



Blind

the

Eyes

**BONUS
SNEAK
PEEK**

K.A. WIGGINS

Blind the Eyes

Extended Sneak Peek

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Snowmelt & Stumps

Special subscriber-exclusive sneak peek edition. Blind the Eyes is now available on preorder and will be on sale June 1, 2018

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A Snowmelt & Stumps book

This book has been published in Canada and adheres to Canadian grammar and spelling rules.

Chapter 1: Remnants

CADENCE FOUND ME the night I surrendered to the Mara.

I got lucky. They devoured only my disobedience.

Cadence's luck wasn't so good. She's been with me for over a year now, and I'm starting to think she'll be the same impossible child forever.

"So I had this dream last night," she says. "It was about trees. I miss trees. I miss climbing with . . . w-with—I just miss them. We should go find some. Let's go now. Okay? Now. Let's go now. Now-now-now-n—"

"Stop it." I don't have time for her lies. Regulation 3: Distraction is destruction. I must not allow myself to be distracted, nor be a distraction to others. It's why everything here's the same shade of grey: the paint, the carpet, even us. It's the reason for these shapeless, hooded uniforms and masks. It's even why we have to work everyday, instead of letting the computers do it all for us. Distraction leads to dreaming. Dreaming draws the Mara. The Mara would destroy us all—if the Towers of Refuge didn't protect us.

But Cadence hates being shushed. She blows a rude noise in my ear and proceeds to singsong something that mostly consists of her new made-up word, *trees*, looped at different pitches.

She needs to stop telling stories and pestering me. Obviously, she can't have actually dreamt. I'm pretty sure ghosts don't sleep. And no one in Refuge dreams, not if they want to live.

My skin crawls in a not entirely unpleasant way.

"Dreereams of treeeeees," she warbles into my ear.

"Shut up!"

I swat at her and snag my hood. The ward securing it flies off. I scramble to yank it back in place and keep my mask from sagging. The last thing I need is to

expose the uneven dark blotches on my naked face.

Forty grey workers sit behind grey consoles in the grey room, bathed in dingy yellowish artificial light—the windows were painted over back when the waters rose to hide the drowned city. Cadence says it was to stop the drowned looking back. In any case, my decidedly non-regulation colouring would stand out like a vivid stain on the face of such bland perfection. Showing my face wouldn't just be a Regulation 1 offense, either. Regulation 2: Segregation is safety. Minimal contact between workers is essential to our survival.

“Probationary Worker 18-Cole.” The voice is nasal, cracking and uneven. “I might've known.”

I flush another shade darker.

Division Supervisor Kistrfyv's shoes nudge my shameful black probationary hoodband. His damp, bulbous gaze is neatly framed between the loose mask drawn over his nose and mouth and the crisp, even spread of his hood under the dual bands of a supervisor. They're proper wards, of course, gleaming with protective gold thread. He's dressed perfectly to regulation: baggy, form-obscuring grey tunic and loose pants hiding soft shoes, gloves under drooping sleeves, hood secured with its twin gold wards, and an opaque, veil-like mask covering every inch of admirably grey, medium-dark skin except the narrow opening around his eyes.

His stance isn't quite regulation, though; he leans forward, as though eager. If he weren't the supervisor, he'd be at risk of a violation.

“I don't like him,” Cadence says. “He's a bully. And creepy.”

I tighten my grip on the sagging hood. Cadence may be a forbidden distraction, but there's no way I know of to get rid of her. She's been around ever since that night in Corrections. The Mara could have killed me, down on Floor 6. It wasn't the first time I'd failed to follow regulation, or I wouldn't have been there in the first place. But instead of ending me, the Mara only ate my dreams—and left a troublemaking ghost in their wake.

I earned my way to a probationary position in the Surveillance Technology Division less than six months later. It's not hard to obey regulation anymore; the Mara took the part of me that could make bad choices. Or any choices. I'm better off without it. If only Cadence would stop getting me into trouble.

“Probationary worker,” Supervisor Kistrfyv says again, leaning in too close. “I will not have you destabilizing my division. Submit. Now.”

The chair squeaks as I stand. My mask droops. I tuck my chin, partly to keep my face shadowed, mostly because the supervisor twitches and glares whenever

my head rises higher than his. Head bowed, I shuffle around the console to pick up the black ward—a mark of shameful failure; I won't qualify for gold unless I can pass probation—and snug it down over my hood. If I could, I'd dream of being invisible. But I don't want things anymore. I just obey.

“Probationary worker,” Cadence mimics in a whiny tone so like the supervisor's it makes me flinch, “I demand you extract my head from my butt. Probationary worker, I have nothing better to do with my time than stand here and blink like a fish. Probationary worker, I—”

“Probationary worker.” The real Kistrfyv speaks over her in warning tones. “You've held us all up long enough. Submit, and be quick about it.”

“He's such a weenie,” she huffs.

I twist my hands in the loose fabric at my sides to keep them still and try to look contrite as I mumble through a comprehensive list of my violations: distracting behaviour, immodest dress, lack of focus . . . I wrap it up by mumbling the ritual phrase three times: “I call upon the Mara to eat my dreams.”

Rote submission is different than being Mara-taken. It's meant as appeasement, a sort of pre-emptive measure. Void your disobedient impulses, turn over your hopes and desires to the Mara fast enough, regularly enough, and they'll consume the offering and leave the rest of you intact. I've performed submission hundreds, maybe thousands of times. Before Cadence came, often there'd be a rush of emptiness left in their wake. Now, I feel nothing. I don't have enough dreams left to satisfy them; if they came, they'd probably just end me.

Kistrfyv makes me repeat the summons again. Louder. Clearer. Again. I scrunch my eyes shut and tighten my fists. This show of terror seems to please Kistrfyv, or maybe he just gets bored, because he finally lets me stop.

Cadence starts breathing the word *weenie* in a sort of singsong, gasping air in and puffing it out, drowning out Kistrfyv, who has started in on a lecture without giving me leave to sit. My thighs tremble.

I duck my chin another inch to appear more submissive. I need Kistrfyv to be pleased with me. Pleased enough to arrange a probationary trial soon. Pleased enough to grant me a promotion to full worker and hand over the gold band that wards off the Mara to replace my black one. Pleased enough to erase my record of failure once and for all.

Kistrfyv smooths the dual wards around his forehead as if to emphasize his elevated position and keeps lecturing.

“Betcha he's bald under that hood.” Cadence warbles an improvised ode to

his presumed follicular deficiency at top volume.

I'd kick her right about now, if I could. My legs are starting to ache from standing with my knees locked, but I don't dare shift my weight under the force of the supervisor's damp gaze. To make things worse, the pants on this latest uniform are too loose. They edge past my hipbones, one anxiety-spurring fraction of an inch at a time. Meanwhile, Cadence seems to be experimenting with how long she can sustain each syllable. It's annoying. And distracting. And kind of amazing.

"Aren't you sick of it all?" she says, as if she knows what I'm thinking. "I know I'm bored."

I tense. I prefer it when she's picking on other people.

"Why do you put up with it?"

As if we haven't been over it. As if she doesn't know just as well as I do.

Better, even.

"Fight back! Defend yourself. Look at him. He's a shrimp. He's scared of you. You can't be satisfied with this. How can you be so passive? Do something—anything! Do you have a pulse? Hellooo . . ."

I can't respond. She'll get bored with me—or Kistrfyv will, if I can just hold out long enough.

"Don't you want more? You're really going to let that weenie bully you for the rest of your life?"

It's clear she would do things differently, if she could. Her tragedy is that she literally can't. Mine is she'll never let me forget it.

Kistrfyv seems to see past my mask to the exasperated twist beneath. His sneer is so pronounced it escapes the upper edge of his mask. The effect is unpleasant, but not nearly as much as his punishment will be: extra cycles of rec and more Noosh—the dense, flavourless goop that meets all nutritional requirements while ensuring uniformity among the populace. Or it's supposed to, anyway. It drains the color from the other workers' skin, keeps them shapeless and slim and more or less the same. I remain an inexplicably vivid shade of brown, my eyes and hair still too saturated and distinctive. I'm too tall and too bony—which only adds to the misery of the rec cycles. On the bright side, every time they increase my Noosh allotment, it seems to dull Cadence's voice and makes it easier to resist her distractions.

I can see my probationary trial receding further with every blink of the supervisor's bulbous, judging eyes. He has no intention of letting me live down my failure, letting me blend in with the crowd. He just likes watching me

squirm.

I make no further apology, though Kistrfyv eyes me expectantly. He'd probably appreciate a little groveling or a few tears. Maybe I should make more of a show of contrition. Maybe it would motivate him to promote me sooner.

Or maybe it's hopeless. He tops off his lecture with a group chorus of benevolent regulation, watching me the whole time. After, I'm allowed to sit.

I shift, all sharp angles at odds with the smooth, ergonomic curves of my seat, another reminder that I'm never right, even for something as simple as a chair. A wheel squeaks, high and thin. I cringe.

"You're both weenies," Cadence says.

I'd like to tell her to shut up. I'd like to tell her I have no choice, and she knows it. I'd like to tell her it's better than being like her, forever complaining and never able to do a thing about it.

I'd like to, but I won't. As much trouble as she is, she's all I have left. And she'll back off soon, because I'm all she has. All she'll ever have.

Chapter 2: Strangers

I DON'T HATE my job. Hate is dangerous. Hate is a wish for change. A wish is a dream that can draw down the Mara.

I'm not capable of hating my job. I merely appreciate when I no longer have to be at it. The pressure to focus, to keep from drifting off, to keep from being distracted by Cadence's extravagantly expressed boredom . . . It's exhausting.

Which is the point of work, after all. It's the point of everything. Keep us just occupied and numb enough to stay out of trouble. Even bio breaks are subject to regulation, carefully scheduled to avoid interaction. But I excel at maintaining a modest perimeter, and my posture is flawless. Stooped shoulders to minimize my height, chin tucked to avoid eye contact and hide my face, elbows in, small steps. It's not easy. I have an unfortunate tendency to trip over my own oversized feet, and I seem to be growing. Still.

