Summary

Leo, Michelle, Dawn, and Ella continue to fight in the third novel in Asunder.

Michelle has always hated the feeling of grass on her skin, but now she discovers that the feeling of sand is equally unpleasurable.

"I don't know how to exist without you. I need you unlike anything else. Unlike anything I've ever known."
I should stay calm

Leo 1

I did not sleep, even when Ella lost her voice from screaming, and her voice became nothing but raspy hisses that scratched and burned the air. It is a cruel thing to be absent. At these times of the night, I used to creep out of my bedroom and wake Newt and sit with him for hours. The stars in the sky were fake, and I think I knew this, so we often pinned our bodies tightly in a corridor, waiting for dawn. Even staring at the ceiling was pleasant with him nearby. Now, I am stuck in this room, alone.

At some point, the soft sounds of all the other girls in this room have lulled into one cohesive whisper. One wave that swims across the room, rippling from one girl to the next. Every few seconds, the sounds become disjunct, and I am reminded that we are all separate people.

The door unlocks, and I sit up. I curl against the wall, trying to let the darkness protect me. Hinges creaking loudly, but despite the sound I can't see the figure at the door. My body is plagued by exhaustion from the long day behind us, so my eyes can't focus and my fingers are lagging. There is more than one person walking into the room, all silent.

They walk towards me, masked faces, and I am so frozen I try to scream but no sound comes out my lips. One places a gloved hand over my lips, with leather that smells bitter and is too thick to bite through. I grab at the figure's neck, but they shove me to the bed, and inject my arm with a syringe.

My eyes grow heavier, and I am shoved deep into the dark.

My head pounds and aches, and my eyes try to remain closed. Is this what it feels like to be sedated? Every inch of my skin is exhausted. I peel myself up, my sweaty skin sticking to the covers beneath me.

Where am I?

The walls of the room are yellow, and I'm on a bunkbed. I am in the same place they got me. I My hands fumble as I grab the railing. I sway slightly, trying to still my pounding skull, as my eyes adjust to the sleeping girl across from me. My eyes flutter from girl to girl, counting each one. Head stinging as I name them off. Dawn, Michelle, Ella. And Teresa is here too.

They didn't take anyone.

Why did they knock me out?

I slowly climb down the ladder, holding on as tightly with my fists as my shaky fingers can. My socks shuffle across the floor, muffled yet painfully loud. As I move around, I drop my belt, full of tools to heavy for my swaying hips. The people who brought us here laid out clothing next to the bed. A brown jacket, with wool lining, and jeans. Heavy boots lie at the end. I ignore the mess shuffle into the bathroom to change.

The walls to the bathroom are a clean white. The colour offsets my skin. It has been so long since I've seen my face. Freckles litter my skin, brought out by the sun of the Glade. There are a few cuts on my face, but they are healing well. My cheek bone, however, sports a large yellow bruise from where I landed on the ground while carrying Ella. I run my fingertips along the mark, tracing my skin carefully.
Have I always looked like this? This nervous and uncertain?

I turn out of the room, grabbing my clothes and bringing them back into the bathroom. I quickly change, ignoring the sinking feeling in my chest when I look in the mirror. When I come out of the bathroom Ella is still sweating and tossing and turning. I don't want to know what is going on in her head, though I want to understand. Then she moans, and Michelle takes the pillow out from under her head and throws it in Ella's general direction. Thankfully, Michelle misses.

"Get up," I tell Michelle, hushing my voice to try and keep her calm. "Something is wrong."

"Slim it," she mutters.

Dawn groans, rising in her bed. She yawns, before climbing down the ladder. Her foot stumbles, but she manages to catch herself on the ground. "How am I so shucking tired. I feel like I've slept for twelve years. What time is it?"

I check the watch on my wrist. "Like, 7:00?"

"Can't we sleep in for once?" Dawn asks, mulling through her pile of clothing. "Or are we still on some tight regiment Lee?"

"We were drugged last night," I tell her.

Michelle finally lifts her head, even though her eyes are still closed. Dawn's clothing hits the ground, dropped from surprise. If Teresa cares, she doesn't say anything. I only notice now that she is awake, and I don't know how long she has been awake.

"What?" Dawn asks.

The door handle starts jangling, and Michelle jumps down the ladder. Her knees fail her, as her body slams her against the ground. I move over to help her to her feet, while she shrugs me off. Dawn is already at the door, trying to hold it closed.

Michelle gets up, holding her hands in front of her in fists.

"What exactly is your plan?" Dawn demands, as the door smashes against itself. Her body jerks back and forth, over and over again.

Michelle shrugs, and it makes my stomach turn. The door hinges are cracking. I would grab a bunkbed and shove it against the door, but there is no time. Instead, I pull the scissors out of my belt, thankful I didn't toss them aside.

