



RUIN

N. M. Martinez

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By N. M. Martinez

Cover art and Title design by [Sarah Ellerton](#)

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Thirty years ago there was a revolution. Humans granted powers through experimentation performed upon them against their will broke free from the labs and burned across the land creating dangerous territory called the Wildlands.

Paula grew up in the Neutral Territory and has never known a time without the neighboring Wildlands as a threat. Her government does what it can to protect her people, but they still live in fear of the powerful Wildlanders invading their safe and protected territory.

Then, in the middle of the night, Paula's mother is arrested and Paula is banned from the Neutral Territory to the Wildlands. Now she must make a new life for herself in a territory of people she knows will not be welcoming.

Notes:

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To Laura, Carla, and Van, thank you for your help and support!

And to my dad, thank you for the inspiration

One

They call it a waiting room. This isn't a waiting room. It's a holding cell.

I lay on my side curled up in a ball on the hard mattress. The stiff threads of the wool blanket scratch at my cheek. It's hard to say exactly how long I've been down here. There's no clock and no windows. Between breaths I can hear the bare bulb buzzing softly above my head. The bright light reflects off all the gray surfaces in the room and hurts my eyes. So I close them though I can still see the light dancing before me, burned into my sight.

There hasn't been any other sound in what's probably been hours. It feels like hours. Somewhere out there I can only imagine that my mother, the Neutral Territory politician, is talking to someone to clear this all up.

My eyes slip open. I rub at the blanket watching the fibers flatten against my fingertips as I listen for noises. There are none, surprisingly. I start to breathe again through my nose and my mouth. There are no scents here. The room is completely sterile with no hint that there was ever anyone else here before me. Not even a hospital is this clean.

In the corner of the room, the duffel bag they forced me to pack slouches against the wall like it had a long day. Deep green like the blanket I lay on, I can't help but get the feeling that it is military issue. All it contains are my clothes. That's all I put inside it when they forced me to pack. I didn't know I'd need anything else.

I press my cold toes against the insides of my shoes and curl my limbs closer to my body. The blanket is so perfectly tucked in that it looks like a part of the mattress meant more for show than actual use. I doubt I'd be strong enough to actually pull it up, and I probably wouldn't want to lay under it either considering how uncomfortable it is to lay on top of.

Thoughts tumble around inside my head painfully as my stomach rumbles, twisting with hunger. I haven't been fed and they might never come back. Overhead, the light cuts away the shadows and makes it impossible for me to sleep.

And because I remember. In the middle of the night, I woke up, a sliver of moonlight falling through my window as I lay comfortably in my bed, my mother asleep in the room next door. There wasn't a sound, but I could feel it like waking from a bad dream. My heart beat oddly in my chest pumping enough blood to make my ears hot. As my hand went up to press my ear lobe against my skin, letting the warmth spread out, my door burst open.

Sitting in this gray room now, my hand automatically goes up to my earlobe the same as it did hours earlier. It's brought on by the memory, and when I realize it, I put my hand down on the blanket again and give it a rub letting it cut at my fingertips.

I remember screaming, I think. People dressed completely in black invaded my room like shadows. Their faces were covered and they wore dark shades over their eyes so that the only thing my eyes had to latch onto was their weapons. Large guns that weren't trained on me. They didn't have to be.

"Don't scream," the person in front said roughly. From the voice, I could tell it was a woman, but there was no comfort in that. She looked like the rest and held just as dangerous a weapon. She was the one to toss me the duffel bag. "Get your clothes. Let's go. Now."

All I could think about was Mom as I shoved the clothes into the bag. My eyes stung in fright as I shoved and kept trying to breathe. Mom hadn't said-- she couldn't have-- but I could remember her words from days ago. She said to me one morning over waffles she'd actually made herself, "Times are changing, Paula." There was something of a sad smile on her face. Maybe it was just a cautionary smile. "We'll have to be prepared in case things change too much."

I only looked at her like she was crazy. "And live underground like Uncle Wiley?"

~~She shushed me. We weren't supposed to talk about Uncle Wiley. Still, she kept that smile plastered on her face. "And eat food out of cans. Don't forget that part."~~

Now, lying on this hard mattress, I crumple. My face presses into the blanket. No tears come though I can feel them deep inside locked in my chest filling my lungs. It's a struggle for air. I don't know where Mom is. I don't even know where I am.

But I still remembered the glimpse I caught of her as they hauled us to different dark vans parked askew in front of our house. Her eyes were wide enough that I could see the white edging, the black irises like perfectly round holes. In that instant I drunk in the sight of her as if I knew I wouldn't see her again. Her short hair, dark against her light skin, was all over the place, hanging in her face wild as she fought them. The top she wore clung tightly to her body and rode up as she struggled. But when she saw me, when her eyes went wide, she stopped. The group around her stopped too like she suddenly become too heavy to push on even though she's hardly over a hundred pounds all together.

And then she screamed my name. Surrounded by the noise suppressing darkness, her voice pierced through the enforced quiet. "Paula!" She began to fight again ferociously in a way I never believed I could see her fight, but it was useless. The darkness surrounded the both of us and pulled us in different directions. Before I even had a chance to call back I was in the van being pulled to the cold steel floor and held there as we set off.

My lashes have become heavily saturated with tears, and as I blink the wetness spreads to the smaller lashes under my eyes. It's hard to know what to do right now since I'm still unsure of what exactly happened. I don't know where Mom is or what these people are going to do to me.

There's a metal click at the door, then it swings open and I hop up into a sitting position on the bench. Another special enforcer dressed all in black stands there. By the harsh white light of the bare bulb, I can clearly see that this blob is in the form of a woman. She doesn't hold a gun, but I notice a holster at her waist.

"Come. Bring your clothes."

I stand up quickly and grab my duffel bag. She doesn't wait for me. Before I've even lifted my bag she's out the door and I race after her. The woman is tall, her strides long, and I have to struggle to keep up as I drag my now heavy feet down various gray hallways. They all look exactly the same to me which only adds to my unease. In each hall, I try to count the numbers of heavy metal doors we pass, aware that they may hold others, maybe even my mom.

The last turn takes us to a different kind of door. This one is a heavy wooden door. We step through into a smaller room where the walls are covered in a deep red fabric from the ceiling to the floor. They drape over the wall like curtains and I almost reach out just to feel it, surprised at the richness of the soft looking fabric.

"Don't touch that," says the guard as she reaches a hand out to grab me and pull me even closer to her side. I bump into her, surprised at how solid her body is.

We step through another door and end up in a Judgment room. I freeze just as we step through, and she stops with her hands behind her back as if waiting to be called. Right away I notice the small group standing in front of the judge's place. They speak in mostly in quiet voices though some of the words snap in anger.

Everything in the room is bigger than it looks on TV. The statues in the corner of the room reach to the ceiling which is just a tiny bit higher than the ceiling of the halls we walked through. Over each door there is a large and ornate covering made of wood supported by large columns of marble. The room is filled with heavy wooden benches, each perfectly polished so that they shine warmly though they don't look very inviting for actual sitting.

In front of us is the large bench for the judge. It's at least seven feet in the air. Four men stand

front of it talking, the oldest looking one standing nearly as tall as the judge's seat. I stare at him watching the way he glares at the smaller man in front of him, waving his large hands with the sleeves rolled up and exposing his massive forearms. His hair hangs sloppily in a face etched with lines from a hard lived life. He clutches his hands as if he means to attack, but the smaller man facing him has a black suited special ops person with him who stands behind him holding a gun like the ones that had invaded my room in the night. And then I notice the others around the room. All dressed the same and holding their guns pointing towards the ceiling though I can see their hands on the triggers ready to aim quickly.

