were just a vague concept. But then I married a warden, Roman, and they had a mission for me.”

Her gaze slowly tracked to me, as if interested despite herself.

“One mission,” I told her. “Everything else, going outside the walls and visiting The Smoke, that had nothing to do with me being a Sister. That was all just me and my curiosity. That’s who I am, who I’ve always been. I never hid myself, not from you, and if you can’t see that, then maybe at some point you just stopped seeing me.”

Her chin lifted, and a dismissive noise escaped her throat. She thought I was trying to turn the blame onto her. I wasn’t. I just wanted to open her eyes, before I lost my best friend.

“Is that all?” she said.

There was one more thing, and I didn’t hesitate. Whatever else happened between us, I knew my best friend. I knew I could trust her, even if she decided she could no longer trust me. She would never go blabbing my secrets.

“Daniel Edgar and some of the other, older heirs, are locked up at the Guard Station across from Berkley House. The Sisterhood believes they’re a threat, and plans to

send them to rehab. I don't yet know how, but I'm going to get them out."

Her eyes widened. "You're going to break them out of prison?"

"Probably not." I grimaced. "I've managed to get a position at the rehab center. I'm hoping it'll be easier to find an opportunity there than at the Guard Station. Like I said, I don't exactly have a plan yet."

"Why are you telling me?" Her eyes flattened again. "Have you finally decided I'm good enough to help your causes?"

The way she said it, she wasn't offering. It was more like an accusation.

"I'd love all the help I can get," I said anyway. "But I don't even know how I'm going to do it, let alone how anyone else can help. I just wanted you to know what's going on."

Jessie said nothing.

That was okay.

Well, not okay, my heart was still sore at the distance between us, but I'd said what I'd come to say.

I opened the door, had already stepped outside before I found one more thing to say. "Jessie, I love you. I would never knowingly do anything to hurt you. Whatever else, I hope you can believe that."

Then I left. I did glance back when I grabbed my bicycle, and again just before I started pedaling away, but she didn't appear in the doorway.

Later that afternoon, I received a message from Janice Clearwater instructing me to present myself at Berkley House tomorrow at 8:40 sharp.

The following morning, as I was getting ready to leave, a voice message came in from Roman. He would be home this evening. Relief washed over me. I didn't even care how cold his mood was, I just wanted him here. This cabin felt empty without him.

When I arrived at Berkley House, a couple of minutes early, Janice Clearwater was already waiting for me in the entrance hall with another woman, whom she introduced as Belinda Hart, the other approved volunteer who'd be joining us today.

Belinda Hart was a lot older than me, a lot older than Janice. Her hair still held color, although the blond seemed to be washed out, limp strands cut into a bob that sat just shy of her shoulders. The rest of her was staid and neat. She wore a thick woolen skirt with flat boots and a cardigan buttoned up to her throat beneath a matching woolen jacket.

Janice was also dressed in a black pantsuit and flat heels, while I was in my comfortable jeans, stylish boots and a long-sleeve t-shirt beneath my winter coat.

Janice ushered us outside into the blustery chill and fine drizzle, speaking as we hurried up the street and to the corner across from the Guard Station. "The shuttle runs on the hour throughout the day to the Quantum Zone, but there are additional early morning services. The Rehabilitation Center is the last service stop."

We weren't the only people waiting for the mini-bus, mostly men dressed in sharp suits but two other women as well, dressed in the gray pants and tunic shirts of the guard uniform. They looked as out of place as I felt, catching a morning shuttle to work.

The lack of privacy meant we didn't speak much more, except for the odd pleasantry.

"I'm delighted to finally meet you," Belinda said, her smile warm, almost grandmotherly. "I only know you by reputation, and what we've seen on the screens, but I feel as if I know you."

"Thanks." What else could I say? I blushed and awkwardly returned the smile, and then the shuttle arrived, already half full, and we packed on and found spare seats scattered amongst the other passengers.

I'd never visited the Rehab Center. Everyone knew where it was situated, set apart from the hub of the Quantum Zone, all the way across on the far end, but it was an institution of nightmares. Despite my usual overactive curiosity, this was one place I'd never felt any desire to explore for myself.

We drove through the symmetrical streets of the Quantum Zone residential area, then deeper into the power hub of our scientific and medical research facilities. Massive glass buildings and sleek laboratories shadowed the streets, the shuttle making regular stops along the way to drop off and pick up new passengers.

It was roughly thirty minutes before we left the buildings behind and arrived at the final stop.

The only other passenger still on the shuttle was a middle-aged man. He climbed off with us, shooting a couple of glances our way before he strode on ahead. We walked in the same direction, down a paved driveway that curved into a shallow forest that seemed to act as a boundary between the Quantum Zone and the Rehabilitation Center. A different kind of wall, hiding Capra's little secret from the more respectable citizens.

It wasn't long before the building came into view, a low sprawl of brickwork built in

a fat U around a bland, paved courtyard. Towering conifers pressed close on all sides, hugging the manmade compound, as if nature were doing its best to protect the lost souls trapped within.

The entrance was a thick glass door with a guard standing sentry just inside. The reception area was warm and welcoming, the floor carpeted in cream and brown tones, the walls hung with oil landscapes, the lighting soft. Even the man behind the reception desk greeted us with a gentle smile and kind eyes.

The next hour was taken up with sorting out our security access. Belinda and I had our photograph taken, and then we were given a laminated card with our photo, name and citizen number and instructed to wear it clipped on our person, in a visible spot, at all times. We also had to hand the card in at reception each evening, and collect it again in the morning. They took security very seriously.

Janice had disappeared at some point, but she returned to bring us into the heart of the building. We passed through an internal door, one at a time so we could unclip our security card and scan it. It was a laborious effort just to walk through a doorway.

“All access and attempted access to secure areas is registered and recorded,” Janice informed us.

That was unfortunate, although not unexpected.

The long corridor behind reception was somewhat less inviting than the reception lounge. The walls were more eggshell than cream, the floor tiled instead of lush carpet, the click-clack of our footfalls echoing in the hollow space. The air also felt colder, and my nostrils twitched at the sterile, clinical smell.

Numerous doors dotted the passageway, all closed, with Janice’s office at one end, across from a set of swing doors labeled Ward Z.

She invited us into the visitor chairs and settled in behind her desk, which looked like ordered chaos. Pens and notepads, various piles of blue binders and a coffee mug within easy reach.

Janice pushed the mug aside and planted her elbows on the table, leaning in. “As I’m sure you can understand, the members of staff here are highly trained and currently all male. We do intend to initiate a trainee program for women, but that’s not why you’re here. First of all, your positions are voluntary and temporary, to help us clear the backlog. Depending on how that goes, I may recommend you for the trainee program, if you wish.”

I settled back in my chair, not at all interested in the trainee program.

“What do you mean about backlog?” asked Belinda.

“I’ll get to that.” Janice steepled her fingers beneath her chin, her sharp blue gaze pinned on Belinda. “Your younger sister underwent a stint in rehab, and you’ve spent the last five years caring for her.”

I snuck a look at Belinda. If her sister had needed ‘caring’, it meant she wasn’t one of the lucky ones who’d escaped unscathed. “I’m sorry.”

They both ignored me, and Janice continued, “Your application said you were keen for this role, so you could learn more about what she’d gone through, and apply that to help your sister. You’re compassionate and sincere, have life experience as well as firsthand experience with women who’ve been through this ordeal. That’s why I wanted you.”

Janice’s gaze swerved to me. “You are without doubt an intriguing young lady. You have grit, I’ll give you that, but most importantly, you chose to throw off the blinders and seek the truth. You’re not afraid to see the ugly side of reality and you appreciate

that sometimes we have to take the hard paths instead of easy shortcuts. That's why I wanted you."

Belinda and I shared a look.

Janice placed her palm on a stack of binders. "We have twenty-three women here at the facility, all in different stages of rehabilitation. We want them released as soon as possible, but also as safely as possible. Your job is to help with their transition."

I wasn't qualified? Was I? "What exactly does that entail?"

"Why not just discharge them and return them to their families?" Belinda said at the same time. "That's the safe option, much safer than a minute more spent in this place."

"I understand how you feel." Janice put a hand up. "You will sit in on their psych evaluations, since many may not feel comfortable sharing the full truth with their male doctors. You will also spend time with them alone."

"I need you to listen to them, to reassure them, and to determine if their home life would indeed provide a safe harbor. In some instances, it will be the man in the family who was responsible for having his wife or daughter committed. I won't send them back to that."

I instantly liked Janice a whole lot more. "What is the alternative?"

She peered at me a long moment, considering her words. "We are, very tentatively, considering the option of divorce in exceptional cases."

My brows shot sky high.

An indecipherable sound choked out of Belinda. I couldn't discern if it was approval or horror.

"It's natural that our first instincts might be to release these poor women as soon as possible," Janice went on. "The ugly reality is that even if these women do not belong here, and have never deserved this, we cannot discharge them until we have a safe transition route mapped out for each of them. We must be cautious, and thorough, but we must also act as expediently as possible."

"To get them home as soon as possible," Belinda inferred.

Janice nodded. "Of course, but I also need Ward X cleared. We have incoming, and I'd prefer to keep them separate from the other patients."

My heart nearly jumped out of my chest. Subjected to the new arrivals. That sounded like being subjected to some terror or unpleasant company...like the councilmen and/or their heirs.

I wanted to help these women, of course I did, but my brain was suddenly fogged. I couldn't wait to get out of this office and explore the facility, to find the weak spots and start planning the break-out.

This was all happening. It really was. And once Daniel was free, I'd finally be able to think clearly again, breathe without nerves and guilt pinching every breath.

Janice handed us each four blue binders. "These are the patients currently in Ward X. Please read their case files and add your notes as appropriate. I expect an update each morning and, of course, I'm available if you need to discuss anything."

Next, a bald man in olive green scrubs took us on a quick tour of the facility.

“Lewis Carlton,” he said as we introduced ourselves. “I’m not a doctor. You can call me Mr. Carlton.”

His heavy black brows made up for what hair he lacked on his head and, combined with the round spectacles he wore, his age was indeterminate. Probably older than I would have liked. Someone younger would have been easier to relate to, but his personality could be a bigger stumbling block.

I had to try, though.

I needed all the friends I could get.

“You’re welcome to call me Georga,” I said, smiling as I extended my hand. “No need to stand on formalities, I’m sure.”

He didn’t shake my hand. “This is a workplace, not a tea party.”

I refrained from rolling my eyes. “In that case, you can call me Mrs. West.”

He stabbed a thumb at the swing doors labeled Ward Z. “That’s for the real crazies. Also known as Ward Red.”

I felt Belinda stiffen beside me. The air around her literally chilled.

I gave Lewis the benefit of the doubt and dismissed the slur. Not that I’d ever be that crass as to refer to Daniel’s mother as crazy, not out loud, but the first time I’d met Miriam Edgar, I had thought she was gone with the fairies. That was before I’d learned about her stint in rehab, though.

Also, I was desperate to get the full tour. “Can we take a look inside Ward Z?”

“You don’t want to do that,” he said.

“Actually, I do.”

“That’s a level 3 ward, top security.” He started walking. “You don’t have access.”

I remained in the passage between Janice’s closed door and Ward Z.

Belinda stayed with me. “What are you thinking, dear?”

“I’m thinking that Lewis might not have top security clearance, but we’re going to need access to any women inside Ward Z at some point, right?”

Belinda acted before I could. She unclipped her card and swiped. There was a soft beep, but the red light above the card reader didn’t change to green.

Disappointed, I tried the door anyway. Maybe the light sensor was broken. It wasn’t. The door remained firmly locked.

Lewis had stopped to watch us with a bored expression.

“All done messing around?” he said when it became clear we weren’t getting inside Ward Z.

Belinda said nothing and I shrugged as we caught up to him. “So, how long have you worked here?”

“Too long,” he grunted.

We walked down the long corridor, the plaques on the closed doors self-explanatory. An Administration Office. Doctors’ offices. A staff lounge at the far end, just before

the passage dead-ended in two sets of swing doors, one to Ward X and the other to Ward Y.

Lewis swiped his card for Ward Y and pushed through. Belinda and I hung back to swipe our own cards before following, into a room with an unmanned desk in front of a wall of pigeon holes, some empty, some containing yellow binders.

The room made me feel claustrophobic and I soon realized there wasn't a single window. Fluorescent tube lighting bounced off the four walls with a yellow hue. A steel-plated door cut into one of the walls with the obligatory scanner and red light.

"This is the nurse's station for this ward," Lewis told us. He gestured towards the doors on either side of the counter, one with a small viewing window. "The communal spaces and the patient rooms. Ward Y is for serious offenders and re-offenders."

I didn't appreciate the terminology, but I held my tongue as Lewis shepherded us out again without further exploration. I'd lost all interest in making a friend out of him and had already decided I'd rather tour the facilities properly later on my own, without his foul commentary.

He waved a hand at the swing doors to Ward X. "Minor first offenses, mostly probation sentences."

"That's where we'll be starting," Belinda murmured.

That's where they'd be putting Daniel. Not because they considered his offence minor, or because they intended to release him after a short probation period. That was just the ward we could get cleared out quickly.

The door to the staff lounge stood open and we took a quick look inside. A pair of

brown sofas anchored one corner of the room. There were a couple of tables and chairs. A counter with cabinets beneath ran along one of the walls, holding a sink, mugs and plates stacked on a drying rack and a coffee machine.

I walked up to the bank of windows, genuinely pleased with the view. The forest of velvet pines pressed close, spectacular and peaceful.

“This is beautiful,” I exclaimed. “Do all the patients have this view from their rooms?”

Lewis peered at me from beneath the rim of his spectacles, then shook his head in a disdainful manner, as if he were trying to shake me off his vision.

Without answering, he pointed out the fridge. “If you want to bring in your own food. The canteen only offers whatever we serve the inmates, so it’s nothing fancy.”

“Inmates?” I marched up to him, my blood heating. I’d held my tongue until now. I’d made excuses for him. I’d done my best to ignore his callous attitude to women who’d been so grievously wronged. “Please tell me that is not how you refer to the women held here.”

His mouth thinned into a sneer. “Society is too kind to call them criminals out there, but why do you suppose they landed up in here? They broke the law.”

Belinda confronted him, as unimpressed as I was. “What is your position, young man? Are you an orderly?”

“That’s none of your business.”

I squinted at the security card attached to his chest. His name, Lewis Carlton, and citizen number beneath his photograph. I didn’t see anything about a job title.

Before I could re-read his citizen number to remember, he turned from us. “That completes the tour. Excuse me, I do have actual duties that require my attention.”

Belinda’s stare pricked his back as he walked out. “I do not like that man.”

“He should not be working here,” I said emphatically. “These women shouldn’t have to put up with another minute of that kind of attitude while they’re waiting to be discharged.”

A short while later, after hearing Belinda and me out, Janice was in total agreement with us.

“We’ve weeded out most of the bad seeds,” she assured us. “I must admit, we were more concerned about the medical and technical staff, but you are absolutely correct. We cannot have orderlies and admin employees who lack sympathy or hold onto outdated sympathies. I’ll look into Lewis Carlton at once.”

The rest of my day was productive. It didn’t take long to read through all four case files. The binders only held the admission form, and some blank pages for my notes. I sat in on two psych evaluations and got a good snoop around Ward X when I visited my other two patients. By the end of the afternoon, I was confident in recommending one of them for immediate discharge.

I stopped by Janice’s office and slapped the blue binder on her desk. “Mary Styler is a Sister of Capra. She’s twenty years old and was returning from a meeting with her contact in the Sisterhood when a guard caught her out on the street after curfew.”

Janice arched a brow, still listening, expecting more before she gave her verdict.

I had plenty more. “She’s not afraid to speak her mind, and for two hours all I heard was how bored she was and how unfair it is that she’s stuck in here and missing the

revolution. She blames her pathetic husband, who apparently didn't have the backbone to stand up to the guard who arrested her. She plans to make him suffer and keep him miserable for months before she finally forgives him."

Janice's mouth twitched. "It certainly doesn't sound like she's a victim of abuse within her home."

"If anything, I feel sorry for her poor husband," I said. "Look, her marriage might not be ideal, but if she's not happy about something, she's not going to cower in silence. She doesn't need to spend another night here when she has a safe home to go to."

"I agree." Janice pulled the binder closer, taking it off my hands.

"Another thing," I said. "Ward X has two communal spaces, but the on-duty nurse told me the patients aren't allowed to use them socially."

"The rehabilitation program relies heavily on isolation," she said. "The communal areas are only used for group therapy."

"These women aren't officially in the program anymore."

Janice slid her elbows across the desk, pressing forward. "Once all the women have transitioned out of Ward X, we'll be transferring the council heirs there, Georga."

My heart gave a wild kick at the confirmation.

"But we'll still have the same nurses on rotation, and we can't set a precedent for bending the rules or allowing leniency in special circumstances," Janice continued. "Also, we need to avoid looking like we have different rules for men and women. That was the council's way, not ours. We fix this by discharging innocent women as soon and as safely as possible."

“I guess that makes sense.”

“Oh, and Georga,” she called as I turned to leave. “About Lewis Carlton. His employment has been terminated.”

I turned back to her. “Thank you.”

“Thank you .” Her gaze narrowed as she considered her next words. “I did some digging into his background. His uncle is a prominent Puritan.”

Well, that certainly explained Lewis Carlton. Puritans believed women were a necessary evil. The snake in every garden.

“We’re trying our utmost to not show prejudice or make the men of Capra feel persecuted, regardless of their former or personal beliefs,” Janice said. “But I won’t tolerate misogynists. I’m grateful that you and Belinda spotted it. If you pick up any other unacceptable behavior, please don’t hesitate to bring it to me.”

Slowly but surely, women like Janice Clearwater were redeeming my faith in the Sisterhood.

Change was here. I could see it, touch it, feel it.

I had a voice. Every now and then, I could even hear it.

After the shuttle ride back to town, I stopped by Berkley House to collect my bicycle. As I was pushing it out of the alley, I spotted Lisa exiting the building. She didn’t smile when she saw me, but she did veer in my direction.

Lisa only really did one emotion—cold and cutting. But today, there was a tremble underlying her clipped tone. “Have you heard about Parklands?”

“Parklands?”

“They’re relocating the council families to the Legislative District.”

“Okay.” That wasn’t a complete surprise. Parklands was the Council Residential District, a secure estate of grand homes reserved for council members and wardens. Why did Lisa sound so bothered? “Is Geneva planning to move herself and the leaders of the Sisterhood in? Does your mother not want to live in Parklands?”

“That’s not it.” She shook her head emphatically. “The Parklands homes won’t be occupied. For now, anyway. My mother says the Sisterhood wants to distance itself from the elitist stigma of the council. So why throw the families out?”

“The Legislative District isn’t exactly the slums,” I pointed out. “It’s got the lake, and it’s closer to town.”

“But it’s not their home ,” she said through gritted teeth. “At least give them a chance to grieve or whatever in peace before disrupting their lives again. I’m not sticking up for the council, or my father, but we’re dealing with a lot, you know? The families, I mean. Although if you ask my mother, it’s just another day. She hasn’t even been to visit my father at the clinic.”

A couple of platitudes came to mind, but they all felt dismissive. Lisa had every right to feel whatever she was feeling.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said then, the slight tremble in her voice flattening out. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Maybe not.” I hesitated. Lisa was not a natural confidant. But she was a St. Ives girl, and St. Ives girls didn’t rat on each other. “But I’m also not okay with some of the decisions that have been made. Like Daniel, or any of the heirs. They shouldn’t be

locked up.”

“That’s another one. What the hell? What’s going to happen with them?”

I shrugged, not wanting to get into all that. “I’m just saying, it’s okay to not be okay with everything the Sisterhood does. I’m definitely not.”

She looked surprised, then gave a small laugh. “I knew there was a reason I liked you.”

“You don’t like me,” I said, although it was mostly teasing. I wouldn’t call Lisa a friend, but we’d come a long way from our prickly school days.

“Oh, yeah, I forgot.” She flicked her hair over one shoulder and leaked a small smile as she walked off.

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Roman's truck was parked outside the cabin when I got home. It was already starting to get dark, and the lights were on. Thankfully, so was the heating. I shrugged out of my coat and hung it on a peg by the front door.

I had no idea what I'd be walking into, and I mentally prepared myself for everything and anything. Or so I thought. I was not prepared for the sight of Roman tossing a salad in the kitchen.

"Hey," he said when I walked in, his gaze lingering a moment.

"Hi." Relief swept over me as I studied him. There was still some bruising on his face, but the color of his skin was back to normal, tanned and healthy. His eyes had lost that feverish shine.

"Hungry?"

"Starving." I glanced at the steaks he'd already seasoned and set aside to breathe. "I could have made supper."

"I got home early." He reached for a pan and turned to the stove. "And I wasn't sure how late you'd be."

He didn't ask where I'd been. Then again, he'd been gone two days without saying where he'd been.

I rested a hip against the edge of the kitchen table and folded my arms. Roman was home, cooking dinner, looking like his old self. It was almost as if we were back to

normal, but of course we weren't. He wasn't taking me into his arms or brushing a kiss over my mouth. I wanted to wrap myself around his body and inhale him. I wanted to hug him close and never let go. But I couldn't do any of that.

At least he seemed mostly recovered. That was the most important thing. "You look a million times better."

"I am." The butter in the pan sizzled and he threw the steaks in. "Speaking of which, you know that warden's meeting I went to? I collapsed and they—"

"You collapsed?" Dread folded around my spine.

"It's all good." Roman bent his head my way, his gaze connecting with mine. "I was taken to the clinic on the warden base. That's where I've been the last two days."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Was this what we'd come to? He'd had the opportunity. He'd responded to my messages. "I thought you were cooling your heels in The Smoke, but all this time you've been fighting for your life?"

"This is why I didn't tell you." His attention returned to the stove. "I wasn't fighting for my life."

His dismissive attitude wasn't helping. My voice pitched. "Because you didn't want me to overreact?"

"Because I didn't want you to worry," he said coolly.

"I am worried." My fingers dug into my palms. "I should have been worried. You were in hospital."

"My kidneys were bruised, but it wasn't life threatening." He flipped the steaks and

slid the pan from the heat. “They hooked me up to IV antibiotics and glucose bags and whatever else they shoved into my blood. I’m a hundred percent now.”

He didn’t get it.

He seriously didn’t.

The food was ready. Roman plated the steaks and grabbed the salad bowl. I brought cutlery and two glasses of water to the table.

“I know you’re mad at me, but I’m your wife,” I said as we took our seats. “I love you. I have a right to worry about you.”

“I’m not mad at you.” He didn’t look at me as he said that. He plied salad onto his plate and picked up his knife and fork.

Roman didn’t lie. Not to me. Not that I was aware of. But he did have a track record of keeping quiet instead of telling me the truth.

We ate in silence until I couldn’t take it anymore. “Okay, you’re not mad at me. So what are you?”

He looked at me and chewed.

Tears stung behind my eyes. The cracks in my heart were showing. Was this so much worse than him being mad? Did he hate me? Had he decided he couldn’t ever forgive me?

“Roman.” My voice choked.

“I don’t know, Georga.” He put his cutlery down and rested back in the chair. “What

should I be? You tell me.”

“I’ve told you everything.” I’d barely touched my steak, but I wasn’t hungry anymore. I pushed my plate aside and gulped down some water. “No more lies. No more secrets. But I can’t tell you what to feel, Roman.”

“That’s the thing,” he said, his stone-cold gaze pinned on me. “Have you told me everything?”

I stared at him, a sinkhole opening up in the bottom of my stomach. What now? I had told him everything, hadn’t I?

He ran a hand through his hair. “Why did you marry me? Was it because I was a warden?”

“What?”

“You accepted my offer to advance your status in the Sisterhood.” He stated that as fact, but then he added, “Is that what they expected of their members? To accept any offers that would benefit them?”

My mouth went dry.

“You said they were determined to use your marriage. They used you and you used me.” His jaw squared. He was biting down on his back teeth. “You used our marriage, and you weren’t opposed to any of it. That’s what you said.”

“You used our marriage as well,” I said weakly. “You needed to appear to be conforming to Capra society. You only offered for me because you thought Daniel was also offering, and you knew I’d accept him. You didn’t want to marry me, but if you’d walked away, it would’ve hurt your prospects of rising to High Warden.”

His high ambitions weren't for himself. They were in Amelia's name, so he could be in a position of power to prevent other young girls from being traded to the Barons and the wilds.

But I'd done what I'd done for the Sisterhood.

Both our causes were just.

"I never betrayed you." His voice was so damn cold, it sent a chill over my skin. "I never took anything from you. I never used you, and certainly not in any way that could damage you or those you love."

He was so arrogant and self-righteous and judgmental...and he was right, of course. Maybe that's what stung the most.

"I didn't want to marry anyone, Georga, but the moment we exchanged vows, I did honor this marriage. I protected you to the best of my ability. I tried to give you whatever happiness this world would allow. I did not enter this marriage with ruthless intentions."

I wanted to blurt out that I hadn't, either. But that wasn't the whole truth.

"I'll ask you one last time." His warning was palpable. This was my final chance. "Why did you accept my offer?"

I'd already lost him.

I felt it in my bones.

I dropped my hands onto my lap beneath the table. I didn't want him to see my fingers tremble. "I knew you were a young man with bright prospects and a

prominent future. My mother assured me of that. I knew a warden's wife would be a coup for the Sisterhood. I knew they'd take full advantage of our marriage."

His brow lifted. His mask was firmly in place. He looked bored, as if I had nothing new to tell him.

"But that's not why I married you," I said. "I was an emotional mess. Daniel hadn't offered for me. Jenna was marched out by the guards for refusing to graduate. Then I had to watch Brenda, who was supposed to be my friend, walk down the aisle with Daniel. I wanted to hide in my bedroom and cry my eyes out, but I couldn't do that."

Roman's expression gave nothing away.

