

Chapter One

“What do we do?” I ask Trent, my voice barely above a whisper.

In the flickering firelight his eyes watch me intently but I know he’s somewhere else. His mind is outside the room, out on the streets, gauging the distance and weighing our options. We both listen to the crunch of feet on loose gravel, the scuff of shoes on asphalt. The drag of the blade over the rough ground. When he finally sees me again, I know we’re in trouble.

“We wait,” he tells me, his voice too loud.

“Shhh!” I shush him violently, glancing nervously at the broken windows. So far they’re still pitch black. They may be coming, but they’re doing it in darkness.

“It doesn’t matter, Joss. They know we’re here.”

“So we’re just going to let them kill us? Eat us for dinner?” I demand. I sit up, going into a crouch and scanning the room for something, anything. “Screw that, Trent. If I’m going down, I’m going down fighting.”

“If we don’t fight and we don’t run, we may be able to talk our way out of this.”

My eyes snap to his, shocked. “Are you serious?”

He nods slowly. The footsteps are coming closer. They’re almost here and my heart is ready to implode.

“I’ve seen it happen. I’ve seen people taken prisoner by them before.”

“Pft,” I scoff. “They were probably saved for a midnight snack. Kept warm with beating hearts and eaten later on.”

“Maybe,” Trent agrees with a shrug, “but what do we lose by trying.”

I chew on the inside of my lower lip as I debate this really stupid plan. But he's right and I know he's right, I'm just fighting it like crazy because I don't want to be taken prisoner again. I also don't want to die, and I really, really, really don't want to be eaten.

"Okay, but you're not doing the talking," I finally tell him. "You'll get us killed immediately."

He raises a skeptical eyebrow, but just like I know he's right, he knows I'm right. He doesn't fight me.

"Agreed. But you won't do any better. You're not exactly Miss Congeniality."

"No, I'm not," I admit reluctantly. My eyes go immediately to Ryan. "But you know who is?"

"You better wake him fast. They're here."

I pounce on Ryan, shaking him violently until he grumbles and moans, his hands flailing weakly to make me stop. But I'm relentless because I'm terrified and I know he's our only hope. I shake him harder only to be greeted with more grumbling.

"He's out cold," I say, exasperated.

"You'll have to—"

"Knock, knock," a low, slow male voice sings.

A pale face appears in the broken window, grinning when he sees me.

I nearly scream. As it is, I die a little inside like Wesley in *The Princess Bride* tethered to the machine stealing years off his life. That's what this world is doing to me. Killing me slowly one terror at a time until I'll be the oldest seventeen year old ever to walk the earth. I'll think I have years left to live if only I can keep my guard up, keep the monsters at bay, but then one morning I won't wake up because my heart will have given out. And I won't blame it one bit.

The face disappears from the window. The second it's gone, I wish it was back because at least then I know where one of them is. I can hear more people milling around outside the walls. They run their hands along the exterior, tapping lightly as they move until the entire building feels like it's humming. The walls are closing in on me and I'm panicking hard. My breaths are coming in short, painful gasps and my skin is nothing but a drowning victim under the sweat breaking out over every inch of my body.

I'm scared of zombies. I'm scared of the Colonists. After the gun in my face, I'm a little scared of the Vashons. But I have never been so afraid of another living being as I am right now. I always knew I was disgusted by them, repulsed by their willingness to devour another human being like the monsters that stole everything from us all, but I never knew how deathly afraid of them I was. They're human but inhumane. Living but dead inside. It's a double threat enemy I'd hoped to never face.

Yet here they are now in force.

"Trent," I say urgently, not sure what I'm expecting from him. I think I want him to have all the answers and make this go away. I want him to know everything now. In fact, I encourage it. But what I get in response to my plea for God knows what surprises me.

Just as there's an eerily light, polite knock on the door behind me, Trent pulls a stick from the fire and lays it on Ryan's bare arm.

"What the f—" Ryan cries, pulling back and jerking into a sitting position.

He blinks several times trying to clear his eyes. He looks pissed and I don't blame him. If Trent ever tries that with me, I'll make him eat that hot poker. But the good news is that Ryan is awake and fully alert now. Mission accomplished, I just don't like how we got here. I don't think Ryan does either.

"We have company," Trent tells him.

Ryan freezes as he listens to the sounds around him. Fingers tapping on the building. Faces start popping in and out of the windows, some just passing by, some stopping to smile grimly before moving on. There are women in the group. Somehow that makes me sicker.

The knock sounds at the door again.

"Who is it?" Ryan asks Trent.

"Your neighbors," the man outside the door answers. "We need to borrow a cup of sugar."

"To make their People Pies with," I mutter.

I hate to admit it so I won't, not to anyone but myself, but I feel better having Ryan awake. I feel less certain that I'm going to die tonight.

He frowns at me now, his warm eyes dark in the dying firelight.

“Cannibals?” he whispers.

I nod, my mouth tightly strung in a grim line.

He curses under his breath then jumps slightly when the knocking starts up again.

“We know you’re home,” the man calls again, his voice teasing. “Open up.”

“Trent thinks you can talk to them,” I whisper to Ryan quickly. “He’s seen people talk to them and not end up dead.”