What is going on? I bite my lip and hold my duffel tightly, terrified suddenly of becoming a target. Then I hear the smaller man in front clearing his throat and I'm pushed from behind by the larger bodied woman and nearly trip over my feet.

The older man looks to me, his angry brows rising slightly at the sight of me. Behind him stands a younger man who I hadn't had a chance to really look over. His cool gray eyes are already on me and probably have been on me for a while.

From behind, my shirt is grabbed, twisted into a ball in her hands and shoved forward towards the strange men standing there. Neither of them moves towards me. I stumble but manage to stop myself and stare at the pair of them.

"I'm sure you must recognize her." The man's voice oozes from over my shoulder. "A gift from us to you. A memento to remember your spy."

The older man's eyes narrow as he looks at me, unfamiliarity clear on his face. "No, I don't."

I glance from him to the man behind him. His face seems to harden, his brows coming down again while the man behind him maintains his cool gaze. I turn a bit to look over my shoulder. The smaller man looks up at the larger man in front of me with a small, cruel smile.

"The DNA is a match for you. I don't know how Cheryl hid her from us for so long, but it will be added to her list of crimes against the state."

It takes effort to swallow as I hear his words but don't fully understand them. Crimes against the state? My mother? But she's a politician. She's done nothing but work for the state. And a DNA match with this man? What does that even mean? But I can't even ask. My mouth is stuck together.

"Take her with you. And just remember it's only a matter of time before we find the rest of them."

I hold my mouth closed, a headache starting just over my brows that blurs my vision. Both of the men look at me, but it's the face of the older one I search. The one behind him shows nothing. It's the face of the older one I can see something. The way his mouth pulls down and his brows press together making a crease between them.

I turn towards the smaller man one last time and catch his eye. His gaze shifts from a small smile to a dark glare directed at me. "Go," he says in a low even tone directed right at me. "You're banished."

My knuckles strain as I grip the duffel bag hard, frozen in place by his cruel eyes but scared to turn back to the two men they want to take me away from here. There's only one place we can be going. I'm banished and these men are taking me away-- The Wildlands.

The woman in black steps forward with her hand on her holster. I can't see her eyes, but it's enough of a movement. I take a step back and feel a large warm hand on my arm that tugs me softly, yet still a bit roughly, making me turn. Our eyes don't meet. I can't look up at either of them again now that I know what they are.

We walk out together with a small crowd of the special ops following us to the fence that leads to the buffer zone. None of us say a word, though I do catch a glimpse of the older man's mouth, set hard in a line of disapproval. The younger man glances around as if he were taking in details about black suits around us. When I almost catch his eye again, I look ahead quickly.

The fence goes high up into the air. At the top are strands of barbed wire. Two guards stand at the entrance dressed in regular military uniforms. They watch us come up cautiously, each holding a large gun. On the other side of the fence, the ground is covered in brown plants and wild bushes. The grass is waist high for me except for a worn path which we follow with the guards next to us.

I walk between the two men while trying not to accidentally brush against them with my hand. The walk is uncomfortably quiet. No one says a word. I keep trying to glance up, but catching sight of either the gray eyes of the younger guy or the forearms of the older guy makes me nervous. My body is completely on autopilot, my brain blank, as I take steps further and further away from home and away from my mother.

A hasty breath burns down my throat to my lungs. I suck on my lower lip, squeezing it tight between my teeth. It's like when you lose someone and your brain refuses to accept it, but you know it's real. This isn't a dream; it's actually happening. But I can't help feeling like someone will say "Just kidding," at the end of this walk and let me go back. I'm not a part of this. I don't even know these men.

There's a second gate, a larger wider one that is sterner than the simple wire one we first walked through. This one is supported by cinder blocks and tall towers where more uniforms stand with their rifles. It's when I see the second fence that I worry I'm going to be sick. Automatically, my hand jumps to my mouth and it presses my lips against my teeth like I can stop that feeling.

On the other side of the fence lays The Wildlands. My first glimpse is sparse green hills that go on into the distance. There's a small road before us, and on that road there's an old car with rust strains all over its basic white paint.

"Go. Don't come back," the guard in the lead says. I can almost hear her smile.

My feet freeze. I'm stuck in my place watching the two men walk carefully over to the car with their eyes on the tower. The guard behind me gives me a shove towards them.

"You too."

The older man stops and looks back at us as the younger man walks around to the other side of the car. First he glares at the guard behind me, then his eyes fall on me. "C'mon," he says with that same expression he's worn since the judgment room.

I don't move. My body won't listen, every muscle is frozen. Behind me is my home, the last I'll ever see of it, and in front of me is the one place I never thought I'd go.

The younger man is already on the far side of the car when he pauses to take in the scene and then he scowls. My body, still frozen, flinches when he starts towards me, but the only thing I can do is squeeze my eyes shut until he's on me. He wraps one hand around my upper arm, the other one ripping the duffel from my hands, and pulls me to the car,

I want to pull away. I don't want his hands on me. But he holds me securely, in a way that would be difficult to break. Fighting him would only annoy him more.

He tosses my bag into the back seat, then pushes me towards the car. I throw my hands up to stop my body from hitting the side, and then I hop in, scooting across the back seat before he grabs me and tries his toss again.

I grab my duffel bag and hold onto it tightly.

The younger man doesn't look abashed under the glare of the older one. He only shrugs, then walks around the car to have a seat in front of me. The older man gets in, and starts the car without a word. As the car rolls down the broken road and into the Wildlands, my heart beats so hard in my chest that I can feel it hitting against the fabric of the duffel. My eyes sting, but I wipe them on the rough material, hoping that no one is looking at me and seeing my weakness and my fear.

The younger man's voice cuts through the awkward quiet in the car sharply. "Well that went all to hell." He scoots back in his seat and stretches so that the back of the chair bends towards me. "What"

we going to do with her? A Neutral girl has no place in the Wildlands."

~~The older man gives a sigh. He rubs at his face with one hand as the other sticks to the steering wheel to guide us safely past the large holes in the pavement.~~

The younger one gives a sigh of his own, slightly harsher. Under his breath, I think he says, "I know what to do with her."

My duffel sits on my lap, thankfully obscuring my view of the younger one directly in front of me. The glare from the older one that I catch from the corner of my eye is enough to make my stomach curl into a ball that painfully pulls at whatever is connecting it to my heart and the rest of my body.

The older one doesn't say anything. His look is meant to be more than enough of a warning, and for a moment, it almost seems as if it will work. The younger one is quiet, looking out the window. Then he adds, "You always were a little bit soft."

My hands against the fabric of the bag become sweaty, and it's an effort to hold them together. I squeeze up a little bit more, drawing my knees closer to my seat. The older man seems to completely ignore the dig at him and a thinly veiled threat to me like it was nothing.

"They knew we were coming." The older man carries on with the conversation, his voice deep in the small space of the car.

The younger one rests his arm on the open window. I can see it around my duffel bag. There is a side mirror that reflects back to me his eyes squinting as he looks off into the distance.

"They got to someone," he says. "Or they had someone planted."

Air flows back to me from his open window, shoving my hair around. I'm thankful for the fresh air. It dries my eyes and gives me something else to focus on other than their voices quietly conspiring. Out the window I can see nothing but hills in the distance. From everything I learned about the Wildlands in school, this isn't what I had expected.

A tingle along the nape of my neck draws my attention back to the car. Things are quiet again, but in the side mirror there are a pair of clear gray eyes watching me that don't turn away when I notice them. He looks slightly annoyed, brows drawn and eyes hardened as if he's expecting that this won't go well.