For a second, someone stops, and I think the banging might go away.

"What do we do about Ella?" Dawn hisses, glancing back at the bed. She then glances over at Teresa. "Some good help you are."

I ignore her comment, trying to answer her question about Ella. There isn't much to do about her so I just hold the scissors, in my shaking hands, and the door starts clicking.

In a few seconds, the log slides out, and the door handle moves. Michelle rushes to the door to hold it in. It slams from the other side, causing both of the girls to stumble back.

The door opens. On the other side stands a girl. I'd guess she's around my age, with a mouth agape. She has brown hair and skin and looks absolutely confused to see us in here. She backs away from
the door, dropping her small tools on the ground and turning around to face the rest of the group.

"They're gone," she even seems confused by her words. She turns behind her to address the others. "They're gone."

I move towards the door, slowly. I grab the doorframe, peering out but pulling myself back into the room. There are bodies hanging from the ceiling, bodies I don't dare look at. I try to calm my racing thoughts, refusing to search them. Who are they? Are they our friends? Is Newt there?

"What the shuck..." Dawn trails off.

I can hear a ton of people whispering. I can only make out their bodies through the hanging figures. All in pajamas, all of them holding weapons, and I'm the only one out of us who is dressed. Where are we? Why are there shucking bodies hanging from the ceiling, and where is everyone else?

A girl, around my age, pushes to the front of the crowd. Her hair is pulled into tight dreads, and she stares at me.

"Get out here," she tells us, strong and certain. "Get out."

I shake my head back and forth, and none of the others move. I realise that Michelle has recoiled from her position at the front, and now I am taking charge. At least, I'm supposed to be taking charge. That's always been my role since I'm less volatile than the rest of them. I don't know that I necessarily like this position though.

"You get in here," I tell the girl, trying to maintain eye contact with her despite her angry demeanor. "We aren't going out there."

"Not when you have shucking bodies hanging from the ceiling!" Dawn agrees, almost yelling with the shrill of her voice. It remains a whisper though and dies in silence.

"We didn't do that," their leader keeps her voice calm, despite the bodies hanging behind her.

"What did you do with them?" A blonde girl with a funny accent steps in closer to us. Her voice is identical to Newt's. The pair of them give me déjà vu.

We didn't do anything. I look back and forth between the girls, and even Michelle shrugs. What are they?

"The boys," she reiterates. "Where did they go?"

Boys? I spin around on my heels. "I could ask you the same thing."

She frowns, and so does the girl with the dreadlocks. Shaking her head back and forth doesn't quite show exactly how pissed off she looks. "This is stuck. They were in your room."

I don't quite understand some of the words they are using, but I think I'm beginning to understand. Teresa still stands near the back of the room. She won't come forward and won't make eye contact with any of them. I stare around at the beds. Six bunks, still, just like the room we were in last night. Yet, nothing has changed since they drugged us last night.

They moved us. Whoever was here before, is gone. They must be with Newt.

"We're replacing them," I say it to myself, but it only causes the girl to look at me like I have two extra heads on my shoulders. "You had five boys, correct? And now, they're gone?"
"What are you going off about?" The girl continues, her arms crossed over her chest. "Who are you?"

I don't know how to explain who we are. So, I step out of the room, into the maze of the deceased. The girl in front of me backs up as I approach her, though I don't blame her. I still have the scissor in my hand. I tuck them away.

"What's your name?" She asks me.

"Leo," I tell her. "Like Da Vinci."

Her eyelashes flutter, like the click of a camera, and she turns around to face her pack. Michelle and Dawn still haven't left the room, though Teresa is beginning to move out. She still hides against the doorframe, and some of the girls stare her down. I can't blame them since she is so pretty.

"Harriet," the girl with dreadlocks responds. "Like Tubman."

"Wait, are these shanks Gladers?" Michelle asks, breeching the barrier. She makes a face at the girl who broke the door down, before turning back to me. "They're from the Maze."

"You're Group A," Harriet points to the door.

There is a sign next to our room, with a list along the wall. Of subject numbers. B1, B57, B58, and B59. There are more of us.

"Where's Sheil?" One of the girl's steps out of the group. She has long curly brown hair, that essentially swallows her whole, and her voice is determined. "He's gone too, right?"

Harriet glances at her over her shoulder, and offers in a low voice, "Marie..."

"I have his insulin," Marie continues, ignoring Harriet. She begins to dig through her bag, on the ground, as if she has already misplaced it. "He'll die by the end of the week without it."

He's a diabetic and they have insulin? I always thought Ella might be epileptic, but obviously she's not. Otherwise, we'd have a drug for that. There has been another group here this whole time. It really was just an experiment.

"He's where we were, probably," I'm not sure, but I pretend to be. "They traded us."