I sucked in a deep breath and continued. "I had to accept an offer from some boy I didn't know, since I'd wasted all our graduation balls on Daniel. I had to graduate, or I'd be sent away like Jenna, to God knows where. I didn't have a choice."

Roman scrubbed his jaw.

My gaze dipped. I twined my fingers in my lap. "Then I saw you."

Dark. Dangerous. And so sinfully beautiful. His chiseled features set in mutiny, that storm raging in the hollows of his jaw, eyes as gray as stone and icy cold.

"You want to know why?" I said. "I chose you out of spite. I was furious, bleeding rage from my pores. I was hurting. I was scared. I felt small and hopeless."

"Georga."

My eyes lifted to him. "And there you were, a powerful warden, a man who had all the choices in the world at his fingertips. I didn't know why you'd offered, but I

could see how badly you didn't want me to accept. You weren't trying to hide it. And if I had to live the rest of my life in an unwanted marriage, I decided then and there, so could you."

Roman just looked at me. Filling awkward silences had never been his style.

"And then..." I pushed to my feet, my knees shaky, my heart trembling as badly as my hands. "And then I fell in love with you and I don't regret it. I don't regret any of it."

I turned from the table and stumbled blindly in the direction of the bedroom. Tears streamed down my cheeks.

That really was my last confession. I'd bared my soul down to the last rotten ounce. I had nothing left to hide.

I made it as far as the bedroom door. A firm hand clasped my arm and spun me around, up against the wall. He wasn't gentle. He also wasn't rough. He plastered one hand to the wall, his body caging me in, and I was looking into his glinting eyes, unshuttered with raw emotion.

He saw my tears and cursed.

"I'm a cold, arrogant bastard." His thumb brushed the wetness on my cheek. "I don't deserve your tears."

"You wear the mask of a cold, arrogant bastard." I didn't know what was happening here, but I had nothing left to lose. "That's not who you are. Our marriage has always been a ticking bomb, and I tried so hard to not fall in love with you. But every time you showed me a little more of who you are, I fell a little deeper."

His gaze went soft, washing warmth into my bones. The breaths between us grew hotter and hotter, packed with volatile energy that could go either way. Desire wasn't love, it didn't forgive all and it didn't last forever. Roman was sculptured in some dark, savage beauty that had always called to me.

He was my fallen angel.

He was my sin and he was my salvation.

Now that I'd once had all of him, I could never settle for less. My body might be exploding for his touch, but my heart wanted so much more.

His head bent forward, bringing his mouth an inch closer to mine.

"Don't," I whispered, even though my body ached for him. "Not unless you forgive me. Not unless you still love me."

He pulled back a little to look at me. His smile came on slow and cocky, devastating my resistance. "Georga, you are so damn beautiful, I could spend the rest of our life in bed with you and never be sated. But I could walk away from that, from sex and physical desire, without breaking sweat. What I can't seem to do, what I've never been able to do, is walk away from loving you."

My heart turned to jelly. So did my legs. I slid down the wall a little and Roman scooped a hand around my waist, pulling me against him.

"I love you." His words brushed the corner of my mouth with the ghost of a kiss, and then his lips covered mine and he kissed me properly, urgently, stealing my breath and my senses.

We landed up in bed, ravaging each other as if we'd been starved for years instead of

a few days. Each touch, each look, each taste, each word... felt like a lifetime of cravings crammed into each heartbeat. My skin was connected to my bones connected to my heart connected to my soul, and all of me was connected to Roman.

Many hours later, I rolled out of Roman's arms and up onto my elbows, and told him about the rehab center and my volunteer position.

His satisfied smirk turned grim. "I don't like the idea of you being anywhere near that place."

"I know, it's creepy," I said. "It does feel good, though, to help those women. But that's not why I took the job. Daniel and the heirs are due to be transferred there. I figured that's our best shot to stage a breakout."

"I thought you were going to use the system to save Daniel."

"I am," I said. "How do you think I got the job at the rehab center?"

"Georga." He looked like he wanted to say more, then he sighed. "Have you spoken to Geneva about this again?"

"She's released the younger boys, but she's never going to change her mind about Daniel and the older heirs." If I'd tried to push her harder, it would just have raised her suspicions. "She's convinced they're too big of a threat."

A few beats passed. "Okay, but whatever we decide, we do this together."

"That's the plan."

"I've been out of the loop, but tomorrow I'll see what stance the wardens have taken on the situation." He pulled me back into the crook of his arm. "Maybe they're

willing to persuade the Sisterhood to release the councilmen and heirs.”

“Would they have that kind of leverage?”

“They have the leverage,” Roman said. “Whether they’re willing to get involved in town politics, that remains to be seen.”

After that, I drifted into my first night of restful, uninterrupted sleep in days.

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The following day, I made friends with a useful contact at work. That sounded worse than it was. Axel Gomez was twenty-three with short dark hair, an open, honest face, and a healthy disregard for the old regime. The more I got to know him, the more I actually liked him.

I was the only person in the staff lounge, eating a lunch of creamy mushroom pasta from the canteen. It wasn't terrible.

I'd noticed that most of the bustling activity here occurred behind closed doors. If that's what you could call the groups of men, some in scrubs, some in suits, that occasionally entered or exited a ward. The atmosphere seemed pretty sedate. Hushed. I didn't know if that was normal, or if a lot of the staff had been dismissed—and I guess they'd pressed pause on most of the therapy sessions or whatever counted as rehabilitation in this place.

Anyway, there I was, twirling pasta onto my fork with one eye on the open binder beside my plate, when a dark-haired guy in pale blue scrubs entered the lounge. Pale blue meant he was a nurse.

When he saw me, he made a bee-line for my table, his widening smile pressing dimples into his round cheeks. "Georga West."

"That's me." I closed the binder holding my confidential patient notes.

"Freaking Georga West," he gushed, his voice slightly high and giddy. "I can't believe I'm actually meeting you. Do you mind if I sit?"

He placed a hand on the back of the chair across the small table from me. His other hand clutched a paper-wrapped sandwich. “No pressure. Say no if you want to be alone. This is just so cool. I have to ask, you know?”

He’d obviously seen my face on the screens. He knew who I was. But why was he acting so weird about it? “I don’t own the chair.”

He stayed on his feet, his smile waning.

“I mean, you’re welcome to sit.”

“Oh, cool.” He pulled the chair out and sat, his smile back to full wattage. “I’m Axel, by the way. Axel Gomaz.”

“You’re a nurse?” I said. “I didn’t see you around yesterday.”

He unwrapped his sandwich. Turkey and mustard. “I’ve been working the night shift.”

“That sucks.”

“Nah, it’s cool.” He lifted the sandwich to his mouth, but didn’t bite down. “I like the graveyard shift. Not much happens, and no one’s barking orders at you. But they rotate us, one week day shift, one week night shift.”

My ears perked. “So, it gets kind of quiet here during the night?”

“Yeah, total skeleton staff.”

“What does that mean?”

He blinked at me. “Ah, right.” He shrugged. “Well, it’s just the night nurses and there’s an on-call doctor, although he doesn’t always stay at the center. It’s a short ride if he needs to come in.”

“No one at reception?”

Axel’s radar finally went on alert. He gave me a narrowed look and took a bite of turkey sandwich.

Had I blown it? I laughed and brought a forkful of pasta to my mouth. “I’m just curious about how this place runs. Too curious for my own good. That’s always been my downfall.”

“Are you kidding me?” His brow hiked. “You’re legend. You took out the council in, like, one night. That was so sweet.”

It was my turn to blink at him. “Sweet?”

“Epic.” He leaned over, lowering his voice confidentially. “You have a huge following, you know that, right?”

I shifted in my seat, really awkward now. “A following?”

“Well...” He glanced around to check we were still alone. “Me and my friends, we’re not fans of the council. And we’re not the only ones. But it’s not like any of us had the guts to do anything about it. Some of that council bullshit...it’s sick, you know?”

I nodded. “They hid a lot from us.”

“Yeah, and it’s not just that.” He took another bite of sandwich, chewed, and swallowed. “I shouldn’t be saying this...”

“Saying what?”

“This is strange, right?” He looked around again. “Suddenly we can say things that would’ve gotten us locked up in here.”

His gaze swung around to me. “Not you, though. You just went ahead and said it all, right in their faces. That was so sweet.”

It was definitely time to set him straight. “It wasn’t my decision to go public with those screenings. I didn’t even know the Sisterhood was going to do it. If I had, I’d like to think I’d have been okay with it, but I’m not sure I’m that brave.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

My father’s words flooded me. “I’m not kidding, Axel. I’m not this great hero, or leader, or whatever you’re making me out to be.”

“You went over the wall,” he said firmly. “You went to The Smoke. And you came back to tell us. If you think you’re nothing special, that’s sad. There are loads of us who think you rock big time.”

Well. “Thanks?”

“Don’t let the system take your juice, you know?”

His manner of speech was making me slightly dizzy, and it wasn’t just the overly zealous enthusiasm. “Juice?”

“You’ve started a whole movement,” he said. “That’s you. We’re done with the old crap. Like, take my mom for instance, she’s awesome. Smartest lady I know. Much smarter and tougher than my dad. No one should be telling her when she can and

can't leave her house or how she's allowed to use her time. She would have loved to be a nurse, you know? She's the one who made me passionate about it."

Something wasn't adding up. "If you feel so strongly about this, how come you work here?"

He snorted. "I apprenticed at the Medi-Center. I was hoping to get assigned there, or at any of the clinics. But we don't get a say in our placements."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Nah, it's all good. I mean, it's not like they'd close the place down without me. This way, at least I could keep an eye on the women on my watch." He leaned forward again with a smirk. "Hey, I heard the councilmen were admitted to Ward Red this morning. What's up with that?"

Geneva was moving fast, that's what. "What happens in Ward Red?"

"Sick shit, that's what."

My heart picked up an unnatural beat. Not that I cared about Julian Edgar and his council cronies, but Daniel would be next. "Axel, I'm serious."

"I don't have clearance for Ward Red." He shrugged, making me wait while he popped the last of his sandwich into his mouth and swallowed. "But what I do know is, patients never go straight there. They're usually only sent there after they fail to respond to treatment in Ward Y."

"How bad is it?"

"Depends," he said. "The real sick shit is the experiments, like shock and torture

therapy. But that's just what I've heard. Not sure it's true."

I thought of Bev, who hadn't spoken since her six-year stint in rehab. Geneva had called her a hard-crack case. My mouth turned sour.

"But mostly it's the laser operations," Axel went on. "When nothing else works, they zap parts of the brain to cut off certain stimuli."

I thought of Miriam Edgar, and if I'd had any sympathy for her husband, Julian, which I didn't, it would have evaporated on the spot. "How does that work?"

"Hell if I know," Axel said. "But usually they take at least two days to map the brain before they operate, and they do it while the patient is still in Ward Y. I've never heard of anyone being admitted straight off the bat to Ward Red."

I didn't have any answers for him, but thank goodness Daniel and the heirs were being transferred to Ward X.

Geneva had confirmed it.

But for how long? Two days? Just long enough to map their brains before Ward Red erased their souls?

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“I ’m scared,” I admitted to Roman that evening.

We were sitting on a blanket in front of the fire he’d built. Outside, the wind howled and a branch or something kept knocking against the cabin roof. It wasn’t a storm, not yet, but a bitterly cold wind had started blowing in during the afternoon with gale force strength.

We’d spoken at length over dinner and I’d told him about Axel and everything I’d learned. I’d always known the Rehab Center was a place of nightmares, but now I knew exactly why.

My gaze met Roman’s in the crackling firelight. “What if we fail? What if we don’t get Daniel out in time?”

His jaw squared. “That’s not an option.”

“That’s what I keep telling myself. We can’t fail. That is not an option. That is not going to be Daniel’s fate. I won’t allow it.” I drew in a shaky breath. “But I’m not the bigger-than-life hero everyone keeps making me out to be.”

Roman’s jaw cracked into the semblance of a grin. “Not everyone, only this Axel guy. Should I be worried?”

I slapped his arm. “Roman, I’m serious.”

“You’re stubborn.”

My chin went up. “Are we trading insults now?”

He shifted closer and kissed me on the mouth, a slow, tantalizing kiss that stroked me with desire. “You’re determined to feel solely responsible for Daniel’s situation, and his fate, and it’s not on you. Not even a little.”

“You’re not helping,” I murmured against his bristled jaw.

“I would be, if you weren’t too stubborn to hear me.”

I pulled back to look at him. The look in his eye was heated from our kiss, from the promise of the night, but there was also grit and steel there. He wasn’t teasing.

“I feel responsible.”

“You didn’t lock him up. You’re not sending him to rehab.” He brushed his knuckles across my cheek, his gaze washing me in warmth. “You didn’t even spearhead this rebellion. You spoke your truth, and you wanted change. That doesn’t make you guilty for everything these Sisters of Capra do.”

He wasn’t enamored with the Sisterhood. He was a warden, unaffected by Capra politics, and he’d never brought the council rules into our home or marriage. But he’d developed a personal dislike for the Sisters of Capra, and Geneva. I was in no position to try and change his mind. I had my own doubts, no matter how hard I tried to balance the bad with the good.

“I am responsible,” I said softly. “It’s not about feeling guilty, Roman. I’m responsible for Daniel’s fate because I’m the only person in a position to help him.”

Roman and I exchanged a look of frustration. The wardens weren’t prepared to help. Roman had said as much over dinner, but now he elaborated. “I knew it was a slim

chance, anyway. So long as Capra operates efficiently and keeps delivering the goods, they refuse to get involved.”

“How altruistic of them.” My sarcasm was dripping. “They’re happy to trade ovarian eggs from The Smoke, and medical and technical expertise from Capra, but they can’t be bothered to step in when shit hits the fan.”

Roman’s brow quirked. “Do you really want the wardens to interfere in Capra business?”

“Do you always have to be the voice of reason?”

A baritone chuckle rumbled in his chest. “You must understand, those are the boundaries on which the Eastern Coalition was founded. Capra was always meant to be a self-governing town, an experimental capsule left to its own devices. The Smoke provides additional resources, and acts as an outlet for the overflow.”

“Overflow?” I scoffed. “Those are people you’re talking about, citizens kicked out of town.”

He let my protest ride. “The Wardens offer protection from the wilds. We have a decent-sized man-force and stock of weapons, but we’d be overrun if the barons attacked with their hordes. Trade is our best weapon. It’s how we keep the wilds at bay. It’s why the barons are happy for us to preserve this little slice of civilization instead of decimating it. They benefit from all Capra has to offer, too.”

I rolled my eyes. “What about The Smoke and those union families that run The Smelt and The Break? Isn’t that what you wanted? For the wardens to step in and clean up the corruption?”

I didn’t mention the underground human trafficking ring that had taken Amelia from

him.

That's where Roman's mind went, anyway.

His eyes darkened. "That's one good thing that's come out of the Capra Rebellion. If it can happen in town, it can happen in The Smoke. The Protectorate is afraid the union families will get ideas about grabbing more territory, or wrest power from them completely. They're scrambling to take back control of The Smelt and The Break."

Relief hit me from all sides. This was what Roman had always wanted, to get rid of the families, to stop the human trafficking of young girls and whatever other nefarious power they wielded. "That's good."

"It's also keeping the Protectorate busy and out of Capra business. Despite the clearly established boundaries, the Protectorate have always aligned themselves closely with the council."

That could solve a problem I'd been putting off for another day. "Are you saying it's safe for Daniel and the heirs to stay in The Smoke once we break them out?"

"The Smoke was always safe for them," Roman said.

"But not safe for Capra," I argued. "I trust Daniel implicitly, but some of the others...the Otter heir in particular, he's bad news. He'll try to enlist the aid of the Protectorate to restore the council. I have to be honest, I haven't figured out what we should do with them."

Roman gave that some thought. "No guarantees, but the Protectorate is going to war with the Grabough and Hanson families. They don't have the capacity to take on an agenda from any of the heirs as well."

“Not right now, perhaps, but what about later?”

“That depends on the timing, and how the Sisterhood develops their relationship with the Protectorate,” he said. “Once the politics in Capra has settled, I doubt they’ll rock the boat.”

Everything was lining up.

Now we just needed to get Daniel and the others to The Smoke.

But first, there was one more thing I had to tell Roman about. I didn’t want to. We’d only just made peace between us, and we’d never see eye-to-eye on this. Julian Edgar could rot in hell for all I cared, but Roman believed the system was bigger than the individual.

I couldn’t keep this from him.

No more secrets.

“Julian Edgar was admitted to rehab this morning,” I said. “Ward Z.”

Roman shoved both his hands through his hair. His masks were all down tonight, and his expression was pained. “We have to get him out, too. We have to get them all out.”

The councilmen belonged there.

They deserved everything they had coming to them.

Even Ward Red.

I wasn't a monster, but a mist of fury and revenge invaded my head whenever I thought of Julian Edgar and his cronies.

They'd taken my choices. They'd murdered the hope of me carrying a baby of my own flesh and blood in my womb. They'd taken too much from all of us.

And let's not forget, there was nothing rehab could do to them that they hadn't sanctioned, hadn't condemned countless women to.

"The councilmen have too much power," I said carefully. I didn't want to fight about this. "I won't release them into The Smoke. They'll claw their way back into Capra, with or without the Protectorate's help."

"I don't like it, but I hear you. Rescuing all the councilmen could be too dangerous. I can't manage five of them, but I can manage Julian Edgar." His voice brooked no argument. This wasn't a matter for debate. "I'll take him into the wilds."

"Okay." I didn't agree, but I would do this for Roman. "We can include Julian in the rescue mission, if it all works out. But there's only one plan, we'll only get one attempt at this, and I won't jeopardize Daniel."

"That's all I'm asking."

Roman stood to fetch a bottle of wine and we spent the rest of the evening strategizing. Our plans were loose, mostly vague options thrown into a pot, but it was a beginning.

We refined the plan over the next two days as I familiarized myself with the layout of the rehab building and coaxed further details from Axel.

The graveyard shift was our best window of time, when the rehab center was manned

with a skeleton staff. No receptionist on duty and only the one guard stationed there. The overnight ward nurses. The on-call doctor, possibly, depending on whether he decided to be on-site that night...or if we were particularly unlucky and he was called in for an incident.

According to Axel, Ward Red was usually locked down overnight and my security card didn't give me—or any of the other nurses—access. Thanks to Roman's insistence that we include Julian in our plans, this was a major hiccup.

After more persistent digging, Axel mentioned an intercom system between the nurses' stations. He'd been telling me about an emergency. He'd needed a sedative for one of his patients, and he didn't have access to the controlled-drug cabinet. He'd had to call the nurse from Ward Red out to get the sedative for him.

Slowly but surely, we were batting away potential problems.

By the end of the second day, Belinda and I had finished with Ward X. All but two of the women had been released. We didn't feel they had a safe environment to return to.

Janice told us to leave it with her. "The council families have been relocated to the Legislative District, and there are several large homes standing empty."

"That was quick."

"The sooner everyone moves on from their old lives, the better," Janice said. "And we're repurposing some of the properties. Rose has established a halfway home for women at the Otter residence. That should be a good fit."

That evening, Roman and I reached a disturbing conclusion. We'd been going around in circles with various plans, but only one was almost foolproof. It was simple. Brute

force tactics. Our best shot at succeeding. But whichever angle I looked at it, I would not be able to cover my tracks.

I stared into the glass of red wine I was nursing in front of the fireplace. The storm had blown itself out before fully manifesting, but winter was here, and Roman had taken to lighting a fire for us each night. The cabin had heating, but this was more romantic. We were taking all the little moments we could get, in between strategizing this plan that was about to blow my world apart.

“There’s no other way,” I said. “Too much can go wrong. Besides, I’ve been thinking about this. It’s going to be obvious it was an inside job, and Geneva knows how I feel. She’s not stupid. She’ll put two and two together and realize why I wanted to be assigned to the rehab center in the first place.”

“She won’t have proof.”

“Trust me, that doesn’t factor into any of her decisions,” I said. “She locked up the heirs, not because they’ve done anything wrong, but because they may cause problems one day. The risk is too great all around. If I stay in Capra, she will have me arrested. And if we go with a weaker plan that protects my role in this, it could fail, and she’d probably come after me anyway.”

Roman and I drank our wine and thought on it, and he eventually conceded. “We have the apartment in The Smoke. You’ll be safe. The Protectorate doesn’t have the bandwidth for Capra’s troubles right now.”

“And even if they did, I’m handing them the heirs.” That’s where their allegiance would be right now. I would be safe. That wasn’t my concern.

There was also Roman to consider. He was my husband. We were irrevocably bound together in all our deeds—and misdeeds.

“What about you?” I asked. “Will this cause trouble for you with the wardens?”

“The wardens are committed to remaining impartial for the moment.” He didn’t sound concerned, but maybe he was downplaying it for my benefit. “I won’t throw it in their faces, and I won’t be acting in any official capacity as a warden.”

“Geneva won’t see it that way.”

“Geneva’s personal grudges won’t affect me.” He shrugged. “Besides, there’s no reason for me to be in Capra. I’ll put in for a transfer. That should make everyone happy.”

“Except for James.” The senior warden was fully invested in Roman’s personal future and ambitions. That’s why he’d brought Roman to Capra. He was in the process of stepping down and ushering Roman into his position.

“Except for James.” Roman cupped my chin and searched my eyes. “What about you ? You would be leaving Capra behind. Your family. Your friends. It will be a long time before you’d be able to return. Maybe never.”

Could I really do that?

For Daniel?

But it wasn’t just for Daniel. It was for all of them, all those lives destroyed by their fathers’ sins, by some perceived treachery that lay in their future. Even the Otter heir, who made my skin crawl, hadn’t done anything wrong. Not yet. Possibly not ever.

It was wrong.

We shouldn’t erase someone’s soul because of something they may or may not do

one day.

“But I will get to live,” I said to Roman. “Daniel and the other heirs deserve that, too. To live, not simply to just exist as empty shells.”

It was decided then.

My heart was already aching for the people I’d leave behind. And for myself, if I were being honest—for my life in Capra.

But I would have Roman, and he was my home.

I would be okay.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:27 am

The following morning, I didn't take the shuttle to the rehab center. I left home an hour earlier and cycled all the way, skirting the town square and taking a leisurely detour along the lakeside path in the leafy Legislative District before navigating the symmetrical Quantum Zone.

Even in the bleakest months of winter, Capra was beautiful. My days were counting down, and I wanted to savor every moment, capture a thousand mental pictures to take with me.

The streets were lined with trees, some with bared branches, the evergreens still furred with velvet pine bushels. The grass was patchy and yellowed in places, but that was nature, too. Across the lake, the nature reserve was still mostly green and thickly wooded. A spiral of gray smoke rose up in the distance, a strong contrast to the cold, fresh air that stung my cheeks.

The Smoke was a place of shortages and hardship, the Blood Throats, the crime families, and the uncertainty of the Protectorate. But most of all, The Smoke was not pretty. The streets were lined with concrete instead of grass and trees. The buildings were packed on top of each other without space to breathe. The only nature to be found there was the occasional polluted breeze.

I would miss Capra.

I would miss my parents and Jessie most of all.

I would make a life for myself with Roman in our apartment in The Smoke, and it would be a good life, a great life...but today, this morning, there was a physical pain

in my heart.

I wasn't wallowing in misery and self-pity.

That wasn't it.

The Smoke had walls, but they didn't trap you. The Smoke had rules, but they didn't suffocate you. For all its shortcomings, The Smoke offered adventure and excitement, a life that could be as unpredictable as you wished it to be.

Maybe, if I could convince Roman, one day we might make it into the wilds. Plan a safe route to lands beyond the barons' reach and who knows what we might find. One thing I'd learned over the last few months was that there was more left of this world than I'd ever believed possible. Maybe more than even Roman believed possible.

But first I had to mourn the loss of Capra.

I stopped by my parent's home. In a relatively short span of time, I'd come to think of it as theirs, no longer mine. The cabin was my home now...until it wasn't. I wondered how long it would take before I started thinking of the apartment in The Smoke as home.

My mom opened the door with a mug of coffee in her hand, her smile warm when she saw it was me. "Georga, darling, how lovely."

"I can't stay long," I said as I stepped inside the hallway. "I'm on my way to the rehab center."

"What on earth for?" She paled, her brow spearing into deep creases as she added breathlessly, "Why would you do that?"

I realized where her mind had gone. “Mom, no! I’m not being admitted. I work there.”

Relief collapsed her frown, but she still didn’t sound impressed. “Well, for goodness sake, haven’t they closed that place down yet?”

“We’re transitioning the women out,” I explained. “I haven’t heard anything about them closing the center. Have you?”

“Well, no, but one would hope.” She sipped on her coffee. “I’ve just made a fresh pot.”

“I really can’t stay.” I wished I could. I wanted to absorb every precious minute of my family while I could. “I thought, maybe, Roman and I could come over for dinner tonight?”

“Of course, darling,” she said. “That would be wonderful. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.” I shrugged and smiled weakly.

Mom wasn’t fooled. She studied me, seeing far more than I was willing to share.

I averted my eyes, and spotted the newsletter on the hallway table. “Is that a new flyer?”

“It came this morning,” Mom said. “Did you not get one?”

“I left home early.” Or maybe they were no longer delivering to Parklands, since only wardens now resided there.

SISTERS OF CAPRA

BULLETIN

REFORM & REGULATION

Dear Citizens of Capra,

Effective immediately, all curfew restrictions are abolished. We will continue to have a guard presence on the streets and expect all citizens to abide by the law of our society and conduct themselves appropriately. There will be no exceptions. All young ladies between the ages of 12 and 15 are invited to book an appointment at the clinic with regard to ovarian egg harvesting. This initial interview will be a consultation and opportunity to discuss the screening process and determine how you wish to proceed. This is not mandatory. Single men older than 25, and who have unsuccessfully participated in at least 2 graduation ceremonies are eligible to book interviews regarding alternative options going forward. Please enquire at Berkley House.

As always, the Sisterhood stands with each and every citizen of Capra, regardless of gender, age or social standing.