"I miss colour," Cadence says out of nowhere. Like she does. "When was the last time you saw a proper, rich blue? Or orange? Ooh, I miss oranges too. And fruit. And eating."

My mouth goes dry. A tingle buzzes the base of my skull. "Shh."

"Oh, come on, it's not as if they can hear me."

"But I can." She has to stop doing this to me, reminding me she's a ghost. The dead are strangely distracting. I hurry back to my console and squint at the screen.

"You oughta thank me for breaking the boredom. How you can stare at that thing all day, I'll never know."

Maybe if I pretend she's not there, she'll back off. I start scanning from the submerged lower levels, deserted except for the occasional aquatic patrol, and work my way up floor by deserted floor, past the ebb and flow of the Corrections

division on Floor 6 and on to the tangle of codes that marks the higher divisions. Floor 15, Residential, is reliably busy; cleaners come and go all day long. Floor 18 looks empty, though of course it isn't really. The system doesn't track surveillance workers. There'd be no point in sitting here monitoring myself sitting here monitoring . . . yeah, no point at all.

The snarl of worker codes is heaviest between floors 16 and 30, tapering off on the higher levels. As far as I can tell, only a few enforcers and a handful of division leaders ever go that high. Apparently the Mayor lives up there, but if she has a code in the system, I haven't figured it out.

"Oops. You missed one. Hey, if I help you find five more screw-ups, can we leave early? I'm so done with this scene."

A surveillance feed on Floor 19 is patchy, the handful of codes flickering in and out too quickly to represent the actual movements of workers. I flag the anomaly to the field team for investigation.

"Don't ignore me—say thank you. Manners. Honestly, were you raised in a barn?"

I don't understand. Barn? But she's teasing, playful, which is better than nagging. She did save me from an error, after all.

She was also the source of my distraction.

"Thanks," I mutter into my mask. "Now will you let me concentrate?"

She makes a rude sound in my ear. It's only a few minutes before she starts up again, complaining about things I don't understand, distracting, harassing, and occasionally helping, just to change things up.

A good worker doesn't need release from the boredom. A good drone lives for the boredom—or rather, the boredom is what lets us live. So I'm not struggling to focus, counting the minutes through the day. I don't dream of a different life, a better one. Not anymore.

But can I help if I'm forced to listen to Cadence imagine wild and beautiful alien worlds? She doesn't always nag and tease and pester. Sometimes she tells stories, wild fantasies of people and places from the Outside, before the ocean invaded. Colours, not just shades of grey; forms that aren't purposelessly shapeless; food that's something other than flavourless and slurped through a straw twice a day. More often than not, her stories trail off in confusion, usually when she tries to talk about herself instead of just making things up. Because, you know—ghost. She doesn't remember her past. She doesn't know any more about the world than I do.

But she keeps talking while I focus on my screen. Flag the anomalies.

Repeat. Build a record of obedience. I've only just sat down after my second bio break of the day when I see it. I have to look twice to be sure. Surveillance is down across a full half of Floor 20.

"Is that . . . ?" Cadence sounds awed. "Full crash? How would that even happen?"

It's a major anomaly. If there were warning signs, someone's going to be in a lot of trouble. I flag it for field service. Whoever gets assigned to investigate is going to be busy for a while. An alert takes over my screen: "Surveillance Technician 18-Cole-: Assigned to task."

That can't be right.

"No way," Cadence says, "you get to do a field investigation? Awesome."

That definitely can't be right. Only senior surveillance technicians are assigned to field duties. I glance at the supervisor's office door and swallow. I should report something's gone wrong and get the task reassigned.

Unless he did this.

The buzzing in my head settles into a deep, pulsing ache. I push back at it, rumpling my hood. He wouldn't, would he? Purposely assign a major field investigation to me, just to see me fail? Or—

I take a closer look at the notation buried in the attached files. Two words jump out at me: "Probationary Trial."

I can't believe it. I'd thought after this morning's incident, I'd be waiting months, years even.

I wring my hands. It's here it's here it's here it's . . . impossible. It's a trap. Kistrfyv is setting me up to fail. I hardly know anything about field missions.

But there's no way to refuse the task, not without admitting failure and giving up my shot at normality. I push back my chair, catch my knee on the side of the console, and almost collide with a passing worker.

"Really?" Cadence sounds delighted. "You're actually going? This is so cool. What do you think Floor 20 is like?"

She keeps up a steady one-sided commentary. I try to breathe and walk at the same time. I clench restless fingers into stillness, fumbling the door to the hallway open. There's a crowd in front of the elevator doors.

A crowd.

Refuge Force. It was all a trap. Kistrfyv set me up, and now they've come for me and they'll drag me back down to Floor 6 to die—

But enforcers wear white, close-fitting uniforms. The figures up ahead are in standard grey, Noosh-bleached features shadowed under their hoods as they

huddle distressingly close together.

“You just gonna stand here or what?” Cadence sounds annoyed. It’s as if she doesn’t even see them, doesn’t realize how deeply in violation of regulation it is for them to be congregating out here. Work shifts are carefully staggered to avoid this exact situation. There should never be more than one of us moving between locations at the same time.

One worker in the middle of the group stands out. He’s tall, maybe even taller than I am, his shoulders thrown back to show the clear line of his body beneath a carelessly dishevelled uniform. His ID is obscured; I can’t tell which division he’s with. I’ve certainly never noticed him before. His hood has slipped, exposing dramatic blue-black strands against golden skin. But even properly covered, he would stand out—his irises are like liquid gold. And he’s staring right at me.

“About time,” he says.

Chapter 3: Freedom

I MOVE OUT of the doorway.

“Finally,” Cadence says. Then, as I take another step: “Uh, Cole? This way. Cole!”

She’s annoyed. It makes sense. It’s repulsive, the way those workers are all in each other’s space. And that strange man, he’s practically malformed: shoulders thrown back, his smooth, angled jawline visible where his mask has shifted to one side. I can even make out the corner of his mouth, upturned. He’s smiling?

I feel sick. Or something.

He gestures and the others melt away, apparently taking their cue to leave. He moves closer. Somehow the loose folds of the same shapeless uniform we all wear seem to accentuate his form instead of obscuring it.

“It’s been ages, flame.” His voice is warm, liquid in a way that tugs my shoulders up around my ears and makes my teeth squeak.

Why does he act like he knows me? Whatever this is, it’s very, very wrong. I need to get out of here.

I don’t move.

“You don’t remember, do you? It’s okay, just come with me.” He moves closer. “You’re in danger here.”

What comes out of my mouth bears only a passing resemblance to language. I try again. “Wh—who are you?”

He laughs. “Ravel. I’m the one you’ve been waiting for.”

His hand on my arm. A shock like static electricity prickling across my scalp. A memory: the dead man’s face, blue-grey pallor over a bony jaw. That night on Floor 6.

I jerk away. The back of my head thunks against the wall.

“Easy—you need to trust me. I’m here to help you.” He slips an arm behind my back and sweeps me toward a door across from the elevator. I’ve never noticed it before. Never had a reason to.

“I don’t like this,” Cadence says. “Cole? Do something.”

“I’m here to rescue you,” Ravel says over her protest. “I know what you want, flame. I know what you need. You don’t have to be alone anymore. You don’t have to hide among these drones. I can give you back your life.”

He sounds so confident. But he’s wrong. I don’t want anything. The Mara took that part of me. The trouble is, they also took the part that knew how to talk back.

He leans in. The warmth of his breath on my ear makes it hard to focus.

“You’re out here on an assignment, right? That was me. I set it up to help you escape. You can’t trust Refuge. They’re lying to you, lying to everyone. They can’t protect you like I can. They just want to use you. You don’t remember—you don’t know how much they’ve taken from you already. Come with me. It’ll hurt less if you come now. I don’t want to see you suffer.”

Beyond the door, a stairwell stretches away into the shadows. I turn to look full into his face—far, far too close now. He smiles, all shining eyes and even, too-white teeth.

“Who are you?”

He sighs, and the pressure at my back lessens. “It would be better if you’d just trust me. This is all for you, after all.” His teasing tone reminds me a little of Cadence’s now. “Haven’t you ever dreamed of escaping this place?”

I suck in a breath and twist to look up and down the hallway. How dare he make such accusations?

“Hey.” He catches my chin. His gloves are missing. The warmth of his hand scorches right through my mask. His voice drops, his gaze dazzling in its intensity. “You can trust me. You’re meant for more than this. Didn’t you ever wonder why you were spared?”

I forget how to breathe.

“Cole, move,” Cadence says. “This guy’s crazy. Let’s get out of here.”

Where does she want to go again? What . . . what was I doing? I can’t think. I need him to stop talking so I can think, but he just keeps going.

“I made a place to help people like you, flame, a place where you can be what you were always meant to be.” He brushes his thumb against my cheek, rumpling my mask. “There’s another world at the end of these steps. Freedom

has everything you could ever want and more. You just have to reach out and take it.”

The concern in his expression seems to hook inside me and yank. I’m on fire. Of course, if it’ll make him happy. Of course. Whatever it was that he wanted. Whatever he said—

Wait, what did he just say?

“People like me.” I lean away. *People like you.* Other people. Probationary workers? Failures?

“But you’re special.” He hurries on. “You always have been. You’re meant for more, so much more than this. Don’t you feel it? Haven’t you always known you were different?”

Different .

“This is wrong.” It’s not a complaint, nor a challenge. It’s not even a choice. Just a statement of fact. I take another step back.

I’m nobody special. I’m not tempted by his words—just confused. He sounded so authoritative; I almost obeyed out of habit. But the Mara took the part of me that could be tempted. This has to be a lie, some kind of trick or scheme.

Finally, I get a proper glance at the ID printed on his uniform: 00-Ravel-. There’s no division code, no sequence number. He’s fake, just playing a part. It’s all part of my probationary trial. Obedience in the face of temptation. And what could be more tempting than someone like him telling me I’m meant for something more than this?

It’s so obvious, now I’ve caught my breath and can think again. It’s a final call to dream instead of obey. I need to submit to the Mara.

“You shouldn’t be here.” My voice comes out cold and even. I’m pleased with how steady it sounds. “You’re in violation of regulation.”