"Who did?" Marie jumps in, peering around.

"WICKED ya stupid shank," Michelle rolls her eyes, finding her way into the room. Dawn is close behind her but avoids the bodies. "Who else would shuck up our lives like this?"

They still linger. These must be their rescuers, hanging from the ceiling. They are too old to be our friends. So many bodies. Though they wanted to leave me behind, the rescuers offered me nothing but kind faces when I got back. They fed us, and clothed us, and now they hang here, discarded bags. They're worth nothing.

Marie doesn't seem to respond. Neither does Harriet though. How do we get back to our group? Maybe we don't. That couldn't have been good-bye forever. We couldn't have just disappeared like that. It's not over.

Harriet glances around before sighing. "Let's just get all y'all sticks into the other room. Then we'll
The girls seem to listen to her, as they filter around the hanging bodies. I try my best not to touch any as I move through them. Dawn pulls up next to me, wrapping her hand around my wrist.

"We say nothing about Ella?" She asks, unsure of the answer.

I nod. I'm not sure what we would say until I can trust them all together. Ella is an anomaly. "Who knows what these girls want."

Dawn agrees, clinging on to me until we get in the room.

They don't have beds in the next room, and their walls are darker. Along the ground lies dozens of sleeping bags. There are more girls in here then boys we had survive the Maze.

There is nowhere to sit, but the girls seem to follow a routine. They move against the wall, until their bodies coat it in a circle, leaving Harriet, the blonde girl, and the four of us in the center. There has got to be thirty of them, which is only five more than we had. Still, these girls are organized, and they came to kill.

Harriet seems to be circling us, like we are play. Michelle can keep her cool, but I can't.

"Relax, vulture," Michelle rolls her eyes. "If I wanted to shuck you up, I would."

Harriet says nothing. She maintains a firm and strong face, her feet planted far apart on the ground. "What's your name?"

Michelle doesn't answer, instead rolling her eyes. "Really, an interrogation?"

"We aren't the enemies here," Dawn calls out. "We didn't choose to be here, just like you bloody didn't."

They really aren't helping. I step closer to Harriet, addressing her. "Michelle's the ginger, the other is Dawn. That Brunette is Teresa."

"So, you're from the Maze?" The other girl steps forward. The blonde one who talks weird; she seems to be their second. "The other Maze anyway."

I nod.

"Who are you?" Dawn asks, staring at the girl. Her eyes linger and linger.

"Sonya," she tells us. Her eyes scanning our faces. She lingers too long for me to be comfortable.

"Which one of y'all was the trigger?" Harriet asks.

Trigger?

Teresa nods, stepping forward. "I was the last. Covered in blood."

"Stuck," the girl in the center sighs. "It's the exact same. All of it."

I think we had that part figured out. Four came up, then one more. They don't seem surprised that there is only four of us though. As if, they too, were missing a fifth body.

"Who are you missing?" I ask.
"Aris," Sonya continues. "He's our trigger. Sheil, Lott, and Jay are gone too, but they came a while ago. Emil with them, a month before Rachel."

Rachel is there Thomas. "Which one of you is Rachel?"

Sonya flinches, before looking down.

"Rachel died," Harriet answers. She glances over at Sonya, lingering. "She was shot by Beth."

I hear the soles of Michelle's shoes rub against the ground. Beth was their Gally. Did they make her go crazy too? Did they make her shoot Rachel? Was Chuck's death Gally's fault, or was Thomas supposed to die instead?

"Our Rachel lived," I tell them. "Thomas is alive. Our version of Beth shot someone else. WICKED forced him too."

"Beth was forced?" Another girl steps forward. Harriet shoots her a look, before she moves back against the wall.

A massive shriek erupts from the room over. Ella. I burst through the doors, running across the room into Ella's. She's on the bed, writhing in pain. I run over into the bathroom, to soak a cloth in water, before putting it over her head.

"Who is that?" Harriet demands, leering over top of us. The other girls are flooding into our room.

"Ella," Dawn answers. "She's the fourth girl."

"You failed to mention she was alive," Harriet cuts in. "I figured she would've died too."

I try to take Ella's pulse as she rolls around. Her hands scratch at my arms, and Sonya moves next to me, pinning the girl down.

"One of the boys is dead?" Dawn asks over my shoulder.

"That's really not the point right now," Sonya cuts in. "What's happening?"

"The Changing," I tell them. "It's the Changing."

"A what?"


"We need to run her a bath."

"We need to give her water."

It doesn't matter what we need to do. What matters is getting Ella help.
I should be solid

I can hear Ella panting inside the room. Leo is preoccupied with her, as are Sonya and Harriet. Those two girls seem to circle in like hawks, watching and waiting.