We stand together.

Once I'd read the newsletter, Mom murmured, "I know you've had some concerns about the Sisterhood, and Geneva."

"I thought you hadn't noticed." She'd certainly dismissed it all as irrelevant.

Mom could flip from mother hen to stern parent mode in a heartbeat, and she did so now.

Her tone was unapologetic. "I didn't want to encourage your negativity."

“You think I’m being overly sensitive and that the sun shines out of Geneva’s—” I cut off in horror at the word I was about to use in front of my mother. I’d been spending too much time with Axel.

“I think you’re young and idealistic, and I’m well aware of Geneva’s flaws.” Mom pursed her lips around a sigh, looking at me. “It takes a strong woman to run a secret organization within a patriarchal society like ours.”

I refrained from rolling my eyes. I’d had just about all I could take of Geneva’s strength and power.

She plucked the newsletter from my fingers and waved it at me. “It takes a hard woman to achieve this.”

Well, I couldn’t argue against any one of those points in that bulletin.

Her gaze softened on me, as did her tone. “And it takes astounding courage and idealism to do what you’ve done. You are the girl behind a woman like Geneva, the one she built her throne on. I am incredibly proud of you, Georga.”

I wasn’t the girl standing behind Geneva: I was flat on the ground, trodden down beneath her dictatorial boots, and now I was about to lose my town, my home, my friends and my family.

Resentment flared within me, but it was stubborn and selfish. Things were changing for the better in Capra. Not for everyone, but for the vast majority... for the greater good of all. That was how Capra society had risen from the ashes of the old world. If not for all the selfless sacrifice back then, none of us would be here now.

Mom’s hand curled over my shoulder. “There is no perfect in our world, darling. There wasn’t before, there isn’t now, and there never will be. There’s only better than

or worse than, and I believe the Sisterhood is better.”

I swallowed down a lump of pure frustration, at my mother, at Geneva, at myself.

“You’re right,” I conceded. It would be childish to expect any version of our world to be perfect, and I was no longer a child.

I glanced at the time on my wristwatch and groaned. “I really have to go.”

Mom wrapped me in a hug. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I said, aware of all the chances I’d missed to tell her just how much I did.

I pulled myself together on the long cycle to the rehab center. I had to get my head into the game. Now that we’d settled on a definitive plan, I wanted to inspect each part and plug any holes.

As we did each morning, Belinda and I shared a coffee in the staff lounge and then checked in with Janice. This morning, we received a new set of patient cases. Yellow binders for Ward Y. The serious and serial offenders. Or the way I saw it, the women who’d been seriously and serially failed. Some were broken by the system and the rehab program. Some of them still had a spark in their eyes.

One woman confounded me.

Lauren Allbright was twenty-six years old. She had a pleasant face, wore a serene expression and smiled gently. Her husband was a research scientist in the Quantum Zone and she had two children, boys aged five and three.

We were seated in a small communal lounge in Ward Y. She perched on one end of a

two-seater couch and I pulled up a hardback chair right in front of her, her file open on my lap. I'd already read both her admissions forms. This was her second stint in rehab.

"It says here..." I glanced between her and the top admission form. "The first time, you were apprehended at the Blue Fish at 9 pm. You walked in and went right up to the bar counter."

It was unthinkable for a woman to enter the rowdy bar, let alone on her own and after the curfew hour.

The look in her eye turned prickly. "I was thirsty."

"I'm not judging you," I assured her.

I really wasn't. I was thinking of Beth, the woman I'd tried to help not too long ago. Her abusive husband had made her stand outside the Blue Fish, in the bitter cold and rain, while he drank inside. I needed to determine if Lauren's home situation had somehow forced her reckless behavior.

"Were you looking for your husband?" I asked, scribbling down notes as we spoke.

"I was looking for a gin and tonic."

I blinked. "But surely you knew the bartender wouldn't serve you."

She smiled and shrugged, the prickliness gone. "You can't blame a woman for trying."

Was she just defiant by nature? I could totally appreciate that. "So, your husband wasn't inside the Blue Fish?"

“Jackson was home with the kids.”

“Did he know you’d left the house?”

“Possibly.” She shrugged again. “The first few times I broke curfew, he came after me and brought me home. By then, he’d probably given up.”

“He didn’t send the Guard after you?”

“Jackson?” Her brow creased. “He never did before. That’s why I had to go into the bar...to make sure.”

To make sure of what? “Is there anything you’d like to share with me about your home life? Is Jackson a good man?”

“He tries his best.”

“Are you afraid of him?”

Her eyes widened. “Why would I be afraid of my husband?”

“I don’t know,” I said gently. “You tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“Lauren.” I leaned forward, offering a comforting smile that I hoped would encourage her confidence. “You really can, you can tell me anything. There won’t be any repercussions.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

I wasn't getting through to her. "I'm just trying to help get you out of here."

Something resembling fear struck in her eyes. "Don't do that. I don't want to leave."

"You're afraid of going home?"

She shook her head. "I like it here."

"There's nothing to like about this place, Lauren. If you don't want to go home, we can arrange alternative accommodation for you and your children."

"My children are happy where they are." She turned her head, her gaze going out the window. The window was small, the view sliced by iron bars, but whatever she saw restored some of her serenity. "Jackson is a wonderful father."

I skimmed over my notes.

Jackson is a good man. He didn't have her admitted. He didn't send for the Guard. He tries his best. He's a wonderful father. She's not afraid of him... or so she says.

"Eight days ago, you went back to the Blue Fish," I said.

"When you have a winning horse..." She pulled her gaze in from the window to smile at me.

"You wanted to be re-admitted?"

"It's so peaceful here," she sighed. "Quiet."

"That's a huge risk to take for a little peace and quiet." I wasn't buying this. There must be something at home that she was running away from. "If they felt you weren't

responding to rehabilitation, they would have tried more serious measures.”

“Like Margie,” she said. “She’s a woman who lives on my street. She was totally different, rehabilitated, when she returned from rehab the second time. Her mind is cleared. She drifts effortlessly through each day.”

“Exactly.”

“Exactly,” she repeated dreamily. “It must be so blissful. So peaceful. No more noise.”

It suddenly dawned on me.

Lauren Allbright’s mind wasn’t in any condition to be released to its own devices, and I certainly wasn’t qualified to handle her case.

I jotted down my final thoughts and, as soon as I’d thanked Lauren for her time, I took them to Janice.

“We have excellent psychiatrists here,” Janice declared. “That’s one good thing that’s come out of this institution. Now they’ll actually get the opportunity to use their skills to build people up instead of tearing them down.”

“Are you saying she’s going to stay here?”

Janice nodded. “But she’ll get proper help instead of a laser lobotomy.”

Laser lobotomy . That must be the laser operation that zapped the brain, killed off emotion, spontaneity and pretty much flat-lined your personality.

I gave a small cough. “This morning, I noticed that Ward X has been cleared of all

patients.”

“That’s correct.” Janice planted her elbows on the table and linked her fingers beneath her chin. “The last two patients have been relocated to the safe house in Parklands. Rose collected them yesterday evening.”

“That’s good.”

Janice’s smile held a trace of impatience.

She was waiting for me to leave.

“Does that mean the heirs will be brought in today? I mean, now that Ward X is empty and available.”

She set her shoulders back, stating with an air of authority, “You and Belinda won’t be involved in their rehabilitation.”

“Oh, I know,” I said. “I was just curious.”

Her gaze narrowed on me. “That’s none of your concern, Georga.”

I cursed myself for the foolish move. I’d pushed too hard. I no longer had to worry about the kind of suspicions my behavior might raise after the fact, but I couldn’t lose my position before the great escape.

“Understood,” I said with what I hoped was indifference and hastily exited her office.

That evening, Roman brought home a tranquilizer gun and a small, flat box that contained four darts. “Aim for the largest area, the chest is your best bet. The darts will penetrate a shirt, or scrub top, even a sweater or white coat. If they’re wearing a

heavy jacket or coat, then you'll need to aim for the neck."

"It shouldn't come to that," I said with more confidence than I felt.

"Either way, try to get as close as safely possible before you pull the trigger." Roman grinned without a trace of humor. "The propulsion is strong, that's not the problem. But if you're close enough, you can't miss."

I gave him a look. "Says the man who can probably hit his target with his eyes closed. You do realize I've never held a gun before, right?"

He didn't laugh. "Do you realize how many reservations I have about this plan?"

I did, and I wasn't about to entertain any one of them. "Show me what to do."

Roman demonstrated how to load a dart, then he handed me the gun.

The weapon was black, and hard plastic. Much lighter than I'd expected. Then again, I had nothing to base any expectations on. Roman made it look effortless, but it took me three attempts before I managed to pop the dart into the spring mechanism. Once I'd done it, though, once I knew how much pressure to apply, it came naturally.

"Get comfortable with the grip," he said. "Make sure your finger has an easy reach on the trigger. Here, let me guide you."

He positioned himself at my back, reaching around me as he caught my wrists and extended our arms, then wrapped both hands around the cold, plastic butt in my hand. I was instantly aware of his body pressed to mine, of being folded within his masculine embrace, inhaling his scent. Heat swept through me and my skin pricked with desire.

I wasn't the only one affected. His mouth brushed the spot below my ear, not quite a kiss, but somehow so much more.

"Roman..." His name was a sigh and a groan. "You're distracting me."

"Maybe we should have a timeout from this training session." His voice was gravel, husky with temptation as his mouth trailed down the side of my throat.

I rested the back of my head against his chest and tipped my eyes up, and I almost gave in when I saw the hunger in his molten silver gaze. "What about my parents? We have to be there for supper in half an hour."

There was a devilish glint in his eye, a wicked grin sliding across his bristled jaw. "We can be late."

It was that grin that did it. I missed this side of my husband so much, and I hadn't been sure I'd ever see it again, and here it was...for me.

Needless to say, we were late for dinner with my parents.

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I couldn't say I enjoyed the last dinner with my parents. Because that's exactly what it was. Everything was too intense. I was frantic and desperate. I felt like I had to absorb every smile, every look, every word and hug and mannerism, and before I could savor the moment, it slipped away with the knowing that this was all I'd ever have of them.

Memories.

Pictures in my head.

I wouldn't get to see the fine lines around my mom's eyes and mouth age into proper wrinkles. I wouldn't get to see the gray streaks in Dad's hair overtake the brown. I would never again get to see my dad's eyes and words fill with the pride and love he carried for his only child. I would never again feel my mother's comfort or even feel the sting of her stern reason.

My parents would be captured in this moment, forever frozen.

As the evening drew on, I became quieter and quieter, frustrated at myself for wasting this precious time.

It didn't go unnoticed, of course.

At one point, my mother dragged me into the kitchen on the pretense of helping her serve dessert.

She folded her arms and pierced me with a worried look. "What is going on, Georga?"

You look utterly miserable.”

I couldn’t tell her the truth. Her loyalties were already conflicted, and she’d be losing me in the process. What if she decided that betraying my confidence was the only way to save me?

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. “Sorry, I’ve just had a long day.”

“Is it that place?” Her mouth pursed. “I know you want to do your part, darling, but honestly, does it have to be at the rehab center? No wonder you’re depressed.”

I jumped at the excuse. “You’re right, it’s affecting me worse than I thought it would. But it’s not a permanent position. Another week or so, at the most. Rose has asked me to join her team and I’m thinking about it.”

Cautious relief relaxed Mom’s features and she unfolded her arms to hug me. “I love you.”

I hugged her back fiercely, blinking back tears. “Love you, too.”

When Roman and I climbed into his truck a little later, I asked him if we could stop at Jessie.

“Do you mind if I drop you off?” He started the truck, sliding a look my way. “I planned to take a drive to the rehab center and scope the area. About an hour? Is that good?”

I’d walked the perimeter of the building many times over the last few days, mapped the emergency exits for each ward and road access and surveillance cameras. But Roman insisted on seeing it for himself.

“I don’t know if she’ll want to see me,” I said as he pulled away from the curb. “She’s probably still pretty mad at me.”

We completed the short drive to Jessie’s street in silence. He cut the engine and leaned across to brush a kiss over my mouth. “Should I wait to see if you’re received?”

I shook my head. I wouldn’t allow Jessie to turn me away. “I have my iComm. I’ll send you a message if I need you to pick me up sooner.”

His hand rested on my thigh, his eyes on me. “Are you okay?”

“Just a lot on my mind.” I smiled for his benefit. “This is hard.”

“You don’t have to go through with it, you know.” Moonlight bathed the interior of the cab, casting shadows on his face and contemplative expression. “There’s always Plan B.”

I laughed. “The one where I slip a fast-acting sedative into the coffee supply and hide behind the couch in the staff lounge, waiting for the unsuspecting night nurses to come in, one by one, to get their coffee fix? Then, when they collapse, I stack their bodies behind the couch, steal their security cards to gain access to the wards and hope no one notices anything is amiss. What could possibly go wrong?”

Especially since we weren’t taking out the guard stationed at reception. His absence would be far too noticeable, especially since the on-call doctor could arrive at any time and sound the alarm.

“I mean the other Plan B,” Roman growled, unamused at my sarcasm. “I blow out the emergency exit with explosive putty and you don’t need to be involved at all.”

We'd already discarded Plan C. "You'd need to take out the reception guard for that to work. It's too risky. If someone comes along, or he doesn't answer his iComm, it'll raise the alarm."

There was no way to blow the door out quietly. Then Roman would still need to sweep the wards and get everyone out of their rooms. The timing just didn't work.

"We're going with Plan A." I planted a kiss on his cheek and climbed out of the truck. "I love you."

"Love you," he said, his jaw softening, and he didn't pull away, watching, waiting as I walked up to the front door of Jessie's white-washed terrace.

I knocked and turned to blow Roman a kiss, then made a shooing gesture to give him permission to go.

Jessie's husband answered the door. His green eyes lit on me with surprise, quickly followed by a warm welcome. "Georga, lady of the hour."

"What?"

"Oh, you know..." Harry smiled sheepishly and pulled me into a hug. He must have seen Roman's truck over my shoulder. "Is Roman coming in?"

"Not tonight," I said. "He has to be somewhere. But he'll be back to fetch me in a while, if that's okay?"

Harry waved at the truck and closed the door.

"We're always happy to have you here, for as long as you like, and as long as possible." He winked playfully and lowered his voice. "If you could put in a good

word with Jessie for me, I'd be forever grateful. I don't know what I've done, but I'm sorry. Really sorry. Don't forget to mention how sorry I am. I'm groveling here."

He was speaking in a teasing tone. That was Harry, always a laugh, always good-natured, truly one of the nicest people I've ever met. But it seemed something was going on between them... or not. I gave myself a mental slap.

Harry hadn't done anything wrong.

I had.

And apparently Jessie hadn't shared why she was in a bad mood.

"Jessie's in the kitchen," he said. "Go on through."

"Thanks." I almost gave him another hug, because I could, because Harry was another person I would miss. But that would have been weird, so I didn't.

Jessie wasn't aware of my arrival. She had her back to me, water running in the kitchen sink as she rinsed off their dinner dishes. The kettle on the stove whistled and she shut off the water, grabbing a drying towel as she turned, and abruptly dropped it when she caught sight of me.

"Sorry," I said, stepping deeper inside the kitchen. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"What?" She scowled at me. "What are you doing here?"

"Harry let me in."

"That's not..." She flapped a hand, sighed, and moved to take the kettle off the stove.

"What do you want, Georga?"

I hated this.

Some of her anger was justified, but I was done taking the blame for everything she'd thrown at me. Still, I hated this rift between us. I'd do just about anything to get my friend back.

That wasn't why I was here, though.

Jessie flicked her voluminous black curls over one shoulder and reached for mugs. "I'm making hot chocolate. Or would you prefer coffee?"

"Jessie." I edged around the kitchen table, but her knitted brows stopped me before I got anywhere near her. "I don't want hot chocolate. I don't want coffee. I just want to talk."

"Well, go on." She shoved her hands into the front pockets of her pants, every bit as stubborn as me. Her brown eyes were flat without the mischief we usually amused ourselves with. "I'm not going to kick you out of my house, Georga, and it's not like you're going to leave of your own free will until you've had your say. So what is it?"

I rubbed the ache developing at my temple. "You know what I said about Daniel?"

"Of course I do." Jessie blew out a noisy breath. "I've also spoken to Brenda about it. She lives two streets over from me now. Did you know that?"

The accusation in her tone grated on my nerves. "I didn't know, but what are you saying? Is that somehow my fault now, too?"

Her expression softened fractionally. "I'm not blaming you, Georga. I'm just...it was distressing, seeing Brenda like that. She's lost everything. Her husband. Her home. Her future. She knows Daniel is going to be sent to rehab, and she knows what kind

of life she's looking at with him once he returns."

I thought of Brenda's outburst of spiteful rage and had to bite my tongue. That's not why I was here, and I wasn't heartless...or maybe my perspective had just shifted. I was also about to lose my home. My future. At least I still had Roman. Maybe she was just hurting so badly, and I'd been the face she'd lashed out at.

I pulled out a chair and sat. "What I've got to tell you, please, don't say anything to anyone, and especially not to Brenda. At least, not until it's done. Then you're welcome to let her know."

Jessie took one step closer. "What's going on?"

"Daniel and the other heirs will be admitted to rehab within the next day or so, and Roman and I have a plan to get them out," I said. "We're taking them to The Smoke, and we're going with them."

"What do you mean, you're going with them?" She came another step forward, pressing her palms to the table. "You're coming back, right?"

"I can't." My throat thickened with all the emotions warring inside me. "Roman is organizing his own transfer out of Capra. We'll be living in The Smoke."

"I don't understand. You've been there before and you've come back."

"Roman and I have been over it, again and again, and there's no way to hide my involvement," I told her. "It won't be safe here for me, not once Geneva knows I helped the heirs escape."

Jessie deflated into the chair across from me, half-slumped on the table with a hand dragging through her hair. "You can't do this."

“I’m so sorry.” I stretched my arm across the table, my palm turned up. “I can’t not do this. I can’t leave Daniel to whatever fate Geneva has in store for him.”

“What about your parents?” She stared at me, wetness gathering in the corners of her eyes. “Your mother will be devastated. Does she know?”

“I can’t tell her,” I said. “But I plan to write them a letter and...and I was hoping you’d deliver it once I’m gone.”

Jessie’s gaze dipped to my upturned hand and then, to my relief, she placed her hand in mine. “When?”

“I don’t have an exact date, but it will be soon,” I said. “A couple of days at the most, if everything goes according to plan.”

“There was supposed to be time for me to be mad at you, and to get over myself.” Her voice developed a quiver. Her grip on my hand tightened. “We were supposed to raise our children together. We were supposed to have family barbeques in the summer and toast marshmallows around a log fireplace in the winter.”

“I’m sorry,” I said again.

What else could I say?

And then, suddenly, there was something. The service hatch to the train tunnel. We were using it to get everyone out, but there was no reason anyone would discover our secret route.

“Jessie, you’re right. I have been to The Smoke and back,” I said excitedly. “Once the dust has settled and no one’s actively searching for me, I should be able to sneak back into Capra for visits.”

Jessie's eyes brightened. "And, maybe, one day I could sneak out to visit you in The Smoke."

I'd have to discuss that with Roman, but he wouldn't have a problem with bringing Jessie to visit. Suddenly anything seemed possible. My chest felt as light as those marshmallows Jessie envisioned us roasting.

Jessie made us hot chocolate as the mood in the kitchen swung from heartbreak to laughter.

A few hours later, back at the cabin, I sat down and wrote a letter to my parents. I didn't know if either of them would understand why I had to do this, but I had to say goodbye, and leave them with a little hope. And although I couldn't mention how , I promised I would see them again.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:27 am

Belinda and I were finishing our morning coffee in the staff lounge when Axel walked in. His face lit up with enthusiasm when he spotted me.

“I’ll leave you youngsters to catch up,” Belinda murmured, offering Axel a kind smile as she stood. “I’ll see you in Janice’s office?”

I checked my watch. “Five minutes.”

Axel swooped into the chair across from me. “So, what’s with your chief taking all the face time?”

I was growing accustomed to Axel’s odd word choices. That didn’t mean I understood half of it. He and some of his nurse friends had found old world tech in a medical storage facility and listened to thousands of hours of something called podcasts...that’s where they’d picked up their so-called pod slang. The tech was forbidden, naturally, but that’s exactly why they spoke the slang. It was their little rebellion of words, which I could totally relate to.

I assumed my ‘chief’ was Geneva. “Face time?”

He rolled a finger around his face. “You know, screen time. She’s up there with something new every day, but we’re seeing less and less of you and it’s just the same old, same old.”

Geneva was weaning the public off me. I couldn’t say it was a surprise. “I’m not a prominent member of the Sisterhood, and I guess I’ve said all I’ve got to say.”

“We haven’t heard all we’ve got to hear,” Axel said. “You’re like, legend. You should be up on the bandstand.” His eyes lit up. “Hell, yeah, let’s do that.”

I was almost afraid to ask. “Do what?”

“Saturday, you on the bandstand,” he stamped out. “I’ll bring the crowd. It’ll be epic.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“You don’t get it.” He threw his hands out. “You’re a hot commodity, Georga. People can’t get enough of you and they want to, like, hear it direct from you to—” he jabbed his thumbs at his chest. “Come on, we’ll fill the square.”

That was never going to happen, so any protest was redundant.

I pushed to my feet, aware of my five minutes ticking down. “Maybe, let me think about it, okay?”

Axel fist-pumped the air. “Sweet.”

I was almost out the door when he said, “Oh, yeah, did you hear? The heirs came into Ward X.”

My heartbeat stuttered and my entire body snapped to attention. I kept my expression neutral as I slowly turned to him. “Are you sure?”

“They were admitted overnight.” His usual exuberance dampened. “I hope they don’t land up in Ward Red. That would be messed up.”

“Okay,” I said stupidly.

My head was spinning.

I whipped myself about and out of the lounge. Once in the corridor, I slammed my back against the wall and breathed, slow and steady. My feet itched to carry me straight to Ward X. But I couldn't do that. Belinda and I had our usual morning meeting with Janice.

Don't raise any more suspicions than absolutely necessary.

The check-in with Janice never took more than ten minutes. This morning was no different. She was pleased with our progress, and she didn't breathe a word about the heirs being admitted. Had Axel heard wrong? I didn't dare ask Janice. Last night she'd made it clear that the heirs were none of my business.

So I didn't ask Janice anything. I didn't say much at all, just murmured now and then while I let Janice and Belinda do all the talking. My head had stopped spinning. My thoughts were tunneled into the end game.

The countdown had begun. Two days. That's what Axel had said. It took two days to map the brain for the procedure. I didn't know for sure that that's what was in store for Daniel.

I try my best to be pragmatic, Georga, never cruel. Maybe Geneva would assess the heirs individually, maybe Daniel would be deemed a lesser threat, but I wasn't prepared to leave Daniel's life up to chance or Geneva's grace.

When we stepped out of Janice's office, my gaze landed on the door to Ward Red. From here, it didn't look any different to the other wards. The metal plate engraved with 'Ward Z'. The scanner on the wall beside the swing doors. That was the difference, of course. I couldn't just swipe my security card to gain access, as I could for Ward X and Ward Y.

Ward Red complicated our plan.

Getting Julian out of there tripled our risk.

Just another thing to resent Julian Edgar for.

“Is everything okay with you, my dear?” Belinda asked. “You were quiet in there.”

My gaze jerked from the swing doors to her. I shrugged and clasped today’s set of yellow binders to my chest. “I’m starting on two new patients this morning, and I was just thinking about them. The women in Ward Y are a lot harder to figure out than Ward X.”

“They’ve been through a lot worse,” Belinda said agreeably.

We shared a sympathetic smile, and then turned in the direction of Ward Y. We’d just passed the internal reception door when activity pulled our attention back to Janice’s end of the corridor.

My footsteps stalled when I saw a small huddle of people exiting Ward Red. A doctor in a white coat. A nurse in blue scrubs. And Julian Edgar, feet shuffling between them, his gaze lowered, not quite on the floor, but somewhere around level with my knees as the group steadily advanced.

I wasn’t the only one rooted to the spot.

Belinda patted my arm, her voice low, “You’re acquainted with the former councilman, aren’t you, my dear? It can be rather disturbing to see them like that, but I think it must be the drugs. My sister improved after the first few days.”

My hands curled into fists at my side.

I wasn't disturbed.

I was fighting the red mist clawing up my throat.

This man had taken too much from me. Roman liked to talk about the council, the system, but for me, Julian Edgar was the council and he was the system. I blamed them all, but I hated Julian Edgar with a particular passion.

It felt more personal with him. He'd invited me into his home with his smiling blue eyes and kindness. He'd seduced me into the bosom of his family with his enigmatic charisma and warmth.

It was Julian who'd sat across the supper table from me, laughing and joking with Daniel about their fishing trip, full of adoration and praise for his son, his own flesh and blood, while I reeled from the impact of what I would never have, while my insides hurt as if an unborn babe had been ripped from my womb, and while his wife, Miriam, ate placidly and stared vacantly, no longer knowing how to love or even engage with her son.

They were almost upon us now.

The nurse opened the door to reception and, before the doctor ushered him through the doorway, Julian's gaze lifted.

"Morning, ladies," he said. "Georga, how are you?"

He knew who I was, but there was no spark of recognition. His eyes weren't cold and flat with ruthless intent or blazing with anger or filled with humor that creased into the corners. His voice was familiar, but his tone didn't prick and his words didn't cut.

The usual injection of Julian was missing.

He was a shell of what he'd once been.

"Are you being released?" I asked.

Julian looked to the doctor for confirmation, who gave a shallow nod. "We should be going, Mr. Edgar. The car is waiting."

"Yes, we should be going," Julian said to me and, with a polite smile, he allowed the doctor to usher him through the doorway.

Did he know that he no longer lived in Parklands?

Would he even care?

I stared after him, walking at that slow shuffle, allowing himself to be led, until the door swung shut in my face.