Dark brows knit together over those molten eyes; so expressive, so pleading. It’s wrong to notice; I know it is. I need to end this, now.

“I call upon the Mara to eat my dreams.”

“Don’t you want to be with me? Why don’t you tell me what you want?” He leans in, whispers, “Tell me your secret desires. I’ll give it all to you.”

Images flicker through my mind in shades of blue and grey as I go cold, colder than their stiff skin. No. The Mara ate my dreams. They took all that away. But if they hadn’t . . . What would he say if I told him just what I used to fantasize about? If he knew just how different—how ‘special’—I used to be? I shake my head.

“I call upon the Mara to eat my dreams.” The tingling starts to recede. The memories fade.

“What’s wrong? Please—”

“It’s a trick,” I whisper, more to myself than to him. “I won’t fail. I call upon the Mara to eat my dreams.”

For an instant after the final repetition, his face goes blank in a way that clears my head instead of fogging it. But then he relaxes again into an expression of warm invitation. The light returns to his eyes. I’m left off balance, not sure of just what I saw.

“Cole, I’ll take care of you. I’ll make it all right. Look, just follow me down to Freedom. Just down to the end of these steps, to the life you were meant to live. You know you want this. You won’t regret it, I promise. Trust me.”

“I won’t fail,” I say, louder. He looks confused. “I know my duty. I won’t be tricked. I will pass probation. You tell Kistrfyv that.”

I take another step back and feel behind me for the elevator call button. I flatten myself against the cold steel.

“You only hurt yourself by denying me,” Ravel says, one hand outstretched in invitation. “You’ll come to me in the end.”

There’s a whoosh to my right. A door swings open. A worker emerges, head modestly bowed.

“You’ll come to me.”

It’s a breath on the air, followed by a click. When I look back, the stairwell door is closed and Ravel is gone.

Chapter 4: Leftovers

I NEARLY TOPPLE backwards into the elevator car when it arrives. My heart doesn't slow until the doors close, sealing me safely in.

"Finally," Cadence says. "Talk about messed up. Who does that guy think he is? Creepy, much?"

"He acted in violation of several regulations." The memory drives a wave of heat through me. The things he said— "Unacceptable behaviour, even if it was part of the probationary trial."

"Uh, yeah, unacceptable and weird. You gotta be clear with guys like that. Don't let them think they can push you around."

"I—"

"Let 'em know what's what. You can't humour them. They won't get the picture."

"I didn't—"

"Wait. It's not like you, you know, liked him, is it? Ew. Guys like that are no good, Cole."

The elevator interrupts my sputtering. Floor 20. I step out into the hallway. My knees lock.

What was I thinking? I don't know how to investigate a broken surveillance system. I have no idea where to even begin figuring out what went wrong. I'm going to fail, and Serovate's going to mock me and ship me back to Corrections, and I'm never going to get out of there and I'll probably die and—

"I have to go back. I don't know how to fix this." I pluck at the hem of my shirt, my fingers fluttering as fast as my racing heart.

"Obviously. Wasn't the whole point to get out and explore? Don't tell me you seriously thought you were coming up here to work?"

Floor 20 is a care ward—declining workers, mostly, waiting out their final years safely ensconced in tiny, separate rooms. Even if I knew how to perform a field investigation, with the space all broken up like this, it would take forever to work my way room by room across the whole floor and figure out what had gone wrong. But I can't go back now. Either Kistrfyv set me up to fail, or Ravel was telling the truth and it's his fault I'm here. Either way, I'll have to figure out what's wrong with the system before I can go back.

I pause at the first door to my right. There are sounds beyond, a sort of gurgling wheeze. Snoring?

“Now what?” Cadence asks.

One more thing I'd forgotten: there are people behind each door. I'll have to invade their space to carry out my investigation. Just the thought of it makes me ill.

“There's someone in there,” I say, by way of explanation.

“Well, duh.”

“I can't just go in.”

“Cool. Don't. This place is boring. Let's go check out a different floor.”

“I can't.”

“Fine. If you're gonna be a wimp about it, you can just go back to work and stare at your boring stupid screen some more. Or maybe you just wanna go back and see your boyfriend.”

I gasp, whirl to face her with my hand raised for a swat—but she's not there. She's not anywhere. It's moments like these she feels . . . I don't know, too close and unfairly far away at the same time.

Before the waters rose and the Mara came, people were made differently. Individually. Gross as it sounds, people apparently got together to make more people. Which is unhealthy and dangerous of course, so Refuge started producing workers in a controlled environment instead. But if I'd been born before, into a family, would it feel like this? Stuck with a bratty little sister to pester me all day and night?

If we weren't both unsequenced—from production series discontinued after only one iteration; not broken enough to destroy, but not valuable enough to bother making more of—I'd even have thought maybe Cadence was one of my series, another Cole who died before she'd finished growing. Being haunted feels like too much connection, like family and more than family, someone you can never get away from, but eventually it's so normal to be together you forget anything else.

I lower my hand. I get why she's annoyed with me. I need to suck it up, push through the awkwardness, get it over with. Instead, I twist my fists tighter in the loose fabric at the sides of my uniform and set off down the hall.

"Now what?" Cadence has been sounding different since we ran into Ravel. Less bratty, more, I don't know. Snarky? As if she's somehow getting closer to my age. Can ghosts age?

I push the distraction away and try to focus. "I should start at the other end, work my way back."

Starting from the far end of the corridor is a great idea. Methodical. Logical. Probably what protocol would dictate, if I actually knew the appropriate steps to take for a field investigation. It's also the perfect excuse not to open any doors for another minute or two.

Cadence laughs at me all the way down the hall, around the corner, and to the end of that stretch as well. I stare at the last door and roll my shoulders, producing a crackling sound from the joints in my neck. I listen for another moment. Silence. That's a good sign. I push it open, hoping for a vacant room, despite the sign beside the door that reads: 20-Bell-. Another only. If she were part of a series, her sequence number would be after the second dash, forming her short ID: Bellwan, Belltu, and so on.

As it turns out, I get my wish for another few moments of solitude. Sort of.

The room is miniscule, maybe twice the width of the overturned cot. The air is thick with the heavy sweetness of the protective airborne sedative used in the upper floors of Refuge to protect us from distraction and disobedient thoughts. Its cloying scent is dense in the small space. Probably a good thing, given the circumstances.

The body is unlike any I've seen. It's partly covered by pieces of the overturned cot. The floor and walls around it are fractured. Gritty white powder mixes with congealing blood. It's as if something ripped through the corpse and right on into the room around it.

The buzzing in my ears mutes Cadence's shriek. Dark stains seep up the soft toes of my shoes.

The corpse is not fresh. Raw gashes scissor across its body. Its uniform hangs in shreds, exposing purpling shadows closer to the floor, grey-white flesh higher up. During the day on Floor 6, the dead were carted off almost immediately. Mara-taken in the night were another matter—I've seen corpses as old as six or even eight hours dead. This one's joints will be stiff by now. It would be impossible to smooth away its anguished contortion even if I wanted to take pity

on it, to wipe away the echo of its pain.

What's left of the dead woman's face is twisted in horror. Her bulging eyes are opaque, pearlescent. Mara-taken.

I kneel. There's a smell below the cloying sweetness of the air: bitter, rotten, sharp. Everything about this death is different than it should be, except for the eyes. What happened to her?

The woman—Bell?—must have been very old. Her skin is lined and sagging. Her close-cropped hair is thin; transparent wisps that don't seem to be able to soak up the stain of blood. I've never seen anyone quite like her. One of the side effects of Noosh; it flattens out our differences. All of them, age included. Until it can't, and then I guess we end up here on Floor 20.

I drag two gloved fingers through the powder on the floor: gritty from concrete dust, slightly tacky from the blood that spilled when whatever did this went right through her and into the floor below. The Mara don't leave damage like this. They aren't physical. They eat dreams. They take only what's inside, leaving the shell hollow but untouched, except for those pearl-blank eyes. It's why we're so carefully controlled, why we have the ritual of submission: to keep us as empty inside as possible.

But if the Mara only hunger after the inner life, what slashed Bell here so deeply it tore through the thin carpet and into concrete?

The buzzing in my head prickles across my scalp, spreading.

This isn't happening. This forbidden fascination with the dead—the desire know what they knew and feel what they felt, to become someone else for even a moment—the Mara took it away with all the rest of my disobedience. I don't break regulation any more. I can't lose everything I've worked for. I won't fail again. Any moment now, I'll step away, send for help, submit my longing to the Mara.

Instead, I reach out to touch the corpse's ashen skin.

Chapter 5: Susannah

THERE'S A FLARE of piercing light, and everything changes. I'm . . . somewhere else. Sound comes back first: a delicate, distant melody. I've never heard anything like it.

I haven't heard music like that in years, the child thinks.

I peer past an improbably frilly and beribboned skirt. Shiny white shoes swing in time to the gentle tune. I'm sitting at a table set with china and silver amidst a lavish expanse of gently waving greenery, polished wood, and marble pillars.

And here's the strangest, most impossible part of it. I'm not me; I'm her. A small girl in an extravagant, inappropriate dress. I see what she sees, feel what she feels, and, increasingly, think what she thinks.

A shadow hovers over our hands, curdling our stomach: a faded silhouette of withered fingers clawed against white sheets. We gasp at the sudden ache of arthritis. Mama reaches over to press our smooth, childish hand and the vision passes.

The warmth of her touch is alarming and unexpected somehow. We look up into her smiling face, smooth and unblemished—so young, why does that seem odd?—and across at Father, frowning nearsightedly at his menu, although of course he'll order the usual.

My— our— sight blurs at the edges. Everything beyond the glittering expanse of our table is out of focus. I try to pull away from the girl and the air thickens. I look closer. Skeins of translucent, threadlike fibres clog the air, creating a fog-like effect.

Everything about this is wrong. This can't be happening. I can't be here. I can't be imagining this. I'd never.

There has to be some sort of explanation. How did I get here? What's happening?

But I slip deeper into the girl's mind with every one of our shared breaths.