“Not right away, at least,” Trent corrects.

I glare at him, my eyes warning him to not paint an uglier picture of our situation than he has to. Ryan isn’t stupid, he knows the score, but he needs to go into this at least *thinking* he can win it.

“What do I say?” he asks Trent incredulously. “Please don’t eat us?”

“Maybe don’t lead with that.”

“Lead with what then? The weather? Ask about his kids?” Ryan demands, whispering harshly and sounding angrier by the second.

“Maybe start with opening the door,” I suggest, trying to sound calm when I am anything and everything but.

They both stare at me for a minute before Ryan nods his head.

“Weapons hidden, give nothing away,” he mutters to us as he stands and heads for the door.

Ryan, I think it’s important to note, was our reigning poker champion in prison. Even Trent with his robot’s heart wasn’t able to beat him. Trent has no tells, no emotional outbursts or giveaways to exploit. Ryan, on the other hand, has many but most are lies. He’s an incredible actor or a liar depending on how you see it. I think it’s one of the reasons he does so well in the Arena. He has a charisma, an easy kind of charm that pulls you in and makes you trust him. Even as he’s taking all your money.

This is why he is our ambassador.

My blood is rushing in my ears as he takes a steadying breath. Then he turns the handle. I think someone says something from outside but I can’t hear it, not over the sound of my own fear and panic pounding in my ears. Ryan nods, steps aside and a man dressed entirely in black walks in. He gives the small room a once over, his eyes barely

falling on Trent on and I. It's something I'm a little insulted by. He's looking for threats but I just got passed over like I was nothing. Like I'm an office chair or a roller skate.

The man's skin is painfully pale. His dark hair is a shock against it where it droops over his forehead, looking clean and shiny. This is how I judge people in the apocalypse. Do they have a shower and do they use it. Yes on both counts for this guy, meaning they're living relatively well. No one showers first and drinks water to survive second. If you have your priorities right yet you still have the means to be hygiene conscious, you're doing alright. Better than alright.

"So," he says quietly, turning back to Ryan with a stern eye, "who are you and what are you doing here?"

"We washed up on the shore here and weren't prepared to travel at night," Ryan says, his voice surprisingly deep and strong. "Not through this territory."

"Not through *our* territory."

"No. Colonists either."

"And how do you know we're not Colonists?"

"You knocked," he answers wryly.

The man grins. It's not as horrifying as I thought it would be. Not like when Trent does it. It seems more natural. Easier. Like he does it all the time. I remind myself that the truly horrifying thing about the cannibals is that they look just like everyone else. Right up until their pan frying a calf muscle over an open flame. Then you can feel it in your bones, smell it in the air, that they are wrong.

"Smart. So you were on the ships then? You're Colonists."

"No," I blurt out. I snap my mouth shut the second I say it but it's already done. All eyes are on me now.

"Really?" the man asks, stepping toward me.

I see Ryan tense beside him but then another man steps inside the door, blocking his path. The first man looks at me intently and I don't feel as terrified as I thought I would meeting his stare. His eyes are strange, too large and too dark, but they're not crazy. Not as insane and empty as I thought they'd be.

"Yes, really," I say, worried my tone is too sharp but I'm not great at censoring myself. This is why, right here. This is why Trent and I were supposed to shut up. I clear

my throat. “We’re not with the Colonists and before you ask, we’re not with The Hive either.”

“Are you sure? That was a Hive boat you sailed out on.”

I swallow, glancing quickly at Ryan. How do they know about the boat?

“Did it sink?” the man asks. “We lost sight of it in the chaos.”

“Capsized,” Trent chimes in.

“And you left it like that? Uh oh,” he tuts, feigning concern. “Marlow won’t like that. You’ll be indebted to him now. That’s never a good place to be.”

“You know Marlow?” I ask.

He looks down at me, giving me a more thorough inspection than before. “I know of him. Never had the pleasure of making his acquaintance.”

“You’re not missing much.”

He grins again. “So I hear. Clear something up for me, would you? You sailed to Vashon Island on a Hive boat, but you’re not with The Hive. You clearly aren’t with the Vashons because here you sit, on the opposite side of the Sound. You say you’re not with the Colonies and I’m inclined to believe that. So if you’re not with The Hive, the Vashons or the Colonies, who are you exactly?”

“No one,” Ryan says, his voice dead.

I’m surprised by his reaction but then I remember that it’s true. That I did that to him. He’s no longer a Hyperion because he betrayed them for me and that’s going to eat him up inside. That was his family. A piece of his life with his brother and I’ve taken that, giving nothing in return. But he’s not no one. Even standing in an empty room without a weapon or cent to his name, he’s so much more someone than I’ll ever be.

“Well, whoever you are, you need to come with us.”

“And if we don’t?” Ryan asks.

“You will.”

It’s not a threat exactly, it’s more like a truth. One I feel in my gut. He’s right, we’ll go with them because we don’t want to die and it doesn’t even have to be said that that’s what will happen if we resist. We all know it. I can feel it and they can probably taste it and there’s no sense in denying it.