I don't know if I'd rather be in there or out here. Ella's screeching is pretty damn awful, not just for my ears either. I feel really bad for her. I let her be a distraction for the Griever, and it got her. Look where that got us. Maybe we are alive, but she might not be in a few days. It's easier to avoid thinking about her just outside the room.

It isn't any better out here though. The girls from the other glade keep staring at me. Their eyes are constantly lingering on me, and the whole thing sends shivers up my spine. Besides, I'm sitting between Teresa and Michelle, and I can't tell if they hate each other, me or they are just as standoffish as usual.

This whole situation is taking a lot of getting used to. Normally I'm fairly chatty, but none of these girls are particularly kind, nor pleasant. It doesn't help that I know no one and feel an imposter in my own skin.

Quite literally actually. The jean jacket the Creators left for me is comfortable. It fits well, and it's something new. There weren't any jean jackets in the Glade. Just plaid shirts, but those days are long behind me now. The Creators took all the plaid away, and all the clothes that made me blend in with the Gladers. Now, I feel unique in this crowd, without anyone wearing the same clothes as me. I'm starting to not feel like a prisoner. It's kind of nice, but also kind of lonely.

"How do we get back to them?" Michelle asks. She's talking about the boys, I think, which is odd. She doesn't like them very much, from what I can tell. All her friends died.

It still hasn't settled in me that we are gone. That Minho is gone. I still haven't told him that I'm pregnant. It feels as though the ground has slipped beneath my feet, my head hit the ground, and I am still too dizzy to recuperate. He can't be gone. He can't be far away.

"You want to go back to those boys?" Teresa asks. "Haven't they tried to kill you, multiple times? Isn't that enough?"

"They've also saved our lives," I retort, glancing up at them.

Teresa shrugs, but Michelle stays still. She neither agrees nor disagrees, which I guess means she is taking Teresa's side. Normally, Michelle is full of snarky comebacks. She picked now to be silent?

"Don't you want to get back to Thomas?" I whisper, glancing over at Teresa.

Ella's screams erupt, and a girl pulls herself to her feet. She stares over at me from across the room.

"Shut her up," It's the same girl who picked the lock to greet us. Her dark curly hair swings when she talks. "Her screaming is going to drive us crazy."

"Sure, we'll just waltz right in and ask her politely," I roll my eyes.

"Don't act like this has nothing to do with you," another girl snorts from across the room. She carefully tosses her black hair over her shoulder. "You chose to put her through the Process."

I stand up, looking between the two of them. "What the shuck are you going off about?"
"She got stung, right?" The second girl asks. "It's the Process."

She's talking about the Changing, I guess.

"What do you mean, 'put her through'?!" Teresa leans in, her hand on her waist. She eyes the girl suspiciously. "She just got stung."

The girl freezes. She looks at two girls behind her on the ground, before back at us. Her mouth is slightly agape. "They don't make you do it?"

I am done talking to this girl if she is going to speak in so many weird words, so I turn to one of the only girls I know the name of. Marie, they called her at the meeting. She kept trying to get at Ella early, and she carries penicillin, so I assume that she is their Med-jack. Regardless, she seems to like to offer up information all the time. "What are they talking about?"

Marie takes a second to realise I am talking to her. "The Process? It's when you get stung."

"Happens to everybody in the first month," the first girl jumps back in. "It's how you get accepted to the Glade."

"Seriously?" That's totally jacked. Already, these girls are sadists. No wonder Leo didn't trust them. I've seen people go through the Changing, and I've nearly been killed by those boys. How the shuck do they do that every month, intentionally? They should all be dead, just based on odds.

"What did you see when you changed?" Teresa asks.

Ella screams again, and the first girl moves. Her foot collides with the door, a heavy thud.

"Stuck," she kicks the wall again, this time with less emphasis, and a furrowed brow.

"Would you quit it?" The other girl. "Seriously Rose, you're embarrassing."

Rose rolls her eyes, glancing at the girl across the room. She hides behind her curly brown hair, but I can see her twisted expression. "Thanks Hilde. If you wanted me to quit you could have just asked me too."

Hilde, I guess she's the girl with the long dark hair and the bitter expression. Her face turns sour, her brow furrowing. For a second, I imagine she is going to snap in half. Instead, she crosses her arms tightly over her chest, ignoring the three girls whispering behind her.

It's not simply because she picked the lock on our door that I dislike Rose, but because she seems to be like, unintelligent Michelle. At least now, the ginger beside me can keep her cool. Rose doesn't seem to give us that luxury.

Hilde jumps to her feet, her hair swinging behind her. She's short, but her red cheeks and tightened fist are just as intimidating as any boy I've ever seen. "Thanks Hilde." She mocks Rose's tone, and then a smile plays on her lips. "Funny, Jay said the same thing to me a few nights ago."