Our heart aches, looking at Mama and Father. We are so happy to be here. But something's wrong, or about to go wrong. We can't remember, and brush away the unease.

Mouthwatering breakfast aromas mingle with the lavish perfume of artfully arranged flowers. We prop a menu against the table edge to scan its decadent offerings. Crisp waffles with cream and fruit. Golden stacks of pancakes, or French toast drizzled with maple syrup. Bacon and eggs.

Eggs. The word tears my consciousness up and out of hers. Cadence has told me about eggs before. Where is she? Where am I? I shouldn't be here.

I can't quite catch hold of why.

There's a distant sense of panic, just on the other side of a heavy curtain. It's pushing toward me, trying to reach me. It thins to only the barest whisper of a passing thought. I drift under again.

The music shifts, the gentle strains now jumbled and jarring, shuddering from distractingly loud and harsh to creeping near-silence. Frowning, we close the menu. A small, ribbonbound box perches behind it. "To Miss Suzannah Bell" says the cream-coloured tag, in elegant cursive.

Mama speaks, but her voice is lost under a violent crescendo of discordant music. Father, his arm draped casually over her shoulder, twinkles at us above his carefully oiled moustache. He does so enjoy finding the best presents.

We feel surprise. It's Suzannah's birthday?

The question is mine. I surface muzzily from the girl's consciousness.

Suzie, she thinks to me, but they call me Bell now.

Suzie seems unfazed at the presence of a second consciousness drifting in and out of her. I squint through the shifting filaments that cloud the air. I'd lost track of them until the girl's name jostled me back into my own head. Suzannah Bell. Bell. It's familiar.

The ID beside the door on Floor 20. The room with the corpse.

Corpse? She wonders.

I shutter the memory. Impossible as it seems—impossible as this whole experience is—I can't very well be exposing a child to the horrors of . . . the horrors of . . .

What was it again? Somewhere else. I'm supposed to be somewhere else. I'm supposed to be someone else. The memories drift away with my consciousness.

We tug the satin ribbon. The box drops open to reveal the most lovely, delicate little doll. It's flawless, dressed to the finest detail in precisely the outfit we have on, down to the spotless white shoes. Mama and Father had to have planned this all out far in advance. Our eyes prick with tears.

The hair and face are not quite an honest copy, though. The doll's tiny curls are much tidier, shinier, and in all ways more appealing; her face is an absolute delight, with sweet porcelain features and the most gleamingest black eyes, not like our muddy hazel ones at all. A whiff of decay drifts through the air, distracting us. Something's wrong—and if we stop and think a moment, if we just concentrate, we'll remember—

But here's our meal now, sweet and savoury scents drowning out that faint swampiness in a wash of fragrant steam. We sit the doll up against a saltcellar and stroke its curls as we eat.

Click.

Something shifts under our finger. Several faint lines angle across the doll's face. We press. The lines darken.

A grating whisper. The head of the doll splits. It fans open in delicate, sharp slices.

Our fork clangs against our plate. We pull the doll to us, anticipating wonders painted on each slice, or perhaps a hollow compartment hiding another gift. But there's only an empty cavity inside, a flat, unbroken darkness that the chandeliers fail to illuminate.

Our hands shake. There's something here we shouldn't see. We peer down anyway.

A sudden wave of dizziness. The reek of decay is stronger now. The doll slips from our fingers. It drops toward the carpet with slow inevitability. We lunge for it. Then we're falling, everything's falling. The world spins out in a dizzy whirl.

My view shifts as she falls away from me. The threads choking the air tangle around her.

I know what this is now. It has to be a dream, a nightmare, a Mara attack. There's no other explanation that makes sense. This world no longer exists. Maybe it never did. The corpse sprawled beside her cot on Floor 20 and this impossibly young child, Suzie, they share more than an ID. But I don't know how she can be dead in Refuge and alive to be dreaming this now. Unless...

Unless none of this is about her at all. Unless this is my dream. My death.

I stare at Suzie in horror. She sprawls on the floor beside her chair, shrunken and stiff as if she's become the doll that fell. Her mother rises in the distance,

elegance itself trailing away toward the ceiling, giant-like. A moment later, her father looms up alongside. Their apparent lack of concern cuts at Suzie's heart. She struggles to understand. She doesn't see through my eyes. She doesn't know what's coming.

The crash of the piano has subsided into ringing silence. The hall feels cavernous and empty. The ghost or memory of Suzannah Bell can still taste decay in the air, and I through her. Her parents hold out their hands as if to take hers, but the angle is too high. She doesn't understand why, not at first. Translucent threads drape from their arms, snarled and heavy. They're unevenly wound ropes by the time they reach Suzie, binding her in place.

The warm, late-morning sun shifts, a flash of stark, blinding light. The long bones beneath Suzie's parents' skin are darkly skeletal silhouettes. Her heart stutters and seizes, her breath caught in her throat. I hold my breath as well, caught in the moment, in her panic and my own horror. The end must be coming soon. Hers, or mine.

A pair of flawless arms reaches past Suzie in stiff, unbending unison. They slip through threads now milky in their thickness as if they're not there at all. A rigid figure with bright curls stalks past Suzie. It takes her parents' outstretched hands. The doll takes Suzie's place without her parents noticing a thing, and that's how I know this nightmare really is almost at an end.

The Mara have come.

The creature holds Suzie's parents' hands as they turn to leave. She calls to them soundlessly from behind a tiny painted rosebud of a mouth, panicked now. What dream, what nightmare is this? Her thoughts snag. *Dream. It's just a dream.* But instead of relief, terror wells in instinctive response.

Her horror makes it harder to keep mine at bay. We both know now there will be no waking, no escape. They're coming for us, have already come, are here now. The only question is, have they already come for Suzie—come and gone and left this echo for me to stumble into? Or has their devouring somehow carried on all this time, past the ending of Suzie's physical form? Or is it not Suzie they're here for at all?

I would run, but like her, I can't move. I'm as formless as a ghost.

She struggles against leaden arms, unable to see the weight of coiled, knotted threads pinning her to the ground. She longs to pinch herself, shock herself awake, close her eyes and open them to her own, real life. She'd even welcome back the endless decades of mindless drudgery, the pains of the years burdening her aged frame. Her longing tugs at me, casting shadows of an aged corpse in

my mind.

But her eyes are frozen in place, wide and staring. Her outflung limbs are a dead, cold weight dragging her down. She can't open her lips to form the words of submission, to release her dreams to the Mara and save herself. She's trapped, as immobile and helpless as the doll that has taken her place. Left behind. Abandoned.

The Mara in their cruel mimicry of Suzie let go of her parents' hands. Suzie can't look away from the sight of them again after all this time, so young, so healthy and unaware in their short-lived happiness, even if it is an illusion. The ghost of the years between them creeps back into her mind and memory. They'd never been this happy. This paradise had never truly existed in their lifetime. So much loss. So much pain. She wants to forget. She wants to go back to being a child, protected. She wants them to look again at her, to see her and love her.

I choke on the sensation of her loss, heart racing in time with hers, gaze darting as hers cannot. It's not just the doll that's the Mara, but everything around us. This alien place and these unlikely people are all a part of some elaborate, soul-sucking nightmare. These things Suzie has shown me, they're not real. They were never real. Family. Music. Food. They have to be the product of the Mara, luring her—us? me?—deeper, strengthening our attachment before devouring us whole.

The creature turns and stalks back toward us, glittering eyes malevolent in that expressionless porcelain perfection of a face, a cruel replacement for Suzie's—Bell's—broken, aged weakness. Its doll eyes are clouded with a faint impression of grey and green and blue – the child's hazel eyes, painted over her replacement's bottomless black ones. Suzie's memories roll back over her, the weight of years and so many deaths crashing back into her mind and body all at once.

I'm shocked to realize at least some of what I've seen is from her memories and not entirely a fabrication of the Mara. Shocked and relieved. Unless this is just another dimension of deception, it's possible this isn't my dream after all. But I'm not sure what's more improbable; that the Mara could have spun all of this out of my imagination in the first place or that Bell could really have been that old. I mean, a family? An actual childhood spent outside of Refuge's walls? Could she really have been produced—born—before the floods?

The porcelain mockery of a face leers, glass eyes full of bottomless, eerie knowing. Black leeches through the hazel paint. The delicately fanned segments of the creature's head, grown so large now, have slipped back together with only

the barest hint of their former, grotesque separation. A thin dark line shows just at its hairline; a narrow but seemingly bottomless gap where the skull curves to the perfectly arched spill of its hair.

Something squirms within. It trickles down the porcelain forehead and oozes along the angled line of that painted brow, a gathering oil slick of midnight tears pooling in the socket of one glittering eye. They overflow, streaking over the smooth cheek, spattering with acid heat across Suzie as the Mara loom over her in that flawless replica of her own beribboned dress.

She surges against the burning, struggling to move the dead weight of arms and legs turned to cold, immobile porcelain. I want to cover my eyes, but I can't move, can't escape any more than she can.

The sole of the Mara-doll's pristine white shoe grown to gigantic proportions rises to blot out the light. And falls.

Everything washes away in a wave of shattering pain as the Mara end the nightmare the way I knew they would, in horror and agony and death.

FOR A LONG moment, there's nothing else. Then I'm alone in the dark, whole, my thoughts, my senses entirely my own once more. The ineffable awareness of Suzie's existence that pervaded the dream is gone. There's nothing left but sick, quivering fear. Am I dead too this time? Is it over?

In the darkness, the figure of an old woman coalesces. Her face is bare and exposed, her edges frayed and wispy. It's the broken body of the corpse I reached out to, Bell. The fraying along her edges grows, threads of silver unravelling until she's the girl with the golden curls and hazel eyes.

"Suzie," I say into the darkness.

She stares back at me, her young face etched with sadness. A whispering, rushing sound surrounds us, filling the empty spaces.

"Suzie," I say again, wishing I could reach out to her, reaching for the edges of my own boundaries to try to draw them together and touch the broken child. I feel as shattered as if I'd been crushed alongside her, but the dream was hers, not mine. She was the victim of the Mara, not me. So why do I hurt?