I stand slowly. Trent does the same in my peripheral but I keep my eyes on Ryan. He's watching me rise and I can't read his face. He's gone into Arena mode. He's a fighter now, dead and calm inside. I envy him that. I recognize that trick as one I used to be able to perform but my skills have slipped or fallen entirely away and I'll never be able to do it again. Even now as I look at him I can feel emotions swirling inside of me. I feel scared, anxious, protective, angry. And it's all for him.

The calm cannibal leads us outside into the dark and the cold. We leave our fire burning inside and I have the fleeting, ridiculous thought that we should put it out before it burns the building down or draws someone to it. But it's not my home and the moths are already here. The damage has already been done.

I fall in line behind Ryan as we head out the door. I'm startled by the sudden ceasing of the raps and taps on the outside of the building. It's so well-orchestrated and perfectly synched that the lack of sound unnerves me as much as it did when it started. I'm beginning to think these people share a brain.

"Weapons," someone ahead of Ryan says curtly.

My eyes are still adjusting to the darkness from the firelight inside. I can't see exactly who said it but I don't make the stupid mistake of hesitating. I unhook my knife and toss it to the ground toward the shadowed voice. Then I slowly pull my ASP free, running my fingers over it lovingly and aching inside. I just got her back. How many times can we be separated before it's the last? I look up, doing my best to glare at the man in front of us. I hold up the ASP for him to see.

"I want this back."

"Toss it with the others," is his cold reply.

"Do you understand me? I want it back."

"When?"

"When we leave."

"Who said you will?"

I suppress a shiver along with the urge to whip the weapon out to full length and crack it against this guy's face. He's taking shape as my eyes adjust and he's not that big. He's actually almost my height, not that much meatier. I'm not used to fighting the living but I'm suddenly curious how I'd fare. The more I can see of him, the more convinced I

am that I can take him. The more the power I know I can build in the ASP becomes tangible in my fingertips and they itch as my palm burns to release it. But I can't fight all of them, neither can Ryan and Trent, so I slowly lower the baton to the ground where I let it fall with an echoing clatter.

"I'll leave," I tell the guy as I stand up straight, "and when I do, you're giving that back to me."

I can't be sure, but I think he grins.

"This way," the lead guy says, taking off without looking back.

The cannibals fall in formation around us. They've surrounded us on all sides and I realize I've misjudged their numbers. There are more than I thought. They seem to materialize out of the darkness as we move and I'm glad I stowed the urge to fight. Even if we were twice as many, we'd never have fought our way out.

I keep my eyes on Ryan's back, his broad shoulders leading me forward and blocking out the world ahead of us. It makes me nervous. I'd rather be the lead, see where I'm going. Know what I'm walking into. I'm going on a lot of faith following blindly behind him like this, especially with Trent and all his height pacing so close behind me. I start to feel caged and crazy. I'm surrounded on every side and I can't see and I want to run or fight or scream but I keep it locked inside. I keep my eyes on Ryan and I remember sleeping beside him. I remember him between me and walls, me and doors, me and danger. I remind myself what it feels like to press my back against his and trust that whatever is coming behind me is irrelevant. It's already dead because he's there.

I remind myself to trust him the way he trusts me. All the way.

Chapter Two

We walk through the streets silently without any light. I've done this before, it's not that big of a deal in a neighborhood you know, but I don't know this one. Not at all. Not even a little. I don't come south of the stadiums. To move through this area is to be close to the Colonies and while I can see their lights blazing closer than I feel comfortable with, I know the real trouble is what you don't see. Not until the van rolls up on you silently and people snatch you from your home. But the way the cannibals walk us brazenly through the streets, I wonder how much of a threat the Colonists are to them. Maybe they give them as much space as the rest of us. Maybe no one likes the idea of being eaten for dinner, least of all by someone living.

Without a word, Ryan stops. I slam into the back of him and as his hand reaches back to help stabilize me, I wait for the impact of Trent to sandwich me between them. It never comes. Whatever stopped Ryan, he saw it coming over my head and I'm more annoyed than ever at being caught in the middle here. I feel clumsy, blind and a little helpless. The helpless is what pisses me off the most.

"Why did we stop?" I ask, brushing Ryan's hand away.

Before he can answer there's a sharp screech of metal on metal. I break formation and step around Ryan to stand beside him.

One of the cannibals is using a horrifying hook weapon as a giant crowbar to pull a manhole cover up out of the street. Funny thing about manholes – I don't go down them. It's dumb. Tight quarters, no idea who or what is in there with you, perpetual darkness. The list of reasons why I'm not insane enough to go down into one is endless. But it looks like I'm about to throw that list out the window because once the manhole is open, we're promptly led toward it.

It's a black hole to nothing. The descent inside could be five feet or five thousand years, there's no way of knowing. I'm no wimp, I'm not afraid of the dark, but I'm also not a fan of it either and this thing is all darkness. All endless depths of black midnight with all manner of nightmare waiting for me at the bottom. I'm already surrounded by psychos. This is an extra anxiety I really don't need.

"Are we seriously doing this?" I mumble to Ryan as the first of the cannibals is swallowed up by the Great Nothing.

"Looks like it."

"Can I tell you a secret?"

"Sure."

"Promise not to tell?"

"Course."