All the sounds in the room still, except for the huff of Rose's breathing. Her brown eyes flash for a second. She lunges forward, Michelle sticking out a leg and tripping the girl. Up and moving, Michelle pins the girl to the ground with one foot on the other's back. Her hair hangs down heavily over her, while Rose's arms behind her back, and presses a knee against her ribs.

"Enough," Michelle says carefully. She leans closer to Rose as she says it, but stares into Hilde's deep brown eyes.
Rose's fists ball at her sides, but Michelle has her planted firmly against the ground. Hilde walks over, staring at the girl on the ground. She doesn't quite smile, but she isn't frowning either. She twiddles her thumbs carefully, before tossing her black hair over her shoulder.

"What's on your neck?" Teresa asks, tapping Michelle's shoulder. "It looks like a tattoo."

Michelle lets go of Rose, lifting her hand up to her own neck. She looks at her fingertips after wiping her neck, but there isn't any smear across them. I move over, shifting her red hair off her neck. She doesn't stop me, which surprises me. The words on her neck, stamped in dark black ink, surprise me more.

Property of WICKED. Group A, Subject A59. The Hermit.

"They tattooed you," I tell her, my hands leaving her neck. She turns around to face me, putting her hand back up to her neck. "WICKED."

"WICKED?" Marie asks from across the room. "Like, the Creators, WICKED?"

Michelle moves away from me, continuing to rub her neck. It seems permanent. Subject A59. How many of us were there originally? We've gone down to 25 now.

"You have one too," Teresa points to Rose. Rose gets up, backing away from us. "What do you mean?"

"We've been branded," Michelle turns around. "We're all branded."

The girls in the room break out into chatter. They begin to grab at each other, pulling them around to read the words on their necks. Everyone is covered in black ink.

I knock on the door behind us. "Lee."

From inside I hear shuffling, and the door clicks and swings open. Leo, with her hair spread about her head in a messy bun, turns to look at me. Shortly behind her are Sonya and Harriet, peering out.

"Can this wait?" Harriet asks.

I ignore her, grabbing Leo and turning her around. I flick down the collar of her shirt.

Property of WICKED. Group A, Subject A57. The Anchor.

"You've got one too," I say, recoiling from Leo.

"One what?" She turns around, rubbing the back of her neck. She looks at her hand but lowers it. She notices the commotion behind me, turning back to Harriet. "What's going on?"

"They tattooed you sticks," Harriet looks around at us. "How didn't you notice?"


Harriet turns to Sonya, gesturing for the girl to turn around. She looks for herself, reading the black words etched on Sonya's neck, running her hands along each letter individual. She takes her time to think, slowly and steadily.

"What am I?" Michelle asks, pushing past Hilde into the room.
"The Hermit," I answer, before turning to Leo. "And you're the Anchor."

I glance over, trying to catch a glimpse of Teresa's. Her hand flies up to her own neck, defensively. Michelle's eyes widen. Teresa backs away from the doorway, disappearing into the room. Michelle carefully mouths to me. The Betrayer.

"This is a load," Harriet turns towards the door and back to Sonya. With every move, her dreadlocks whip around her. It doesn't seem to bother her though, but the thick strands keep me from seeing her brand. "When would they have tattooed us?"

"They drugged us last night," Leo offers. "I only noticed because Ella kept me awake. They could've drugged you too."

Everyone begins speaking all at once, but that's fair. No one particularly likes being drugged. Maybe that didn't even drink in their Glade. It would suck if these shanks didn't know how to party, even a little bit. Ignoring the fight between the leaders, I move into the hall. Michelle follows just behind me.

"How did these barbaric chicks survive?" I move against the wall, watching the girls rush around. She scoffs, looking around. "It's the barbarism that let so many survive."

She offers nothing else afterwards, instead standing and staring at the girls. They continue to fuss over each other and try to read their necks. I guess I would want to know everyone's too, if I was with my friends. I wonder who Minho would be. Maybe the soul, or the fire, or whatever. I don't really get what these names mean. How is someone supposed to be an anchor?

"You're the Cold."

"You're the Leader."

"Quit messing around, I know I am not the Load."

Their mouths move rapidly, spitting out klunk. I don't really want to pay the tattoos any mind, since it's probably WICKED just screwing with us again, but my stomach burns with questions anyway. Dealing with WICKED isn't a game, and it hasn't really ever been. These titles could be just as stupid as the name they assigned me, or they could mean so much more. I don't want to think either is true.

"You want to know your title?" Michelle leans over, asking carefully.

I guess it couldn't hurt. Worst comes to worse, it says I'm the mom and then I'm going to have an awkward conversation. Instead of worrying, I nod carefully, turning my neck.

Michelle's fingers lift my hair, glancing only for a second. I turn back to face her, but she isn't looking at her. Her ginger hair surrounds her, so I can't see what she's staring at. I bet she is just observing the chaos. This probably feels like she is right at home.