"She was never her old self again, but it does improve," Belinda said, her voice soft and comforting.

I didn't need to be comforted.

Whatever they'd done to Julian—the procedure, the laser lobotomy—was no more or less than what he'd subjected his own wife to. Julian Edgar had been erased. It was justice. Exactly what he deserved.

So why did I feel sick to my stomach?

Belinda started walking again and I followed, but stopped when we reached the staff lounge.

“I’ll see you in the ward,” I told her. “I’m just going to get a glass of water. And take a minute to myself, if you don’t mind.”

She paused to look at me, then just squeezed my arm and continued on.

I stood in the doorway of the lounge, watching until she disappeared between the swing doors of Ward Y. Then I bounced out and swiped my card through the scanner on the opposite wall to Ward X.

There were two nurses on each ward during the day. Marlowe had only rotated onto the day shift yesterday, but I’d gotten to know Kyle a bit from my time on Ward X. He was a generation older than me and not really chatty, but I could handle him.

When I swept inside, I was disappointed to see Marlowe behind the nurse’s station. Still, I smiled brightly. “Hi, Marlowe. Is Kyle around?”

Marlowe jabbed a finger at the door beside him. “He’s doing the morning medicine round.”

Every patient had been on some cocktail of drugs in this place and, while that had mostly stopped, Kyle had explained why they had to be weaned off certain medications. The heirs weren’t like the women we’d transitioned out of this ward, though. They were getting the full treatment, and that put the fear of God into me.

“Thank you.” I beamed a smile at him and crossed toward the door with conviction.

Marlowe stepped out from behind the counter to block me. He was a larger man with thinning hair and a wide girth. If he didn’t want to move, there was no way I could make him.

He folded his arms, barricading the door from me. “Now there, I’m not sure you’re

cleared for the new intake.”

“The council heirs, right?” I tried to look both confident and confused at the same time. “I was told they’re in Ward X. Has there been a change?”

He rolled his lips, looking at me, undecided. “You’re working with the new patients?”

“Not on the interviews or assessments. Janice asked me to cross-reference some facts and make sure their admission forms are complete,” I said, name-dropping our boss. “You can check with her, if it’s a problem.”

If he took me up on that offer, I’d have to admit to Janice that I’d just wanted to see how Daniel was doing. It wouldn’t look great for me, but it wasn’t a disaster.

Marlowe finally shifted to the side. “They shouldn’t give you any trouble, but shout if there’s a problem. Kyle should be almost done, so they’ll be sedated.”

“Sedated?” Irritation stabbed at me. “How am I supposed to do my job if they’re fast asleep?”

Marlowe snorted and went back behind the desk, elbows on the counter. “The dosage just keeps them calm, it doesn’t knock them out.”

Thank goodness for that. I pushed through the door and immediately spotted Kyle pushing his cart out of one of the rooms. He did a double-take when he saw me. I waved my yellow binders at him, letting him know I was here in an official capacity.

He turned a shoulder on me to open the next door, leaving me alone in the short passage with rooms on either side. Twelve cubicles, two bathrooms that only allowed one patient at a time and, at the end, the emergency exit.

I peered inside the viewing window on the door to my left. Empty. The opposite room was also empty.

At the next door down, the cubicle was occupied. The man lay on top of the narrow hospital cot, dressed in dark gray pants and a shirt, socks but no shoes. His head was flat on the pillow, his eyes open, staring up at the ceiling. I recognized him from Daniel's cell at the Guard Station. He was one of the older men who'd teamed up with Otter.

He didn't move, just lay there, staring, and my blood ran cold...until I remembered what Marlowe had said. He was sedated, not erased. That's when I saw the cuffs, a pair around each wrist, locking him to the metal rails on the side of his cot.

That could be a problem.

Moving on quickly, I found Daniel and swiped my card to enter. He was in the same position, cuffed to the cot, although he rolled his head toward the sound of the door opening. His gaze pinned me. "What are you doing here?"

His words were sluggish, but not slurred. As I drew closer, I saw the life in his blue, blue eyes. Tired, clouded, but also filling with relief as he looked at me.

I put a finger to my mouth and whispered, "I shouldn't really be here. How are you?"

He made a noise deep in his throat, but I could see my answer. He was okay. His blond hair was greasy and plastered to his forehead. He smelled of sweat and damp. But he was still my Daniel.

"Listen, I don't have long." Every minute was another minute for Marlowe or Kyle to second-guess whether I should be here or not. "How many of you are here? Geneva said she released some of the heirs."

“She released the four younger boys,” he said. “And Carl, too, a day later. When they came for us last night, I thought we were being released. What is going on? They haven’t said a word to us. We’ve been in that cell for days.”

I covered his hand with mine, my thumb resting on the cold iron band circling his wrist. “Why have they cuffed you?”

“Why do they do anything they’ve done?” he returned wearily.

“They’re afraid,” I told him. “Geneva believes the heirs are a threat, that you’ll go underground and cause an uprising against the Sisterhood.”

His mouth twisted into a cynical smirk. “She’s worried we’ll lower ourselves to her standards.”

Some protective instinct surged within me. “It’s not like we had many options, Daniel. If we’d taken to the streets, we would have been hunted, plucked from our homes and removed, or just erased. It’s happened before. We call it The Scraping. ”

Daniel’s face registered no shock. He must have heard about the original protests on the streets back then.

“Maybe times have moved on,” was all he said. “Maybe there was another way.”

I wasn’t going to stand here and argue politics. It was all moot, anyway. “What’s the story with the cuffs? I mean, if you need to sit up to eat or drink, or use the bathroom.”

“The nurses have the keys.”

That’s all I needed to know.

“Roman and I have a plan. We’re getting you out. I promise.” I gripped the side railing on his cot and leaned in closer. “You can’t stay in Capra. We’re taking you to The Smoke.”

His gaze shadowed as he processed that, accepted it. “What about my father? Is he here? They haven’t let me see him.”

I didn’t want to get into this with him now. He was in no condition to hear it. But I couldn’t hide the truth, either. “He was here, but he was released this morning.”

Surprise and confusion tugged at his brows.

“It’s not good news,” I said, my throat thickening. Because whatever Julian Edgar deserved, Daniel had already lost the essence of his mother, and now he’d lost his father. “Daniel, I’m so sorry. They performed some procedure on him.”

“No.” He strangled that one, tiny word. The dread in his expression told me he knew exactly what that meant.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and I truly meant it. “I don’t know for certain, but Geneva wouldn’t have released him unless she’d...” neutralized the threat. “I just saw him, Daniel, and he’s...whatever they’ve done, he’s like your mother now.”

“No!” He yanked at his cuffs, struggling to sit up, fighting the effects of the sedative, his eyes suddenly alight with cold fire. “No.”

“It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.” Except, it wasn’t. I grabbed his cuffed hand, trying to calm him. “I’m so sorry.”

His wrist twisted within my grasp, his eyes wild. “I have to see him.”

“You can’t.” I looked into his eyes, pleading with him to understand. “We have to get you away from Capra. That’s the only way to keep you safe.”

He stopped struggling, a curse dragging on his ragged breath. “They didn’t have to do that to him. My father is a good man. A good man.”

No, he isn’t. The agony in Daniel’s eyes undid me and I very nearly told him exactly what kind of man his father really was. Julian Edgar was the reason Daniel had grown up without his mother’s love. Julian Edgar had committed his own wife to rehab.

That might dull his pain now, but he would soon be filled by another, far worse pain.

I couldn’t do it.

“There’ll be a time to do whatever you need to do, I promise.” I brought my other hand up to Daniel, brushed the hair from his forehead and cupped his jaw. “But you can’t do anything, you can’t help anyone, if you end up like your parents.”

He swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “Is that what they have planned for us?”

“I don’t know, Daniel.” My voice sounded raw, as raw as the nerve endings scraping my skin. I’d wanted Julian Edgar to hurt. I’d wanted to destroy him. But I hadn’t wanted this, not for Daniel. “I don’t know, but I do know this. Geneva sees you and the other heirs as just as much of a threat as the councilmen. She’s never going to just let you walk out of here.”

His chest caved and he went still.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “We’re getting you out.”

“You’re not.” His gaze pierced mine. “I’m not letting you risk your life for mine. Don’t ask that of me.”

“I’m not asking.”

He shook his head, a sad, exhausted smile sliding into his expression. “I don’t need saving. I need you to be safe.”

“I told you, Roman and I have a plan, and it’s solid.” Especially now that it didn’t include Ward Red. “We’ll be gone before anyone knows what’s happened. Trust me.”

“Maybe, but what comes after?” He blinked, long and slow, shaking his head again. “You’ll be their number one suspect. You’ll just be trading places with me.”

“You’re right, we’ve realized that I can’t cover my tracks. That’s why Roman and I are escaping to The Smoke with you. We’re done with Capra. No turning back.” Somehow, I managed a small smile. “And I’m good with that.”

Daniel’s mouth opened, then closed.

I had him.

“When?” he said.

I made a snap decision. There was no other choice. Not after seeing Julian Edgar. Two days to map the brain, but what if they moved Daniel into Ward Red for that phase? That part of our plan had always been murky, pretty much designed to fail.

“Tonight,” I said. “It’s happening tonight.”

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Roman fetched me from the rehab center at lunchtime. I had one hour to finalize everything and pack up my life.

“What’s the rush?” he said as I climbed into the truck. “Daniel was only admitted last night. If we panic, that’s when things go wrong.”

Roman had always had more sympathy for Julian than me. I hadn’t wanted to break the news to him over the iComm.

“Drive,” I said. “We’ll talk on the way. I only have an hour for lunch.”

His gaze locked mine for a beat, then he slammed the truck into reverse. “Start talking.”

“Julian Edgar was released this morning but before you get excited, they’ve performed a procedure on him.” The words rushed out of me. “A laser lobotomy, I think they call it.”

His grip on the wheel tightened until his knuckles whitened. He didn’t look at me, kept his eyes trained on the road.

“I know I said we’d have two days once Daniel arrived at the rehab center, but I no longer trust that,” I went on. “We can’t risk it. If you’d seen Julian, you’d understand.”

“You saw him?” Roman’s voice was gravel, hard.

“Whatever they’ve done, it’s left him in the same state as Miriam.”

The air inside the cab chilled as we drove in silence, punching through the Quantum Zone and skirting the town square.

“Say it,” I said.

His jaw firmed, his profile set in granite. He still refused to look at me, and he wasn’t saying it.

“I got what I wanted,” I spat out bitterly. “I wanted Julian to suffer. I wanted to obliterate everything that made up the man. I hated him. I hate him. My insides roil with disgust and rage when I think of him, when I think of any of the councilmen.”

Roman’s gaze slid to me. He was looking at me now, seeing through my rant and straight to the heart of me. “I thought you didn’t give a damn about what happened to Julian Edgar. What has changed?”

“I don’t give a damn,” I said. “That’s the point. I don’t give a damn. As far as I’m concerned, Julian can spend the rest of his life walking through hell and then he can burn in it for eternity.”

His gaze bounced between me and the road. “I don’t get it.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have gotten what I wanted.” I turned my head from him, looking out the window. We were skirting the town square now. “I’m entitled to my feelings, Roman. I should be allowed to rage and hurt and hate. But, maybe, that doesn’t mean I should have the power to destroy a life just to fuel my own revenge. When I saw Julian, it didn’t feel right.”

When I saw Daniel’s pain, I knew it wasn’t right.

“You don’t have that power.” Roman’s hand landed on my thigh. He waited until I rolled my head his way, until my eyes met his. “As much as you wanted it, this decision wasn’t yours.”

“No one person should have that power,” I said to him. “Especially not Geneva.”

He took his hand back, his attention on the road. “The wardens have a tribunal system. And in the old world, they had the jury system.”

“What’s a jury system?”

“If you were accused of a crime, you were given the opportunity to defend yourself. The jury was a panel of twelve impartial people, brought in from all walks of life. They heard both sides of the story, weighed all the evidence and made the final decision.”

“Geneva would never allow that,” I muttered.

Daniel hadn’t even committed any crime. He was a potential threat, some elusive danger that had to be contained at all costs. The council weren’t any better. Replace Daniel with women in general. We were a necessarily evil to be monitored and leashed in the name of the greater good.

“That’s why they also had an elected government in the old world,” Roman said.

Old world politics was a vague concept to me. That wasn’t the kind of talk encouraged in Capra, and especially not in female circles. “How exactly did that work? Who elected the government?”

“The people.” Roman glanced at me. “The citizens of the country voted on who to put in power, and held them accountable. And every five or so years, they could

change their minds and elect someone else.”

That didn’t make sense. “But if someone was in power, why would they just step down voluntarily when the people changed their minds?”

Roman took his time to formulate a response as we approached Parklands. The barrier was raised, the guard house standing as empty as the many vacated council homes.

“It was another time, another way of thinking, another kind of life,” he said. “Citizens had more rights and no one questioned it, not even the elected government.”

There was a tone of finality in his voice, in his manner as navigated the rutted dirt lane through the woodlands. That was the way it was done then, this is the way it is done now.

I shook off my speculative mood as our rustic cabin came into view. A wave of nostalgia came over me, but I shook that off as well. Accommodating time for the ride back to the rehab center, we had less than half an hour to prepare for tonight.

Besides the clothes in my wardrobe, I didn’t have many belongings. I tore through our bedroom, dumping out the drawers and wardrobe onto a heap on the bed.

Roman went to his study first and came through with his precious books stacked in his arms. Amongst them were his Atlas filled with geographic pictures and historical details of a world before our time and beyond our view, a beautiful photographic wildlife journal, and, of course, Amelia’s sketchbook.

I stabbed a look at the plywood chest in the corner, crafted by a grandfather I’d never known, given to me by my mother. I wasn’t leaving that behind. “You can put your books in there.”

It wasn't long before we'd filled the chest, and I helped Roman carry the chest out to his truck.

He checked inside the lockbox on the back of the truck. "There's some space in here if you need it."

"I'm set, thanks," I told him and returned inside to gather the last remaining scraps of my life into my overnight bag, to erase myself from this cabin as efficiently as Julian had been erased from his body.

Except for the letter I'd written to my parents, folded and lying on top of the chest of drawers. There wasn't time to deliver it to Jessie now, and I contemplated leaving it here for them to find.

Except Geneva, or the Guard, would probably find it first. Even if they passed it on to my parents, which was doubtful, those words were for my mother, for my father. I'd poured my heart out into that letter.

I tucked the letter into my backpack, then I stuffed the tranquilizer gun and the flat box of darts into my purse. It was a tight fit, but there were no unseemly bulges that gave anything away.

After the whirlwind of the last half hour, Roman stopped me just as I was unpegging my coat from the wall by the front door.

"Hey." His hands came to my hips, turning me to him.

I looked into his stone-gray eyes, absorbing his calming presence, and the storm inside me quietened. "Hey."

His gaze lingered on me in a way that pressed warm shivers to my skin. "I love you."

Tears stung behind my eyes. This wasn't the end of us. I knew that. But I'd also learned there were no guarantees in this life, and there was no guarantee we'd walk away from this rescue attempt unscathed.

I reached up, my palms cupping his strong jaw. "I love you."

Heat and something else, something fierce and almost dangerous, glinted in his eyes as he lowered his mouth to mine. The kiss started out intense and grew into desperate urgency as we touched, tasted, fed on each other as if we were ravenous beasts. My bones went weak with temptation to take an extended lunch hour, but we both knew it would be stupid to give anyone a reason to raise questions today, to even look at me too closely today.

Roman pulled out of the kiss, his voice husky, his gaze bathing me in love. "It's going to be okay."

I nodded. "It's going to be okay."

He breathed in, then stood back from me and flipped to mission mode. "Let's run through it one more time. The receptionist leaves at five o'clock. The night shift comes on at six o'clock."

"I'll hide and wait it out," I continued. "We'll give everything an hour to settle. At seven o'clock, I'll execute the plan."

"You have ten minutes." He tapped his wristwatch. "One minute past that, and I'm blowing out the emergency door and coming in for you. Whatever happens, I'm not leaving you inside."

Once I left my hiding place, the clock would start ticking down to someone or something unexpected catching me red-handed in the act. Our plan relied heavily on

brutally quick timing. That had been our biggest hurdle with Ward Red, but that wasn't a consideration anymore, and Roman had cut our time window in half.

Ten minutes should be enough. If I wasn't out in ten minutes, it probably meant I'd failed and I was in trouble.

I did not agree about the part where Roman charged in to save me, but we'd already had that argument many times and I'd lost.

"Ten minutes," I promised. "We'll be there."

I wanted to kiss him again. I wanted to spend one more moment in his arms, but instead I grabbed my coat from its peg on the wall and we walked out the door.

On the drive back to the rehab center, we went over the plan one more time. Roman searched for new weaknesses, but in truth, our plan was stronger, virtually airtight now that Julian Edgar and Ward Red were removed from the equation.

When Roman dropped me off, I shrugged out of my thick winter coat and tossed it into the rear seat. I couldn't wear it indoors and I couldn't leave it hanging in the staff lounge. There was one last lingering kiss, and then I was on my own until ten minutes past seven this evening.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:27 am

I was tucked into a dark corner of the janitor's closet, which was actually a small room. The space was crammed with shelves of cleaning materials and buckets and mops, so it was relatively easy to make myself invisible.

The janitor had already been in here once, and he'd turned the light on. Thankfully the naked bulb was low wattage and he'd seemed to know exactly where and what he wanted. I doubt he'd even glanced beyond the first shelf. He definitely hadn't seen my foot sticking out, and the moment the door closed behind him, I'd cramped myself into an even tighter ball.

This was the easiest part, and the hardest. Trapped. Waiting. If someone realized I'd never left the center for the evening, there'd be a search and they would find me. I was cornered by walls and a door, trapped by that single point of entry.

When an endless amount of time passed without incident, the tension unwound from my muscles. I dared to stretch out, but remained alert to the sound of the door opening so I could scrunch myself back into a ball.

So far, everything was on plan.

Earlier, I'd walked out with Belinda and then, as an afterthought, I'd remembered. "Axel asked me to stop by before I leave. He wants to talk about something."

"That boy always has something to talk about," Belinda said with a smile. We'd just swiped our cards and were passing through the door to reception. "Should I wait, my dear?"

I caught the door before it could close on me, shaking my head. “I don’t know how long it’ll take.”

The guard stood across the room, near the exit doors. He didn’t have his back to us, but he seemed bored, his gaze sweeping continually without hitching on anything in particular.

“You won’t want to miss the shuttle,” Belinda warned.

“If I do, I’ll take the next one.”

“Very well.” She slid her security card through the hatch on the wall, the deposit box where we returned our cards at the end of our shift. “If I don’t see you at the shuttle stop, I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Enjoy your evening.” I smiled at her, holding onto the door as I glanced between her, the guard, and the man at reception, who had his head down and his nose in a book.

I slipped back inside, allowing the door to swing closed behind me. If anyone went looking, my exit had been scanned and registered. If they looked harder, they’d discover that I’d never returned my security card for the evening, but that couldn’t be helped. I needed it, but they wouldn’t have a reason to check the deposit box unless the guard actively took note of the fact that I’d gone back inside and never came out again.

Now that an hour had passed and no one had raised the alarm, it was safe to say he hadn’t.

Moving slowly, carefully in the pitch blackness, I stood and stepped out from behind the fortress of heavy duty equipment stashed in the corner and picked a path toward

the sliver of light shining in from beneath the door. There I bent low, holding my wrist to the light so I could check the time on my watch.

One hour down.

Another hour and a half to go.

I crept back into my corner to wait, nerves pinching my gut. There was fear, too, of course there was, but when had I ever let that stop me? Roman called me reckless. If I had to call my steely resolve anything, I'd call it Fear, a different kind of fear, fear of failing Daniel, fear of disappearing into a net of safety, fear of doing nothing.

I rested my head against the wall, shut down those thoughts, and my mind drifted in the utter darkness.

Maybe times have moved on, Daniel had said. Maybe there was another way.

It was another time, another way of thinking, another kind of life, Roman had said. Citizens had more rights and no one questioned it, not even the elected government.

Those are the thoughts that swirled inside my head, again and again, swirling everything I'd ever known, every thought and belief and hope together into a blended landscape of gray. My mind felt like a murky canvas without definition, not a blank slate, but a place where new writings could stand out stronger and brighter than what had come before.

Every now and then I moved to the door, to the light, to check the time. Five minutes before seven, I decided to go for it. Roman would be in place. The shift change would have settled.

I'd already prepped the tranquilizer gun with the first dart. I tucked the other three

darts into the back pocket of my jeans for quick access, then I slung my purse across my chest and put my ear to the door. I couldn't hear anything above my pounding heart.

Adjusting my grip on the gun, finger positioned on the trigger, I pushed the door open. Fluorescent light bathed the corridor, making it easy to see—easy to be seen. But Axel hadn't exaggerated. The place was like a graveyard once the shift changed over to night. There was a constant, droning sound I'd never noticed during the day. It wasn't loud, more like a white noise filling the air, making its presence known.

Focus.

My gaze scanned up and down the corridor. I didn't see a soul. I wasn't alone, though. A nurse could step out of one of the wards at any time. Not wasting another second, I darted left, the gun aimed chest level as Roman had shown me.

No one stepped out into the corridor, and I was at Ward X.

I sucked in a deep, steadying breath. Hesitating out here in the corridor held its own danger. That was the push I needed. I firmed my grip on the gun, but lowered my arm and moved my hand slightly behind my back.

Then I swiped my card and swung through the door with a breezy smile.

The nurse on duty was a stranger to me. He glanced up from where he perched behind the desk, curious at first, a half-formed smile on his bearded face, but that faded as I hurried across to him.

“Hi, I wonder if you can help me.”

“Um...” He didn't know if I should be here. The rules were ever-changing and fuzzy

since the Sisterhood had taken over. “Visitors aren’t allowed back here. How did you get in?”

“I’m not a visitor,” I said pleasantly, flashing him my security card. “I’m a volunteer. I’ve been working the day shift until now.”

He scratched at his beard, his hand inching toward the intercom. He wasn’t being sneaky, I didn’t think. He was still deciding.

“Here, take a closer look.” I leaned over the counter to shove my card in his face and brought my other hand up— slowly, steady —and before I could over-think it, before his brain caught up to what his eyes were seeing, I aimed the gun at the side of his neck and pulled the trigger.

He didn’t scream. I hadn’t even thought about that possibility until this very moment. But he didn’t scream.

He squeaked and slapped a hand to his neck, to the spot where the dart had gone in. His eyes rounded, then rolled back in their sockets until only the white was visible, and then he dropped, crumpled off his perch and to the floor with a horribly loud thud. Thank goodness there was only one night nurse on this ward, and each ward was isolated behind thick walls.

I glanced at my watch.

Just gone seven.

I scrambled around the counter, my pulse racing, and gasped when I saw the awkward position he’d fallen into behind the cramped station—half sprawled, half shoved up against the wall, his neck angled. He hadn’t broken it— No! I knelt before him and pressed two fingers to his throat, held my breath and stilled my mind...his

pulse was slow, but strong.

I released that breath and sprang into action, patting down the pockets of his scrubs, then lifting his top and there it was, a ring hooked to the loops of his pants with a variety of keys. My fingers had developed tremors, and it took longer than it should have to work the key ring free from his pants.

I checked my watch.

How had that happened? Six minutes until Roman's deadline.

I jumped up, the gun in one hand, my access card in the other with the keys. Another swipe took me through the door to the patient cubicles. There was no time to think or worry, only time to move. I'd taken a quick look after leaving Daniel earlier. I knew which rooms I needed to clear.

I bypassed the older man—team Otter—and went straight to Daniel. He knew to expect me, but he still looked slightly dumbfounded when I barged into his room.

I grinned. "What? You didn't think I'd show?"

"I was expecting you to drop through the ceiling or come crawling in through the vent," he drawled. "I did not expect you to waltz in through the front door."

While he spoke, I tucked the gun into my back pocket and hurried to his side, where I worked my way through the keys. The third attempt unlocked his cuff—after a struggle. My hands were shaky, my fingers awkwardly handling the tiny silver key. It was also the only one of its kind. It had to be one key for all the cuffs.

I moved to the other side of the cot. "You sound much more alert than earlier. Did they not drug you again?"

“I didn’t swallow,” he said. “I held the pill under my tongue and spat it out once the nurse was gone.”

“Good thinking.”

“I’m not just a pretty face.”

I fit the key, turned, and snapped the other cuff off.

Daniel flung his legs over the rails of the cot. That’s when I noticed/remembered his sock-clad feet.

“Where are your shoes?”

He gave me a blank look.

I checked my watch. “We’re against the clock here. Five minutes to get all of you outside. But there’s a three hour walk ahead of us. You need shoes.”

I dropped to my knees to look under the bed.

“Here,” Daniel said. He’d yanked open the cabinet beside the cot and was already sliding his feet into his shoes.

We were down to four minutes when we entered the room I’d bypassed. The man was fast asleep. While I fumbled with his cuffs, Daniel shook him by the shoulders.

His eyes opened heavily. “What?”

Daniel gave him another shake. “Come on, we’re leaving. There’s no time to explain.”

The man's eyes fluttered closed again. Either the evening sedative was stronger, or maybe it was a cumulative effect, and clearly he hadn't been smart enough to spit it out. Then again, he hadn't known about our little rescue operation.

I had both cuffs unlocked now.

Daniel cursed beneath his breath, and slapped the man's cheek. Hard. "Hey, Gerald!"

Gerald stirred and lifted his head from the pillow.

I checked my watch.

Daniel saw. "Go. I'll put his shoes on."

I left them to it and hurried out. This stupid countdown was wrecking me. We should have allocated ourselves more time, but that would have been a danger within itself. It only took one person to come looking for the night nurse, one unanswered intercom call, one random enquiry...

The next room was Otter—or more accurately, the Otter heir. I didn't know his first name, and from what I'd seen, he'd shown all the signs of turning out as vile as his father.