I take a quick breath as the leader watches us, waiting. It's our turn.

"I'm scared," I whisper to Ryan.

He looks down at me. I wish I could see his face better but I'm also glad it's too dark. This admission is huge for me. I'm not even sure why I told him. Not like he can do anything about it. But it helps somehow having him know. Not a lot, but a little. Enough.

"Me too," he replies.

"Me three," Trent agrees at full volume from behind us.

Ryan I believe, but Trent not so much. Still, I appreciate the solidarity.

"I'll go first."

I step away from them before Ryan can stop me because I know he'll try. I'm not surprised when his hand shoots out to grab hold of me. I saw it coming. I dodge it easily, slipping away toward the cracked can of no-friggin'-thank-you yawning before me. I don't give myself time to think about it. I don't let myself go terrified toddler, imagining all of the things that could be in this hole waiting to grab my ankle and yank me down to Hell. I dive right in, swinging my legs down inside, watching them disappear into nothing. What they find is a rung on a ladder. I start to slowly descend, being careful as I feel the slippery, slimy coating on each step. I can feel eyes on me as I lower myself down but I refuse to look up to meet them. Instead I slip down farther and farther until the meager light from above starts to fade away and I get that claustrophobic feeling you

get in an unseen wide open space. The area around me could be huge, boundless, or it could be tiny. There could be walls all around just waiting for me to walk straight into them and bash my nose on their cold, wet surface. All I know for sure is the circle of light above me, the ladder beneath me and the endless black around me.

“One more step,” a voice warns softly, scaring the crap out of me.

I freeze for a second, letting my nerves calm and my senses take over.

They’re to my left. It’s a woman. Her voice didn’t echo much at all so I’m assuming the space down here can’t be too big. If I could find her, if I could touch her, even without my weapon and my arm wrapped up tight, I might be able to take her. Trent could for sure. I’m starting to think I should have let him come down first.

I let go of the ladder and instantly feel dizzy. My eyes are adjusting to the darkness, picking up on what small light is coming in from above, but it’s not going to be enough. I can’t get my bearings on anything and as I slowly take a step toward the voice, I wonder how much she can see in here. Is her eyesight that good in the dark or does she have all of these caverns and tunnels memorized?

“Stand over here,” she says, gesturing. I’m starting to get an outline of her, the movement of her arm telling me where to go and where she is.

“Where is ‘here’?” I ask irritably.

“To your left three paces.”

I put my hands out and shuffle step three paces to the left. I never take my eyes off her. Not now that I’ve found her.

My fingers brush a rough wall, cold and damp. It feels like algae is growing on every surface down here and the air tastes wet and weird. How do they live like this and not get sick all the time?

The light coming in from above is momentarily blocked out by another body making its way down. It’s moving too quickly to be one of the guys. They’re staggering us. Sending in one of their own, one of us, one of their own. It’s smart. Annoyingly so. It also reminds me of the Colonies and my anxiety/anger ratchets up a notch.

Trent comes down next, another of theirs, then Ryan. No one says a word once we’re all assembled. I can hear breathing and shuffling all around me bouncing off the walls and making it feel like people are everywhere. But how many could there really be?

Outside this hole I saw at most ten of them. But inside, trapped in an enclosed space with all of their lips and teeth, it feels like there are a million. And they're all hungry.

I jump when there's a loud crack followed by a scraping sound. Someone has sparked flint, lighting a torch off to my right. I watch the firelight play off the sheen on the walls, dancing like diamonds faceted in every surface when what I'm really looking at is slime. The ground has an obsidian, oily coating on it that glistens with rainbows in the light. I worry that it actually is oil. One dropped spark from that torch could send this entire place up in flames in an instant.

"This way," the guy with the fire says, his voice surprisingly gentle. Almost welcoming.

We follow in single file through the shadowed tunnels beneath the streets. I'm worried about what's behind me, what's ahead of me, what's beneath me, but the one thing I'm not worried about is what's above me. Zombies. Risen. Colonists. There's an otherworldly feel to this place. Like when I came down that manhole what I really did was slip down the rabbit hole into Wonderland. I'm not so sure I prefer it to Neverland. I knew the rules there. They're all a little mad down here and I have the eerie feeling that absolutely anything goes.

We walk for half an hour before I see light glowing at the end of the tunnel. It's yellow and clean. Warm. The temperature has been rising, the moisture disappearing from the air. This is where they live. Where they sleep.

Where they eat.

We walk into the light through a blown out section of wall. It looks like they demolished it to break from these tunnels into another section. The area here is wide open, like a large basement which makes me wonder where exactly we've walked to. Without any landmarks from up above to guide me I'm completely lost. The walls are all exposed brick and broken plaster but as we move through this open space, the eyes of more cannibals watching us curiously from the unlit corners, I see more wood. We come into a narrower passage, almost like a hallway, and I pass a window frame looking through into another large room.

"Where are we?" I whisper despite myself.

"It looks like an underground city," Ryan mumbles behind me.

“Since when is there an underground city in Seattle?”

“Since 1889,” the man ahead of me answers without turning. We pass by a pristine brick archway leading into a small well-lit room with a burning fireplace and three beds pressed against the walls. The man gestures to the room as we pass. “That used to be part of a bank in the 1800’s. This was all ground level back then.”