"You're the Roots," she offers, a smirk on her lips.

The Roots? What the shuck is that supposed to mean? I get the Hermit, because Michelle has no home, and the Anchor, since Leo tethers us to the ground, but not the Roots. Isn't that the same as an anchor? Seems like a bunch of klunk.

"These shanks are going to be a pain," I roll my eyes, turning to face Michelle.
She turns back to stare at me and shakes her head back and forth.

"Nah, they are sticks now," she gestures to the group, before patting her hand on the wall. "That's what they say instead of shank, anyway. Welcome to the big leagues."

She disappears into the crowd, and I expect her to start a fight, but from what I can tell she doesn't. Everyone seems to be settling down a bit, which is at least a relief. I don't want to deal with them any longer than I must. I already know five names, and that's too many.

Minho should be here. He would know what to do, and I would tell him I'm pregnant, like I've promised myself I will over and over again, and everything would be fine. Everyone here kind of sucks. At the very least, they are super annoying.

Sonya squeezes through the crowd, pausing next to me. She smiles at me, a smirk on her cheek, before heading over to the centre of the crowd. Okay, so maybe she isn't awful. Like, maybe she is, but I don't get that vibe off of her. She seems nice.

"Already, that's it." Harriet steps in the centre. The girls go silent as she does. "So, we've all got titles and numbers. That's it. WICKED doesn't have anything on us. We aren't stuck. Gotcha?"

I few girls repeat gotcha, and I can tell I'm going to understand my slang but do the best to avoid using it. Already, I can tell it is stupid and poorly thought up. I mean, ours is the same, but it's my home.

"You sticks good?" Harriet repeats. "Because we've got more important loads to worry about."

Like what? Like getting back to our respective people? Because yeah, I'm definitely more than on board with that.

"Like?" Rose demands. She's next to Michelle, leaning against a back wall. When I catch Michelle's eye, she nods. Is she already trying to make alliances? I guess it wouldn't hurt to have friendships, but in this whole Rose vs. Hilde fight, both options seem like the wrong choice. One is explosive and irrational, and the other starts klunk. I don't know why Michelle is trying to buddy up with the pair of them.

"Like," Sonya offers, "we don't have food, and we are only seeming to get water from the taps."

I glance over to Leo, who stands in solidarity with those girls. Great, so I'm already the only girl glader here who doesn't have a buddy. I didn't see this coming. If anything, I have way more friends in the Glade then either of them, no disrespect. Leo is just nervous, and Michelle kind of a nuclear bomb. I didn't think I'd be standing alone.

Then again, my Glade is filled with boys. Not that boys and girls are different, but the boys tended to flock to me to shack me. I don't think most of the girls are thinking about that right now. I mean, if they were, they would already be all cozied up next to me.

"So we starve to death?" Hilde asks.

Leo doesn't answer her and from what I can tell she doesn't know what's going to happen.

"WICKED wouldn't bring us here just to kill us," Teresa offers.

I roll my eyes, spinning to face her. "Really Teresa? Because last I checked, WICKED was more than content watching us get ripped to shreds. Or have you already forgotten about Dave, and Zart, and Joe, and Jeff, and your own shuck boyfriend?"
Teresa's face goes red, and I can hear her muttering under her breath. "Not my shuck boyfriend."

"Zip it," Harriet offers. "We perfectly know what WICKED does. They did it to us too."

I highly doubt that WICKED stood by while she was attacked in the Slammer by a boy but go off I guess.

"We'll figure out what to do in the morning," Sonya offers. "No use panicking until then."

I almost laugh. Seriously? Their policy is not to panic? Have they met Leo?
I should be sturdier

Michelle 3

I wake up, in the same bed, with an empty stomach. Now is the time where we can collectively decide to panic. Three days without WICKED is I think the longest I’ve had alone. This distance is both welcome (the less of them the better), and incredibly frustrating. I’d rather not starve to death, so I hope they at least poke their heads in and give me something to eat.

When I sit, I manage not to crack my head off the bed above me. My head still hurts from sitting up so abruptly yesterday. I need to learn to keep myself lying down, even when I’m dreaming of an intruder.

Once I’m down, I walk into the center of the room. Everyone has gotten up and left the room except for Ella. She lies on her side, grunting. It’s the quietest she’s been for quite sometime, which is probably how I managed to sleep in so late.

Ella stops moaning. Her eyes flutter open, and close, and she rolls off the bed onto the ground. Spilling at my feet, like a rag doll. Then she starts shaking, and I move back against the wall. Her mouth foams and froths, and her head hits the ground over and over again. I’ve got no idea what is happening.