He was the oldest of the heirs, with a full beard and winged brows that gave him a permanent scowl. Not that he needed the brows for that.

He snarled at me when I slipped inside his room. "You've got some nerve, showing your face here, girl. You promised to get us out of that cell."

You can't leave him behind.

You can't leave him behind.

"I'm getting you out now." I worked one cuff loose, my hands steady, the tremor gone. We were almost there. This was almost done. I moved to the other cuff. "Put your shoes on and meet us at the end of the corridor, by the emergency exit. You won't be able to open it, but don't even try, or you could set off the alarm and then it's all over."

I unsnapped the cuff and stalked out without a backward glance. The man made the hairs on my body stand on end.

Daniel joined me and a short while later, with thirty seconds to spare, everyone was assembled by the emergency exit. Gerald was propped up between Otter and another older heir, Mark. The fifth heir was a friend of Daniel's, a cheeky-looking, dark-haired guy called Kemirick.

Thankfully only Gerald seemed totally out of it. I wondered if he'd been particularly difficult at some point and earned himself an extra sedative dose.

I held my security card ready. "As soon as I scan this, the fire alarm will sound, so we have to hurry. Roman's right outside. Jump onto the back of his truck. No questions, no stalling, or you'll get left behind. Understood?"

No one answered.

"I'll take that as a yes." I swiped my card. The scanner blinked from red to green, but no alarm sounded. That's not the way Axel had explained it.

My mouth went dry.

"What's the hold up?" Otter, of course.

Ignoring him, I depressed the bar and shoved, and finally that high-pitched siren I'd been expecting pierced the night.

Tires squealed as Roman sped out from within the trees. He spun the wheel, all but sliding up alongside us.

"Everyone on the back," Daniel barked out.

I removed the gun and darts from my back pockets and I slid into the front beside Roman.

Seconds later, we were tearing down the driveway of the institution. I glanced out the window, heart in my throat, waiting for the guard to come charging after us.

Roman sent me a grin. "I changed my mind about the guard. I took him out just before your time was up."

That would buy us a little more time. I sank lower in the seat, the tremors back in full force now, every inch of skin and bones shaking.

"I can't believe we did it," I said as I stowed the gun and darts in my purse. "I can't believe how smoothly it went."

Roman took one hand off the wheel to rub my thigh. "We're not done yet."

I looked at him and rolled my eyes. We were already lost in the Quantum Zone's grid of roads. Another couple of minutes, and we'd be hidden by the woods around the tunnel's service hatch.

We were as good as done.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:27 am

Getting the heirs down the hatch proved trickier than breaking them out of rehab. Granted, we had dumped the whole exile to The Smoke thing on them at the last minute, but what had they expected? Daniel seemed okay with it, but the others were resisting.

My coat was buttoned up to my throat, my hands tucked into the deep pockets, but my nose and ears felt like burning ice and every now and then a particularly severe shiver knocked my knees together—partly from the adrenaline rush fading through me, mostly from the frigid cold.

“You can’t stay in Capra,” I pointed out, stamping my feet for warmth and scanning our surroundings for movement. The trees here had mostly shed their leaves, thinning out our cover. We were vulnerable, exposed and wasting precious time.

Otter bared his teeth at me. The man really was a rabid dog. The flickering halos cast by the flashlights Roman had provided played up his vicious expression. “This wasn’t part of our deal.”

Roman was done talking. He flung the hatch open and pointed. “We don’t have time for you to wrap your heads around it.”

We really didn’t. They’d likely already sent out a search party to hunt down the heirs. Roman figured we had about an hour before the effect of the dart wore off and once the night nurse was roused, I’d be in their crosshairs as well.

Daniel made the first move, carefully lowering himself down the hole as he found his footing on the iron rungs.

Otter folded his arms, glaring at Roman. “And what are we supposed to do in The Smoke?”

“You’ll stay at my apartment for tonight,” Roman said, his voice tempered with indifference. “In the morning, you’ll register with the Protectorate. They’ll assign you jobs and accommodation, and you start your new life.”

Otter’s glare dug in harder.

Roman shrugged. “Or stay here, and see how long it takes them to hunt you down and throw you back into rehab. Go, stay, I really don’t give a damn, but when this hatch closes, you’re on your own.”

“Kem, come on,” Daniel called to Kemerick. He seemed as unconcerned about the others as Roman was. “We’re not saying this is permanent. But we can’t be in Capra right now.”

That finally spurred the older heirs down the hole, one by one, sinking out of sight until it was just me and Roman standing on the edge of the hatch.

Roman stepped in front of me and brought his hands up, rubbing my arms. “I’m right behind you.”

He wouldn’t be walking the train tunnel with us. He refused to leave his truck behind and, besides, all our belongings were on there. Once he’d let us through the metal door below, he’d be driving out of Capra. He’d meet us at the other end. If the alert had already gone out, they might search the truck at the gate, but they wouldn’t stop him. Well, that was the theory. It was solid, though, so long as he got through the gate before any fingers pointed directly at him.

Time was short.

But my feet weren't moving.

He cocked his head, squaring a look on me. "You okay?"

"Not really." My gaze locked on his. "Roman, I...I can't do this."

"I wish you could drive with me," he said. "It's too much of a risk, if they search the truck."

"You don't understand." I swallowed. "I'm not leaving Capra. Not yet."

His hands fell from my arms. He looked at me, digesting, his jaw going slack, then rock hard. "It's too late to change your mind. Even if you manage to return and slip your security card into the deposit box before anyone notices, that night nurse has seen your face. He can identify you."

"I know I can't go home, Roman. That's not it." I took his hands in mine. "I've been thinking about what you said, about elected governments and people having the power. Another time, another way of thinking, another kind of life."

"What the hell are you talking about?" he growled, his brow spearing as he stepped back from me. "Georga, what is happening here?"

"Maybe it can be our time, our way of thinking, our kind of life again." I tucked my hands into my coat pockets, missing the warmth of his touch, bristling beneath his sting.

But I wouldn't back down.

This had been weighing on me all day. I'd made this decision a while ago, in the janitor's closet. I just hadn't realized it until this very moment.

“The Sisters of Capra, and Geneva, they have the same unlimited, unchallenged power as the council,” I said. “We’ve traded one regime for another. We can do better. At least, I have to try. I just need a little more time here, that’s all, then I’ll join you in The Smoke. I can keep myself safe. Hidden.”

“Hidden,” he deadpanned, his voice clipped. “Where?”

“The nature reserve, maybe?” I wasn’t working off a plan here. “One of the log cabins?”

“That’s the first place they’ll search.”

“I’ll stay one step ahead of them, move as I need to. I’m not being reckless here, Roman. I’ll be careful. I’ll be smart.”

“No.” He wasn’t relenting. “I’ve given you everything, everything that was within my power to give you, but I can’t let you have this. I’m not going to stand by while you throw yourself at their mercy once again.”

“Roman, I love you.” My eyes felt hot with unshed tears. Was this how I lost him? “But running away before I’ve even tried? It feels like I’m giving up on Capra. And...”

My mind was ticking, catching up. “The letter I wrote to my parents explains everything, why I felt I had to help Daniel and the heirs, and how I have to escape to The Smoke with them. I haven’t mentioned you in it at all. I’ll take the letter back to our house and leave it somewhere visible for Geneva to find. She’ll believe we’ve all gone to The Smoke. There won’t be any reason to search Capra. I’ll be safer here than there.”

They were always going to find out we’d gone to The Smoke. Sooner rather than later

wouldn't make much difference.

Roman hung his head, clearly exasperated. "No one ever changed a damn thing by hiding out in the forest and staying safe."

"Maybe they've never tried it my way. I'm going to give Capra what the Sisterhood promised but never delivered." What Axel and his friends were already doing, even if they didn't know it. "A rebellion of words."

I brought my hand up to cup his jaw, pulling his gaze back to me. "I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life loving you whether that's here in Capra, in The Smoke or in the wilds. Today we saved Daniel, but who will save the next person?"

When he looked at me again, I saw it in his eyes. He knew we couldn't give up without at least trying. "Why does it have to be you?"

"Because I'm the flame," I said. "I have a voice, and right now I am loud and I am heard, but that won't always be the case. It has to be me, and it has to be now."

He groaned, raking a hand through his hair, a sober grin twisting his mouth. "How do you always do this to me?"

"Because I'm stubborn and spoilt and I never learned to take no for an answer?" A smile touched my lips, then slipped away. "Because it's what you would do, what you have done, when you went to war with the Union Families in memory of Amelia. Your life's ambition was to bring law and order to the corrupt quarters of The Smoke. And even now, with the council gone, if the Protectorate hadn't stepped up, you would be finding another way to make The Smoke a safer place for those young girls."

He pulled me into his arms, his warm breath brushing my frozen ear lobe. "Give me

five minutes to send the heirs on their way.” He drew back to look at me. “Where’s that letter?”

“In my overnight bag in the truck,” I said. “But you don’t have time for this detour. Once they know you’re involved in this escape, they’ll stop you at the gate. I’ll take the letter home and then slip off into the nature reserve.”

“I’m not worried about getting myself through the gate,” he countered. “When I took out the guard, he never saw my face. They may think I’m in cahoots with my wife, but they can’t prove it and they won’t dare stop a warden on a whim.”

He lowered himself into the hole before I could argue further. I considered my options, and stayed exactly where I was. It was a cold, dark and bitterly miserable night and there was no reason to go on foot when I had a ride. I was inclined to agree with Roman. Even if they had concrete evidence, Geneva would be stupid to mess with the wardens, and Geneva wasn’t stupid.

It wasn’t long before Roman returned, and he wasn’t alone.

“He’s joining your cause,” Roman said as Daniel emerged from the hatch behind him.

“Don’t worry, I know I don’t qualify for the women’s liberation movement.” Daniel gave me a sheepish grin. “I’m just here for moral support, and to watch your back.”

“You’re here to babysit me.” I scowled at Roman, who was lowering the cover over the hatch. “Did you put him up to this?”

“He volunteered.”

“I insisted,” Daniel said to me.

I shook my head. “No.”

“It should be me,” Roman said, his voice a low rumble. “But I can’t be with you twenty-four hours of every day, unless I give up my warden duties.”

“You can’t do that!” How was that even a thought in his head? “The wardens are all that’s keeping you safe. They’re your last line of defense if this all goes south.”

“So long as I’m one of them, I have their protection, a protection I can extend to you if it comes to that.” His gaze swept to me. “That’s why it has to be Daniel.”

“Look,” Daniel said to me. “I wasn’t about to run off to The Smoke while you stayed behind to fight the good fight, okay?”

We’d risked everything to get Daniel to safety. “It’s too dangerous for you to be here.”

“I thought we’re going into hiding,” he said.

“It’s safer here than in The Smoke,” Roman said at the same time. “Remember?”

They were ganging up on me. Any further protest could and would be used against me. Frustration gnawed at me, but there was nothing I could do right now.

“How is it safer here than in The Smoke?” Daniel wanted to know.

“Roman didn’t tell you?”

“There’s a letter,” Roman said as he kicked leaves and dirt over the hatch. “Let’s go.”

“What about the others?” I grumbled as we tramped the short distance to where the

truck was parked. “They couldn’t have been happy that Daniel stayed and they had to go.”

“Their happiness isn’t my priority right now,” Roman said. “We rescued them from rehab and I’m willing to help get them settled in The Smoke. The rest is up to them.”

“What letter?” Daniel said again.

I filled him in. “I just need to make sure Geneva finds it, so we’re making a quick stop in Parklands. I want to leave the letter at our cabin.”

We were at the truck. I grabbed my overnight bag from the back of the truck before Daniel and I climbed into the rear of the cab, slinking low in our seats so as not to draw attention. We rode in silence, Daniel staring out his window, me rifling through the bag. I found the letter and shoved the bag into the foot well, resting my feet on top of it.

The roads were quiet, not unusual for this time of night. We’d planned for this, a narrow margin of breathing space before the chaos spread out from the rehab center, but we’d used up so much of it already. My nerves were shredding, expecting a blockade of guards to pop out from the side of the road at every corner.

“The cabins in the nature reserve won’t be stocked,” Roman said after a while, revealing what had been churning through his mind as we drove. “You’ll need something to eat, for tonight at least.”

Daniel pulled his thoughts in from the window. “There’s no bedding either.”

“Just as well we’re doing a pit stop then,” I murmured. “What about heating?”

“Some of them have air conditioning units,” Daniel said. “Mainly those closer to the

lake, though.”

“Makes sense.” Only the die-hard fishermen tended to use the nature reserve amenities during the winter months.

“We won’t be using the lakeside cabins,” Roman said flatly. “We’re going as deep as possible.”

The way he said it, he’d take me straight across to the end of the nature reserve, over the wall and into The Smoke if he had any say. I bit my tongue. If our roles were reversed, I wouldn’t be happy about the change of plans either. Hell, even in our given roles, I wasn’t happy, but something was sticking my feet to Capra, refusing to let me go until I’d tried to do better.

“There’s a service road from Parklands into the nature reserve,” Roman said when we passed through the barrier. “We don’t have to go through town again. Almost there.”

The tension inside the cab lifted.

Daniel suddenly sat up straighter, his gaze glued to his window and the swathe of evergreens pressing up against the road.

My heart went out to him as I realized what he was looking at. His home was on the other side of those trees. “They aren’t there.”

He turned to me. “What?”

I hadn’t had a chance to explain everything to him. “The council families have been relocated from Parklands. Jessie mentioned that Brenda is now staying two streets over from her, near the square, but I’m not sure about your parents. I think they may have been moved to the Legislative District.”

He deflated, sinking low in his seat again.

Roman cut left onto the dirt road to our cabin and we fell into silence again until he pulled up right in front of the door.

We all jumped out and dashed inside. Daniel went to strip the bedding in both bedrooms, Roman filled my cloth shopping bag with whatever food he could find and I paused, my gaze darting between the bedrooms and the kitchen.

“Where’s the best place to leave the letter? The kitchen table?”

Roman shook his head. “That’ll look too intentional.”

“It’s going to look intentional, no matter what we do.” Maybe I could work with that.

I joined him in the kitchen, grabbed what I needed from the stationary drawer and stood at the oak table, penning on an envelope, Mom & Dad . I stuffed the letter inside, sealed the envelope and left it right there on the table.

“I’ve done what I’ve done, I’m fleeing to The Smoke and this is my explanation and goodbye to my parents. I’m that na?ve thinking it won’t falling into the wrong hands, or maybe I’m beyond caring.”

Daniel reappeared, his arms loaded with quilts and blankets.

Roman glanced at me. “Are we done?”

“We’re done.” I scooped the pack of envelopes, some pens and a stack of note paper from the stationary drawer before heading out. I was going to need those.

Then I was walking out of my home for the last time, again.

At the last moment, I spotted my bicycle against the wall and pushed that outside with me. Roman didn't comment. We both knew the bicycle meant I wasn't staying put in the deepest, darkest corner of the nature reserve.

We threw everything onto the back of the truck and a moment later, Roman was reversing out into a U-Turn.

Once we hit the service road, the track narrowed, thick pines pressing close on either side. At every fork, Roman kept left, keeping us on the Parklands end of the reserve. We traveled for about twenty minutes, although it was hard to judge the actual distance. The dirt path was pitted with holes and bumps, forcing Roman to drive so slowly, we were crawling, but eventually we arrived at a derelict cabin in a clearing.

Rundown wooden shack would be more accurate, and it didn't sit quite level, as if one side of the ground had started subsiding, dragging down that half of the shelter.

Roman kept the headlights of the truck on until I found my way up the wood-slatted steps to a rickety porch that creaked beneath my footfalls.

Cabin 39.

The door wasn't locked. It wasn't airtight either, with warped gaps on the sides and below. Once inside, I flipped on the electric switch, flooding the interior with light. The curtains on the windows were thin, but we were so deep into the woods, I wasn't worried about giving our presence away.

We were so deep into the woods, I was worried about ever finding my way back to town again.

I wasn't even joking.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:27 am

Roman was generous with his time, too generous, helping us transfer what we needed from the truck, insisting I comb through my moving chest for anything I might require.

“I’d rather you didn’t delay any more than necessary,” I told him.

He gave a slow nod. “I would prefer to get through the gate without a stop and search. But a couple of minutes isn’t going to make much difference.”

So I unlatched the chest and quickly pulled out extra clothes and underwear, carrying that inside to the room I’d chosen. The cabin was small and basic, with a central living space that doubled as a kitchen, a tiny bathroom with a shower stall, two small bedrooms on either end and minimal furnishings. My bedroom had a pair of single beds and Daniel’s had a pair of bunk beds.

Roman dropped my overnight bag onto one of the narrow beds, then reached for me, pulling me into his arms. “You can still change your mind.”

My response was a smile, and a determined look in my eye. “It’ll only be for a couple of weeks, at the most, then I’ll join you in The Smoke. If this is going to work, it will be now, not in the months or years to come.”

The change had to be now, while my voice was loud, while Capra was still shaken from the revolution trembles, before the Sisters of Capra put down solid roots.

He brushed his knuckles across my cheek, his gaze sinking into me. “I’m not leaving you here to fend for yourselves. Tomorrow, I’ll bring proper food, more

blankets...anything else you need?"

"We'll be fine." I reached up onto my toes, fully intent on offering my mouth to his for a kiss when—

"Here's your bedding," Daniel said, oblivious to what he'd walked in on as he tossed a quilt and blanket on the bare mattress.

Just as well.

I extracted myself from the fold of Roman's warmth and strength...before I begged him to stay. "You should go."

Roman hesitated, reluctant to leave me, but he had to go and I was determined to stay and a few more minutes wouldn't change anything. "You still have your iComm?"

"Yes!" I'd completely forgotten about the iComm. That wasn't all. I patted the bulge in the purse slung over my shoulder. "I also have the gun and three darts."

"Keep them close," Roman said.

"You have an iComm?" Daniel stepped forward. "Do you think I could contact my father?"

I thought of the pile of iComms at Berkley House and shook my head. "I'm sorry, but I think his iComm would have been confiscated."

"What about Brenda?"

I threw my hands up. "I don't know. We can try."

“No social calls,” Roman said firmly. “That’s what I wanted to warn you about. If they don’t disable your iComm, it will be so they can monitor it.”

“They can’t trace or intercept calls,” Daniel said.

“They can’t,” Roman agreed. “But they can see where the connection originates, and they’ll know Georga is here, and not in The Smoke.”

Daniel slapped his palm to his forehead. “I didn’t think of that.”

Which got me worrying about all the things we hadn’t thought of. Roman had the training for this kind of subterfuge. It was practically in his nature. Daniel and I were accustomed to a cotton-coated, candy-fluff life. Roman’s words, but in this moment they rang true.

Roman looked me in the eye. “Call me if you need to, but only in an emergency. Understood?”

“Understood.”

He brushed a kiss over my mouth. “I love you.”

“I love you.” Tears threatened behind my eyes. This wasn’t goodbye, but everything felt so uncertain. “Be careful. And don’t return to Capra if you can’t do so safely.”

“If I can’t come through the gates, I’ll come through the tunnel.” The way he looked at me, I knew nothing would keep him away from Capra so long as I was here.

“Go.” I gave him a gentle push, and he went, leaving me and Daniel to sort ourselves out.

Not that there was much to do.

I spread the blanket over the mattress, then shook the quilt out over it. Without heating, it wouldn't be warm enough. I'd have to sleep in sweatpants and a sweater. I insisted Daniel borrow an oversized hoodie from me, but my spare pair of sweatpants didn't fit.

He wasn't overly concerned. He was too busy rooting through the shopping bag dumped on the table. "Hungry? We have crackers and dried apple...and..."

He gave me a look. "Crackers and dried apple."

I wasn't surprised that was all Roman had managed to scrounge from our kitchen. If I were my mother, I'd have pantry shelves lined with jars of preserved fruit and tins of wholesome soup. I made a terrible housewife.

I caught a whiff of apple and my stomach growled. I hadn't eaten since breakfast, I realized. "I could eat."

As I sat down by the table, the chair rocked on the uneven wood-slatted floor. I wasn't a princess. I wasn't complaining. But I did take note of all the small things, the little reminders that we'd chosen the most remote, and possibly least desirable cabin in the entire nature reserve.

Daniel took the chair across from me and propped open the bags containing our feast. He took a cracker to nibble on, his gaze sweeping the space, then coming to a rest on the crack in the drapes covering the window that the table was pushed up against.

What was he thinking about? All his shattered hopes and dreams? Was he as distraught about losing his home, his affluent lifestyle, his prominent future, as Brenda was?

He must be.

He was the golden boy with blue, blue eyes, and now his world had imploded.

A wave of guilt hit me, not at what he'd lost, but at the part I'd played. He was my friend, and I was the one who'd struck at the heart of his family. There was no way to gloss over it. I'd known it at the time, and I knew it now.

"How are you doing?" I asked softly.

"As well as can be expected," he returned just as softly, then he adjusted the drapes to close the crack, to stop the light from bleeding out, or maybe just for his hands to do something.

"I'm sorry."

"This isn't your fault." His gaze swung onto me. "I know you're part of this Sisterhood, Georga, but it's kind of obvious by now that you don't agree with everything they've done."

"That's not what I'm apologizing for." I popped a piece of apple into my mouth and chewed.

I was a coward.

I didn't want to do this.

But every other minute, Daniel was discovering something new about just how screwed up his life was. It would be kinder to get it all out there. He deserved that much.

“Do you remember that day you came home to find me in the den? Your father had a nasty cold, or the flu.”

“You weren’t feeling great yourself,” he said, proving he did indeed remember. “You collapsed.”

“I faked it,” I admitted. “I was on a mission for the Sisterhood. I gave your father herbal tea laced with brandy and a sedative to knock him out, so I could take a copy of his handprint. That’s how they got into the armory.”

Daniel didn’t say a word. His gaze snapped away from me as he picked up another cracker, crumbling it between his fingers instead of eating.

“It wasn’t an easy decision, abusing your trust like that, but I did it,” I said. “I won’t ask you to not be mad at me, to not hate me. I don’t expect you to forgive me. But you should know, that’s who I am, that’s what I did, and I am sorry.”

Still, he said nothing. He broke off a piece of cracker and put it in his mouth. The rest crumbled to dust beneath his forefinger and thumb.

“That’s it?” I said. “You’re not going to say anything?”

“What do you want me to say, Georga?” He sounded weary, defeated, exhausted, and his eyes finally lifted to me.

I wanted him to tell me what a terrible person I was. Maybe I wanted something that I could defend against, a chance to explain, to justify my actions...as selfish as that was.

He didn’t give me the opportunity, and I wouldn’t take it.

I'd taken enough from him.

He crunched on another cracker.

I chewed on bits of apple. This was it, I consoled myself, my final confession. Despite his silence, my chest felt lighter.

Once I'd finished the dried apple, I dusted my hands off.

"You should eat something else," Daniel said. "Crackers?"

"Maybe later," I said, grateful that we were apparently still on speaking terms.

I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes. It had been a long day. The constant onslaught of excitement, stress and adrenaline had taken its toll. I stretched my legs out beneath the table and slid my hands inside my coat, arms wrapped around my waist for extra warmth and comfort.

"I don't recommend sleeping in that position."

My eyes blinked open. "I'm not sleeping," I said around a yawn. "But that sounds like a good idea. It's been a long day."

"A weird day."

I swallowed a laugh. "We are so far beyond weird, we crossed weird about a mile ago."

"I get it, you know," Daniel said, studying me, his expression somber. "I used to listen to the way you spoke. I saw the stars in your eyes, the passion in your arguments, the trouble in your smile, and I liked to think I understood. I didn't, not

really, but I do now.”

I rolled my head his way. “What are you saying?”

“I know what it’s like to feel trapped and powerless, utterly helpless, subject to the whims of people with the authority to do whatever they wish, to you, to those you care about,” he said. “It’s only been a few days for me, but this has been your life. What you did, stealing my father’s handprint...I guess, I get how a person could be driven to do just about anything to change the helplessness.”

“Thank you,” I said in a small voice. It wasn’t forgiveness, but what he’d given me was worth more. He understood why it had never felt like a choice for me. “I’m still sorry.”

“I know.” There was another stretch of silence. “They didn’t have to do... that ...to my father, though. He would have stepped down quietly. He always considered his position on the council to be a duty he was too noble to shy away from, not a power he hungered after.”

I didn’t know Julian Edgar well enough to judge Daniel’s word against whatever inner struggles the man might have fought against. But I also knew that Daniel didn’t know the full story about his father, like how he’d committed his own wife, Daniel’s mother, to rehab.

I didn’t say anything, and I never would. It wasn’t my secret to tell and if Daniel could live the rest of his life without that dark fact, well, that’s what I wished for him.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:27 am

Sleeping in a drafty cabin in the middle of winter wasn't a great experience. I'd tried to count my blessings every time I woke up, either shivering or claustrophobic because I'd burrowed my head completely under the quilt, and came up with nothing from one restless hour to the next.

I thought of the barons and their people in the tents outside Sector Five. Or maybe they didn't trade in the dead of winter. Maybe they were warm and comfy in their compounds—or wherever they lived—until spring.

I thought of The Smoke inhabitants with their electric curfew that cut off their heating in the evenings. Or maybe they all had portable heaters, like Roman. For their sake, I truly hoped so.

Here in Capra, we'd never had to consider basic amenities. Our homes were always insulated. The lights were always on. Food was always available. We paid in other ways, of course, but still...I was spoilt. That wasn't lost on me.

When I heard movement outside my bedroom, I flung off the oppressive weight of the quilt and hopped out of bed.

Daniel was sitting at the table, dressed in the same clothes he'd worn yesterday plus my hoodie, the same clothes he'd probably slept in. "Morning, how did you sleep?"

"I didn't, not really," I grumbled as I squeezed between the two-seater couch that divided the kitchen from the living space. I grimaced at myself. "Sorry, ignore me. I slept fine. How about you?"

“Yeah, okay I guess.”