I glance back at Ryan, my face pinched in confusion.

“How did it end up underground?” he asks the guy, voicing my thoughts.

“There was a fire. Thirty-one blocks of this area were destroyed. When they started to rebuild they decided to regrade the streets in this area since they were built on tidelands and were constantly flooded.”

“Ironic considering the place burned,” Trent says.

“The roads were raised twelve feet,” the guy continues, ignoring him. “In some places they went up thirty feet. What was street level in a building became basement or underground, where we are now. There were skylights like these,” he points to a metal mesh of squares in the ceiling, some of them still housing small, cracked cubes, “up to the ground level to let in natural light. The entire underground was shut down in 1907 when people panicked over the bubonic plague. Most of it was condemned or absorbed into building basements and shut off. This is the last of what’s left.”

“And this is where you live? All of you?” Ryan asks.

The guy half turns his head to look back at us, his face pure shadow.

“Tour’s over,” he said, his voice losing its friendly tone. “We’re almost there.”

They take us down a long narrow alley, more broken down store fronts that lead into bedrooms lining the left side and high crumbling walls lining the right, before turning sharply into one of the rooms. Inside is another wood burning fireplace carved into the wall, venting somewhere above ground in the cold night air or into an abandoned building, a round wooden table, a couple of mismatched chairs around it and three men standing in a corner talking quietly but heatedly. They pause when we enter, all eyes falling immediately on myself, Ryan and Trent.

A shorter man, no taller than I am, steps forward. There’s a shine to his eyes. It’s unnatural and strange. Foreign in the wild.

It’s hope.

“Is this them?” he asks, his tone hushed.

“We think it might be,” our tour guide answers noncommittally.

“Where’s Andy?”

“I’m here.”

There’s a shuffling behind me in the hall. I turn to see a man entering the room, pushing past the other people guarding us. He’s tall, his complexion darker than most of the pale white skin I’ve seen down here so far. He strides into the room, scanning everyone inside and taking inventory. The move reminds me of Trent. He looks closely at the guys then myself, his dark almond eyes examining us in the dim firelight.

“Well?” the short man asks him anxiously.

His eyes meet mine, staying there for longer than I’d like. But as I look at him I start to wonder if I don’t recognize him. It’s too dark in here to be sure, but I swear I’ve seen him before.

“It’s them,” he tells the short man, his voice deep and firm.

Whether I can place him or not, he apparently knows us.

“Wonderful,” Shorty says happily.

I watch Andy as he walks farther into the room to stand beside Shorty. His eyes never leave mine. His stare is starting to make me uncomfortable but I don’t dare look away. I’m an animal from the jungle. I can play the staring game all day long.

“This is perfect,” the short man says to himself, clasping his hands together and smiling. “I’m so glad to finally meet you all.”

“Do we know you?” Ryan asks, his voice surprisingly cold.

“Not yet, but we have so much to talk about. We’ll know each other very well soon enough.”

Andy looks away, glancing over my shoulder. His eyes turn hard as I feel Ryan come to stand directly behind me.

Happy to be released from the staring contest, even happier that I won, I look to who I’m quickly beginning to understand is the leader.

I sneer at him, my lips curling back slightly. “We have nothing to discuss with you.”

The short man smiles. It's wicked in the flickering orange firelight. His teeth flash, and it may be a trick of the light but they look stark white, shadowed and sharp. I fight the urge to recoil.

He steps toward me. The room shifts with him. Shadows build, growing too tall beside him, an army of darkness waiting to answer his every call. A cavalry of devils.

"Oh, my dear girl," he says, his voice going hushed, taking the entire room with it. Everything is pinpointed down to this small man with the quiet voice and the dangerous gleam in his eyes. "I believe you're wrong. We share the same dream."

"I very much doubt that."

"You're wrong."

"What dream could we possibly have in common?"

He grins darkly. "Revolution."

Chapter Two

I'm sitting down to dinner with a table full of cannibals.

It sounds like the beginning of a bad joke. One that ends with something about passing the salt and then everybody laughs only I promise you, I'm not laughing. I'm also not eating, definitely not anything of the meaty protein packing variety. I wouldn't even trust a glass of milk and I. Love. Milk. Love it. The Colonists almost had me selling my soul to them for it. But with the Colonists, believe it or not, I trusted the source more than I do here. Maybe the milk I drank didn't always come from a cow. Maybe sometimes it came from a goat. That's fine. That I can handle. But these people will eat your toes while you watch so it doesn't seem outside the realm of possibility that the milk on this table came from a person and while that's fine for babies, there's something very sickening about the thought of it now.

"Please, dig in," Shorty says from his seat at the head of the long rectangular dining table.

Shorty's name is Elijah. I should probably start thinking of him as that, but I feel like names humanize these lunatics and I don't care to soften my image of them. They're polite, more hospitable than my mom on Thanksgiving, but I don't like it. It's creepy. Creepier than if they came at me covered in living human blood with bits of warm tissue dribbling from their lips. This right here, this is like Halloween in reverse. This is monsters and ghouls dressed up as preachers and soccer moms.

