

ONE

HOW DO YOU GET used to being a raider—a thief and plunderer—so you can save lives? Shavir couldn't help wondering as they sped eastward on the 495 into Queens. Wearing black pants and a turtleneck, she sat on the floor of an unmarked e-van with fake license plates, her body motionless, face frozen, blood pounding.

Four other inert figures, equally clad in black, huddled next to and opposite her, the space between them filled with duffle bags and large lidded plastic crates. In the front seats, Finn's bright blond hair shone next to Troy's shimmering brown as the city lights washed over them.

It was all familiar, their normal routine, but how could you ever get used to that kind of thing?

They took the Van Wyck Expressway toward the coast, right into the permanent evacuation zone, the world turning pitch-black once they reached Belt Parkway. The city no longer provided electricity for anything east or south of here. Where JFK Airport's big pool of light used to be, broken terminals and flooded runways lay hidden in the hot night. Shavir tried to picture what it had looked like when she'd taken her last flight out of there six years ago, but all she could see was the epic disaster of Hurricane Shelby that had washed it all away.

Finn slowed the van as they reached the closed exit ramp for Cross Bay Boulevard, curving carefully around the warning signs and roadblocks before heading into the nothingness of Howard Beach.

They slid past long rows of abandoned houses, the broken facades adorned with elaborate patterns of flood marks.

“Turn left and then make a right,” Troy directed from the passenger seat with the authority of the guy responsible for scouting it all out.

Finn turned the van toward the oceanfront, the dimmed headlights grazing over piles of debris and a shadowy thicket of overgrown yards.

“Stop right here,” Troy said into the silence. “That’s it.”

The van came to a halt.

Lenny cracked the side door, and they waited. Seven people, motionless in the black night, listened to the racing songs of the cicadas and the slow wash of the surf below the van. Wafts of air came seeping in, so hot and humid Shavir felt them through the fabric of her turtle-neck. She tasted salt and realized she was panting.

“All clear. Let’s go!” Tara hissed from behind, and then Lenny pushed open the door.

Shavir switched on her night-vision goggles and grabbed a crate before stepping into the unreal greenish world outside. Reality came lapping against her shins and gurgling into her rubber boots as she sank into the muddy mix of seawater, dirt, and trash that covered the streets. They’d never gone this far into the evacuation zone before. Troy had told them to prepare for some wading in the Atlantic, but this was deeper than expected. The green froth of breakers crashed against the remains of beachfront houses just a few blocks down the street.

Troy took the lead, and the rest of them followed single file, walking upright with their crates and bags since, aside from the cicadas, no one else was around. They slipped along the side of an old storage building, its narrow windows boarded up against the onslaught of the elements. Someone had taken the trouble to elevate the path with concrete, so they now stepped on dry ground even though it was high tide.

At the back entrance, they waited for Nacho to snap the lock.

Sweat collected under Shavir’s mask, along the edges of her goggles and below her chin. Adrenaline bled into exhilaration and a strong sense of fear as she followed the others into the derelict building, leaving Lenny and Zeno behind at the door. Up a narrow staircase to the second floor, and through another door, this one fortified with

soundproofing rubber and an additional lock and metal bolt. Nacho and Troy worked in tandem on those, and the door sprang open.

They all held their breath. No alarm.

The men stayed behind while Shavir followed Tara into the dim room, muted whimpers pervading the foul air. It was at this point, usually, that her fear subsided and the anger set in, propelling her into the methodical mode of action she now needed. She counted the cages, twelve of them—old, decrepit, too small as they always were—and, reliably, the wrath came. She snatched the bolt cutter from her belt and sliced through the padlock of the first cage.

The puppies were much bigger than expected, at least sixteen weeks, and predictably chubby, overstuffed with cheap, fatty food. They were jumping up and cowering down, torn between dread and delight that someone had broken into their crowded cage.

Shavir grabbed the first squirming mass of life and pressed the warm shivering body to her chest. A little tongue found its way between her ski mask and turtleneck, excitedly licking her salty skin.

“It’s okay, baby,” she whispered. “I’m gonna get you out of here.”

She lifted the lid off her crate and placed the puppy inside, grabbing the next one and putting it down beside the first in a single movement, working swiftly until they all tumbled over each other. She closed the lid, yanked up the load, and carried it to the door where Troy was waiting, offering his empty crate in exchange. Tara was right behind her, placing her crate into the hands of Nacho, who followed Troy down the stairs.