The kitchen consisted of a cabinet counter with a sink and a single-plate gas burner. Some shelves bracketed the wall, sparse with a few plates and mugs, a basket of cutlery and two banged up pots. The sink cabinet hid a bucket, a small trash can and a bar fridge.

“What are you looking for?” Daniel called out.

“It’s stupid.” I slammed the cabinet closed and joined him at the table. “I thought maybe the last guests may have left some coffee behind.”

“Wishful thinking.” He chuckled, humor sparking the blue in his eyes. “This cabin probably hasn’t seen guests in years. There’s not much demand this far from the lake.”

I studied him. “You’re in a good mood...” ...considering.

“That’s a stretch, but I’m not in a bad mood.” He opened the bag of crackers on the table and pushed it closer to me. “I’m not holed up in a cell at the Guard Station and I’m not cuffed to a bed in rehab.”

Now that’s how you count your blessings.

We breakfasted on crackers and dried apple. Our supplies were running low, and my stomach cried out for something more substantial, but I wasn’t sure what to do about it other than hope Roman made it back today at some point with proper food. It’s not like we could go shopping in the square.

“I didn’t think this whole hiding out in the woods thing through very clearly,” I said.

“I got the impression it was kind of last minute.”

“It was.”

“So, what’s the plan?” he said.

“The plan was for you to be safely stashed in The Smoke,” I said pointedly. “I should never have agreed to let you stay behind.”

“You don’t own my life just because you saved me.”

My mouth opened, and shut. That was so far out of left field. What was I supposed to say?

“Hell, that came out wrong,” he said, reading my expression. “I’m grateful for everything you’ve done, you know that. What I meant is, you’re not responsible now for everything I do. If I get myself caught, that’s on me, not you. I’m here because I want to be here.”

“And what I meant was, you’re here because Roman asked,” I said. “You’re here to babysit me.”

“I prefer to think of it as looking out for you.” He smirked. “And that’s not the only reason I’m here. Roman said you want to shake things up with the Sisterhood. Let’s just say, I’d like to see that happen, and help in any way I can.”

“This isn’t about getting the council re-installed,” I said quickly.

He shrugged that off. “That’s not even on the table.”

I studied him. Daniel was one of the good guys, but it couldn’t be easy giving up all

that power, losing all he'd lost. "What if it were an option?"

He took his time before responding. "There were things I would have wanted to change, when my turn came to take the reins."

That was one of the reasons I'd fallen for him, back then, right at the start, before he'd broken my heart, before I'd come to realize my heart was never his to break. "You're talking about a different version of the council?"

Daniel shook his head. "There were things my father spoke of changing, but the council was designed to make that impossible. When your turn comes up, you're the shining new arrival, the lone squeaky wheel around the table of older, established members. My father was always outnumbered and outvoted, or, if I'm being totally honestly, talked down, persuaded that his ideas went against the principles on which the Eastern Coalition was founded."

"That's what Roman always says," I murmured. "The system is greater than the man."

"Yeah, he may have mentioned that to me once or twice." A lopsided grin tugged at his mouth. "But anyway, no, I don't think I could have succeeded where my father failed. Capra doesn't need an improved version of the council, it needs a complete overhaul."

"I feel the same about the Sisterhood. We've traded in one regime for another. That's what it feels like."

"So, what do you have in mind?" Daniel rubbed his hands like a comical villain. "Are we overthrowing them?"

I laughed and rolled my eyes. "Nothing that wild."

He wolfed down a handful of crackers, watching, patient while I gathered my thoughts.

“I met this guy, Axel Gomez, he’s a nurse at the rehab center. Roman calls him my number one fan.” I blushed as I spoke. It sounded like I was blowing my own horn. “Axel reckons people will listen to me, they want to hear me speak. He actually said that if I agree to speak from the bandstand on Saturday, he’ll bring a crowd that will fill the square.”

Daniel coughed and spluttered around a mouthful of cracker. “Roman is going to kill me.”

“Why?” I said, instantly worried. “What have you done?”

“Me?” He cleared his throat, his voice hoarse. “I’m supposed to stop you from doing anything crazy. I’m pretty sure that includes something like addressing your followers in the town square in broad daylight.”

“Addressing my followers ?” I cocked a brow at him. “You’re confusing me with the Puritans.”

“You know what I mean,” Daniel said. “It was you up on the screens, your revelations that kick-started the revolution. The people of Capra hang onto your words. Even I’ve heard about how amazing you are, how much everyone admires you, and I’ve been locked away this whole time.”

My cheeks were stinging hot now. “That’s not what I ever wanted.”

“That’s what you got,” Daniel said solemnly. “You’re like their damned pied piper, Georga. You could lead them wherever you wish right now, but the people are not the ones in power. The Sisterhood is not just going to stand back while you shout your

message from the bandstand.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?” he challenged.

“You asked me what the plan is.” My heart thudded, nervous excitement coursing through my veins. This, this was why I’d stayed behind, because the people were not the ones in power, but the power should be in their hands, in their voices. “I’ve been given a voice, and I want to use that to give everyone a voice.”

“By standing up in the town square and—”

“No!” I sliced a hand through the air. “Listen to me. I don’t know how to lead a revolution. And what the hell do I know about leading people? I don’t have the knowledge, experience or patience for any of that. But there’s one thing I’ve been good at all my life. I have an insatiable curiosity. I’ve always questioned everything. That is what I know, and what I can pass on to the people of Capra.”

Daniel quietened, finally listening.

“They’ve already started questioning some things,” I said. “I want to make sure they question everything, and when they do that, anything is possible.”

I had faith in the people of Capra. Axel had given that to me. I’d once felt like I was alone in a town that walked with their eyes closed, blind to the injustice and cruelty—cruelty I wasn’t blameless in. I wasn’t perfect but I liked to think that I was learning, evolving. I’d wanted Julian Edgar to suffer, but I shouldn’t have gotten what I wanted.

“How do you get them to question everything?” Daniel asked.

“I’m going to write Axel a letter.” I smiled at him. “And I’m pretty confident he’ll do the rest.”

A short while later, after I’d washed and changed into fresh clothes, I sat down at the table with two blank sheets of paper and pen. The first letter was to my parents, more or less a copy of the letter I’d left for Geneva to find.

The second letter took me most of the morning to craft.

Dear Friend,

By now, you’ve probably heard what has happened and why I’ve had to disappear, but I am not gone.

I won’t be standing on that bandstand in the town square on Saturday, but maybe you will hear my words and whisper them to a trusted friend or family member, and maybe they will hear your words and whisper them, and when all our whispers gather, our voices will roar.

So here are my words.

I’ve been beyond the walls of Capra.

I’ve walked The Smoke, where mothers and fathers live and work as equals, raising children born of their flesh and blood. I’ve bought produce from a woman’s stall at the crowded marketplace where traders hawk their wares. The buildings are blackened with pollution from the industrial zones and the streets are paved with concrete, there’s little greenery or beauty, but everywhere you go is packed with life.

Solar fields surround their walls and their nights are lit by candlelight. Their gates stand wide open and their energy is severely rationed, most of it feeding back to us in

Capra.

I've seen women dressed in tailored pants suits for their day of work. I've seen men crowded with women in a soup restaurant to eat their hasty lunch. Young girls harvest their eggs and I've heard of women who give their new born babes up for fostering in exchange for credits, all to ensure a steady increase in population and production of ovarian eggs.

I've visited a friend who didn't graduate, who was exiled from Capra and now lives in a dormitory or occasionally with her boyfriend, and who teaches in a local school for adults. I've been accosted by rough men from a gang called the Blood Throats and I've watched children playing on street corners and I've learned that the people in The Smoke are free to leave, to go into the wilds if they choose.

The Outerlands is not a wasteland. By all accounts, it is a wild, cruel place. They call it the wilds.

I've seen the barons and their people, those who inhabit the wilds. I didn't dare to walk amongst them, but I've watched through the fence, across the river from a place called Sector Five, one of our trading posts.

These barons set up camp with their magnificent tents striped in bold blacks and reds and golds.

Men in cotton tunics, men dressed in black leather, men with weapons strapped across their chests, men who seemed desperate and savage.

Women dressed in long robes the color of gems, women carrying cauldrons to hang over open fires, women carrying their babes in their arms.

Children running and giggling as they play in the fields.

I've learned that much of what we consume here in Capra is not grown in The Smoke, but traded from these barons with their large plantations and cattle ranches.

I haven't seen all there is to see. I haven't learned all there is to learn. Isn't that the most wonderful, beautiful thing?

Because this is what I've come to realize.

The citizens of Capra, all of us, are a nation of rehabilitated people. Look to your left, to the mother who was committed to rehab for the crime of speaking her mind. Look to your right, to the man who walked out from rehab with his emotions, spontaneity and personality wiped.

They are not as different from you and me as we would like to believe.

From the day we're born, we are trained to stunt our creativity and stifle our curiosity. Because when your world is contained within walls that cannot be looked over, walls that cannot be breached or traversed, walls that reduce your world to what and who we know, what is there to question? What is there to be curious or spontaneous about?

We have forgotten how to ask questions.

We have forgotten how to demand answers.

We have forgotten that once this world was a landscape so vast, it could never fill our imagination. There were customs and religions and governments and justice systems. The people had a voice. The people shaped their world. The people decided who would rule them and who would make the rules.

Because without the people, you and me, Capra is nothing but an empty shell

surrounded by high walls.

These are my words,

The Flame

(Georga West)

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:27 am

Writing the letter was a simple accomplishment. Getting it delivered to Axel proved more problematic. After an exhausting round of apoplectic arguments with Daniel, I reluctantly conceded that I couldn't just waltz up to the rehab center and lie in wait for him to come off his shift. That was the kind of brazen attitude that would fry Roman's brain and the last ounce of his tolerance for this plan.

I did agree with Daniel. The thing was, would it be any safer to send Jessie? Daniel insisted it would be, that no one would be suspecting her of bad behavior.

That's not why I eventually gave in.

Have you finally decided I'm good enough to help your causes? Jessie's throwaway comment had stuck.

I wasn't stronger than Jessie, I wasn't smarter, I certainly wasn't a better person and I wasn't pretentious enough to think I should or could be her protector. That was never the reason I kept her in the dark.

With both envelopes crammed into the pocket of my coat, I cycled along the bumpy dirt lanes that cut through the dense pine forest. The sun was out and the day had warmed up, and the furious pedaling finally burned the chill from my bones. Despite my initial worries, I didn't end up lost in the woods. For every left fork Roman had taken last night, I went right, and twenty minutes later I was at the Parklands entry point.

I hid my bicycle behind a bush and proceeded by foot. My hair was knotted into a tight bun beneath the hood of my sweater. The collar of my coat was turned up to my

chin. Unless someone actually stopped to scrutinize me up close, I was incognita, just a girl walking along the road to town.

Still, I wasn't sure what to expect. Would the streets be barricaded? Guards at every corner? I kept within the tree line wherever possible. Instead of walking through the Parklands barrier, I hopped the wall.

As I drew closer to the town, I was surprised to find no extra Guard presence at all. There was no obvious manhunt in progress. No chaos.

Walking with my chin tucked in, I skirted the square, sticking to the back alleys that wound around to Jessie's street. It was lunchtime, so there wasn't a lot of pedestrian traffic.

When I rounded the last corner, my mouth went dry with nerves. A guard was patrolling down the far end of Jessie's street. Was he stalking her home? Capra was a small town, it wouldn't take much asking around to discover she was my best friend.

I dipped back around the white-washed terrace house on the corner, thinking. What was I doing here? This had to be Jessie's choice, but it wouldn't be if I put her in danger before she had a chance to make that choice.

A woman pushing a baby stroller approached and I spun about, giving her my back, my heart pounding blood to my head. I bent down on one knee, fiddling with the ties of my sneaker.

"Afternoon," she greeted as she maneuvered the stroller around me.

"Hi," I mumbled, my head down. When I peered up, she'd passed without any undue scrutiny.

I breathed, waited, and then strode forward to cross the intersection, casting a casual glance down the street. The guard was out of sight. Where was he? But I couldn't stand here, loitering on street corners. That was bound to draw attention.

I turned onto the street, fully exposed to the pretty double-story terraces that lined both sides. A silhouette moved behind a window, a curtain twitched, raised voices came from behind a closed door. My pulse quickened, a hundred warnings chasing at my heels, but I forced myself to walk slowly, my hands tucked into my pockets, my head dipped, my eyes scanning through lowered lashes, my ears pricked.

The guard entered my line of vision, two blocks down. My heart jumped into my throat, but he didn't glance this way. He unclipped his iComm from his belt and leaned against a lamppost.

I reached a footpath that dissected the endless row of terraces and slipped into the shadows cast by mostly windowless walls, my kneecaps trembling in their sockets. What a laugh. I'd thought I wasn't scared. I'd thought I was cut out for this. But I haven't changed. I've always gone ahead anyway, forged headfirst into danger despite the fear, not because I have no fear. It wasn't bravery. This was something else, a different kind of fear, a sickening in my stomach at the thought of doing nothing.

What was wrong with me?

Why couldn't I be normal like everyone else?

Why couldn't I just disappear into The Smoke, live my life with Roman? It would be a good life. I knew that. A happy life. Roman was all my heart wanted, all I desired...so why wasn't that enough?

As I stood there in the dank alley, gulping breaths of panic through the tightening in

my chest, I thought of Axel and how his face lit up when he spoke about how his pod language had come about, or when he was exclaiming over my so-called triumphs.

Maybe it wasn't just me. Maybe there were more of us than I'd ever dreamed. Maybe there were so many of us that, when put together, we could be the new normal?

That's what pushed me, what drove me forward.

I took a tentative step out of the shadows to peer down the street. The guard had moved on again. I didn't know where he'd gone. I didn't trust him.

This was a mistake.

I should have waited for nightfall. I was deciding whether to stay or come back later, when a sound snapped my gaze up the street, and I realized Jessie wasn't even home. She came cycling around the corner, her long curls streaming out from the bright yellow woolen cap that adorned her head.

Her eyes were on the road, she wasn't looking left or right.

"Jessie," I called as loud as I dared.

Her gaze veered to me. She kept on pedaling, then she stamped the brake so sharply, she nearly went toppling over the hand bars. "Georga?"

I put a finger to my mouth and stepped back into the shadows as she dismounted and steered her bicycle to join me.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. "I need to talk to you."

"I need to talk to you," I said at the same time. "Not here, though. I think there's a

guard keeping an eye on this street.”

Her nose wrinkled. “What on earth is going on? Your mother came to see me this morning. She’s worried to death about you for some reason. And I’ve just come from Parklands. Do you know the lock on your front door has been busted? Your door is standing wide open.”

Geneva found my letter.

“Keep your voice down.” The guard was nowhere to be seen, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t there. “Look, we can’t talk here. Do you know the service road that leads from Parklands into the nature reserve?”

“Of course I don’t.” She frowned, following my gaze down the road, not seeing anything. “I’ve never been farther than your house.”

She wanted answers right now, I saw that in her eyes. She didn’t understand the danger we were in. Or maybe that was just my paranoia, but I wasn’t willing to take that gamble.

I gave her directions and said firmly, “I’m on foot, so it’ll take me about an hour to get there. I think...I think you should go home, then cycle out to meet me in a bit. And be careful. Make sure you’re not followed.”

Her eyes widened into saucers. Finally, she lowered her voice. “What is going on, Georga? You’re acting like a fugitive.”

“Because I am,” I said simply.

She gawked at me like I’d lost my mind.

The word wasn't out yet, then, not to the general public.

"I'll explain everything," I promised and abruptly turned from her, cutting through the footpath to the next street over.

I didn't look back.

I didn't know if Jessie would meet me, but I thought she would. And if she didn't, then that was its own answer. I'd wait a few days and then deliver the letters myself.

Once I was a fair distance from Jessie's home, my nerves settled. I was anonymous again, just a face bundled against the cold, scurrying along with my head burrowed against the icy breeze.

I hopped the wall into Parklands and made my way to where I'd stashed my bicycle with fifteen minutes to spare. Or so I thought. Jessie was already there, pacing a short path up and down on the intersection of the service road, her bicycle discarded on the patchy grass curb.

She stopped pacing when she saw me and folded her arms, standing with feet apart in the middle of the road. "Are you in trouble?"

Parklands was a quiet neighborhood, more so now that the council families had been relocated. I hadn't seen a soul since I'd hopped the wall, but that wasn't any reason to be careless.

"Come out of the middle of the road." I collected her bicycle and pushed it around the back of the same bush where mine was hidden, and then we stood there, staring at each other, and my bottom lip wobbled. "Is my mother okay? What did she say?"

"Nothing," Jessie said. "She was looking for you and she assumed I'd know where

you were.”

The accusation in her voice stung. We’d always told each other everything, or so she’d once believed.

“I broke Daniel and the heirs out of the rehab center last night,” I said, not implicating Roman out of habit although she’d figure that out for herself.

“You did it?” she gasped, her eyes bulging. “You actually went ahead and did it?”

I nodded. “That’s why they busted into my house. They’re searching for me. We sent the other heirs to The Smoke, but Daniel and I stayed behind.”

Her indignation deflated, the stiffness in her face dissolving into a slack jaw and open mouth. She wanted to know everything, of course, why I hadn’t fled to The Smoke like I’d originally mentioned, where was I staying, was I out of my mind crazy?

I told her everything, the words rushing out of me about how we’d staged the breakout and got away, how Daniel and I were camped out in a cabin in the nature reserve, and finally why I believed the people of Capra deserved better than the old council, better than the Sisterhood.

“You haven’t seen or heard anything about the breakout?” I asked. “I thought they’d be handing out flyers with my face or barricading streets, or have a general alert out for the heirs, but there’s nothing?”

She shook her head. “Your mother must know something about it, that’s why she came to see me this morning.”

I brought out the letters and slapped one into her hands. “That’s for my mother. Do you mind delivering it?”

“You seriously have to ask?” she said, eyeing the other letter.

“This is for a friend of mine, a nurse at the rehab center.” I didn’t hesitate to give Axel’s name away. My trust in Jessie was intrinsic, as much a part of my existence as the air I breathed to live. “He might be under observation, though. You’ll have to be careful, sneaky about getting it to him. If you’re prepared to help, that is.”

“You really do trust me,” she breathed out.

“I’m sorry you ever doubted that.”

“It’s just...” A tear rolled from one of her wide, brown eyes. “I’m sorry I’ve been so hard on you. I felt like you’d outgrown me, outgrown our friendship, that you were growing up to be this amazing, strong woman and that you’d left me behind.”

“Whatever I am, has been shaped by our friendship.” Tears welled in my throat and I swallowed, throwing my arms around her. “I’m not amazing or strong, Jessie, I’m just me, and you’re you. I’ll tell you what is strong and amazing, though. Us. Our friendship. I’m halved without you.”

We hugged for long minutes, and I meant what I’d said. Jessie wasn’t just my friend. She was my sister. My family.

When we pulled apart, I made one thing very clear. “Don’t feel like you have to do this. It’s risky, and I can find another way to get this letter delivered to Axel.”

She rolled her eyes and smiled. “Just tell me what he looks like and where I can find him.”

“The rehab center at 6pm,” I told her. “He’ll either be coming off or starting a shift. But don’t go all the way to the center, there’s a bus stop that everyone uses. You can

take cover in the bushes and wait until it looks okay for you to approach him. There's no hurry. Take your time, however many days you need, until you feel the coast is clear."

I gave her a detailed description of Axel, then slid the letter out of the envelope. I'd specifically not yet sealed it. "Before you agree to anything, read this. You should know what you're getting involved in."

Jessie read slowly, then her eyes traveled to the top of the page and she read again. Then she looked at me, her expression dead serious. "This is big."

"It is." I nodded. "Are you sure you want to be part of it?"

"I'm sure," she said in a small voice, cleared her throat, and spoke with more confidence. "Absolutely. Where does Roman stand with all of this?"

I grimaced. "He's not thrilled, but he's on board."

"Of course he is! That man is..."

"Wonderful?" I supplied.

"I was going to say he's an enigma." She gave a dry laugh, shaking her head. "But sure, let's go with wonderful."

She folded the letter and inserted it into the envelope. "I'll get this delivered. I'll let you know once it's done, but you shouldn't be walking around town, especially after this letter gets out. I'll come to you. Cabin 39, right? Is that near the lake?"

"We could be so lucky," I groaned. At least it was easy enough to get there. I directed her about all the left forks. "When you get to a rundown shack that looks totally

uninhabitable, that's us."

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When I returned to the cabin, an unwrapped parcel of beef jerky lay on the table and Daniel was dressed in blue denim and a sweatshirt that was definitely not mine.

My heart sank. “Has Roman come and gone already?”

“I don’t think so,” Daniel said, shaking his head. “I went home to get a few things.”

A shiver snapped my spine. “You went to see your parents? Are you sure there wasn’t a guard posted nearby?”

“Not that home. I went to Parklands. My mother keeps a spare backdoor key in her greenhouse.” He slumped into a chair at the table and nudged the paper parcel. “I was hoping to get more than this. Most of our personal stuff is gone. The kitchen was cleaned out.”

I sat across from him, my gaze running over his sweatshirt. “Not your clothes?”

“I guess Brenda wasn’t expecting me to come back.”

Or maybe she simply didn’t give a damn. I didn’t say that, though. I was in a mood to give her the benefit of the doubt.

“I saw Jessie. She’ll deliver the letters. She’ll let us know once it’s done. There was a guard hanging around in her street. Maybe it’s a coincidence, but I told Jessie we’re here. She’ll come to us.”

Daniel reached for a stick of jerky. “The Guard isn’t searching door to door?”

“She didn’t say so. Your escape hasn’t been made public. Yet.” He offered the stick to me and I took it. “Hey, I didn’t think about it before, but Jessie could take a letter from you to Brenda.”

“She won’t mind?”

Jessie or Brenda? I bit down on that retort. Maybe I was being too harsh.

“Jessie won’t mind,” I assured him. “She could take a letter for your parents as well, if you like? Brenda will know their address. They must be worried.”

Heat crawled up my cheeks. Did his parents still have the capacity to be concerned about their only son? “Sorry, that’s stupid. I just thought—”

“It’s not stupid.” His eyes filled with sadness. “You know, my mother is...well, she’s still my mother, just a little distant. They will be worried. I’ll write them a letter.”

I wanted to apologize again, but I swallowed it and tore off a piece of jerky with my teeth. I couldn’t have stopped what happened to Julian. Most of my guilt came from the bitter hate I’d felt towards the man.

That I’d felt .

More and more, that emotion was being left behind in the past. Maybe because he’d been punished enough. His suffering would last a life time. But, more and more, I was wondering if Daniel was right, that his father had simply been a cog in a system that couldn’t be changed no matter how much he’d tried or wanted reform.

I brought Daniel pen and paper for his letters and gave him some privacy at the table.

Roman finally arrived with the sunset. He parked his truck deep into the trees and

came walking up to the cabin with a bulging backpack slung over one shoulder and the portable heater tucked under one arm.

I'd been watching for him, and ran outside to meet him. "I wasn't sure you'd be able to make it."

"Nothing would keep me away." A slow grin snaked across his jaw and baked his eyes beneath the sunset as his gaze washed over me, into me. "I missed you."

I went up onto my toes to brush a kiss over his mouth. He wrapped his free arm around my waist, dragging me closer until my body was flush with his, and deepened the kiss, taking his time to show me just how much he'd missed me.

"How long can you stay?" I asked, fitting my hand into his as we walked up the porch steps.

"I'm staying the night," he said. "There's no reason for me to be in The Smoke when you're here."

The weight of his words, rumbled in that gravel baritone, filled me with warmth and gravity in the middle of these uncertain times. Our lives were in a constant state of flux, a never-ending shifting, but Roman was my stable ground. Jessie called me amazing, strong, but I only ever came close to that when Roman was by my side.

While Daniel and Roman caught up, I searched for an electric socket to plug the heater in and came up empty handed.

"It'll do for tonight," Roman told me. "It's fully charged."

"You didn't use it in the apartment last night?" I looked at him properly, noticing the tiredness in his eyes. "How did it go with the heirs?"

“Cramped and disorderly.” He dropped onto the couch with a grimace, running a hand through his hair. “Boyden Otter is an unpleasant character. I kicked them out first thing this morning.”

“Is Kemerick okay?” Daniel asked.

Roman’s gaze swung to him. “They’ll all be fine. I took them to the Processing Center and handed them over to the Protectorate. I wouldn’t be surprised if they land themselves cushy jobs and apartments in Gardens. The Protectorate has always held strong alliances with the council.”

Daniel pulled a chair out from the table and sat back-to-front, his arms folded over the top rail of the back support. “Isn’t that a problem?”

“Not right now,” Roman said, and went on to explain about how the Protectorate was occupied with more urgent matters.

The bulging backpack held various tins of vegetable and noodle soups, produced in The Smoke and a familiar staple in Capra. My mother would never serve tinned soup at her table, but I’d never been that fussy. Especially not in our current circumstances. There was also a fat chunk of crusty bread, a jar of mulberry jam and a tin of hot chocolate.

It was a veritable feast. We ate dinner around the small table while the little heater chugged warmth into the bowels of the cabin. Roman had stopped by our Parklands cabin that morning, so he knew about the busted door. There wasn’t much to ransack, but he confirmed my letter was gone. We agreed that Geneva must, at the very least, suspect we’d all fled to The Smoke, which could explain the lack of barriers and door-to-door searches.

I filled him in about the other letters I’d written and Jessie, and he only asked me

once, “Are you sure about Jessie? You trust her?”

“With my life,” I assured him.

There was so much to talk about, it was nearly midnight by the time we said goodnight to Daniel and pushed the pair of single beds together in our bedroom. I didn’t have pajamas with me and I wanted Roman’s body heat, not my sweatpants, so I pulled a T-shirt on and we snuggled up beneath the quilt.

I draped myself over him, my elbows digging into his chest, my fingers threading through his hair and my eyes locked on his. “I missed you.”