We've been joined by a couple of new people but I can tell by the seating that the important ones are Andy and Elijah. Andy seems to have almost a celebrity status with the rest of the group. People smile at him, clap him on the shoulder, the few women I've seen look at him a little too long. He's a decent enough looking guy from what I can tell

in this light but good looks and a charming smile can't account for the reaction people have to him. It doesn't explain why Elijah has him sitting directly to his right at the table. I glance at Ryan across from me but he's watching our host carefully. Trent sits beside me on my left and a quick glance his way tells me he only has eyes for Andy. This simple fact makes me very leery of Andy.

Elijah smiles patiently at us. "You're not eating."

"I'm not hungry," I tell him dryly.

"You're not hungry or you're not hungry for what we have to offer?"

"I've never been hungry enough to eat what you have to offer," I say, pointedly looking at the strips of meat sitting on a plate in the center of the table.

Elijah's smile changes. He holds it steady but the tightness around his eyes makes it different. It makes it angry.

"Waste not, want not," he sings softly.

I shiver down to my toes.

"What did you mean by us sharing a dream?" Ryan asks. He sounds genuinely curious, the cold edge to his tone thawing slightly.

"I meant what I said. We want what you want. A revolution. Freedom from the Colonies."

"As far as I understand, you don't exactly have to worry about the Colonies," I tell him sharply.

"Then you don't understand anything."

"But they're afraid of you."

"We're afraid of the daylight," he replies biting. "Imagine being a child and never playing in the sun. We've made our way in the world as monsters in the night. It was our only defense. Our numbers have always been too few to fight with and we knew early on as we watched the Colonies grow and change that they would be a problem. They were corrupt from the start."

"So we've heard," I mumble, thinking of the Vashons.

Elijah nods in understanding. "We aren't the only ones who saw it coming. Some ran and hid, some gained the numbers to defend themselves and some made a deal with the devil."

“What deal did you make?”

“Not us. The Hive.”

It shouldn't surprise me, but it does anyway. Marlow obviously hates the Colonies just as he hates the Vashons and I think I understand why. They're more powerful than he is. He imagines himself as something of a King and it's a huge blow to his bloated ego that there are people out there bigger and badder than he is. He'll never control the kind of numbers the Vashons and Colonies are working with and it eats away at him. He hates them for it.

I suddenly wonder if he hates them enough to pit them against each other.

“Did Marlow tell the Colonists we were talking to the Vashons?” I ask, feeling like I just found a huge piece of a puzzle that's been bugging me ever since the Colonists attacked. Why did they decide to make a move against the Vashons all of the sudden? It's been years since they've gone head to head so why now? Why just days after we arrived there?

“Yes,” Andy answers. “He sent word immediately after Ryan won the Blind.”

This is the first time Andy has spoken since he identified us but now as his voice cuts through the room strong and clear I notice how familiar it is.

I narrow my eyes at him, trying to get a better look. “I know you, don't I?”

He smirks. “Ryan knows me better.”

“He's a guard in The Hive,” Ryan confirms with a small nod. “He's one of Marlow's closest men.”

My eyes go wide with shock and realization. “You're the one who brought us in to see Marlow. The one who didn't search us. I was carrying an ASP and a knife in that room.”

Andy nods. “And I was hoping you'd use them.”

“You want Marlow dead?”

“I wouldn't cry over it.”

“So wait. Are you Hive or are you...” I trail off, not sure what to call them. I don't know if ‘cannibal’ is an offensive term. I personally hate it.

“I'm a member of this tribe,” he answers evasively. “I owe no true allegiance to The Hive.”

“So you’re a spy? For how long?” I ask incredulously, thinking that to be a member of Marlow’s inner guard it would have to be quite a while.

“Since the beginning.”

“Do you have spies in the Colonies?”

“No.”

“Would you tell me if you did?”

“No.”

“So you’re probably lying?”

“Anything is possible.”

Ryan sits forward, catching Andy’s eye. “What deal did The Hive make with the Colonists?”

Andy glances silently at Elijah, an unspoken question passing between them. Elijah nods.

“The Colonies have always been obsessed with two things,” Elijah explains. “Cleansing the world of the plague and recruiting more people into their flock. At first they thought the plague was divine retribution. That everyone infected and dying outside the walls they hid inside were getting what they deserved. They felt they’d been chosen to survive. But then not everyone agreed with them and their numbers started to shrink. That’s when they miraculously got word from God Himself that they were meant to save as many people as they could. When willing members dried up, they took to the roundups. They used to be one meager group hiding inside a shopping mall but they keep expanding and as they do they do they’ll need more bodies. More laborers. The Hive made a deal with them that they would provide them with people in exchange for goods. I don’t know what Marlow receives in every payment, but I imagine it’s mostly crops. They’re a group of gamblers, pimps and thieves. They’re not known for their farming skills.”

“Wait, where is The Hive getting people? You can’t just make them out of thin air,” I complain.

Trent snickers behind me. I turn to glare at him.

“What?”

“You’ve lived alone for too long.”

“What are you laughing at?”

He leans back in his seat looking entirely too comfortable. “Ryan, you want to field this one?”