"So are you going to tell us your name?" He says without turning back.

"Paula." It's been hours since I last spoke. My throat is dry, and so the word comes out as little more than a constricted croak.

"What?" He says, this time turning towards the open window so that his ear faces me.

"Paula."

"Ah." He turns to the other man and repeats it to him for me in a quiet voice. They don't say anything after that though. They don't even offer me their names in trade, and I find I can't ask them.

Gray Eyes looks at me again in the side mirror. When I catch his eyes, he says, "You might as well sleep. We've got a while before we get there."

I don't really think I can, but I nod and lay my head on the bag as best I can and close my eyes so I at least look like I'm trying. But it doesn't take long before my eyes open again of their own accord. I don't even realize it at first. I just sit there watching the hills in the distance as we drive, the three of us quiet in the car.

Two

In school they said that the Wildlands were nothing but dead grass and broken buildings, yet leisurely rolling beside us are the green hills with large wild trees growing thickly. We drive on a crumbling road with tall grass and wild plants growing out of the sides. Some of the plants even grow on the road in places.

The rough canvas of the duffel rubs at my cheek every time we hit a bump in the road. Other than the plants growing in abundance, I don't see any other sign of life. The way school made it sound, the entire territory had been populated with cities that had been decimated when the Experiments from the labs took over in the Revolution.

I shiver. The man who's driving the car is older than most of my teachers. He's older than my mother which means that he's probably one of them. He's an Experiment.

They say that the people who were experimented on in the labs have powers. Some hidden potential was unlocked when the people here were experimented on. It was how they were able to revolt thirty years ago and cause the Revolution that destroyed this land and created the Wildlands.

I glance ahead at the younger man leaning back in his chair. In the side view mirror, I can see his eyes closed, but he doesn't seem to actually be asleep. The planes of his face are smooth, making him look younger than he appeared in the judgment room. If the older man is an Experiment, then he's old enough to be the child of an Experiment, so he probably has powers too.

The younger man opens his eyes narrowly. With his head tilted back, he doesn't have to open his eyes much to see ahead. His hands are folded over his chest.

The older man's voice scratches out the question, "You're awake?"

"I'm not asleep." The younger one says, unmoving, his eyes staring forward.

"Good. We're close."

Their voices are quiet, but it's impossible to not hear. My stomach clenches again, painfully pulling on my insides. In the hazy distance, I can see the shadows of tall buildings against the sky.

There's movement in the front seat. The side view mirror shows a glimpse of elbow and forearm as the younger man slides his arms into his shirt and then leans forward to shove it off his stomach. As the shirt goes over his head, I see a dark skull staring back at me on the pale skin of his back. It's surrounded by an intricate design that reminds me of flames.

I can't help staring at him as he tosses the shirt to the floor and sits back in the chair. The light from the sun bounces off his skin and seems to get absorbed by my cheeks. I notice the scars on his arms. Some are faded with age while others are newer, discolored smears on his lightly tanned skin. There's no pattern to them. They are even on his shoulders, but I notice very few on what I can see of his back. The first thought in my head is that he's a fighter. It's said that's how they live in the Wildlands-- they fight. He's gotten in enough fights to have scars and lived to tell about it.

He sits up as we get closer to the buildings and runs a hand through his silky brown hair. "You think they'll want her?"

I peek around the duffel. The older man sits in his seat without saying a word though the younger one has his eyes on him. He grips the wheel, his small eyes narrowed as he looks ahead. The younger one sighs before turning back to face the front.

It doesn't take long before we're at the city line. The buildings rise high into the air, but not wanting to get even closer to the window, I don't follow them up to the sky. Instead, I just watch as we drive past them. On the first floor, most of the buildings have broken windows with shards still hanging in the frame. The paint is peeling from the exterior, and in a few cases I can see plants growing from the inside, their limbs poking through the broken windows.

My grip on the duffel loosens. This is what they had talked about in school. It's been thirty years since the Revolution when the people who were experimented on broke free and over ran the land. The last reminders of civilization are crumbling buildings that have been abused by the local residents. Some of the buildings have writing scrawled on them and then writing scrawled over that, both faded with time and exposure to sunlight so that whatever they said isn't legible anymore. There are a few buildings that look like there were fires set on the inside. The scorch marks from the flames mar the windows frames and the walls making the room look even blacker on the inside.

Gray Eyes catches me again in the mirror. There is a dangerous sharpness to his eyes. "Get down. You look like a stray."

"Down?" His words directed at me completely confuse me for a moment.

"Lay across the back." There's impatience in his voice that reminds me of the way he grabbed me earlier, practically shoving me into the car.

I do as he's told me, laying the duffel on the floor and then stretching out across the back seat and putting my head on my arms. My stomach still tugs, but now it's tugging sideways. I pull my legs up. Gray Eyes glances back at me directly without the grimy mirror as our filter, and I freeze in the spot. He is handsome. None of the scars on his body are on his face, and he looks young though I can tell he's definitely older than me. But his eyes are cold. Maybe it's because of the color. There is just something that is lacking in them.

And then the car slows to a stop. The older man sighs halfway in annoyance. For half a second it looks like he's going to get up, but it's the younger man who swings his door open. "I'll do it."

I almost lift my head, but the older man grunts at me. "Stay down."

With a nod, I press myself against the seat and listen. Not far off I can hear voices, though it's difficult to tell what's being said. One voice I think I recognize as Gray Eyes rings clear over the others. It speaks with some authority and annoyance. But there are others, desperation and anger clear in their voices.

The older man watches with his hands on the steering wheel. He sits still like that for a minute before he utters under his breath, "Stupid."

"There's your meat," I hear Gray Eyes say as he comes closer to us. The sudden silence swells in my ears, filling the car like heavy air pressing down on my lungs. Though I didn't see it, I know something bad has happened. I can feel the shift in the air.

Gray Eyes comes back to the car, a knife in his hands that he carries low by his leg. When he sits down, he grabs the shirt from the floor and uses it to wipe the knife down quickly before it disappears again somewhere on his person. The shirt gets dropped to the floor again. Still I catch the red gash across it from the knife.

I cover my face with my hands and turn towards the seat, the tip of my nose touching the faded fabric. My hair falls over my hand and my face, one extra small barrier that helps me not see. But inside my chest, my heart thuds against bone.

The car has already started moving. We drive past the crowd with their words still simmering angrily.

The younger man speaks quietly. "I had to. We should probably take care of the rest later. It's starting to become a problem."

"Not now."

I peek through my hair and my fingers at the younger man. He leans back with a sigh going to his earlier position. His eyes partially closed his hands over his stomach. From my spot I can see him clearer. Well-muscled, plenty of scars across his front, and a tattoo across his back-- he's exactly the sort of person we were warned about. He's obviously one of those people who, with or without power, fights for survival. We've talked about these people in school. They band together to form tribes and

then fight to kill over territory, food, water. They're the kind of people who wouldn't feel anything killing another. They enjoy it.

My fingers press my eyes shut and I curl up tighter, not wanting to look at him any closer.

"All right, we're here." The older man shuts the car off as he grunts out the words.

The younger man is already getting out of the car, grabbing his shirt to take with him. As I sit up, catch his eyes again. They look colder, a quiet threat. These people hate Neutrals-- especially tribal members. It's why we need guards with guns and barbed wire at our borders, because they wouldn't hesitate to kill us if they were given the chance.

It doesn't take much thought to realize that I need to avoid this man.

The older man stands up and then turns to pull the lever on the seat. It shoots forward, and I come out carefully. Under my feet there's more broken pavement with short grass growing up through the cracks. I tug on my duffel bag, sliding it along the seat to me before I lift it up and out of the car.