He shifted beneath me, his gaze heavy with desire, and then we were kissing, his firm mouth shaping mine, our tongues exploring, tasting, stroking delicious sensations along my veins. He took charge, rolling me over, his hands caressing every inch of my body while his lips worshipped my skin. His touch was velvet heat, spiraling hot shivers to my blood and melting into my bones.

“Roman,” I groaned, my fingers spearing into his hair, my hips arching to meet his.

He chuckled, a primal sound that rumbled deep in his chest, and kissed his way up the column of my throat. “I love you.”

And then time stopped, everything stopped, as he lifted his head to look into my eyes and nothing else existed in this moment. There was just Roman, just me, and the fire of desire breathing against my skin and the love pounding in my heart.

“I love you,” I whispered, and for some inexplicable reason, I felt a hot tear on my cheek.

He kissed the tear away and time ticked on again, our bodies tangling and craving as

we touched, explored and possessed, consumed in each other.

Much, much later, as I lay with my cheek pressed to his chest, his arm wrapped around me, he said softly, “I met with James today.”

I rolled my head into the crook of his arm so I could look at him. He’d already told us that the wardens hadn’t been informed of the escape. For now, Geneva was definitely keeping the missing heirs under wraps.

Roman trusted the senior warden as much as I trusted Jessie. Also, his allegiance lay with the wardens. “Did you tell James everything?”

“Not in as many words,” Roman said. “I told him the heirs had escaped to The Smoke. He’ll inform the wardens.”

“Did you mention our involvement?”

“I didn’t have to,” he said. “How else would I know about the escape? Why else would the Guard bust into my house? James knows me too well. He drew his own conclusions and I didn’t deny it.”

“What will he do?”

“File a complaint against the Sisterhood, for a start. They busted down my door and trespassed in my cabin. That’s a violation of warden territory.”

That was so unexpected, I bolted upright. “Are you serious? I mean, I live there, too, and I’m a citizen of Capra. Doesn’t that give them the right to enter?”

“Probably,” he drawled. “That’s not the point. James wants to have the complaint on record, and send them a warning about messing with the wardens.”

I squinted at him. I'd never met James, but I really, really liked him. "About messing with you ."

A half-cocked grin shrugged his sexy jaw. "I'll take all the protection he wants to throw my way, so I can extend it to you."

"You think I'm going to land myself into a hot mess!"

"I know you are," he said, but there was a smile in his voice and a glint in his eyes.

I punched him on the chest and squirmed back down into his embrace. "You're lucky I love you."

"I certainly am," he agreed warmly. "Another thing. James hadn't put forward my transfer request, and we've decided I'll withdraw it for now."

"He still wants you to take his position when he steps down?"

"He does," Roman said. "But it also gives me a reason to be in Capra for now."

I smiled against the silken iron skin of his chest, and we lay there in comfortable silence. I was reluctant to break it, but I had to know. "Do you think I'm making a mistake here?"

He thought on that for a long moment. "Honestly? I don't know, Georga. But I know you're doing what you have to do." His thumb soothed slow, circular caresses on my upper arm. "I won't allow anything to happen to you. If the Sisterhood gets their claws into you, I'll blow that damn rehab center up."

He spoke that like a vow.

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The next three days and nights followed a similar routine.

During the days, Daniel and I kept busy—and fit—with long hikes through the nature reserve. We stayed deep within the park, never roaming too close to the lake, and had endless conversations about The Smoke and the wilds and the barons.

As I'd suspected, Daniel had never been outside Capra and his knowledge of what lay beyond our walls was sketchy. He knew something of the Protectorate, but he'd never heard of the Union Families and Blood Throats, or anything about life in The Smoke. The same held true for the wilds. He knew we traded with the barons for some of our goods, but he had no idea about the life they led or about the trade of ovarian eggs.

The heirs were not privy to the full truth until they inherited their spot at the council table.

Our nights were spent with Roman, discussing the state of our world, Capra, The Smoke, the Eastern Coalition, the wilds, as well as the governing bodies of the old world.

Roman had been beyond the Eastern Coalition, he'd traveled the wilds.

At times, it seemed his knowledge was like his rogue experience, without limits or any boundaries, and I absorbed it all with insatiable hunger, digested his words from both worlds and used them to craft my next letter.

Roman also kept his ear to the ground, and it soon became clear that Geneva had no intention of going public with the missing heirs or my betrayal of the Sisterhood. The

wardens had confronted the Sisterhood, and obviously the Protectorate knew, but as usual, the citizens of Capra were kept in the dark.

On the fourth day, a little after noon, Jessie found her way to us.

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes shining as she propped her bicycle against the porch and bounded up the steps. “I thought I’d never find you! I took two wrong turns.”

“How is that even possible?” I hugged her, giggling. “Seriously? It’s left turns all the way.”

“I was nervous,” she groaned. “I’m such an idiot.”

“No you’re not,” I said. “You found us.”

I shoed her inside so I could close the door on the winter storm brewing outside. Not that it was much warmer inside. Our portable heater was charging at the Parklands cabin, where Roman ‘officially’ resided.

Daniel was on the couch, snuggled beneath a quilt. “Jessie, right?”

They’d never formally met. I completed the introductions as I squeezed passed the couch to get to the kitchen. “Hot chocolate?”

“Yes, yes and yes! Oh, and I brought this.” Jessie swung her backpack off and dug inside it, producing a tin of raspberry oatcakes. “They were supposed to be choc-chip, but the stores are out of chocolate.”

Daniel laughed. “We’re not fussy here at camp misery.”

“It’s not that bad.” Jessie’s nose scrunched as she looked around.

“That’s what all our visitors say, until we make them spend the night.”

Her gaze flashed to him. “You have visitors?”

“He’s kidding.” I set the pot of water to boil on the gas burner and joined them on the other side of the couch.

“So?” I prodded her with a look. “Were you able to deliver the letter to Axel?”

“Oh, right!” She delved into her backpack again and handed me a piece of folded paper.

“What’s this?”

“Look.”

Disappointment engulfed me as I unfolded the page and saw the ‘Dear Friend’ at the top. This was my letter. “You weren’t able to get it to him? Or he wouldn’t take it.”

“Look closer.”

Daniel jumped up to peer over my shoulder as my eyes scanned lower, reading the words I’d written.

“I don’t understand.” I glanced at Jessie, frowning. “This is my letter, but it’s not my handwriting.”

“Exactly.” She curled up onto one end of the couch and grabbed a cookie to munch on while she talked, her voice pitched in excitement. “So, I got your letter to Axel the

day after you came to see me. It was fine. I grabbed him at the bus stop that morning and the moment I mentioned your name, he was suddenly my best friend. He's something else, isn't he?"

I laughed. "He's enthusiastic."

"And then some." She rolled her eyes at me. "He wanted to know why you haven't come in to work, what's happening, where you are."

"You didn't say anything, did you?" Daniel snapped over my shoulder.

"Of course not." She looked at me. "I didn't say anything to your mom, either, and she also asked. I wasn't sure if you wanted me to tell her?"

"No," I said. "The Sisterhood will be interrogating her. It'll be easier if she honestly doesn't know anything."

"Okay."

"Did Axel mention anything about the heirs escaping?"

"No, and I didn't bring it up," she said.

"Sounds like he doesn't know about your involvement," Daniel said.

One person there did know. The night nurse. What had they done to silence him?

"Anyway," Jessie said, "I'm sorry it took me so long to come. After I met with Axel, I swear I felt eyes watching me everywhere."

My breath snagged. "You think the Guard are spying on you?"

“I don’t know.” Jessie shrugged. “Maybe I’m just being paranoid. I’m not used to all this sneaking around. But I was afraid to lead anyone here, so I thought I’d give it a week, just in case. Then that happened.”

She pointed the cookie she was holding at the letter in my hands. “Carolyn and I went to the Crooked Teapot for brunch.”

“Carolyn?” I was so out of touch with my friends. “How is she?”

“She’s fine, but that’s not the important part,” Jessie said. “When the waiter brought our tea tray, that letter was lining it below the doily.”

I dropped onto the couch beside Jessie, spreading the letter open on my lap. “Someone copied my letter and served it with your tea?”

“Many someones and many copies, apparently.” Jessie’s head bobbed. “Carolyn confessed she’d seen that exact same letter. She was at Grodgens, the playhouse, with Simon the night before, and some of the programs had that letter slipped inside them. So I approached the waiter and after a little persuasion, he told me everything.”

She paused to nibble on her cookie.

“Jessie! You’re killing me here.”

Behind me, the pot hissed.

“I’ve got it,” Daniel said, pushing around the couch to get there. “Three hot chocolates?”

Jessie and I both raised our hands, then she continued. “So, it’s a whole thing that’s been going around town for days. If you see the letter, and agree or sympathize or

whatever with what's in there, you make a copy and pass both on."

I was dumbfounded, didn't know what to say. My gaze slid to the words I'd written.

Hear my words and whisper them to a trusted friend or family member, and maybe they will hear your words and whisper them, and when all our whispers gather, our voices will roar.

Axel was doing so much more than passing a whisper along to someone he trusted. He was multiplying the whispers. And not only Axel. How many Axels were out there?

"It's crazy, right?" Jessie beamed. "I was terrified that eyes were watching me just because I'd been in possession of that letter, and folk are brazenly copying and distributing it around town. I felt ridiculous, such a stupid coward, so I said enough of that, and here I am."

"You're not a coward," I told her. "You passed it on first. That was brave. And I don't want you to take any unnecessary risks. I promise you, I'm not. That's why I asked you to deliver the letters in the first place."

"I won't," she said. "But I'm not going to be afraid of my own shadow. So, what's next?"

I grinned slyly. "Since you ask, how do you feel about delivering a new letter to Axel?"

When I'd written it, I hadn't been sure about the part where I exposed the missing heirs and confessed to helping them escape, but I was sure now. Secrets and silences put lives at risk. I just hoped the letter wasn't too late for that night nurse.

Dear Friend,

A few days ago, I helped the council heirs escape rehab. Whether what I did is right or wrong, I don't know. That's not for me to say. It's not for the head of the Sisters of Capra to say, either. This is what I have come to believe: no person should be judged, before or after they've actually committed any crime, through one set of eyes.

There is another way. I won't tell you what that is. The time has come for you to tell Capra what it should be, to use your voice to shape the rules by which we are governed.

The Smoke has the Protectorate, a ruling body of people who rise through the ranks to become their leaders. I suppose you have to show certain qualities, profess to certain beliefs, to join their ranks before you rise. This propagates one belief, one vision.

They also have the Union Families who control certain zones, The Smelt and The Break. The families rule by extortion, threats and violence.

The Blood Throats, a vicious gang, run The Packing District.

The wardens operate as a military organism with appointed positions. They have senior wardens who are curated, and high wardens who are elected, and a tribunal system to deliver justice.

Here in Capra, we had the council where a seat at the table was inherited within our council families. Now we have the Sisters of Capra and have yet to see how the leadership roles would be passed on. For both these regimes, their hand of power is absolute and, in many instances, extreme.

The old world had an electoral democratic system. Leaders were elected by the

people and held accountable to the people, and if they did not deliver on their promises, or if the people changed their minds, they had the opportunity to elect a different leader every five years.

Justice was delivered by a jury of twelve impartial people after bearing witness from both the accused and the state.

The Eastern Coalition was founded to preserve the human race.

Capra, in particular, was established to preserve human civilization, the customs and traditions, the technical and medical advancements, the parts that might be lost in the chaos when the Fertility Plague devastated our world. So why did Capra fail to preserve the voice of our people? Was it an oversight or necessary evil or plain negligence?

We cannot change what has come before, but we can do better. Our ancestors fought for this democratic right, they died to give the people a voice, and Capra should be charged with preserving it. And once you have your voice back, it is yours to use as you will.

This is our present duty, or the future will become our sin.

The Flame

(Georga West)

Daniel passed his own letters on to Jessie before she left.

I took her aside to speak in private. "Slip the letters under Brenda's door so she doesn't know you delivered them."

“Why?” Her nose puckered. “Do you think she’ll rat on us?”

I had to think about that, which said everything about our failed friendship. “Honestly, no, I don’t believe she would. But she’s in a weird place right now. I don’t know what Daniel wrote, or if he’s made arrangements to see her, but that’s between him and Brenda. There’s no reason to expose yourself.”

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Two days later, Daniel and I were ensconced on the couch, sipping hot chocolate and munching on the last of Jessie's oatcakes. Apparently the council families kept an extensive selection of books on old world politics in their libraries and it was required study for the heirs. Daniel knew a lot more than any of us, including Roman, and he wasn't afraid to challenge my point of view.

"The original council made the right call," he was telling me. "The world was in a state of chaos. Old world politics provided for this as well. They could declare a State of Emergency, and during that period, the electoral process was suspended."

I raised a skeptical brow. "You're suggesting we've been in a state of chaos for 95 years?"

"If you asked my father, he'd say yes, we still are."

"And would you agree?"

Daniel bit down on his cookie and chewed while he considered his response. "The world is still chaotic, but Capra is a closed system by design. We're insulated from the chaos. The council did actually install a conservative version of the electoral system."

"Positions on the council are elected in theory, but in reality they're elected."

Daniel gave a slow nod. "They're elected by the sitting council. That's the way of fathers, to pass their legacy down to their sons. The system is flawed. I argued that with my father many times, that new positions should be elected from a wider field."

“Is that what you would have done, when your turn came to pass on the position?”

“I’d like to think I would have tried,” he said. “I guess now we’ll never know.”

The crunch of tires rolling on dirt came from outside.

“Roman?” Daniel said with a frown.

“He’s early.” I jumped up to peep out the window. My blood ran cold.

“It’s not Roman,” I whispered hoarsely. “It’s a silver saloon. Do you know anyone who drives a silver saloon?”

Daniel leaped off the couch to join me.

At that exact moment, the car pulled up right below our porch and the front passenger door opened before the car had come to a complete stop. Jessie hopped out and a sigh of relief sagged my shoulders.

The driver’s door opened and Lisa stepped out, and I went stiff again.

“Why would she bring Lisa here?” Daniel hissed.

“She wouldn’t.” As bad as this looked, as much as I was freaking out, I knew Jessie wouldn’t be this careless without a good reason.

Jessie had already bounded up the steps. She was hammering on the door while Lisa strode around the car with her usual cool grace in knee-high boots, black denim and a tan overcoat.

“Go hide in your room,” I issued to Daniel as I moved to open up for them.

Instead of listening, Daniel beat me to the door and unlatched it.

Jessie all but fell over the threshold, her eyes enormous and searching for me. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know if there was time, and she had a car. I didn’t know what to do.”

I shouldered Daniel aside and grabbed Jessie by the arm, tugging her inside. I was tempted to slam the door on Lisa, but that wouldn’t help. She knew we were here. “What is it?”

“Lisa said—”

“The Sisterhood has caught whiff of your little letter campaign, that’s what,” Lisa supplied, stepping inside, her nose twitching as she glanced around the cabin. Her gaze landed on Daniel. “Well, hello there.”

“Lisa.” He folded his arms, scowling at all of us. “What the hell?”

She looked at me. “Who’s bright idea was it to hide out in the nature reserve? Anyone with half a brain cell would know this is the first place they’d search for a fugitive.”

My jaw tightened. “Mine.”

“Of course it was.” She rolled her ice blue eyes. “Well, we have to go. Now. You can’t stay here.”

“They’re searching for you,” Jessie said urgently.

My heart kicked violently. “Geneva knows we’re here?”

“For some reason, Geneva thinks you’re holed up in The Smoke and are somehow

managing to slip your letters over the wall,” Lisa said. “But she’s not taking any chances. She’s not raising the alarm yet, doesn’t want a public outcry, but she’s ordered the Guard to be vigilant and tasked a search team to sweep the Nature Reserve.”

“When?” asked Daniel.

Lisa’s gaze swerved to him. “Half an hour ago, so the team’s probably here already. We would have been here sooner, but Jessie was playing coy.”

“I thought it was a trap,” Jessie muttered.

It could still be. I looked at Daniel. “What do we do?”

“Oh, for goodness sake,” Lisa sighed. “I’m not the big bad wolf. But we have to go now.”

“Go where?”

She shrugged. “Anywhere but here, trust me.”

Did we have any other option?

“Pack your things,” I said to Daniel. “If Geneva isn’t sure we’re still in Capra, I don’t want to leave anything behind to change her mind.”

Lisa slapped her palms together. “Chop-chop.”

Jessie stormed around her and started clearing the table. “Do you have a bag or something to dump this into?”

“In the kitchen.” I gave Daniel a shove to get him moving and I darted into my bedroom. My heart pounded, every nerve in my body pinched tight, but I couldn’t panic—I refused to panic.

In all honesty, I was more worried about Lisa than the manhunt. I wanted to trust her, but she was Sisterhood through and through. Like I’d once been. For all I knew, she was the search team, on a sanctioned mission, and we were walking—no, running right into her hands.

But I didn’t know.

I didn’t know .

So I went through my room like a whirlwind, shoving as much as I could into my overnight bag and bundling the rest up in the quilt. Lisa came through to help me carry, and we dumped it into the trunk of her car.

Between the four of us, we cleared the cabin out. There wasn’t space in the trunk for my bicycle, so I pushed it a short way into the trees. If anyone did stumble across it, they wouldn’t necessarily connect it to me.

Lisa and Jessie sat up front and I jumped into the rear with Daniel.

The car shot forward then jerked to an abrupt stop as Lisa cursed and hit the brakes. Gears grinded and then, with a few more stutters and abrupt jerks, we were reversing.

“Do you even know how to drive?” I muttered.

“I’ve been teaching myself.” Her gaze met mine in the rearview mirror with a devilish glint. “This is my second lesson.”

Jessie turned around in her seat to look at me. “She’s fine once she’s warmed up a bit.”

“You know I can drive, right?” Daniel offered.

“You both need to keep your heads down.” Lisa concentrated on changing gears to forward drive before she continued. “I’d rather not be seen with Capra’s ‘most wanted’ in the back of my car, if you don’t mind.”

We slunk low, although I made sure I could still peer through the window. I wanted to see where she was taking us. “Where are we going?”

“I’m taking suggestions,” she quipped.

“Parklands.” Daniel looked at me. “You said the council homes are standing empty. Think about it. They won’t believe we’d dare hide out in our own back garden. That’s the last place they’ll look.”

That made sense. Then again, hiding out in the nature reserve had made sense to me.

I remembered, “The Otter place has been repurposed,” and then I bit down on my back teeth to stop them from shattering. We were traveling at speed and hitting every bump in the road.

“What about the place Brenda and I are— were building?” Daniel said. “Construction ran over schedule and the roof hasn’t been laid yet. It’s not in a state to be repurposed.”

“What about the builders?” I asked. “Won’t they be on site?”

“We lost our slot with the roofers because of the delay,” Daniel replied. “The new

date they gave us was in January.”

Lisa flapped a hand at us, thankfully keeping her eyes on the road. “That’s not a bad idea.”

“Watch out!” Jessie yelled.

At the same time, Lisa slammed the brakes. She must have jerked the wheel as well. The car practically reared and went skidding on the dirt gravel. My knees rammed the seat in front of me. My neck snapped and my forehead hit something hard and bounced and everyone screamed.

Except for Lisa, maybe.

When the car came to a sliding halt, she glanced around at us. “Everyone okay?”

I glared at her.

Daniel put a hand on my arm. “You okay?”

I curled a hand around the back of my neck and rolled out the giant crick. “I’m alive.”

“There’s a guard,” Jessie whispered.

“Of course there’s a guard,” Lisa retorted. “I’m not that bad of a driver. He came out of nowhere.”

The breath whooshed out of me. And my head was throbbing from where I’d banged it. And why the hell had I ever trusted Lisa? She’d practically driven us straight into a guard.

Daniel inched forward to peer between the seats.

“Stay down,” Lisa pushed through her teeth. “Seriously? Everyone, just stay calm.”

“He’s just standing there,” Daniel said, slumping out of sight again. “Why doesn’t he move off the damned road?”

“I’ll deal with him.” Lisa opened her door, stepped out, and closed the door.

I rolled down my window so I could hear what was going on outside.

“Are you crazy?” she blasted the guard. “You came out of nowhere. I almost ran you over.”

“What are you doing out here?” I heard a male voice respond in a deep, even keel, not catering to her outrage.

“He’s looking at us,” Jessie squeaked. “Oh God, he’s trying to step around her.”

“I’m teaching myself to drive,” Lisa said. “The roads are quiet here. Or at least, they were quiet, until you jumped out of the trees and into the road right in front of me.”

“You can’t be here,” he said. “The nature reserve is off limits.”

“Since when?”

“Well, it’s not official yet.”

“Then how was I supposed to know?”

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave, miss—”

“With pleasure.”

“—as soon as I’ve checked your vehicle.”

My stomach dropped.

Daniel moved. “I’ve got to do something.”

I gripped his arm in a death vice. “Do what?”

“I don’t know.” His voice was low, urgent, a scowl digging between his eyes. “Jump him, I suppose.”

“He’ll have a Taser.” Visions of what Roman had looked like after a round with the guards swarmed me. Roman...

“Wait. Wait!” I scooted back, looking for my purse. I’d put it in on the seat beside me. “Where’s my purse?”

Daniel shifted and contorted himself and I spotted it in the foot well by his feet and I stretched across to grab it, heart pounding, mouth suddenly dry. I’d been wrong about Lisa. She wasn’t working for Geneva. Which meant she was in as much trouble as the rest of us. How many more lives could I carry on my conscience?

“I still have the tranquilizer gun Roman gave me,” I said to Daniel, clumsily ripping my purse open with fat fingers. I pulled out the gun, dropped it onto my lap and fumbled with the slim case to extract a dart. “I’ll take care of the guard. I used this on the night nurse. I know what I’m doing.”

“Excuse me,” Lisa was saying. Panic had crept into her voice, which meant it wasn’t looking good. “You’re not searching my car. What do you expect to find?”

“It’s procedure.”

“The council doesn’t make the rules anymore,” she stamped out. “You don’t have the right to stop and search me just because I’m a woman.”

“It’s not that—”

“Do you know who my mother is?”

“Yes, and she would expect me to make sure you’re safe.”

“Safe from what?”

“There could be a criminal running around in the park.”

“And you think he somehow snuck into my car?” Lisa exclaimed. “If there’s an unsavory character about, then you’re the only one placing me in danger, keeping me standing out here in the open, when I would already have been safely back in town.”

“Um, guys?” Jessie whispered. “If you’re going to do something, now would be a good time. She can’t block him. He’s coming around and, oh—” she broke off in a swallowed gulp.

“I’ve got this.” Daniel snatched the gun from my lap and plucked the dart from my fingers.

Within a heartbeat, he’d loaded the dart. Okay, so clearly he also knew what he was doing.

“Stay here.” He opened his door and climbed out and I immediately bounced up to peer over the back of Jessie’s seat.

The guard reeled back at the sight of Daniel, then pulled himself together. One hand went for his Taser and the other hand went to the iComm clipped at his belt.

“Don’t even think about it,” Daniel barked out, advancing one slow step at a time, his arm stretched taut with the gun aimed, his finger on the trigger.

“I’m not doing anything,” the guard said carefully.

It was a lie. He was looking Daniel in the eye, but that hand was still unclipping the iComm and—

“No!” I screamed, slamming my way out of the car and charging around the hood. The guard’s gaze snapped to me, his hand momentarily frozen at his belt, and then he slapped at his neck and his eyes widened in shock. Daniel had used the distraction to fire the dart, a direct hit just below the man’s ear.

My knees wobbled with relief.

The guard’s legs buckled out from under him, then the rest of him collapsed in slow motion. It actually looked kind of funny, but then he was sprawled on the ground, unconscious, and I realized we hadn’t solved anything.

“We can’t just leave him here,” I said. “They’ll find him and know something’s up.”

“We can’t just leave him anywhere.” Lisa nudged the man’s thigh with the toe of her boot. “He’s seen us. As long as he’s alive, he’s a threat.”

Daniel stood where he was, his arm slack at his side, the gun dangling from his fingertips. “What are you suggesting?”

I stared at her in horror. “We are not killing him.”

She rolled her eyes from Daniel to me. “I’m not suggesting anything, I’m just stating facts.”

Jessie was out of the car, stumbling toward us. “Is he dead?”

“Unconscious.” I turned to her, and noticed the sun striking off the windshield. The reflecting glare made it impossible to see inside the car from this angle. “Jessie, he didn’t see you. You should go. Get out of here, before anyone else comes along.”

“And leave you in this mess?” Her chin nudged high with a pained expression. “Not happening.”

I didn’t need to have this argument now. The guard would be out for at least an hour. I turned back to our immediate problem. “We’ll have to take him with us.”

“And then what?” Lisa demanded.

“I don’t know!” My voice pitched. I pulled it back. “We’ll figure it out, but he’s probably not out here alone. The longer we stand here...”

I didn’t need to finish that.

We couldn’t put the body in the trunk—how was that even a sentence in my head?—because it was full to the brim with everything we’d cleared from the cabin. With all four of us grabbing a part of the guard, we managed to haul him off the ground and into the car, propped up between Daniel and me in the back.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:27 am

We made it to Daniel's new build in Parklands with only one scare, a vehicle approaching head-on. Daniel and I ducked down. There wasn't time to do anything with the comatose guard so he stayed propped up.

My breath caught and didn't release until Lisa gave us the all-clear. The car passed without slowing down. Daniel had loaded another dart into the gun, prepared for all eventualities, but seriously, we didn't have space in the car to collect any more bodies.

Once we were off the main road, we all breathed a little easier. As with most estates in Parklands, trees lined the back road and surrounded the ornate house up ahead with its white cornices and pillars. From the approach, it didn't look incomplete, it looked grand and imposing. As we neared, I could just make out the jagged shapes of exposed steel beams on one side.

"Go around to the left," Daniel instructed. "We'll use the courtyard entrance."