Shadows darken across her face. I recognize the scored lines etched across the corpse of her future-past self. Her eyes cloud over. I need to make it stop, to shelter her, to turn back time to when she was whole and happy and seen. But even as I find my hands and gather my voice, the rushing sound rises and

fragments into thousands of shouting, shrieking voices.

She speaks. I can't hear her past the cacophony. The shadows across her darken and split her skin. She throws her head back. Her face contorts in a scream. I can't quite pick it out among the host of howling voices. It breaks me nonetheless, as if the gashes across her flesh are mirrored inside me.

I struggle harder to reach her. Countless invisible hands seem to shove against me, hauling me back and away.

Her mouth slackens; her chin tips down. She stares at me with milky eyes and shattered skin. The edges of her are short-cropped threads drifting in an intangible breeze. Darkness wells up in the corners of her eyes and overflows. It runs down her cheeks in a continuous stream. She smiles, slow and empty.

A wash of light carries it all away.



I'M KNEELING IN a tiny, brightly lit room, reaching out to a corpse once more. I blink. For a moment, it seems as if the tips of my gloves are tangled in silver threads.

Chapter 6: Secrets

“WHAT JUST HAPPENED?” Cadence sounds faint.

I clamp my fingers around my elbows and flatten my back against the wall.

“Oh,” she says in quite a different voice. “Oh, no, it’s okay. You’re okay. It’s gonna be okay.”

I stare at a jagged crack in the paint and try not to see what’s left of Bell at my feet. Suzie.

No. It can’t have been real; this isn’t Suzie, but Bell. A declining worker, old and worn and probably senile. I try not to think about her abbreviated ID. Another discontinued, defective only. Is that why she was killed?

“I don’t know what you did just now,” Cadence says. “But all this stuff has been coming back to me—flashes of memories from before. It’s incredible. You’re never gonna believe—”

“I didn’t mean to.” I tuck my hands out of sight. “I know I shouldn’t have, but I just—and then that girl . . .”

“Huh? What girl? You mean touching the body? Yeah, that probably wasn’t a great idea. What was that even about? But listen, I’ve just remembered—”

She starts babbling again, making up some story about her memories coming back, lost friends, some kind of mission, trying to distract me. I’m sure she means well, but it’s no use. I have to get out of here. I was just hallucinating, or something. That’s as bad as dreaming. The Mara will come for me. With a dead body at my feet, I clearly can’t rely on Floor 20’s shields to protect me.

But it’s like staring at a light for too long; the image of Bell’s body has burned into my retinas, and like a phantom behind that, the image of the little girl, Suzie, writhes as it’s eaten away by the Mara.

My fingers itch. The buzzing in my head swells against the thought of

leaving her. If I touched her again, could I go back? Make it different? Help her? Or at least keep her from being alone in the dark? It's irrational to think I could do anything about her death; incontrovertible proof lies at my feet, staining my shoes. I flatten a hand against the closed door, trembling.

"Are you even listening?" Cadence says, as if whatever it is she has to say matters right now. "Hey, I know that Ravel guy was a real creeper, but he was on to something. Refuge is super messed up. You need to get out of here, like right now. Besides, I really need your help with—"

I thump the door once, twice, then repeatedly, as if the dull *thud* will help me figure out what to do.

"Uh, Cole?" she says, quieter this time. "What's going on? I know it's freaky how messed up the body is, but it's not like you've never seen a corpse before. It's okay, you know? Let's just get a little space between you and this mess."

I ache to go back, to press both my hands on that chill, wrinkled flesh and cry out Suzie's name until I reach her again. Instead, I push on the door and take a deep breath of the clearer hallway air. My gloves leave dark smears against the grey paint. A storm of gritty, bloodstained footprints behind me catches my gaze and won't let go.

"Good," Cadence soothes, "you're doing really good. Just walk away, okay? In fact, listen, Refuge is totally no good—but I think I can get you out. We could both escape—"

"I'm not in the mood for your stories right now."

I can't be here. I can't be feeling this way. The Mara already ate the part of me that could feel and choose and—

"Cole, I'm not playing with you." Her voice is fierce. "This is for real. You have to help me—"

The unmistakable tone of an elevator car arriving chimes in the distance. We both freeze, listening to the whir of the doors opening. A low grumble of male voices filters around the corner. I strain to make out the words.

". . . just saying, as an inspector . . . more than qualified . . . Her Worship's . . . fail to see what some low-level enforcer . . ."

The speaker's voice is gruff with irritation and nearly drowned out by the heavy thump and scuffle of thick-soled boots. Refuge Force.

They've come for me.

My own thin shoes make a faint squelching as I waver. I want to slip back into the room with Bell and hide, but I've been drawn to her since the moment I saw her. No, I haven't. That's not possible.

“Inspector.” The words are soft, deferential, but the tone is slippery. “Don’t sell yourself short. Your esteemed intellect surely sees the advantage of a mutually beneficial arrangement. We both live to serve Her Worship’s interests, after all, and the, ah, issue in question does seem to be escalating.”

They’re getting nearer, approaching the corner. I flinch back from the doorway, out of sight.

“None of that, Serovate.” The boots stamp to a stop. “I won’t stand for your greasy little word games. Precision, man. The corpses are what’re escalating. The attacks. Fatalities. Her Worship personally commissioned me to investigate, and I—”

“To be sure, Inspector, to be sure. Admirable precision indeed. I stand ready and willing to support the honourable inspector in, ah, precisely the manner required by Our Lady.”

The sound of rustling plastic crackles around the corner. I shrink further into Bell’s room. I should have acted sooner, should have reported the death right away. Maybe I could dash out to meet them as if I’ve only just arrived on the scene? My knees disagree, weak at the thought of interrupting the bickering enforcers.

“Is that really necessary?” The inspector complains. The rustling gets louder.

“Not at all, Inspector, not at all. I myself see no need for such precautions, but Her Worship did express some distaste at the way the last scene was handled.”

“If you’d been doing your duty properly instead of letting that poor worker stumble over—”

“As you say, Inspector, the consequences were less than ideal. Her Worship mandated a more proactive approach to her people’s security in future, although I would be more than happy to dispense with erecting a perimeter around the scene, if you would care to authorize . . . ? No? Ah, well. Why don’t you proceed with your investigation and I’ll just finish up here, then?”

“I don’t need an enforcer to tell me my job,” the inspector growls, “nor to remind me of my duty to Mayor Ajera.”

“Just so. As you say, you’ve performed your duties admirably. And yet, the wrong workers keep dying despite Her Worship’s provisions, and even her specially commissioned officers have done—let’s see now, oh yes—absolutely nothing to slow the tide or explain the damage.”

“Why, you little, I—”

I shift my weight. I’m going to get caught eavesdropping if I don’t hurry up

and approach them first. But what does he mean by *consequences*? And *wrong* workers? As if there's a right kind to die?

"So of course," the enforcer continues, apparently unperturbed at his inflammatory effect on a senior officer, "you'll want to have something to show for your efforts today, to remind her of your continued value. After all, the risk to Mayor Ajera's position if these stupid drones realize Refuge can't actually protect them . . . I mean, really. Submitting to the Mara. Little golden halos. The idiots will believe anything if you catch them young enough . . ."

A roaring sound in my ears drowns him out. I press my mask against my lips. Did he really just say that? If that's true . . . If it's true . . .

"Told ya," says Cadence, as if her flippant tone could fool me into thinking she's not just as shocked as I am. "This place is bad news, Cole."

I sink to my knees. *Refuge can't actually protect them*. What does he mean? Refuge is the only thing that protects us from the Mara. The wards. The rite of submission . . .

But behind me is the proof that something is very, very wrong. There's a glint of gold wire in the cracked concrete beneath Bell's shattered body. She was protected and well sedated, if the cloying thickness of the air was any indication. If the presence of gold and sedatives and a lifetime of self-control and obedience weren't enough to save her—

I need to get out of here.

"Enough!" the inspector roars. "That. Is. Enough. How dare you—"

"Easy, inspector. You wouldn't want to go doing anything you might regret. I doubt you'd enjoy spending your overtime supplementing the rank and file—though you have to admit, there is some use for us lowly enforcers, if only as brute force and a clean-up crew."

"Kidnapping children is hardly—"

"—a task for an elevated servant of Refuge such as yourself. Quite so. A messy, regrettable business, to be sure. So perhaps we would better serve Refuge's interests and your own by staying on task and finding a way to slow the rate of casualties?"

A chill ices along my spine, though a part of me recognizes this as an absurd overreaction. Children? What do they mean, kidnapping children? From where? Refuge has solved the massive danger that human interaction poses by growing its workers to near-adulthood since the flood. But if Refuge has lied about what it takes to survive the Mara, what else could they have lied about?

I need to get out of here. Now.

Thud.

“Who’s there?” the inspector demands.

The response is a startled murmur. A care worker coming on shift, perhaps, or a declining worker checking on the noise in the hallway. Come to think of it, it’s amazing I didn’t run into anyone sooner.

Either way, it’s a chance to escape. I slip out and ease the door closed with my fingertips in the gap to keep it from slamming.

“What are you doing?” Cadence whispers, even though no one else can hear her.

“Getting out of here. Didn’t you hear? The “incident”? Corpses? They’re looking for this whole situation back here”—I wave one arm in broad indication of Bell’s shattered body, the cracked floor and walls, the surveillance system failure—“and I plan to be gone by the time they turn that corner. Which is any minute now.”

The door’s propped open by two fingers. I’m arrested by the narrow slice visible through it as I glance back.

Suzie.

All of the sudden, the urge to go back in there, to reach out to her—what’s left of her—is overwhelming. I’m not even sure which calls me more strongly: the child, her pain transforming into something hungry and dark, or the pallid corpse. But Cadence is watching.

“Are you kidding?” She interrupts my train of thought with a dramatic reversal of her own. “You have every right to be here. You were sent up on assignment, after all. If anything, running away now is going to cause more trouble. Here’s what you’re gonna do: report the death like an obedient little drone, wait until they dismiss you and start their investigation of the scene, and then escape.”