There are people standing around, many of them staring at us. I try not to meet their eyes, scared of what I'll see. But then I hear the younger man swear out loud. He stands by the back of the car, still with his shirt in his hand.

"Not Brandon." He turns his gaze on the older man behind me, his narrowed eyes reminding me of a knife.

The older man feels close to me. I don't look back at him, but I can almost feel him standing close behind me. "You know he's the best choice."

The younger man clenches his teeth together like he's biting on his tongue. It's a look that makes my stomach go crazy, and I sway ever so slightly, almost bumping into the older one behind me.

The people stand around, some sitting on old picnic tables and others sitting on old chairs around unlit fire pits. They are nothing like the people back home. There's a weary look to everyone here. Their clothes are faded and distressed, but not without care. Most of the women are covered up enough, but their tattoos still show across their backs. Large dark skulls stare from the backs of those who don't turn around. I notice that some tattoos are larger than others. Designs float around the skulls, twining like tongues of fire.

A couple of the people move and I catch a few smiles on some faces as people greet the man who walks directly toward us. His blue eyes scan the small group of us waiting by the car and when he sees the younger man leaning against the car with his arms crossed over his chest he grins. But once he's close and his eyes fall on me, his smile warms. "Hey. You must be Paula." He sounds very sure on it and yet still asking me more out of politeness than anything else.

It's hard enough to face so much direct attention, so I'm glad he doesn't reach his hand out to me. I just nod while holding onto my duffel bag.

The older man clears his throat. "Brandon's going to take you while we get to the bottom of this." His last few words jumble together, tumbling over each other as they fight to escape. He doesn't show me towards Brandon, but he might as well. I'm trapped with nowhere else to go.

Brandon reaches a hand out, lifting it from his side and pointing at my duffel bag. "I'll take it for you. We've gotta walk upstairs. You're probably tired."

My entire body buzzes. The first instinct is the one that pushes my words out. "No, I've got it."

I can see his brows raise, his hand slowly reaches for my bag. "Trust me," he says as his small smile crinkles his eyes. I let go of the bag as he slings it over his shoulder. Then he looks at the other two. "I guess you two already have things to do."

The older man sighs again. "I'll fill you in later."

The younger man pushes off the back of the car and walks past Brandon. He gives him a light shove. "Just don't get attached." Then he walks off into the crowd.

Brandon seems to mostly ignore him, though tension creeps into his brow for a moment before he turns back to me with a sparkle in his eyes and the hint of a smile on his lips. "Well, we should go. You must be hungry."

I nod. Gravel and dried grass crunch under my feet as I step over to him and we start walking through the crowd and away from the older man. I try not to stare, but I do catch a couple of eyes and quickly turn away. Brandon holds his head up, meeting the glares of the others. They seem to turn away when he looks directly at them.

I hear the engine of the old car start before I see it. We're on the first balcony when he backs up and pulls away. Even though I don't even know his name, I can't help feeling like I've lost my last link to the Neutral Territory. My heart tugs at my chest like it's trying to follow along, but we have nowhere to go. I certainly can't go back so I continue walking up the stairs behind Brandon.

Three

We walk up three flights of shaky steps. There isn't enough room for us to walk side by side, so Brandon walks in front of me, the duffel bag in his hand which he holds about level with his waist. His shoes make loud thumping noises against the thin concrete steps. The rusty rails vibrate under the palms of my hands with each step he takes.

The third floor is the top. I pause for a second and take in the view. Buildings stretch into the distance. The afternoon light reflects off of them, most that same pale white color. The groups milling about out front still; most of them haven't even changed their position.

Brandon stands in front of a door near the stairs. It's the apartment on the corner. He opens the door for me and lets me walk in first. "I don't know what you're used to, but I know this can't compare." His voice is gentle as he walks in after me and shuts the door quietly.

I press my lips together as I survey the main room. It's a small apartment. The kitchen and the main room are connected. Really the only thing separating them is the small kitchen island. The rest of the apartment is sparse. The white walls are completely bare, and the furniture is old and well used. By the front door sits a small breakfast nook type table with a couple of mismatched chairs pulled up to it. A little further in there is an old couch and a small table.

Brandon steps past me with my bag and heads to the door at the other end of the small room. When he opens the door, I catch a glimpse of a bed made with old blankets. He drops my bag on the bed before he turns around and comes back.

My stomach grumbles, but I'm not quite sure what to say. I just met him, and my head is still swimming.

"You must be hungry." He smiles as he motions for me to have a seat at the table. "I'll make you some sandwiches."

I nod. The seat I take creaks and wiggles as I watch him in the kitchen. Brandon gathers plates, a loaf of bread, and a knife. He turns around and opens the fridge to take out a small jar of spread. In the quick glimpse I get of the darkened shelves, I can see he's using it as a pantry to stock cans and jars.

I take another glance around the room taking stock of the electrical outlets. All of them are completely bare against the wall. Not a single thing is plugged in. Sitting on one of the tables near the couch, I notice the lamp. It has a knit rope through it with one end soaking up oil from the base. One end is burned.

They don't have electricity. Do they even have working plumbing?

Brandon glances up at me as he puts the sandwiches together. "Don't worry. We do have working toilets." His eyes twinkle when I turn to look at him. "You just had that look."

He steps around the kitchen island and hands me a plate with the sandwich on it before he steps back to grab a cup and a jug of clear liquid. "Water. We've got running water, but I wouldn't suggest drinking it."

"Thank you," I say as I accept the plate from him.

"So you do speak." He grins at me.

I look away from his bright eyes. He doesn't look that old, but I know he's older than me. Though there are no lines on the pale skin of his face, his hands and neck are thicker than the boys I went to school with. He's not that much older than me. I'd guess probably in his early twenties.

"Sorry." The word slips out even as I don't look at him. "It's just..." My throat tightens and the words stop.

He takes a bite of his sandwich and nods. "S'okay. I know." Oddly, it does seem as if he understands. "After you eat, you should get some rest."

I nod as I reach for my sandwich. My hand feels heavy. The fingers sink into the soft bread before I've even picked it up.

In the small bedroom, I lay on the bed under the covers. Brandon had suggested I do whatever I need to get comfortable. He said I could stay in the bedroom for as long as I want.

My stomach twists some more, not in hunger, but with the complete wrongness of this entire situation. Under the covers, my jeans and shirt feel thick and make it difficult to move freely. The pillow is cold and unfamiliar. A light musky scent tickles my nose through the clean pillow case.

Wildlanders are savages. Since the Revolution, they've had to live that way. They fight to survive. I wasn't expecting to see an apartment with furniture and a bed.

People are talking and laughing in the alley behind the building. I don't dare look. What little I've seen has been enough. I didn't know what to expect. In school, they don't prepare you for banishment. A good Neutral wouldn't be banished.

My hair falls over my nose and mouth and I don't move it. I focus my attention on the strands. My inhaled breaths pull them against my lips only to push them away again when I exhale. It works well for a short while, but soon I find myself laying still, staring at the wall, curling even tighter into a ball.

Who are these people and why am I here? The thought circles through like a whirlwind and in the eye of the storm are quiet thoughts of my mother that I try to ignore. But they sit in the center, a weight on my heart that squeezes my chest anytime I look too closely at them. There is nothing I can do for her and it hurts to realize it.

I lie on my side on the bed with a hand on my chest. Once the pain begins I lean forward, pressing my fist against the bone protecting my heart and crushing the skin against my knuckle. The physical pain is a focus I can handle. Tears spring to my eyes because of the sharp pain from my knuckles and nothing else. Those tears are easier to ignore. Easier to focus on the pain on my skin than the deep pain within.