“Leo!” I feel myself trying to yell, but the sound is struggling in my throat. My arms are frozeb, gripping the wall. I didn’t even touch her. “Leo!”

The door bursts open behind me, and Leo is immediately on the ground, rolling Ella onto her side. She turns back, to stare at me, before gesturing for me to leave the room.

“What happened?” Dawn leans in the door, grabbing my frozen arms and pulling me outside.

I don’t know. One minute, she was just groaning, and the next, that. The twitching. Uncontrollable. Is that the Changing?

“Michelle,” she snaps, staring into my eyes.

I move out of her grip, finally finding my knees have seized wobbling. In the space that we and Group B share, there is one door that has yet to open. No one tries to stop me as I walk over to it. I grab the handle, before kicking the door. It won’t budge.

“What Michelle, what are you doing?” Dawn asks.

I’m getting the shuck out of here. I’m going to find Gally and go somewhere where I don’t have to worry about Ella, or about nightmares, or the rumbling in my stomach. For shuck’s sake, the Glade would be better than being trapped in this room.

I reach into my belt, grabbing the hammer out of my pocket. I smash it into the handle, and the handle smashes back with equal force. The hammer shoots away, almost flying out of my strong grip. My knees teeter as I remain my balance. The doorknob isn’t even dented.

Great, just great. What the shuck is the door even reinforced with?

“It doesn’t unlock,” I can hear that stupid girl behind me, Rose, over my shoulder. “I can’t pick it. I don’t even know that it opens. Could just be to shuck with us.”
So, that’s it. We’re stuck now?

“Even if it could unlock, we ought to stay here,” Harriet adds in. I recognize her distinct voice apart from the others. Man, I’m already starting to think Alby 2.0 is going to get on my nerves. “There ain’t nothing outside but those stickin’ crazies.”

“Cranks,” Rose corrects, her voice sour. “But it’s better we face them then starve to death.”

I guess first impression aren’t everything.

“She’s got a point,” this voice has the funny accent just like Newt’s. I turn around and realise I don’t remember the blonde girl’s name. She looks over Harriet sighing. “There is no food in here.”

Right, starvation. It’s nothing I’m not used to at this point. We practically had run out of food by the time we left the Glade. If I can’t go another couple days without eating, I’ll be damned. I ignore my stomach as it rumbles in my chest. I don’t know if I’ve even eaten since Dave died. Maybe it was before that, or maybe it was only a few days before we left.

My world feels like it has been dividing into two halves. The days before I lost Dave and Gally, and the days after. Now though, now Gally is alive, these worlds seem to be a colliding and smashing together. They are two distinct jigsaw puzzles I’m trying to fit together. The only way to make them feel connected, or at least, to try to forget about the after, is to find Gally.

“Let’s stay calm,” the leader offers. “We can start panicking tomorrow. Until then, there isn’t anything we can do.”

I roll my eyes, backing away from the door. My feet essentially scrape across the floor, until I plop myself down against the wall. This is the worst.

I can hear Dave and Gally’s screams echoing in my ears. Seeing, and then not seeing. I’m still blind in one eye. He beat me blind, or I guess whoever was controlling him did. It’s hard to separate Gally from WICKED. Too often, they intersect. Who was he before them? Who will he be after (if he lives that long)?

I don’t know how I can escape to find him. I doubt WICKED would bring us together. They seem only keen on separating us. Not that I mind being pulled away from those boys, but I don’t think I like being here any better. Especially when their Alby is still alive and breathing down my neck.

“Harriet’s the worst,” Rose plops down beside me. She maintains a distance, thankfully, but continues to drone on. “You’re lucky you’ve missed her in the Glade.”

I turn to look at her. She wears a sour expression and turns away from me. What’s her deal anyway? Both simultaneously standoffish and chatty. I work alone.

“Reminds me of our shuck leader,” I admit, gritting my teeth together. “He died.”

I hope that will shut the conversation down, since as far as I’m aware I don’t talk with casual acquaintances about death. Especially not when they leave a hanging implication that certain people are better off dead. Unfortunately, Rose nods as if she’s becoming accustomed to the idea of death.

“Stung,” I tell her. “So, he offed himself.”

“Rough,” she agrees, leaning her head back against the wall. “We had two go that way, after the Process.”
I still don’t get why they forced everyone to undergo the Changing. Seems like a bit of a hazard for me, for pretty much little gain. I don’t know anyone who did who made it out unharmed in the end. Except for Thomas, but everything seems to be a shucking exception with him. It’s his fault everyone is dead and gone now, anyway.

Leo walks out of the bedroom, and I’m on my feet. She huffs out air from her red cheeks. Her hair, normally in a ponytail, falls in front of her face and across her neck.

“Ella is having a seizure,” she enunciates every syllable carefully.