She’s . . . absolutely right. And more importantly, it’s the perfect excuse to go back into Bell’s room, even sit down again beside her. There’s not much space, after all. Maybe sit so close that when I casually brace my arm against the floor, my fingers might just brush up against . . .

I draw the door open again but hesitate. I didn’t like the sound of those two enforcers. Especially the junior one, with his greasily polite little veiled threats. What if they guessed I’d been listening the whole time?

“Now what? Could you maybe try not to look so suspicious?” Cadence says, not bothering to keep her voice down.

I forget to whisper in return. “What if—”

“Did you hear something?” the inspector says.

Chapter 7: Morristu

THE ENFORCERS' BOOTS thunder closer. Shadows in the distance. They'll turn the corner any moment and see me. I can't be caught like this.

I dive for the nearest door. It's all I can do to hold my breath and jam my hand against frame. With my fingers softening the door's fall, the latch can't click shut and give me away. The boots pound closer, closer . . .

"Wait out here," the enforcer, Serovate, says, his voice clear and sharp just on the other side of the door.

My lungs ache with the urge to gasp for air, but it's not safe. I swallow hard at the dark smears my glove leaves on the doorjamb, and look down in horror at a trail of smudged footprints.

"That's no good," the inspector mutters, rustling away further again. I clamp my lips shut and try not to moan, but he doesn't seem to have noticed me. Yet. He must be talking to the person they encountered by the elevator. "Over here. Now face the wall. Good. What's that ID again? 20-Morris-02? Right, Morristu: You just wait like that and don't look 'round."

Morristu's breath catches. The worker must be terrified to have been detained by Refuge Force. I would be. Will be, any minute now, when they follow the footprints right to me.

"No, no. Now don't get all worked up like that." The inspector seems to be trying to soothe Morristu in the hallway while I panic behind the door. "You're not in trouble—"

"Yet," Serovate says.

The inspector grunts. "I'll have some questions for you after we've finished inspecting the scene. Just something I'm trying out, you understand. Questioning potential witnesses yields astonishing insights, particularly when there are

surveillance failures. Technology, you know, doesn't solve everything. It's really quite fascinating, all the tools and systems they made use of in the time before . . ."

I gulp at the word *surveillance*. The inspector clears his throat, cutting his rambling short.

"Well, we'll come back to that. Rest assured, if you follow regulation and offer us your full compliance, I'm sure you'll be back on your rounds in no time."

"Yes, Inspector," Morristu says with a quaver.

I'm surprised by her voice. I've never come across a sequenced female before—only anomalies like Cadence and me. But Morristu is evidence that Refuge sees at least some value in producing females.

Boots scuffle inches away. This is it. They'll notice the footprints and throw open the door and—

"Shall I open the door for you, Inspector?" The enforcer hardly seems to be trying to hide the sneer in his voice.

"Serovate, you're in the way. You know I insist on being first to the scene."

"Of course. Wouldn't dream of obstructing your investigation." Serovate shuffles and scuffs heavily, as if it's too much trouble to pick up his feet.

There's no creak, no whoosh of displaced air, just another moment of breathing: deep and purposeful nearby—the inspector, most likely; noisy and careless, even closer—the other enforcer, Serovate, practically on the other side of the door; and fast and shallow, further off—the panicking unfortunate, Morristu. It's all interspersed with the rustle of uniforms. And the creak of the cot beside me.

I dart a terrified glance over, but its occupant is sleeping, a truly ancient creature, judging by the wrinkles around its closed eyes. Its caved-in chest barely rises with each breath; only the slightest ripple marks where its mask drapes over an open mouth.

"Well," Cadence says. "That could have gone worse."

I grit my teeth. She's right; I could be out there beside that terrified worker in the hallway, nose to the wall waiting for who knows what to happen. But if I'd listened to her and acted sooner, I might've been able to get control of the situation. Besides, I hadn't counted on this room being occupied.

"Hmm," the inspector grunts from the room next door, his voice muffled through the thin walls. "This one's worse again."

"Oh, I don't know," Enforcer Serovate says. "That kid down on '14 looked

pretty bad last week—”

“Look at the floor.”

“Ah. Well. Isn’t that interesting. Someone’s been in here. And how distressing; I’ve gone and walked through the trail.”

I press my hand harder against the door to keep it from shaking. Maybe I should just make a break for it? But if the enforcer clumsily obscured my footprints, they might not realize I’m here. Plus, I’m pretty sure I can’t actually outrun them.

“Hmm? Trail?” The inspector sounds distracted. “Trail? No, these gouges. Bit much for the Mara based on the current pattern of escalation, but I can’t see any of the drones managing this kind of damage, unless Morristu out there has some serious talents up her sleeve.”

Serovate offers an eerie giggle at the inspector’s absentminded comment. Morristu moans. The two men shuffle and breathe and say nothing for too long after that. They must be looking at the small room with its untidy bed and gouged, bloodstained floor; the body in the midst of it, horribly exposed, being coldly examined.

I twist my free hand in the folds of my uniform until my fingers stop aching to reach out and the tingling that spreads across my scalp at the thought of her starts to ebb. I’d like to throw open this door and drag both of them out of Bell’s room. To slam the door in their faces and keep her to myself. To lay down on the shattered floor beside her corpse and hold her cold wrinkled hand and pull that broken child from the grasp of the Mara.

What’s happening to me?

“Someone’s been here,” the inspector says, finally. “See the footprints there? And there? And this smudge on the door? I don’t know how we missed them on the way in. The trail is hopelessly trampled now.”

“Indeed,” Serovate says. “How remarkably observant you are, Inspector.” He raises his voice and demands, “Was it you?”

I cringe back from the door, but it’s not me he’s asking.

“I d-don’t know anything,” the woman in the hall stammers. “What’s that?”

“Did I say you could turn around?”

“I didn’t mean to, it’s just— you asked and I . . . And that . . . Is she dead . . . ?”

One of the men heaves a sigh—the inspector, I think—and the woman whimpers.

“You really shouldn’t have turned around,” Serovate says with noticeable

glee. “Inspector?”

“Her Worship won’t be pleased to lose another one.”

“Not our fault she popped up before we could finish sealing the perimeter. And you did say someone had been in the room before we got here.”

“I wasn’t . . . I didn’t,” Morristu sobs.

“She probably didn’t,” the inspector acknowledges absently.

Serovate barks a laugh. “Likely not. Still, now that she’s seen . . .”

“Oh, very well. Go ahead.”

“Floor 20 Care Ward Worker Morris 2,” Serovate says formally, “you are under arrest for the murder of Floor 20 Former Worker Bell. You will be taken before Her Worship Maryam Ajera, Mayor of the Towers of Refuge, to plead your case.”

“But I didn’t do anything.” Morristu hiccups her plea between panicked gulps of air. “You know I didn’t do anything. Please.”

I glance at the sleeper beside me, but his shallow breaths continue unbroken despite her wails.

“You know this is kind of your fault, right? That they think she was in there.” Cadence says.

I want to snap back and ask what she expects me to do about it.

“Oh, just go along,” the inspector says to Morristu. “You’re better off with Her Worship anyway. Shields might actually do you some good up there. Wouldn’t want to end up like this one, would you?”

“Well, that’s done for her,” Serovate says, sounding amused at Morristu’s renewed sobbing. “Sometimes I wonder about you, Haynfyv. Cold as ice.”

“It’s Inspector Haynfyv,” Haynfyv says irritably, “and I don’t know what you’re on about now. I complete my duty. Without emotion. In compliance with regulation. As you well know.”

The enforcer snorts. “Aren’t we beyond that little myth at this point? Surely you don’t have to wear your mask with me, *Inspector*.”

“Regulation is regulation. I will continue to uphold it regardless of its current efficacy.”

“Or lack thereof, isn’t it? Very good, Inspector. You uphold your blessed regulation, and I’ll worry about who gets to keep drawing breath. And who doesn’t.”

Morristu chokes on a sob and falls silent.

I shiver. They can’t be saying what I think they’re saying.

“Caught that, did you?” Serovate sneers. “Go ahead. Regret your life. Your

pointless little existence. All your futile little choices. You'll be over it soon enough. But don't worry. We'll just go out and hunt down a nice fresh little replacement. And I know just where to—"

"Enough," the inspector says sharply. "I've an investigation to get on with. Just because you're enjoying running wild doesn't mean the rest of us don't have a duty to Our Lady. The effects of regulation must be recovered."

"If it ever had any. You were appointed quite recently, weren't you, Inspector?"

I close my eyes. It's not true. They're treasonous liars. Refuge protects us. The shields protect us. Our obedience to regulation and our submission to the Mara protects us. If not . . . If not, nothing stands between any one of us and being crushed like Bell.

"Just get on with it," the inspector growls.

With a final mocking laugh, Serovate hauls the sobbing Morristu away. "Don't forget to keep an eye out for that tech," he yells before getting on the elevator. "Her Worship did say to bring her on up for a chat, preferably unharmed."

I swallow hard. Cadence sucks in a shocked breath. What could the mayor possibly want with me?

"Tech?" Haynfyv mumbles absently from the room next door. I flatten myself against the door. "He knows perfectly well I prefer pre-flood methods to today's unreliable tools . . ."

His absentminded mumbling trails off. There's some shuffling from the other side of the wall. Then quiet. Then rustling fabric. Knocking sounds. Scraping.

I bristle at the thought of the inspector poking around my corpse. Well, not *my* corpse; Bell's corpse. But still. I found it first.

Which is kind of the problem.

"Do something!" Cadence says.

If it weren't too dangerous to even breathe, I'd demand to know what she thinks I could possibly do about any of this. So far today, her endless digs and distractions have done nothing but get me in trouble. But what should I do? Wait here until the inspector goes away again? Will he leave the body? Can I get close to her again?

I roll my shoulders. I need to let that go. Focus.

"You can't just ignore this," Cadence says as if I'm an idiot, as if I don't know I have to get myself out of this somehow. "You can't just turn your back on all of it, pretend it's not real. Listen, I know people who can help you. Just

follow me, okay? We can come back and save everyone later. But you'll need help."

"What help?" I hardly dare to breathe the words, but she hears.