I'm that way for a while. My body trying to release the tears and my fighting it with every breath. It works for a while. Helps me forget where I am and the fact that a stranger sits in another room waiting for me to fall asleep. Helps me forget my mother and the fact that I once thought I was safe. That there is nowhere safe in this entire world.

I jump up, the bed squeaking under me when I wake. The darkness of the room presses down on me like the Special Ops soldiers did when they were herding me and my mother out to their dark van parked on the front lawn. My first instinct is to find light, but I pause, stuck in the darkness and scared to find the light.

Frozen there on the bed, I can see a bit of light seeping into the room from under the door. It becomes brighter as the light source moves closer with a soft sound of shoes on a carpeted floor.

There's a knock, and Brandon's voice, strong and so unfamiliar, jerks me out of my stupor. "Are you okay? Can I come in?"

That he asks throws me. It isn't like I have a choice. This is his apartment and his room.

"Yes." My voice shakes.

Brandon opens the door slowly letting the light lead him into the room. I sit up and grab my glasses from the side table, wanting to be prepared even though I don't know what I need to be prepared for. There's no smile on his face as he steps over to me and puts the lamp down on the table. "You're scared of the dark."

He doesn't ask. I glance up at him and nod without bothering to offer an explanation. There really isn't any.

Brandon isn't a tall man but I have to glance up at him from my spot on the bed. He's also not a small skinny man. His body is thick, but not fat. "Mind if I sit down?"

I lift my feet up to make room for him as my heart thuds hard against my skin. He takes a seat and the mattress dips towards him. I have to put a tiny bit of weight on my toes to stop myself from sliding closer to him.

"Mr. Smith stopped by earlier, but we thought it would be best if we didn't wake you." He pauses when he notes the blank look on my face. "That was the older one on the car ride with you. He never even introduced himself, did he?" I shake my head as he sighs and scratches at the back of his neck with a hand. "Figures. Well, there's some things you should probably know, and I'm the best one to tell you."

There is no twinkle in his blue eyes this time. He has this air of maturity that he didn't have earlier. Brandon seems to watch me carefully, his eyes both gentle and sharp. "Mr. Smith is your dad." He pauses to take a breath and then quickly exhale it. "He's also the leader here."

My breath catches, and I bite my lip. Brandon becomes fuzzy for a moment until I take off my glasses and wipe at my eyes. Mom always had a different story for my father. Sometimes he was a soldier. Sometimes he was a politician. After a while, she would just work it into silly bedtime stories, and I'd pretend they were all true. I had a vision of my father being an honest and decent man who just couldn't be with my mother.

My hands shake. I trap them between my body and my knees.

"And he's my father too." Brandon says it quietly, his eyes on me and still lacking that sparkle.

My toes curl against the mattress. I have a brother. For a moment, my mouth falls open and then I look away, down at my bare feet on the blanket. Secretly I always wanted an older brother though I don't know why. All of my friends who had older brothers said they were nothing but pests.

I didn't get a good look at Mr. Smith, but I don't see much similarity between Brandon and him. But Brandon and I do both have dark hair. Like my mother. I bite my lip hard.

"Just him," Brandon adds. "We share blood through Henri. I mean, Mr. Smith."

"So we're only half related?"

Brandon shakes his head, and he frowns. "I don't know what you mean."

"We only share one parent."

"Ah. We don't make distinctions like that here. We share blood. That's all that matters." Brandon leans back on the bed, one hand behind him as he looks at me. "You don't like us, do you?"

I almost choke, but the words fall out of my mouth quickly. "No, it's not that. It's just--" But my words completely fail me. My hand falls on my mouth as our eyes meet. There is something of a twinkle to his eyes now, but it doesn't look the same. His lips curl up in a smirk like he expected that I wouldn't be able to explain myself.

"Right. Well, you stay here. I'll leave you the lamp tonight just until you get your bearings. We can't do this every night, okay? Oil's not always easy to get." Brandon stands and reaches out to the lamp to twist a knob. It shortens the wick and dims the light. "I'm going to take the couch."

Four

The bed is cold. I wake up but find I can easily go back to sleep to avoid the reality that I'm on someone else's bed. Sounds from the kitchen tell me he's probably making breakfast for us even though I'm really nothing more than a complete stranger to him. But he's got to eat, and so he's probably going to make me breakfast too. I stretch out, sliding my bare feet into the cold unused corners of the bed and pushing the blanket away from me to let the early morning air into my warren sanctuary.

I reach over to the table for my glasses. The lamp still sits there with its shortened wick bravely burning away. Not much is left but a small halo of flame. I sit up and blow it out, not quite sure what else you're supposed to do with it. A tail of smoke curls up from the wick and pokes at my nose.

My clothes are crumpled. It's a little too dark for me to go digging around in my duffle bag. Plus I don't want to be rude. I don't know what Brandon's schedule is like yet. What if he needs to get in here and I'm in the way? So I just pat my clothes to smooth them out the best I can, and then step over the door.

I open the door carefully and peek out. It's still somewhat dark in the main room. There are three windows, but only one is facing towards the sun. The two other windows at the front of the apartment will be covered in the building's shadow until noon most likely.

Brandon peeks out from the kitchen with a small smile. "Did you sleep okay?"

I nod, still not knowing exactly what to say to him.

"Well, breakfast is almost done. You should probably get cleaned up or whatever you need to do." He motions towards the small bathroom beside the kitchen before he steps back to the stove.

The door is already partially open. It gives a short squeak as I push it open further and pause. The apartment is barely lit so the bathroom, lacking in any windows at all, is black. My throat pinches shut at the sight. I glance back to Brandon who has his back turned to me.

"Uhm," I clear my throat softly, prepping for the stupidity of my next statement. "It's dark."

Brandon puts batter down on the hot pan before he turns a bit to look at me out of the corner of his eye. "Yeah, you're just going to have to make do. It's fine. There aren't any monsters in there, I promise."

My cheeks flush. I touch a cheek with the cool fingers of one hand and step back to the bathroom. The sink is right in front of the door, so I stand at it with a foot holding the bathroom door against the wall to let in what little bit of light there is. I wipe down my face with my wet fingers while trying to ignore the darkness sitting in the corner of my eye. Not having a towel to dry my face, I let it air dry and catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Without light there isn't much to see, but still I'm surprised at the dark circles under my eyes. My face just doesn't look right. Paler in some places and darker in others, I almost don't recognize myself.

I turn away from the mirror and step back out with the spaces between my fingers still moist.

In the main room, Brandon's already put a small stack of pancakes down at the breakfast table. There are some freshly chopped fruits and some cheese on the two plates sitting at the table. It's not exactly like breakfast at home with Mom but it still makes my stomach twist at the simple familiarity of it. I pause, frozen in spot by a pain from not one specific memory but every memory all at once.

Brandon steps out from behind the kitchen counter with a concerned look. "Are you okay?"

He can probably read it all over my face. Still I try and cover it up with a nod as I give myself some time to shove things down. "Yeah."

For a moment, it looks as if he'll call me out on it, but he doesn't. Instead he goes back to the counter and pours us two small glasses of water from the water jug which he then brings over to the

table.

~~We both sit down at the small table. He takes a couple of pancakes and some pieces of fruit. I don't really know what you'd eat."~~

"It's fine. We used to eat pancakes all the time." When my answer seems to satisfy him, allowing him to dive into his own pancakes, I get a burst of bravery. "So, uh, what do you put on them?"

When he turns to me with his brows raised, his mouth full of pancake, my whole head turns red with embarrassment. "What?"