“Joss, think about it,” Ryan says patiently. “How would The Hive be creating people to sell?”

I blush as it dawns on me. “The Stables.”

“Exactly.”

“They’re selling babies?!”

“Yes,” Elijah answers bitterly, the disgust I feel written on his face. “There’s no contraception anymore. Pregnancies are a real risk and with the women in the Stables... *working* as often as they do, babies are a natural outcome of that.”

“Are these women giving their children up willingly?”

“Not all of them,” Andy tells me quietly. “I’ve seen them stripped from their arms just moments after they’re born. The women fall apart, the babies are screaming. It’s not easy to watch.”

I glare at him. “But you still do it.”

“I can’t stop it. I might be able to save one but then my cover is blown and years of work are lost. Wasted.”

“So instead of saving one you save none. How very noble of you.”

Andy’s eyes flash as his jaw clenches. “I saved your boy here after his show in the Blind. That crowd wanted to tear him apart and I got him out. I can’t save everyone but I do what I can.”

“However you need to work the math to sleep at night,” I spit, but I wonder why I’m doing it. I actually understand and I’m grateful that he got Ryan out. I’m just appalled by the idea of selling children to the point that I can’t see straight. I’m angrier than I’ve been in a long, long time and I don’t have the real villain here to shout at so Andy will have to take the abuse.

“Joss, calm down,” Ryan warns.

“No way! Captain Hook is selling Lost Boys, Ryan! It’s jacked up!”

Elijah frowns. “Captain Hook?”

“She’s very into *Peter Pan*,” Trent explains casually. “It’s endearing.”

“The point is, we have to do something about this,” I demand.

“That is exactly the point, yes,” Elijah agrees. “From what Andy heard in your meeting with Marlow—“

“Captain Hook,” Trent corrects.

“Shush,” I whisper to him.

“Hey, it’s your thing. I’m only trying to help.”

“Help by being quiet.”

“You do realize that you’re Peter Pan in this scenario, right?”

“What?” I cry, turning to face him. “No, I’m Tinkerbell.”

“Hardly. She was a seductress. Spritely. You’re too manly for that.”

I sigh. “I hate you sometimes.”

“But you love me most of the time. That’s what matters.”

“Andy heard us talking about the Colony in the north,” Ryan says, getting us back on track.

Elijah nods. “He told us what you had planned. What you asked of The Hive. He also told me they had no intention of helping you, no matter what the outcome of your trip to Vashon Island was.”

“No surprise there.”

“So we’d like to take you up on your offer.”

“Sorry, what?” I ask, shocked.

“Our deal with Marlow was that we’d bring the Vashons in to fight with us,” Ryan reminds him. “We didn’t get their help. We barely made it off their island with our lives.”

“They think we betrayed them to the Colonies,” I agree, feeling oddly sad at the thought of the Vashons hating us.

They’re the closest thing to my kind of people that I’ve seen in a long time. After hearing Sam talk about it, I could see living there out in the open and the free. No zombies, no Colonists, no Hive. I could be exposed to the world and that world wouldn’t want me dead. I could sleep soundly at night in a warm dry place without worrying about waking up to a prison or to find a Risen in my face or a Lost Boy in my bed. But that

strange dream died when the Colonist boats rolled down the river and Ali put a gun to my head.

“We aren’t worried about the Vashons,” Elijah assured us. “We’ll join our numbers with yours to fight back against the Colonies. To take back the surface.”

“Our *numbers* are three,” I tell him, gesturing to Ryan and Trent.

“For now, yes. But once you’ve taken down the Colony in the north you’ll have more.”

“Not many more. Those aren’t fighters. Those are Colonists. Maybe not the die hard, uber religious crazy ones, but they’re still soft. The three of us, a few of you and whoever we can get to put up a fight from the MOHAI isn’t going to be enough to take down one of the stadiums.”

“And once one is down the others have to fall quickly behind it like dominoes,” Ryan reminds us. “We can’t give them time to send warning to the other Colonies.”

“Wherever the others are. No one knows.”

“We do,” Elijah says simply.

I blink. “You know where the other Colonies are?”

“We know where one is. The one in the south, near the shore. They have boats there that they use regularly. We assume there’s another Colony across the water, but we don’t know exactly where.”

“How many are there?” I whisper to myself, starting to feel hopeless.

“There’s the one in the north where you were held,” Ryan says, counting, “the two stadiums, one in the south and now one across the water. So five.”

“That we know of.”

“Yeah.”

I start to panic a little inside. When all of this started I never intended to get involved beyond fulfilling my promise to the people in the MOHAI. I’d bring them help if I could and I’d get them free. From there I figured it would be between them and The Hive what happened next. I never planned on being part of it. In my mind it was their issue. The Colonies were their problem but the deeper I sink into this mess, the more I see that the Colonies are *everyone’s* problem. The Hive’s, the Vashon’s, the cannibal’s, the Hyperion’s, Crenshaw’s – even mine. Very, very much mine.

So now here I am amassing an army of my enemies, exposing myself to all of the people I've lived in fear of for the larger part of my life and I'm talking about taking down more Colonies than I ever knew existed. This is insane. It's impossible.