The stink of decay was getting more intense, and it was when she opened the third cage that Shavir found the body. The other pups were still alive, but this one little thing was cold, lifeless, already decomposing and poisoning its siblings.

She knew what to do. *Don’t freeze. Keep moving. Grab a puppy. Ignore the body. Don’t lose time.* But despite herself, tears blurred her vision, soaking the goggles, the mask. She looked up, around at the room—the soundproofed walls, the broken cages, the rotting dog food, the dirty floor laced with excrement and maggots. She inhaled the putrid air and started gagging.

“You okay?” Tara asked, suddenly next to her.

Shavir wasn’t okay. Nothing in this room, in this whole damn city, was okay, and all she wanted to do right now was sit down in the muck and grime and cry. But she nodded without stopping her momentum, not allowing the slightest break in her routine, doing what she had to do until the cage was almost empty. Only the one little dead body was left, like so many other dead bodies they’d had to leave behind.

It took her and Tara less than ten minutes to clear everything out. They received two empty bags in exchange for the last couple full crates and turned to check the walls for doors. The first was locked, but there was a second one at the back of the room.

The way Tara’s body grew rigid when the door gave way told Shavir they’d found what they were looking for. She pushed past her friend into a tiled space, the floor sticky against her boots. She recoiled from the greenish outlines of the tools, but, stepping forward, she put everything in reach into her bag: meat hooks, knives, hatchets, and all the electrified stuff that ran on batteries. The nausea was so bad by now she was just grabbing things, paying as little attention as possible to what they were or were meant to do. A mistake.

A meat hook caught the hem of her sleeve and pulled it back, ripping her skin. She saw a dark line well up along the underside of her exposed forearm and yanked at the sleeve, covering the wound before her blood dripped on the floor. Bending down for a precious thirty seconds, she frantically scanned the floor for anything allowing for DNA recognition. Tara told her to get out, twice, her voice uncharacteristically urgent, and so she finally zipped up her bag, and they ran down the stairs and out the back door.

Lenny’s dark shape was waiting for them outside, his right arm gesturing to duck down into the water immediately.

Obediently, Shavir stepped off the path and sank into the muddy ocean, the cut on her arm screaming at contact. She crouched down and looked up at the black sky.

The high pitch of a surveillance drone whirred above the cicadas and the surf. It had both ears and infrared eyes, so the thing to do was to duck deep down into the rancid water and remain absolutely still.

Shavir tried to keep herself from breathing, from thinking, even, aware only of Tara's body next to her own and the menacing drone above.

It didn't pause, nor did it turn or descend. But if the van got into its vision range, they were screwed.

The drone flew on to the back of the building, its whirl dying away into the perverse soundtrack of the neighborhood. When it was gone, they emerged from the ocean and waded back to the van, where Nacho swung open the side door for them, on his face shock and relief.

Shavir ripped off her goggles and mask as she jumped in, gulping for air. She dropped her bag on the wet floor and collapsed next to it as the van started moving. A whiplash of pain shot up her arm when her knee bounced against the cut, and this time she cried out.

Finn turned around from the driver's seat. "You got hurt?"

It baffled her, that question, coming from him at that moment. A rare display of care so sudden and so misplaced in the grand scheme of things, it made her want to laugh out loud. She stared at the milky oval of Finn's face across the dark van filled with dripping activists and terrified dogs. "I'm fine."

Without another word, he turned back around.

One of the rescues started whimpering in a crate stacked close to Shavir's ear. "It's okay, baby," she breathed. "We're safe now."

She leaned back against the crates and wondered if that was true. That dark line of blood on her skin. The stained floor that had made it impossible to tell apart her own blood from whatever had dripped from the tools over the months these fuckers had been running their illegal meat farm. Hopefully, she'd been fast enough covering the wound. But really, what was she doing out here, doing this job, if she couldn't ever get used to it or do it right?

Across from her in the dark, Tara laughed as she peeled off her soaked turtleneck, exuding confidence as she always did. But Shavir was still obsessing about her mistake and what it might mean when they passed the roadblock again and the van sped up in the direction from where it had come, back to the distant lights of Brooklyn.