"At home, we have syrup with pancakes. And sometimes butter."

I'm not sure what he thinks. Brandon gives a laugh before slicing into his pancake again with a shake of his head. "Syrup? I dunno. Butter we can get, but I don't use it that often. Don't want it to go bad."

My head is still hot as I cut into my pancake with the side of my fork.

We don't say much else, and in a way I'm thankful for it. I don't really think I'm capable of holding a real conversation right now. Brandon eats his meal in quick bites just like any regular guy. When he's finished, he stands up and picks up his plate and the empty pancake plate. "I have to head out for training. I'm already almost late. Do you think you can get the dishes for me?"

His back is to me as he puts the plates in the sink. Across his broad back the fabric of his shirt is stretched thin, and I can see the darkness of the tattoo. It's not small like some of the others I saw yesterday, and though I can't see its detail, I guess that it's about the same size as the tattoo Grey Eyes had.

Brandon turns around and glances at me, waiting for an answer. I nod, "Sure."

He steps forward to the door and pauses with a hand on it. "Thanks. I'll be back for lunch, okay?" Then he's out the door, cold morning air swirling into the warm kitchen.

I take my time cleaning up. There's a rag on the sink next to the faucet. I don't see any soap, but the dishes are only covered in crumbs from the pancakes. Once I'm done with that, the apartment is light though still not ideal. I take another look at the bathroom with the intent of taking a shower, but it's still much too dark for me and so I take a seat on the couch. I'm only sitting there for a couple of minutes before I flop over on my side, my knees in my chest, my fingers pressed lightly to my lips to keep my mouth from my thumb.

This is wrong. This is all wrong. I feel like I should be crying, mourning the loss of my mother. I don't know where she is or what's happening to her. Is she somewhere out here too? I guess I could have asked Brandon, but I'm scared of the answer. Wherever she is, that's wrong too, and she's in trouble probably more than I am.

This isn't real yet. Everything still has the haze of a nightmare washed over it. I pull my knees closer. My right arm is starting to ache and I let it hoping that it will help me come to terms with reality. My eyes burn. I stare at the bathroom door, partially closed, the room still dark.

Today is a school day. I wonder what my friends must be thinking. From time to time it happened that someone would move away suddenly. We'd discuss it at breaks between classes, asking if anyone had heard anything. There was never a warning. But we just shrugged our shoulders. It had been happening for so long that we never thought about it.

Is that what my friends are saying now? Do they believe that I'd leave without telling them? Will they completely forget me?

The tasks I take on for the afternoon don't last long enough. Before I know it, I'm lying on top of the bed curled in a ball, my shoes kicked off nearby. The bedroom is chilly just from the bareness.

I shiver, but I don't pull the blanket up. The cold keeps me awake. I try to sit still without thinking but the cold also brings back memories. At first I fight it in an attempt to keep my mind clear. The

memories still come though, washing over me and making the hair on my arms stand up.

~~It was the old vinyl seats in a truck. I sat with my coat on, wrapped tight around me as I scooted closer to Rob. The vinyl of the seat was like ice through the fabric of my pants. I jumped and laughed, reaching for me to pull me to his side. His stupid truck broke down in the morning when we were on our way to see one of the parks. It was supposed to be a surprise, but we didn't make it. Stranded at the side of the road, both of us absolutely freezing, Rob, my shy friend who never made a move on anyone the whole year I'd known him, finally made a move on me.~~

"I know how we can get some attention so we're not out here too long," he'd said with an arm draped over the back seat of the truck, a hand on my shoulder. "I don't think you're going to like it."

"Does it involve us using our jackets somehow?"

"No, that's not exactly what I was thinking." Rob looked to the roof of the cab with a smile on his lips.

I was completely baffled. "Are you thinking we should get out and walk? Because that I definitely object to."

He laughed and looked down at me. I expected him to make another joke or give another hint. Instead, he leaned down and kissed me. My heart beat so hard in my chest that I shook. The temperature in the cab suddenly rose and both of our faces turned red. His shoulders rose as if he were trying to hide his head between his shoulders, and as soon as I saw his mouth even starting to shape the beginning of his apology, I threw my arms around him and pulled him back down.

In the real world, I gasp. It starts out as one, then a second one as I fight for air to breathe. I shut my eyes, still gasping, shaking with tears, crying over a boy when I don't even know where my mother is. I still hold hope for her. I want to believe that she's out there somewhere and we can find her. But in Rob's case I know that's over. I'll never see him again. He'll sit in class and stare at the empty seat until the teacher calls someone from the back to take my spot. Then I'll just become like any other person in our life that's disappeared. I'll just be a memory in the back of his mind-- a what if and wonder.

The shared moment of that memory is as clear and pure as if it had just happened the day before. But even that memory is tainted ever so slightly.

There was the knock on the window that broke us apart. We were both embarrassed, out of breath and red faced, burning up from the sudden rush of blood against our skin trapped by our coats. A man dressed in the formal uniform of the Security Force stood waiting, his jaw square and taut, and his shoulders round and broad. Rob rolled down the window and explained to him about the truck stopping, how we were from out of town and didn't know which way to walk.

The Security Force guy had on shades similar to the one worn by the special ops that would later steal me away from my mother. They hid his eyes and reflected our own faces back at us. He frowned at the two of us in a way that made me wonder if he'd ever been young and just discovering how much he really liked someone. He stepped away to call us a tow truck with a stern warning that he'd be back.

Rob watched him walk away before putting his arm around me again and whispering in my ear. "See? I told you it would get us noticed."

The weight from a large hand on my foot makes me jump. The room is dark again and I can't see who's touching me right away. I almost kick him until he speaks.

"Hey, it's me. Don't kick." Brandon's hand is still on my leg, holding it down now instead of just lightly touching it. "I made some dinner."

I nod before realizing that it's probably too dark for him to see me unless seeing in the dark is his power. "Crap. I fell asleep again."

Brandon chuckles. I sit up and he reaches out for me, the hand that had been on my foot taking

hold of my arm lightly. "Sorry, I forget you don't like the dark."

~~The oil lamp is on in the main room, but it only casts a weak light. Brandon picks it up and puts~~
down on the table as we both have a seat.

Dinner seems to be canned meat, canned veggies, and some sort of grain. I'd laugh if it wasn't
another painful memory to shove away and hide from.

Brandon digs in hungrily. His hair is wet from a recent shower, and his clothes have changed from
earlier. Now he wears a tank top, his arms showing from the shoulders down. There aren't many scars
on his arm like there were on Grey Eyes though there are a few. His arms are thick and muscular.
That makes me nervous. I'm not quite sure what they plan to do with me, and so far I've slept away the day.
That doesn't exactly make me stand out in a good way.

He glances up at me then down at my plate. "You're not used to canned food?" The
acknowledgment brings back the memory I'd tried to shove away. Brandon's mouth turns down ever so
slightly as if he can read my pain on my face, and he probably can. I've never been very good at hiding
things like that.

"Another memory."

Brandon's mouth falls open partially as if he wants to say something, but then he closes it right
away. Maybe he wants to tell me to get over it and deal, but then he realized that it's only my second
day. Or maybe he just doesn't know what to say.

I hate being the cause of the silence, but I don't know what to say either so I dig into my own food.
The flavors are all familiar though the seasoning's different. It reminds me of those times when Mom
would go to her political functions and leave me with Uncle Wiley. He'd show me how to play chess
while we dug into our canned dinners with our spoons.

It won't help the silence any, but I still ask the question, the words are so thin they slip right out.
"Brandon, do you know anything about my mom?"