"I know people. I remember how to—"

She doesn't remember anything. She can't. It's just another one of her games. One of her made-up stories. Ghosts don't have memories, not real ones at least. But if she did, if there were another way, a place I could escape to, someone who could end Refuge and expose its lies . . . What about that man with the golden eyes, Ravel? What if that wasn't just a test? He offered to help.

I tug at my hood thoughtfully and catch a whiff of blood from my stained glove. Poor old Bell. Poor Suzie. But I have to stop thinking like that. I can't do anything about it now. I was supposed to pass probation, finally, but somehow I ended up bloodstained and hiding out from enforcers in someone else's room—clearly having overheard all their secrets, no less. If I just snuck back to work without having completed my own investigation or reporting the corpse, forget passing probation. I'd probably be shunted right back to Floor 6. And that would be the best-case scenario.

"Tech!" Haynfyv's voice, sudden and loud from the next room, makes me flinch. I bump into the cot beside me. "Ah. That's right. From the Surveillance Division. Why didn't he just say so in the first place?"

There's a rustling sound as the inspector gathers himself next door.

No. Oh, no. I'm out of time.

"Don't move," Cadence says. "He doesn't know you're here. He doesn't know it was you in there, not really."

She's right. If I just stay quiet, he might not even look in here. But beside me, the shrivelled occupant of the cot's eyelids flutter. The mask draws in against withered lips in painful, inevitable slow motion.

A reedy shriek splits the air.

Chapter 8: Disobedience

I RUN.

The door crashes shut behind me. It dampens the high-pitched shriek only slightly. My pants bind at the knees and threaten to slip past bony hipbones. I clutch them with one hand and race toward the elevator. I'm panting by the time I round the corner. There's a sort of gold tape netting spanning the walls. It looks fragile. I grit my teeth and run harder.

Heavy boots crash behind me. The inspector shouts. I disobey his order to stop and face the wall. There's no time to feel guilty about it.

Voices murmur and complain from behind too-thin walls. A few doors crack open—a flash of bloodshot eyes under wrinkled brows—and snap shut as I pass. I'd assumed the residents of Floor 20 were mostly deaf or sedated into passivity. The enforcers had shown no particular concern over eavesdroppers.

"He's gaining on you," Cadence says.

My shoes flap on the carpet. One works itself loose. I stumble and kick it away. I charge the security perimeter at full speed, hoping it'll snap or pull away from the walls. It doesn't. I bounce back, wheel my arms for balance, and hurl myself at it again, scrabbling to climb. The inspector's shouts get louder all the time.

"Under, stupid! Go under it!" Cadence yells.

I want to yell back in frustration. The perimeter webbing sags against the floor. I lever it up enough to drag myself underneath. My hipbones scrape carpet. My waistband rolls alarmingly. Then I'm through.

I skid to a stop in front of the elevator, sweating madly, and jam my finger on the call button.

"There's no time," Cadence wails. "He'll catch you first."

She's right. He'll be rounding the corner any second. The perimeter barrier won't hold him for long.

I punch the button a few more times, then whip around, desperate for a way out. I flash back to a memory of gold eyes and white, white teeth, Ravel's arm upraised in a showy flourish toward a shadowy stairwell. Could that stairwell be accessed from every floor? There's an unmarked door directly across from the elevator.

"Go," Cadence says, following the line of my gaze.

I throw the door wide and stumble into the darkness beyond.

"To the right. Right!"

I pull to the side, thundering up the stairs instead of down. My one remaining shoe flaps against the sharp steps, squelching a little and probably leaving prints. I kick hard. It peels free. Maybe the inspector will trip on it.

The door crashes shut behind me. It cuts off the light from the hallway. I stumble in the darkness and bark my shins.

Cadence screams in my ear, "Hurry, faster!" and then, "Stop!"

I reach for the next step and skid to my knees when it's not there. The door slams open below. I stop panting and cringe back into the shadows. Why couldn't I have gone down? Maybe then I could've escaped onto the next floor. But the inspector takes off down the stairs instead of up. I will my heartbeat to slow. His footsteps crash and echo. There's a creak as he reaches another door, a pause, and then a slam.

I let out a sigh.

"Not yet," Cadence warns.

The door slams, and Haynfyv's footsteps sound again, descending to the next floor. He's not gone, but he's not coming back, at least not yet.

I slide one glove up the cold roughness of the wall for balance. My sight's adjusting to the gloom. There's a pale blue light marking the door below me. It illuminates a few steps, the way back. The air is dusty and dank smelling. I taste salt and iron on my tongue, sweat and panic.

I reach out a bare foot to descend.

"What are you doing?"

I risk a whisper: "Going back."

"Are you an idiot? Back where? Go up, stupid. Up, up, up."

There's a dim strip light above the closed door below us. Pale, dim blue like Bell's withered lips, bloodless in death. I need to go back for her. I can't think too hard about what I'll do when I get there. I can't explain it to Cadence, either.

I don't know how. It had to have been a hallucination, brought on by the stress of trying to pass probation. It had to be. Not a dream; no one survives dreams. And not a real ghost, either. Cadence is never going to turn and reach out to me with pearlescent eyes oozing darkness like that. Definitely not.

Right?

"It's too late to help her," Cadence says.

I choke.

"Morristu is gone."

Oh. *That* her. Right.

"Besides, you can't risk opening a door and alerting that inspector you're up here. You'll just have to find a different way to make things right. Trust me. Keep climbing."

"Make things right," I repeat. I feel for the wall and edge my toes along until I find the next step. What a strange idea, that I should try to do anything about that poor worker's situation. How could I? It would be a violation of regulation to even remember her name. But better Cadence think I'm worked up about some care worker taking the fall in my place than realize just how much I want to go back to Bell's corpse. Much, much better.

Around the corner, another strip of blue light comes into view: the next floor up. I work my way toward it, careful not to trip and alert the inspector to my presence. His boots still crash on the stairs in the distance, diligently in pursuit, just in the wrong direction.

"Keep going," Cadence says when I reach the next door.

And the one after that. And the next one. My legs tremble. I push my hood back and wipe away sweat.

"Keep going," she urges.

I plant my feet stubbornly and risk a whisper: "he's got to be far enough away. I'll be careful."

I reach for the door.

"Stop!" she screeches, and I jump back. "What are you thinking? It's not safe. Keep climbing."

I reach for the door again, and she yells.

"I'm tired," I reach out once more.

"Wait, wait, wait."

I pause, both hands flat against the door.

"Just wait. Let's talk it out. You're not thinking clearly."

"He's so far away now. It should be safe to get off."

I pause, listening pointedly. There are distant echoes every time a door crashes shut again. I can barely make out the sound of the inspector's boots on the stairs.

"Get off?" Cadence says, incredulous. "Get off what?"

"The upper floors—"

"And go where?"

"Home."

"Cole."

"What?"

"Really?"

"What?"

"You can't go home."

"Of course I can. Listen, it's safe enough, and I'll be careful, and—"

"*Cole. You. Can't. Go. Home.*"

The hairs prickle up on the back of my neck in a this-is-bad-but-you-haven't-realized-it-yet sort of full-body shudder that starts tiny and grows. "Oh."

"Yes, oh. What did you think? That you'd just sleep it off and head in to work tomorrow morning as if nothing happened? Refuge Force were looking for you anyways, remember? That inspector even saw you."

"Just my back. That could be anyone." I know full well I'll be on record as the surveillance tech on site.

"Don't act stupid. Even if Refuge Force were that useless, you really think you could just go back? Pretend you didn't see any of it? Didn't hear any of it? Go along merrily passing probation and working away in that dreary little death trap of an office?"

It's not until she says it that I realize that's exactly what I'd hoped for. No, not hoped. I don't hope. Planned. I'd been planning to go back and pretend nothing had happened. Keep my head down and follow the rules.

I turn and lean against the door, then slide down to the cold floor with a thump.

The rules. Regulation. It was all a lie. Or at least, it is now. Maybe obedience had done some good in the past. Maybe not. But by the enforcer's own admission, neither physical shields nor obedience and surrender are any guarantee of safety from the Mara. There's no reason behind any of it—Cadence's death, or Bell's, or my survival. They didn't eat my dreams to spare me, to make me the perfect drone—they ate because they wanted to. And Refuge, sending me to Corrections, putting me on probation—all my hard work,

all that self-control, self-denial, the clenched fists and the bitten tongue—and for what? It doesn't matter what I do, or think, or say. There's no point to any of it.

Despite myself, a little shiver of anticipation works its way up my spine. I've been living surrounded by corpses waiting to happen all along. It just turns out I'm one of them.

Chapter 9: Discovery

IT CHANGES EVERYTHING, knowing Refuge has been lying to us. Obedience to regulation doesn't keep the Mara away. Surrendering my dreams and desires to them never saved me. But it's crippling to even think about what's left. There's just no point. Noosh—pointless. Work—pointless. Passing probation . . . Staying away from corpses—pointless.

I lurch up the stairs, pulse pounding in my throat. I'm overreacting. It's too simplistic to dismiss everything. After all, how will I live without Refuge? There is nothing else. Nowhere else. I don't have any dreams left to help me find a way forward.

The image of Ravel, confident, mesmerizing, floats up from the roiling chaos of my thoughts. Ravel and his impossible offer. What did he call that place? Freedom? But even if I were willing to go to him, he said "down at the bottom of the stairs," right? And I'm going up.

"Cadence," I whisper. It's really more of a wheeze. And an excuse to stop climbing. I slump on a sharp-edged step, panting, for a few moments.

"What?"

"Why am I climbing? Like, besides that the inspector went down. Thanks for that, by the way."

"Haven't you been listening?" she says incredulously. "I'm saving you."

Saving seems a little dramatic, but okay. She's a dramatic person. And she's not wrong.

"But what's the point?"

"Keep climbing."

I groan.

"You do get that you can't go back, right?"

“Pretty much.”

“And you’re clear turning yourself in to save that worker wouldn’t help anything, yeah?”

I hadn’t considered trading myself for Morristu, but she doesn’t need to know that. “Yeah.”

“So you need help. A way out.”

“Out?”

“Out.”