Although winter had thinned the camouflage, it still felt pretty secluded as we pulled up around the side of the building. The closest residence was his parents' old home across the field, and that sat empty now.

Daniel poked the guard to make sure he wasn't on the brink of coming around. "Give me a minute. I have to open the door to the basement from inside, but we can take him straight through."

Either he'd stashed a key somewhere—like his mother—or maybe they hadn't bothered locking doors, what with the roof missing. Or maybe he smashed a window.

No one asked when he returned a short while later. We were too busy huffing and puffing as we maneuvered the dead weight of the guard out of the car and carried him down the outside steps to the basement.

Inside, the walls were unpainted, the only window was a narrow strip of glass above eye level and I swear it was ten degrees colder than outside. Some empty paint tins, a folded tarp, and cardboard boxes littered one shadowy corner.

There was a large storage closet that also housed the electric's board and Daniel insisted we put the guard in there. The door was sturdy and locked, and there were no windows.

"We should bind his ankles and wrists," Daniel said. "And gag his mouth."

Jessie offered her scarf and Lisa and I returned to the car in search of more cloth bindings. By this point, it was safe to say Lisa could be trusted. I just wasn't sure why.

She popped the trunk and gathered a quilt into her arms. "We should unload everything so I can take the car home before it's spotted here."

I slung my overnight bag over my shoulder, and scooped up as much as I could carry and we headed back.

"Why are you helping us?"

"I liked what you said in that letter of yours."

I looked at her in surprise. "You agree that the people should have a voice?"

"I was referring to the part where you busted Daniel out of rehab." Her bottom lip

curled in disgust. “I’ve been begging my mom to talk to Geneva about releasing the heirs, but she just keeps saying that I’m too young to understand the consequences. I’m not an idiot. I understand. That doesn’t make it fair, though.”

“It doesn’t.”

“I don’t care how much trouble this gets me into.” She looked at me, her eyes glacier and fierce. “I’m glad I helped you and Daniel. I’d do it again. Honestly, I don’t care.”

I stepped in front of her, stopping us at the edge of the steps. “Your mother is basically second-in-command. I mean, she’ll stand up to Geneva for you, right?”

Lisa gave a dry laugh. “Like she stood up for my father? She hasn’t even visited him in hospital.”

“But you’re her daughter.”

She shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Can you talk to her tonight, feel her out?” I said. “We can’t keep that guard tied up in the basement forever and when we set him free, we need a plan in place. Daniel and I will go to The Smoke. Jessie’s okay, he never saw her face. But is it safe for you to stay in Capra?”

“Are you asking me to join you in The Smoke?”

“You’re welcome to,” I said. “Of course you are, but that might not be what you want.”

“Hmm.” She sighed heavily. “I do agree with everything else you said, you know. The Sisters of Capra promised to give us all a voice, but from what I can see, Geneva

and a few select women at the very top have kept that for themselves.”

I laughed. “We’ll make a whisperer out of you yet.”

“Is that what you call yourselves?” She moved around me to continue down the steps.
“Whisperers?”

“We don’t really call ourselves anything. This all happened a lot faster, a lot bigger, than I ever expected when I wrote that first letter.”

She glanced at me over her shoulder. “What were you expecting?”

“I guess I just wanted to put the seeds out there and hoped the ideas would grow over the years to come.”

Back inside, I found a pair of long woolen socks in my bag, one for the guard’s wrists and the other for his mouth. We propped him against the wall and I tucked one of the quilts around him.

“Really?” Jessie said. “You’re such a softie.”

“I already feel wretched about what we’ve done to the poor man.” I winced, watching as Daniel locked the door on him. “And this basement is freezing. He’s going to be stuck here all night.”

“Just the one night?”

I eyed her. “Why do you sound so disappointed?”

“Because when he goes free, I lose you.”

“Oh, Jessie.” I pulled her into a hug. “I’m going to sneak back to visit so often, you’ll be sick of me.”

“It’s not the same, is it?”

“No, it isn’t.”

Once we’d transferred the rest of our stuff from the car to the basement, I turned to Lisa. “Before you go, do you have an iComm? I need to get a message to Roman and if I use mine, then Geneva will know I’m still here in Capra.”

“Yeah, I don’t have it with me, though.”

“I’ll write down the number for you.” I knelt to delve into my bag for a pen and paper, and quickly scribbled down my citizenship number. “Here you go.”

Lisa took the paper, and stood there, studying my hastily scrawled penmanship.

“What’s wrong? Can’t you read my writing?”

She folded the paper and looked at me, her eyes bright. “What happens when you free the guard and disappear into The Smoke?”

“It’ll be fine,” I assured her. “Roman has an apartment there. It’s not that bad. We’ll get Daniel sorted out and if you need to get out of Capra, we’ll have a place for you.”

She shook her head. “What happens with your whispers?”

“Oh.” Everyone looked at me, waiting, but I didn’t have anything profound to say. “I hope the whispers continue. I hope one day they’ll bring about proper change here.”

“What if that day could be tomorrow?” she said. “What if you could get your words out to everyone, every citizen in Capra, in one big, final splash?”

“What are talking about?” Daniel scoffed.

“Geneva has a newsletter scheduled to go out tomorrow,” Lisa told him. “I’m the one who gets them printed and stacked, and I usually do the hand-off for delivery in the morning.”

She looked at me. “I could fit something in there, hide it between her paragraphs. Only a couple of lines, so it’s not too noticeable. It’s worth a try?”

My skin tingled with a feverish thrill, with the enormity of what she was suggesting, with the fantastical notion that we could actually pull off something like that. “It’s too risky for you. They’ll know you’re responsible.”

“I won’t be here to take the blame.” Lisa folded her arms, feet apart, standing her ground. “I can’t stay in Capra once you let that guard go. I don’t trust my mother to protect me. She’ll fight for me, but will she fight hard enough, harder than Geneva? I wish I believed she would, but I don’t have that kind of faith in her.”

“You’re sure?”

She bobbed her head. “Absolutely positive. And if I’m leaving, I intend to go out on a bang.”

I grinned at Daniel. “What do you say?”

He groaned. “Roman is going to kill me again, isn’t he?”

“How many lines do I have?” I asked Lisa.

“Six?” She fluttered her hand. “Maybe seven? I’d give you half a page if I thought we’d get away with it.”

I sat cross-legged on the ground and grabbed a fresh piece of paper. The words I most wanted whispered had already been written for my small audience. Now they’d go out to Capra...with a call to action.

We had the council. Now we have the Sisters of Capra. The old world leaders were elected by the people and held accountable to the people. WHAT DO YOU WANT?

The Eastern Coalition was founded to preserve the human race. Capra, in particular, was established to preserve civilization, the customs and traditions of the old world, the parts lost in the chaos. You lost your voice in that chaos, too, and Capra should be charged with preserving it. This is my belief. If you believe with me, gather in the town square today at 9 am and let our voices join into a roar that cannot be silenced. And once you have your voice back, it is yours to use as you will ~ The Flame (Georga West)

“You guys are crazy, you know that?” Jessie exclaimed when she saw the note.

She wasn’t wrong. I had to say, though, her cheeks were flushed with the same fever running through my blood. She wasn’t in a hurry to leave, but I convinced her to ride back into town with Lisa.

Daniel and I made our way up the short flight of basement stairs into the house, looking for livable space to spend the night. The entrance hall was marble floors and pillars, with a wide stairway winding gracefully up to the top floor. The space was light and airy with tall ceilings and walls of stained glass windows.

“The library will probably be most comfortable,” Daniel said, taking me through to a carpeted room with wood-paneled walls.

I noted the large window with no drapes. “We won’t be able to turn any lights on when it gets dark.”

“You’re funny.” Daniel smirked. “The electrics haven’t been connected yet. There is piped water, but it won’t be heated.”

I didn’t care about electrics and hot showers. Neither did Daniel. Today and tonight were irrelevant. Tomorrow was all-consuming, drowning out everything else in white noise.

We ended up sitting on the floor, backs pressed to opposite walls, battling worst case scenarios between us.

Eventually Daniel bored of that and flipped it around, and we pummeled potential outcomes and theories into some vague shape of political reform until Roman arrived, out of breath, calling my name.

I jumped up to meet him, Daniel hot on my heels.

Dread swarmed me as I took in Roman’s sweat-drenched hairline and hard breathing. “What is it? You look like you’ve been running for your life.”

“I thought you were running for your life.” He pushed a slow breath out, pulling his hands through his hair, his eyes glinting with something dangerous and furious. “I came as quickly as possible, but I didn’t want to risk driving. I parked my truck at home and cut across the field. Lisa left some cryptic message about you having to get out of the nature reserve in a hurry.”

“The Guard is searching the nature reserve,” I said. “They didn’t find us.”

“Except for the one shoved into the closet below,” Daniel supplied unhelpfully.

Roman blinked, long and hard, his jaw hardening to cut glass.

I went to him, fell into his arms, alarmed at how fast and loud his heart was beating. “We’re fine. I’ll explain everything.”

As I did, the more Roman heard, the less thrilled he looked. He didn’t try to talk me out of tomorrow, though. That was his way, the way he loved me, and one of the many reasons I loved him. He wanted me safe, of course he did, but he kept me safe by supporting me, protecting me, rather than trying to bludgeon me into someone that I wasn’t.

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As soon as it grew dark, Roman slipped back home across the field for sandwiches and a flask of hot soup. We fed the guard and Daniel spent a long time down in the basement with him, but the man wasn't interested in the state of affairs in Capra and he didn't believe we planned to release him alive. I wasn't proud of torturing the poor guard—he'd only been performing his duty—but I hoped he'd forgive us.

I didn't sleep at all.

None of us did.

We sat vigil through the night, nursing the prospect of tomorrow as if it were a sickly child with grim ailments. Lisa would change her mind, or someone would catch the imposter insert before the newsletter went out. I'd made the gathering first thing in the morning, so Geneva wouldn't have time to put proper countermeasures in place, but that was still a probability.

But more than all of that, the idea of hundreds of citizens flocking to the town square tomorrow was too enormous for me to comprehend.

They weren't ready.

I wasn't ready.

I was still grappling with the notion that I wasn't alone, that I'd never been alone. I'd only meant to sow some whispers, then watch from The Smoke as new generations, generations much bolder than ours, nurtured their voices over time.

Dawn arrived, and then an hour later Lisa walked in, wheeling a bulging suitcase. “In case it all goes wrong. The newsletters have been picked up, but there’s no guarantee someone won’t spot the difference before the stacks are distributed for delivery. It’s out of our hands now.”

Roman gave her directions to the tunnel’s service hatch. “If we’re separated and it goes bad, we’ll meet there. That’s our route to The Smoke.”

The tension in the air was palpable, charged with nervous energy and frissons of excitement.

“What do we do about the guard?” If we had to flee, who would find him? “Should we release him before we set out for the square?”

“I’ll scout out the square before you go anywhere,” Roman said. “It’s a numbers game. Geneva can’t throw hundreds of people into rehab, but she’ll have no problem if there’s only a handful.”

I shook my head. “I’m not Geneva. I won’t throw a handful to the wolves while I sit safe and pretty. I’m going.”

Roman came to stand in front of me, his palms cupping my cheek, the intensity of his gaze rooting me to him. “That’s not what I’m asking you to do. A dozen or so people milling around the square haven’t done anything wrong. But you’ll be recognized.”

“He’s right,” Lisa said. “I have no interest in playing the martyr.”

I agreed, Roman could go scout first, but I made no promises about the rest. As the hour of gathering drew close, Jessie arrived in a fluster of activity, charging through the house, calling for us, and waving the newsletter madly. “This was slipped under my door this morning! Look!”

We huddled around her and there it was, at least one batch had gone out with my words.

“Did you come through the square?” Daniel asked. “Did you see anything?”

“Oh!” She slapped her forehead. “I should have done that, shouldn’t I? The streets were busy, but I don’t know if people were going to work or the square.”

Roman waited another quarter hour, then he left to go check it out. When he returned, he’d brought his truck.

“Release the guard,” he issued to Daniel. “We’re driving. By the time he reaches town on foot, he won’t be our biggest problem anymore.”

“Driving where?” I asked for clarity. “The town square or The Smoke?”

“Is The Smoke an option?”

“No.”

“Hmm.” A suave grin snuck across his darkly beautiful features and cracked his mask. “People have started gathering. I’m comfortable with the numbers.”

Lisa pumped the air with a fist.

Jessie went quiet.

“You don’t have to join us,” I said to her. “You’ve done more than your fair part.”

“I’m not missing this,” she said. “But I must admit, I’m a little scared.”

“I’m a lot scared.” It wasn’t a joke, but it got a smile out of her.

We piled into the truck, Daniel up front with Roman and the rest of us on the rear bunk. Daniel had let the guard out through the basement door, so I hadn’t seen him, but I imagined he wasn’t hanging around.

The streets were quiet as we drove through Parklands and into town, but as we neared the square, we saw why. Everyone was here. Not hundreds. Thousands...possibly the entire population of Capra. They walked the full breadth of the street ahead of us, forcing us to abandon the truck. They streamed into the alleys and arteries that fed into the square, filled the walkways and overflowed onto the plaza of the Foundation Hall.

This many people made a lot of noise, breaths and coughs and shuffled feet and indistinguishable murmurs, but there were no raised voices. We made our way behind the stragglers and onto the plaza.

Roman hooked his arm through mine to keep us from getting separated. “Your rebellion of words has no words, but you can feel how much they’re saying.”

“It’s not my rebellion anymore.” Cool tears stung my eyes. I couldn’t believe how many people had turned up. “It belongs to everyone now.”

Daniel and Jessie and Lisa stayed close, and we moved into the crowd as one unit, a fragile rowboat rocking through a sea of Capra citizens. It wasn’t long before people became aware of us, recognized me or Daniel or maybe both of us, and they started to part and spread the word. A path opened up for us through the crowd and whispers rippled into a chorus and became a chant.

The Flame.

The Flame.

The Flame.

My heart caught fire.

Our little party came to a halt.

“They’re opening a path to the bandstand,” Lisa said.

Daniel bent his head toward me. “They want to hear you speak.”

Roman turned me around to look at him. “What do you want to do?”

The Flame.

The Flame.

They were calling for the flame, but it was their bravery, their resilience, the power of their voices that pulsed throughout the square.

My gaze went over his shoulder, to the pillared entrance of the Foundation building, to the guards stationed by the arched doors. “Geneva’s inside there. Watching. The people of Capra have spoken. I want to make sure she listens.”

Roman considered that, then gave a slow nod.

We changed direction, and the crowd at our back parted, the chant following as we made our way across the plaza to the Foundation Hall. Daniel stayed with us, but Jessie and Lisa melted into the crowd.

Three guards blocked the entrance, two women and a man, armed with rifles and severe expressions. This was Geneva's countermeasure, to throw open the armory and hand out weapons.

"Georga West." The woman stepped forward, her rifle cocked. "I have orders to bring you in."

Roman shoved me behind him. "She's also the flame. Do you hear that?" He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "You'll have a blood bath on your hands."

"I'm coming in anyway," I said, stepping out from around Roman. "Take me to Geneva."

The woman's gaze bounced between me and Roman and the crowd, and her strutting confidence wavered.

"Just you," she said, nudging at me with the barrel of the rifle.

Roman didn't even bother acknowledging that. A minute later, Daniel, Roman and I were being led up the stairway to Geneva's corner office on the top floor.

We didn't have to knock. Her door stood open, as if she'd been expecting us. Although, maybe not.

She was seated at her desk, a look of surprise crossing her face before it hardened. She stood abruptly and came around the desk. Her gaze swept across me and Daniel, flicked to Roman, then landed on me again with contempt. "What have you done?"

I smiled at her. I wasn't feeling it, my stomach cramped with nerves, but I refused to show an ounce of weakness. "Look out your window, Geneva, there's your answer. The people of Capra have made their stand."

The look in her eyes turned brittle. “What do you want?”

“This isn’t about what I want or about what you want,” I said. “Are you willing to talk?”

She wasn’t, that was clear in the mutiny set into her expression, but she didn’t have a choice.

Roman stopped me at the threshold. “I’m not here in any official capacity, but I’m still a warden. I can’t be part of a political strategy meeting.”

Wardens remained impartial to town business, always. “I understand.”

“I’ll be right here, if she gives you any trouble.” He ushered Daniel and me inside and closed the door, cutting himself off from any discussions within the room.

Geneva went to stand by the window, staring out over the pavilion. “I underestimated you. But out of everything you’ve done...” She turned to stab a look at Daniel “...this disappoints the most.” Her gaze moved on to me. “Daniel Edgar may be your friend, but council runs in his blood and it is thick. His allegiance will always lie with them.”

“My allegiance lies with Capra,” he said stiffly.

She ignored him, her gaze pricking me. “I don’t know what he filled your head with, but he will take back everything we worked to achieve. Is that really what you want?”

“You still don’t get it.” I stepped deeper into the room, shaking my head at her. “This isn’t about what I want. It never was. It’s about what the people of Capra want.”

Her brow arched with impertinence. “The people of Capra want the Sisterhood. We speak for them. We stand for them. They were perfectly content with the reforms we

were bringing about, until you confused them.”

“Maybe that’s true,” I said. “Maybe they do want the Sisters of Capra.”

She looked astounded, then suspicious.

I shrugged. “Let’s ask them.”

“Ah, I see.” She huffed out a dry laugh and crossed to her desk, where she picked up her copy of the newsletter and read, “We had the council. Now we have the Sisters of Capra. The old world leaders were elected by the people...”

She peered at me. “What if they choose the council? What if we’re returned to the dark days?”

“What if they choose the Sisters of Capra?” I left that hanging, dangling like bait, then added softly, “You can’t mow down every citizen in the square, Geneva. The tide has turned. There’s no going back. You either swim with it, or you and the Sisterhood will drown.”

She moved to the window again, casting her gaze outside while seconds ticked to minutes, then she finally brought herself into the room again, sat behind her desk and gestured Daniel and me into the visitor chairs. “How would this work?”

I shared a look with Daniel. “You can explain it better than me.”

“Well, the details must still be ironed out, but there are a few fundamental principles.” He shifted in his chair, not squirming, but not entirely comfortable beneath her seething attitude toward him. That’s exactly why I’d given him the floor.

“The people will nominate their candidates,” he said. “Everyone and anyone is

eligible. The top ten nominees will stand as official candidates and the people will then cast a final vote to elect three joint leaders.”

“You’re suggesting three leaders, not one?” Geneva looked at me. “That sounds like a council to me.”

“It’s a committee, a tri-electorate body that accommodates more voices, not just the loudest one.”

She fixed a piercing look on me, searching my head, hunting for my weaknesses, and found none.

“I will be put forward as an official candidate,” she declared.

“We haven’t even started the process and already you’re rigging it.”

“It’s one place out of ten and I’m not the only one with an unfair advantage.” She held a finger up and cocked her ear. “Listen to the people chanting outside. They heard you before anyone else had a chance to speak. They will vote overwhelmingly in your favor.”

I scowled at her, at myself, because was she right? “That’s not what I want.”

“As you keep pointing out, this is not about what you want, Georga. You put it out there, and now it is there.” She pursed her lips. “That is my condition. And you should know, I may drown in the aftermath, but I can put up quite the fight if that’s what you prefer.”

I was sure she could turn this into a war, and she would.

“Daniel will be put forward as well.” I checked with him. “If you’re okay with that?”

Otherwise it will appear biased, as if our support lies with the Sisterhood. This way, we're bringing on one person from each of the previous regimes. In the end, the people will have the final say."

Daniel inclined his head. "I'm okay with that."

I flourished a hand at Geneva. "That is my condition."

"You're making a mistake, but since you insist, we'll trust the people to choose wisely."

There was still a lot to discuss and it was another before Geneva called for the technical team to set up a screening in her office. We'd decided that as the head of the current establishment, the message would be clearer, with no scope for doubt or any backtracking, if it came directly from Geneva.

Daniel and I stood to one side. I had something to say, but she would address the people first.

Once she was prepped for the camera, she took her seat behind her desk. "Dear Citizens, you have spoken, and we have listened."

Daniel tipped his head to me. "You'd think this was her idea."

A member of the support staff glared at us and put a finger to his lips.

"Keep an eye on her and what she says," I whispered to Daniel and slipped out the room to fill Roman in on everything.

Geneva wouldn't speak for long, so I didn't have much time to explain myself to him before someone popped out to call me back inside.

It was my turn to address the people. To say what I had to say, for possibly the last time.

I sucked in a deep breath. “Do I look like a nightmare?”

His smile came on slow and steady, washing me in warmth. “You look beautiful.”

“I haven’t even showered this morning.”

He placed a hand on my shoulder, steadying me, and held my gaze. “Are you sure about this?”

I didn’t have to think about it. “One hundred percent sure.”

My throat went dry when I stepped in front of the camera. I couldn’t see the people, the cameraman and his encouraging smile filled my vision.

Beyond the walls of the Foundation Hall, a crescendo of voices rose into, “ The Flame! The Flame! ” and I knew the people could see me.

I put a hand up, a hesitant, shy wave, and waited for the noise to simmer down, and then I started speaking.

“Dear Friends, thank you for coming today, for standing as one. Look to your left, look to your right, look at what we have done.”

I looked into the camera, forced to wait as another chorus of chants went up.

“In the following days, you’ll be given the opportunity to nominate your candidates, as has been explained to you. Think carefully, choose wisely, and please be aware that I am withdrawing myself from any nomination. So if you were thinking of

showing your support by voting for The Flame, please do not . I'd hate to see even one voice lost in a vote that will not count.

“My place is not up here, on a screen. My place is there—” I gestured toward the camera, to the people “—standing with you, standing amongst you, and if ever a time comes when we are not heard, my voice will join with yours and we will roar.”

I stood there a moment longer, smiling at the roar of voices that shook the air and trembled the glass in the windows, and then I stepped away from the camera and walked out of the room into the hallway, where Roman waited for me.

“Let's go home.”

He threw an arm around my shoulder, tucking me close as we walked. “And where is home?”

I tilted my head to look up at him. “Home is wherever you are. I've done all I have to do.”

Warmth and humor creased into his eyes. “Until you find something new that must be done.”

My heart swelled with love and all the things that made Roman. “Well, now that you mention it, I have been thinking about the wilds and the unknown world beyond the river. I know it's dangerous, but you've gone and returned and I'm sure we can find a way to sneak passed the barons and—”

His mouth came down, crushing my words in a kiss that melted me to the bone.

“Is that your way of silencing me?” I said when I found my breath again. “Not that I'm complaining. Keep doing that, and I'll happily remain silent forever.”

His grin was arrogant and charming and sexy as all sin. “By forever, I take it you mean a week or two?”

“Hmm, that kiss was definitely worth a month.” I grinned impishly. “Maybe two.”

Six Weeks Later

We were gathered in the square again. There'd been some hiccups, but the final vote had been cast and the three newly elected leaders of our Tri-Electorate governing body were preparing to address us from the bandstand.

Despite the ice front that had blown in during the night, it seemed like every man, woman and child was on the streets, packed here into the square with us or around a screen somewhere. Stalls were set up throughout Capra, offering cups of hot chocolate and gingerbread cookies, not quite on the same scale but reminiscent of Foundation Ball festivities.

Today had been declared a national holiday, the first amendment to Capra's legislation. The first of many. This was just the beginning.

I stood near the bandstand, but toward the edge of the crowd. Jessie and her husband, Harry, stood by my side. Lisa and her husband Brian stood on my other side.

Roman stood behind me, his arms around my waist, folding me in his strength and warmth and scent—my rock, the support and love that underpinned the foundation of my world. He wasn't dressed in warden black. He was here as my husband. For now, we were firmly based in Capra. James had stepped down and Roman's promotion to senior warden had come through. He hadn't yet decided whether he'd pursue the position of High Warden when the time came. Our future was an adventure in the making.

I rested the back of my head against his chest and looked up at him.

He pressed a kiss to my forehead, murmuring, “All okay?”

“Perfect.” Some days I wondered how we got here, then I looked into his eyes and saw the answer.

Movement on the bandstand drew our attention.

Daniel Edgar stood forward and raised a hand, preparing to address the crowd. Maybe it was the comfort of familiarity, or some version of the old regime rearing its head, but he’d been elected with the highest vote count. He wasn’t the old council, though. His beliefs aligned with mine and when he spoke, it was impossible to doubt the innovative transformation he championed for.

Beside him stood Geneva. I wasn’t disappointed with her election. She would always be a fierce advocate for women and when her methods inevitably strayed toward intolerance and aggression, well, that was the point of our tri-electoral system. Three rounds of voting, the first for a wide field of nominations, the second to whittle the candidates down to ten, the third to elect our three very different leaders to enhance each other’s strengths, balance out the weaknesses and ensure every voice is heard.

Our third leader was a silver-bearded man whom I didn’t know, but my father vouched for him. Apparently he was a sturdy man of integrity and representative of the people. We’d see. I didn’t have anything to say about him, but the people of Capra obviously did. And if he didn’t deliver, they could change their voice when the next election came around in three years.

Lisa nudged my shoulder. “That’s going to be me, one day, addressing Capra with my acceptance speech.”

“I don’t doubt it for a second.” I smiled at her. “You’ll have my vote.”

Brenda was also up there on the bandstand, seated in the row of chairs behind our

standing leaders, basking in the glow of her husband's success.

I didn't begrudge her that.

After all, here I stood, basking in the glow of my husband's embrace.

Every relationship had its own path to travel, and Daniel seemed happy enough with the path he and Brenda were on.

Once all three leaders had delivered their short address, a large red, black and gold banner unrolled behind them, heralding three base flames rising to form a single fire that burned through the TRI-ELECTORATE signature.

Jessie slipped her hand in mine and leaned in. "That's you!"

She was referring to the flames.

"It's all of us." I squeezed her hand. "A flame can flicker, or be stamped out with one boot. But many flames rising together become a fire that can rage and burn this world down if it is not tended to with care."

** Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoyed the final book of my Sin of Duty series. **