The light of the lamp on his face casts a shadow over half of it when he turns and looks at me. He
clears his throat and wipes his mouth with his hand. "No. Henri-- Mr. Smith is looking into it."

I nod. It is sort of a relief and sort of not to have no definite answer. There is still hope.

"That's why you're still here."

My eyes drop to my plate as I gather another forkful of food. It's only my second day. I haven't
really had time to give thought to my living situation. And then I realize with another guilty pang that
I've had all day and I spent it feeling sorry for myself and not thinking about what a burden I must be
to him.

Brandon speaks at once, his voice steady and calm. "I just mean if you were wondering. Because
he's going to want you to go with him at some point."

That doesn't make me feel better.

A sad fold forms over the corners of his eyes. Perhaps he realizes that there isn't really anything he
can say that will make me feel better, so he leaves it alone.

I take a bite of my food and that seems to signal that the awkward conversation part of the night
is past so we both return to silence. But after my second bite, I'm staring at the small flame on the lamp
and really thinking about the situation. At some point, Henri is going to want me to go with him, but
he doesn't even know me.

There's a question I'd never asked of those in control of my life before. The word comes out
without my even needing to think it. It's there across the table before I've even realized I asked it.
"Why?"

Brandon pauses, his fork lowering to his plate. "What?"

"Why would he want me? He hardly seemed interested in me when I did see him, and he's never
been a part of my life. So why would he care?" I sound angry though I don't mean to sound that way.

so I take a deep breath and keep my eyes on the table. "Sorry. This whole thing is just-- it's just hard to understand. I don't really know why I'm here, or what we did. Mom's always worked for the government to make things better. So I don't understand why they'd..." My voice slightly warbles right before I just let the words die. Crying in front of Brandon isn't acceptable, so I turn my head and blink through the mist of unshed tears until my vision is almost clear again.

Brandon is very still. He clears his throat after a couple of seconds and speaks before I have my eyes back in my control. "You'll have to ask Hen-- Mr. Smith when you see him."

I turn back to him unsure how to take his words until I see his eyes and the steady way he looks at me. He's being honest with me. There's no way for him to know what's on Henri's mind. He could guess, but that won't help me right now. I need honest facts. I do need to talk to Henri about this, not Brandon.

"So I'll get to see him?"

"In a day or two." Brandon's look softens ever so slightly and I'm not sure if it's just because that's what I'd like to see. "In the meantime, you really should start taking a look around outside. You should get used to it."

I nod though I honestly have no intention of going outside for as long as I can hide away.

Five

"Henri's coming to see you today." Brandon says it with a piece of toast near his mouth, watching me carefully as if waiting for some reaction. "He should be here around lunch."

My toast scrapes down my throat, but there isn't really much to say to that, is there? I glance out the window looking at the roofs of tall buildings all stained and dirty. When the leader of a large tribe makes plans to see you, it's not as if you can just refuse politely.

Brandon leaves and I pick up the dishes to wash in the sink slowly with a thin stream of water. There isn't much more than crumbs on the plates this morning, but still I wipe at them with the rag while trying to ignore the way my stomach roils. There's no avoiding it. Henri will bring news of my mom.

After I've cleaned up the plates and cleaned up myself, there isn't anything else to do. The past couple of days I've been taking afternoon naps until Brandon gets home. But my stomach and the twitch in my leg that makes me bounce my knee when I sit won't let me settle. Brandon hasn't said anything more about it, but I know there's one thing I can probably do and in my heightened state of activity/awareness, it's probably not a bad idea.

Before I have a chance to think my way out of it, I'm at the front door and opening it cautiously. No one stands on the balcony, so I take a few steps out and leave the door open in case I need to rush back in.

The morning air is fresh and cool against my face. I give a slight shiver and rub at my arms as I look around. Down below, people hang around out front doing things much of interest. Most are just talking and laughing. From three stories up it's hard to really absorb any minute or important details about them.

On the balcony across the way and one floor down, two people stand close in discussion. One looks to be a very large male who towers over the shorter and more delicate frame of a woman wearing clothes very much like I am. She leans away from him slightly, but there's hardly any distance between them. He lifts one large hand to her face and stands much closer to her. The girl only comes to his chest. She stands stiffly and doesn't look directly up at him.

I turn away and look out over the buildings, trying to put the scene from my head. One of the things they taught us in school is that there were more men than women experimented on. So dangerous as it is to be here at all, being female and being here is even worse.

The buildings go far off into the distance. Most of them are tall buildings that reach high into the sky. They are in much better condition than the buildings I first saw when we drove in, though they are all dirty and stained. Some of them have green tints to them where mold or something is growing up the wall. Others have dark stains and spots where paint is starting to fade or chip off and reveal the plaster or wood underneath.

This was a city once. Not everyone who lived and worked here was a scientist. Some were just the support for the labs-- janitors, cooks, maintenance men and women. All of them regular people who happened to live on this side of the fence. It's something that I never gave thought to when I was learning about The Revolution and the Wildlands in school. Real people lived here with their families raising children in a place they believed was safe.

I chew on my lip. How many died? There are buildings as far as I can see, and if they were even half way filled, I still can't imagine the number of people that would have once roamed with their families, greeting friends on their way to work. The buildings further out look as if they're sagging and starting to rot and fall apart from disuse.

Behind me a door squeaks open. I turn quickly, ready to dive back into Brandon's apartment, until

the boy stepping out looks up at me. His eyes open wide at the sight of me, and then he smiles. ~~Everything about his face seems open and honest and-- normal. Like any of the guys back home.~~ He seems closer to my age than Brandon, but still I freeze in the face of his apparent kindness.

"Hi," he says as he shuts the door behind him. "I'm Mitchell. Is it okay if I join you?"

The door to Brandon's isn't far away. It still sits partially ajar, waiting for me to slip back through. But there's nothing for me to do in Brandon's apartment except to wait for Henri to show. I look at Mitchell and shrug even as my stomach twists. "Yeah. Sure."

He steps up to the railing with me and leans on it with his forearms so that his face is at least level with mine. From this point, his eyes look almost green as he turns his head towards me slightly and smiles. "So what's your name?"

"Paula," I pause and decide to say no more. It just doesn't seem like a good idea to tell him too much about myself when I don't know anything about him yet.

Mitchell looks out over the buildings and his smile fades a bit. "You're a long way from your home, aren't you? You're Neutral." His voice is soft, spoken low just between us without being accusatory.

Still, I swallow and fight the urge to run away. It's no secret how the Wildlanders feel about Neutrals. They blame us for the Labs and for keeping them here. I look away from Mitchell, one hand on the rail holding tight.

He peeks at me from the corner of his eyes before looking away and tapping on the rail with his finger. "It's okay. Hey, we're the same really. I mean, I'm human too." My words are caught in my throat and I gag on them. When I don't speak, Mitchell stands up and lets his mouth creep slowly into a friendly smile again. "Hey want to see something?"

Not really, but I just shrug and say in a small voice, "Sure."

Mitchell backs away from the rail and steps towards Brandon's apartment. For half a second I worry he's going to step inside, but then he stops and looks back at me to motion for me to follow. "Over here." He stands at the side of the building, and I follow him. He points off in the distance, and my eyes follow his pointed finger.

I stare into the distance without knowing exactly what I'm supposed to see.

"Do you see it?"

One of my hands shields my eyes as I look at the buildings. Those out in front and further away from us look in the worst shape. Some of them look burned, the walls and windows are blackened with soot. All of the buildings sag with the same weary weight as the other non-used buildings.

Except for one far away building. Gleaming brightly in the distance there is a large dome. It almost blends in with the other buildings around it, but now that he's pointed it out, it's impossible to miss. The other buildings around it are darker and damaged.