“Oh. I thought . . .”

“Don’t you ever listen?”

“You said that already.”

“You need to get out of Refuge.” She enunciates as if she thinks I really am an idiot, when she’s obviously the one without a clue.

“There’s nothing out there.” The city has been an uninhabitable, flooded wasteland for generations, overrun by the icy ocean and drowned in toxic fog, only the Mara left to prowl its corroded towers and submerged streets.

“Oh, really? Fine, since you know so much: what do you want to do?”

“You know I don’t—”

“If you say ‘want things’ right now, I’m going to scream.”

“—want things.”

“Stop it.”

“It’s not my fault—”

“Stop it.”

“I can’t—”

“Enough. There’s nothing wrong with you.”

“How can you say that? Just because I got lucky and survived doesn’t mean —”

“Why did you touch the corpse, Cole?”

I stub my toes on the edge of a step and bark my knee. I have to sit down and clutch it for a moment until the pain fades. It’s good timing. I don’t have any idea what to say to her.

“It’s not a trick question. Too hard? Here’s an easier one: Why didn’t you report the field assignment when it first came in? You knew you weren’t ready for it. No? What about that creeper in the hallway you couldn’t take your eyes off of? Why did you procrastinate when you first got off the elevator? Why did you hide from Refuge Force? Why did you run?”

“I-I don’t—”

“What does a good drone do, Cole?”

“I—”

“A good drone obeys. A good worker follows regulation. If the Mara took your dreams and you can’t want anything, and you just live to obey, why are you listening to me right now?”

I want to be anywhere but here, in the dark, cold concrete scratching my back. I want to curl up on the floor next to Bell’s body. Not really an option. Doesn’t stop me from wanting it.

I want to go back to work. Slide into my desk and pretend I never moved from my console. Definitely not an option. I’ll never pass probation now, and I can’t stomach the idea of sitting there with my black band for all eternity, shoulders hunched against Supervisor Kistrfyv’s sneers.

I want.

My nails dig right through my gloves into the concrete step. When did it happen? When did I become this needy, this selfish, this demanding? When did my dreams return? Did I grow new ones?

I should call the Mara right now, surrender voluntarily, before I’m too full of wishing and wanting and dreaming to be drained without being killed. If ritual submission even works. But I can’t stop. I don’t want to. What I do want is the last year of my life back. I mean, all that work trying to fit in and earn their acceptance, wasted. I’d love to shout the truth about Refuge for the entire division to hear, to see the look on Kistrfyv’s face as I rip his authority to shreds

...

I mean, wouldn’t it feel great? At least, for all five minutes before the enforcers came and dragged me away. Besides, no one would listen. No one would believe me. It’s not as if exposing Refuge’s lies would make a difference .

..

“Anything?” Cadence asks, apparently done waiting.

I don’t want to say no, so I start talking without a plan.

“I can’t go back.” It’s as if I can hear her eyes rolling, but I plod on, ticking off the things I know so far. “And I can’t help anybody, and—”

“I didn’t say that.”

“What?”

“I didn’t say you couldn’t help anybody. You should. Help people.”

“They won’t listen to me.” The appeal of destroying Refuge’s authority is not lost on me. If Refuge no longer existed, I wouldn’t be a probationary worker. I wouldn’t even be a failed trainee. It might not even be a problem that Noosh had

never worked properly on me. If everyone else's life were turned upside down, mine wouldn't stand out so much. But . . . "They have no reason to trust some probationary worker. They'll think I'm crazy. There's no way I can convince anyone by myself."

"Which is why you need to do what I tell you. You can't survive on your own, right?"

I nod.

"So you need allies to help you bring down Refuge," she says, as if it's so simple and obvious a next step it really goes without saying.

A memory of Ravel's outstretched hand and the shadowy, descending stairs beyond flickers to the surface. She continues before I can point out she's been leading me in the wrong direction.

"It solves everything. Think about it: Refuge's after you now, so by exposing its lies, you not only secure your own safety, you earn a place with strong allies who'll help you get the job done."

It makes sense, kind of, although it's weird how serious Cadence seems as she explains. Still, I warm to the idea of any plan that involves attacking Refuge. All that wasted effort to behave and obey, to make myself small and silent and invisible and empty. Why not tear Refuge down? Why not make them all suffer for my misery? Mine and the others', living and dead.

Okay, new plan. Take down Refuge. Find allies to convince the workers they're being lied to (and take care of me). Which means I'm going to Ravel after all, just as he said I would.

It's been too long since it was okay to feel. I think I should feel, I don't know, indignant? Embarrassed? Maybe it's embarrassed; my face is warm and my pulse is speeding up. But it's almost like excitement. Despite my entire life falling apart in the space of an hour or so, maybe this day is going to turn out after all.

But this is Cadence—silly, flighty, troublemaking Cadence—telling me to use what I know to buy my way into a new life. She doesn't have the greatest track record when it comes to having a solid grasp on reality.

"This isn't just one of your made-up stories again, is it?"

I don't know what I'll do if it is, but better to know it now than later.

"Would I do that to you?" she says.

Chapter 10: Eternity

CADENCE AND I are alone in a world of near darkness. Dying.

At least, I'm sure *I'm* dying.

My heart races, about to burst. My muscles quiver on the verge of collapse. My uniform is soaked through with sweat. I even pulled my mask away from my face, not that there's anyone here to see. The breath rasps in my throat, tasting of blood and pain. I think I'm going to pass out.

This must be why Refuge never bothered expressly prohibiting use of the stairs. Assigned health cycles never prepared me for anything like this. I've lost count of how many times I've scraped and bruised my shins and elbows. Kicking off my shoe to avoid leaving a trail of blood seems pretty pointless now; between the sweat and the scrapes, I'm leaving quite the mark on these stairs. But it's hard to be too worried about pursuit when the burning in my legs competes with the fire in my throat for attention.

"You're doing great," Cadence says. "Almost there. Can you believe how clear the air is in here?"

I'd strangle her if I had the energy. And if she were corporeal. As it is, I can barely summon the will to raise a hand to the next step. Pause. Now my knee.

I've been crawling up this stairway for an eternity and will continue on for all time. I can't remember why I started, and I don't have the will to stop. I am a machine, set to continue until the parts wear out.

Scratch that. If I'm a machine, I'm definitely in need of maintenance. My throat is hot and tight, my tongue thick in my mouth. My lips are cracked as if all the moisture has leached away already. My stomach stopped grumbling a while ago. I've missed my Noosh for the evening. I've never missed a meal before. I'm not sure what will happen to me.

“How much further?” I say.

Cadence snorts. “You’re being ridiculous. Get over yourself. A little exercise is good for you. Weakling.”

She singsongs the last word as if she’s reverting to her usual childishness, faking echoes since the stairwell can’t bounce them back.

I pretend not to hear her. Nice that she’s back to her chipper, pesky self. “So, how exactly is climbing stairs going to help me get allies? Who are these allies, anyway?”

“Wait and see.”

“I think I’d rather just go to Ravel, thanks.”

She changes the subject instead of responding; we’ve already argued about it, repeatedly. It’s not safe to go down; Haynfyv headed that way. Besides, Cadence apparently knows people who’ll help me if I go up. I didn’t like this plan much from the start, mostly because it involves more climbing. Also, because I’m still afraid she’s making this all up . . . and maybe a little because it doesn’t involve Ravel. Cadence did have a point about the risk of running into Haynfyv. Of course, heading for the rooftop sounded a lot more reasonable several floors ago. Right about now, being dragged off by Haynfyv doesn’t sound so bad. I bet he’d give me a drink of water, at least.

“You want to tell everyone the truth about Refuge, right?” Cadence reminds me, as if I’ve forgotten the plan already.

Not right at this moment, I don’t, not if it means climbing until my heart gives out. I’m more and more ready to quit on this plan, or at least her part of it, if she doesn’t start delivering soon. Of course, the thought of backtracking after how far I’ve come is horrible in its own right.

“Right,” I say, reluctantly, “so why am I killing myself alone in the dark?”

Maybe not the best choice of words.

Cadence doesn’t seem to notice. “Just trust me, okay? It’ll make more sense later. I just need to . . . If we can get to the roof, I’ll remember more and—”

“Wait, what do you mean ‘remember’? I thought you said there were people up there.”

“It’s—he’s . . . It’ll help, okay? I’ll remember more, and we can find—find— allies. I’ll help you find allies on the roof. They’ll take care of you. I promise.”

I start crawling up the stairs again. It’s not that I believe her. I’m growing more and more convinced this stairway will never end and there’s no destination and no help for me at the end of it.

But there’s an edge to Cadence’s voice I don’t like. I wonder again about the

girl, Suzie. If what I'd encountered had been her ghost—just if—then could the same thing happen to Cadence? Could I stop it from happening to Cadence?

I crawl onward, distraction helping to dull the pain. When I run out of stairs, it's not so much a surprise as a revelation.

I press forward dumbly against the door at the end of the stairs. Pause. Press again. Shuffle in a circle until I'm back facing the door.

Stairs stretching down into shadows. Door ahead. Walls. That's it.

I made it.

I draw a deep, rasping breath and start coughing. My tongue is buried under a blanket of bitter dust. My lips are cracked. My throat burns. I curl on my side against the door and listen to the sound of my heartbeat slowing.

There's a noise beyond the door. Sharp, high calls, piercing and far off, behind a faint rushing sound that rises and falls like one of Cadence's less inspired songs, like breathing.

Sweat stands out on my skin, already growing chilly. My clothes are soaked. I'm shaking from terror, or something like it.

Cadence is entranced. She breathes something that sounds like "seegles."

The word means nothing to me. I have no interest in meeting the source of that horrifying, alien sound.

A groaning, rattling roar starts somewhere far below. Suddenly, I'd much rather meet these "seegles" of Cadence's than whatever monstrosity is surging behind me.

I strain upwards and slide along the door until I feel a handle. The door flies open, snapping at its limits and bouncing back before the onrushing air shoves it away again.

The thought of roaring and shrieking horrors is wiped from my mind in an instant.

I have discovered light.

Thanks for reading this extended sneak peek!

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