"We'll need more people," Trent says quietly. It's the first truly serious thing he's said since we sat down and I look back at him in surprise. He's still reclining, comfy and at ease, but his eyes are sharp. Piercing. "We'll need to talk to the others in the Hyperion to see if we can recruit more bodies. We'll need to visit other gangs as well. The Elevens. The Pikes. You," he says, looking directly at Andy, "will need to blow your cover. Start shopping for help."

Andy stares back at him impassively. There's a tension passing between them, one that I don't understand but I'm pretty freaked out by. The way Trent is eyeing Andy... it makes me happy Trent likes me.

"This is what I was planted for," Andy finally agrees softly. "I have some connections I can tap into. There are always people unhappy with the status quo."

"They're going to need to be pretty angry if we want them to go against The Hive," Ryan warns him.

Andy grins knowingly. "Oh, they're a very angry bunch. Trust me."

I don't. I don't trust this guy that has probably sat at a table full of Hive members just like he's sitting with us now, smiled that same smile and speaking those same words. He's a traitor and it doesn't matter if he's betraying the trust of a man I hate or not, he's still willing to look people in the face and lie to them about absolutely everything. I don't trust your average person even on a basic level so this guy is setting off all kinds of alarms inside me.

"How many people can you rally to make a move on the northern Colony?" Ryan asks Elijah.

"At least twenty men and women from our guard."

"It's not much."

"It's more than none at all," he says, carefully reminding us just how many people we've successfully recruited from The Hive and Vashon Island.

Ryan nods in silent, grudging agreement.

Elijah stands suddenly, gesturing for the rest of us to do the same. We do, though I'm not sure why, and the ease with which he commands the room unnerves me. He leads Trent, Ryan, Andy and I down one of their dark, strange hallways to the room where we first met him. Large white tubes have been brought in and propped up against the far wall. He and Andy immediately move to them and start examining their tops.

“Do we have that area?” I hear Elijah mutter thoughtfully.

“We have everything,” Andy answers confidently. He looks over his shoulder at me. “Where exactly up north is the Colony you were in?”

“On the shore. In the old MOHAI building. It was a museum. The Museum of—“
“History and Industry. Yeah, I know. Here it is.”

I glare at him as he pops the cap on one of the tubes and pulls out a large scroll of paper. When he spreads it out on the table, the faded blue paper a mess of white writing that makes me dizzy, I nearly gag. More maps. It makes me think of Captain Hook and his whore house. It makes me oddly angry.

“This is a map of the sewer systems,” Elijah explains. “We have street maps as well but I feel the best route for making a move against the Colony is via the underground. They’ll never see it coming.”

“That area is swarming with zombies,” I tell him faintly, staring at the map.

“Yes, everywhere is lately.”

“Not like up there. They’ve created barricades to lock most of them in as a natural defense.”

Elijah looks at me pointedly. “We can handle the Risen.”

I nod silently but inside I’m thinking he’s using a Colony word. Is he like me and it became part of his vocabulary as he adjusted to this life? He’s old enough to know where that word started, but does he remember?

Or is he like Andy? Is he playing both sides?

“We’ll move on the smallest Colony immediately,” he says.

“How soon is immediately?” Ryan asks.

I notice that he, Trent and I are all hanging back by the door. None of us have advanced toward the table where they’re examining the map.

“Tomorrow night.”

“No,” I say firmly.

He looks up at me with a mix of surprise and annoyance. “And why not?”

“Because it’s impossible. Because we don’t have a solid plan yet. Because we don’t know how many people we’ll be able to gather from the gangs.” I look him in the eye hard. “Because I don’t know you. I don’t trust you. I don’t want to make deals with and fight alongside vicious, rabid animals.”

Andy snaps up, his posture going rigidly straight. I ignore him. He worries me but not right now. Not when I’ve got Ryan and Trent beside me. I’m still afraid, but I don’t feel alone and afraid and that makes a pretty sizeable difference in my world.

“You don’t know a damn thing about us,” Andy says, seething with anger.

“Lucky me.”

“We don’t need her,” he tells Elijah. “We know where the northern Colony is now. Get her out of here.”

I open my arms wide. “All you gotta do is show me the door.”

“Gladly.”

“Stop, both of you,” Elijah says impatiently. “Andy, we need her because the location of the Colony isn’t enough. She’s connected to them. They know her. They won’t work with us, they’re terrified of us, but they’ll follow her.”

“She’s nothing but a mouthy brat. She’ll get people killed. *Our* people.”

“And you’ll have dinner for a week,” I tell him with disgust. “What are you complaining about?”

He shakes his head, his mouth a tight line of compressed anger. “Get her out,” he snarls. “Get her out of my sight.”

“She stays,” Elijah tells him, his voice quiet yet firm. “But I’ll make a deal with you.”

“I get to kill her when it’s over?”

I smirk at Andy even though my stomach is a tight knot of dread. I feel Ryan and Trent close ranks around me. It’s a half step each but it’s a warning, one I sincerely open Andy heeds.

“No,” Elijah tells him. Then he looks at me and I see the anger Andy is so openly expressing buried deep inside this small man. The firelight is in his eyes and it burns hot, livid and...happy? He smiles faintly. “You get to educate her.”