Mitchell grips the rail with his hands. "You know, that's where the Revolution started."

My mouth falls open as I take in the scene, but the second he says the words, I close it and look at him, shocked that he'd show this to me and that he can even say that with such certainty. "That's a lab? How do you know that the Revolution started there?"

"Everyone knows that." He raises one of his brows at me, a corner of his mouth lifting. "That's how I can tell you're Neutral. We don't get many down this far. They're always easy to spot."

That makes my stomach tighten. "Do many Neutrals get dumped into the Wildlands?"

He looks at me with some pity and I have to turn away. "Yeah. It happens. They don't usually get dumped far though from what I hear." Mitchell sputters a bit, scratching at the back of his neck and his eyes down. "But, ah, you'll be fine. Brandon's a good guy. I'm sure he wouldn't ever force you to do anything you didn't want to do."

"What?" I lift my eyes again, searching Mitchell's face for understanding that seems to completely pass over my head. What would Brandon ever force me to do? What does Mitchell think I am

Brandon?

"Brandon's a good guy?" Mitchell says it again not as if he's unsure of what he's saying, but he is unsure of why I'm having a reaction to his statement.

Heavy footsteps sound on the stairs behind us and we both turn around to see the back of the person coming up the stairs. The man walking up comes into view quickly, first a head of mostly brown hair with plenty of silver strands throughout and then broad shoulders. Right away I know who it has to be and I glance at Mitchell. He stares straight ahead, his tanned face suddenly ashen. My visitor reaches the top of the stairs and turns towards Brandon's house. At the door resting ajar, he pauses and that's when his sharp eyes land on me and Mitchell standing side by side. We must look like a pair. Me short and stumpy and him tall and lanky with his mouth agape.

"Uh, I have to go," I say softly.

Mitchell looks down at me, but he doesn't say much more. He manages to close his mouth and give a little nod, but his wide eyes are turned on me like I've suddenly become a completely different person in just the few seconds since we heard the footsteps coming up the stairs.

Henri stands by the door and waits for me to enter. He is a giant of a man compared to Brandon. His height alone is enough to be intimidating, but he's also broad across the shoulders and thick in the waist though nothing hangs over his belt except a fold of the shirt he wears tucked into his pants.

A tiny prickle of dread creeps up my center as I walk to him and slip inside the apartment. Henri doesn't say anything as he follows me and shuts the door behind him.

I haven't really decided what to call him out loud or in my head yet. Brandon makes an effort to call him "Mr. Smith" but he slips and calls him "Henri." I don't feel either name is exactly right, but neither is calling him "Dad."

For a second we both stand quietly together. He has that same weary expression he had when I first saw him in the judgment room. I can almost sense the sigh before it comes. He motions to the couch and his back still against the door blocking my one exit. "Have a seat. We need to talk."

He's larger than I remembered him being. Or maybe now that I know a little bit more about him he seems more intimidating. His entire frame blocks the doorway. I had thought that I was becoming braver, starting to be the sort of person who would make my mother proud, but now that I stand in front of the man once again I can't help realizing just how far I still have to go.

I take a seat on the couch. He steps over to sit on the table in front of me as I hike my knees to my chest as some small form of protection from him. Already, he's spoken more than he spoke before. He throws me off and only makes the situation less real.

"About my mom?" My voice sounds so pitifully light compared to his deeper tone that rumbles up from his chest when he speaks.

I see the corner of his lips pull back ever so slightly. The first sign of anything I've seen on his face other than weariness. "Mostly."

His face is drawn making him look like he hasn't slept for days. There's a good amount of stubble on his chin, but it appears as ever present as the lines on his face. He rubs at it subconsciously.

For a moment he looks down at the ground as if contemplating what to say, and I fear the worst. I blink back the tears, trying to be brave enough to hear the news but the silence stretches out too far. I know only seconds have passed, but the fear creeps up my spine and I can't help softly asking, "My mom?" It prompts him to glance up at me as if he just realized that I'm sitting before him waiting for him to give me the news that will completely devastate me.

"She's alive." He says it in a way that makes me think she really isn't but he's just saying what he thinks I want to hear so that I won't start to cry in front of him. Then he reaches into his front pocket and pulls out a small envelope which he holds out to me. It has my name on it in her curly script, slightly squished together as if she wrote it in a hurry. At the sight of the familiar handwriting, my

stomach hops and makes me nauseous.

I reach for the letter trying to be quick about it, aware that my entire body is shaking. Though I blink quickly, my eyes still start to moisten, and I try my best to focus on something here and now but the letter weighs heavily in my hands. I can't help but be very aware of the heat trapped between my fingers and the thin paper. It hits me that this may be my very last communication from her. I can feel myself already drowning, the water piling up near my eye and ready to spill over. To be able to go on and breathe, I have to push the thought away and focus on the present.

Henri hasn't said anything. I don't know how long I've been sitting there not speaking and on the verge of tears, but he's not looking at me again. He clears his throat before he speaks again as if he's aware that I'm managing even though he hasn't looked up. "How much do you know about what she did?"

The question surprises me. I pause to gather my thoughts as I think it over. "Mom was a politician," I say as if I'm on a quiz show and only mostly sure that I have the right answer. "She used to warn me never to get involved in politics."

Henri lifts his eyes from the ground then and plants them directly on me. They narrow as he draws his mouth closed and I feel like I've failed the quiz even though she was my mother. Of course I knew what she did.

His hand rests on his thigh, slightly pressing on the fabric, legs open wide before me so that he looks even broader sitting than he did standing. He hesitates, thinking of what to say or how to say it. "She wasn't just a politician; she was an activist. There were things she didn't like, and she told people so. She has enemies." He levels his gaze at me and I try my best to meet his eyes without facing away. "They're the ones who have her now. There aren't any strings I can pull to get her out."

The letter between my now moist fingers is still very heavy and I stare down at it, my hair falling into my face and covering my view of Henri. I think this quiet lasts longer than the initial quiet at the start of our conversation, but neither of us interrupts it. I assume he's letting it sink in. This isn't the bad news I was expecting, but I'm sure that it isn't any better. In fact, it's probably worse.

For as long as this quiet lasts, it isn't enough. Henri eventually breaks it, his deep voice pulling my eyes up just enough to look at his knees through my hair. "You can't stay here. I want you to go with me while we figure out what to do with you."

I don't like the way he says it as if he has no clue what to do with me, and he probably doesn't. I'm just a banished girl from the Neutral Territory-- nothing more than a stray even if I was handed over to him. What can I do that will be useful here?

My eyes focus on his as I swallow the last tiny bit of moisture from my mouth. Brandon did try to warn me that Henri would want me to go with him at some point, but I wasn't ready to hear it then, and I'm not ready to hear it now. Henri doesn't make me feel comfortable. He watches me with hardened eyes incapable of understanding how I feel.

The front door opens and Henri and I both turn. For half a second, I fear that Grey Eyes has come looking for Henri, but it turns out that it's just Brandon coming home for lunch. He pauses when he sees the two of us sitting, his eyes bouncing from me to Henri and back to me again.

Henri turns back to me and continues his attempt to make me see reason. "It's disrupting to her relationships to have you here."

Brandon doesn't move. He leans back on the door, and I know his eyes are still on me though he can't bear to look up at him. My eyes stay down on my hands in my lap holding onto the letter.

"What'll you do with me?"

Henri sighs. "I'm not sure yet."

My stomach twists and pokes my insides at the thought of leaving with Henri. Once I'm in his hands, he can do anything he wants with me. He's the leader here; who could stand up to him or stop

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