Dawn is the first to move, darting in the bedroom after her, and then that other funny-talking girl follows her. Another girl, one I don’t know, takes hold of Leo and pulls her off to the side. I watch Leo breathe, her chest heaving in and out three times, before she turns around and walks back into the bedroom.

“What’s up with Ella?” Rose asks. She hasn’t moved from where she sits on the ground. “Is she an epileptic?”

I shake my head. Although I don’t know entirely what is up with Ella, I have my suspicions. “She remembers.”

“I thought she was going through the Process now?” Rose asks.

“She is,” I move forward, ditching Rose and following them into the room.

Ella lies on her side, her body twitching up and down. Bile is spewed across the carpet and causes the room to stink. Her skin has turned a dull grey, and her hair pillows around her so much its difficult to see her face.

I don’t know how long we stare at her, because it seems we are helpless. There isn’t much else we can do anyway. It will go on until its over.

Then it is over, and her body stills. She doesn’t regain consciousness, like most do after a seizure. Maybe it’s just Ella, or maybe it’s the Changing, or the Process, or whatever.

“You guys can go,” Leo’s voice shakes. “I’ll watch her.”

“You need a break,” Dawn doesn’t suggest or offer. She instructs Leo with every syllable. “Sonya can watch her for a while, right?”

Sonya (I doubt I’ll remember this blonde’s name in half an hour) looks up. “I got Ella.”

Dawn agrees, tugging Leo out of the room.

Sonya looks after Ella. She doesn’t pick her up, and I don’t know how to help without hurting. I’m not exactly someone who builds since all I do is destroy.

I leave Sonya to her work, walking out of the room. Dawn comforts Leo against a wall, stroking her messy and dirty hair. She needs to shower, desperately, since I can smell Ella’s puke and sweat on her. Part of me wonders if I should go over, and the other decides against it since nothing I can do will be any help.

What’s the point of this waiting? Why not just throw us into the action? The Creators must have a plan. Maybe they want to make us feel safe again, so they can rip out the ground from beneath our feet. It’s not going to work on me. I don’t believe in rigidity, or security.
Teresa is leaning against a wall, alone. A fire ignites inside me, and I find myself marching over to her.

“What’s your deal?” I demand.

She glances at me, before pursing her lips together. “Sorry?”

“You hate me all the time, and then you stare at me while I almost get murdered saving your boyfriend from Jackson.”

“He isn’t my boyfriend,” she shoves past me, her voice in a hush.

“Really?” I run past her, blocking her from moving forward. “Because as far as I can tell, you were pissed off when I tried to beat him in. Seems like something a girlfriend would care about.”

“A lot has changed since then,” she tells me. “Also, you don’t need to date someone to not want their face beaten in.

Sounds fake, but okay.

Sure, stuff has changed, but also, it’s all the same. My body breathes, and walks, and talks, but I have forgotten how to live. I can hear Dave screaming. His voice is in my ears, whispering away. He was there, and now he’s gone. I don’t want to think about that anymore. Gally lives. I never picked between them, and I am picking now because one of them lives and the other is dead and gone. Just like my thoughts of him must be.

So I guess things are different because I have made a choice, but they are ultimately the same because I am still in that moment.

How could things have changed for Teresa? She has been awake for, at an absolute max, two weeks. Time has blurred together now, so I count the days in the number of boys who have died. One the first night, one the next. How long has it been since I murdered Ben? Did I murder him? Or did he kill himself? Or, did Dawn? Maybe it was Alby, and the others who banished him, or maybe it was WICKED. I can’t figure out who I hate. I can’t figure out who has killed me.

“I’m glad to be away from Thomas,” she tells me. “There are things Thomas did that I don’t want to remember. He’s a monster.”

“He was working with WICKED,” I agree.

“He was rotten,” Teresa nods. “A kind of rotten that you can’t just ignore.”

We’ve got to stop him, before he breaks the rest of us.
I should keep fighting

Ella 4

It’s the first memory I have.

I’m sitting somewhere, in a building with white halls. My feet dangle above the floor, swinging back and forth like a pendulum. The boy next to me bites his nails. He has his feet pulled up against his chest, and his breathing gets heavier with every passing second.

The people bussing around us don’t seem to notice him. I can’t help myself from turning though.

“What’s you name?” I ask him.

He looks up at me, through his tiny fingers. He doesn’t say anything to me, just continues staring.

“They told me I had a new name.” I tell him, waiting for him to answer. I wonder if he is playing the game with me.

“Me too,” he says.

“It’s all part of the pretend game,” I answer. “Like house. What’s your pretend name?”

“Eli,” he tells me. “They call me Eli.”

I nod, my head bobbing up and down. My black shoes continue swinging back and forth. My Mum dressed me in all my best clothes for today. It’s got to be an important game, or else she wouldn’t care so much.

“Well, they call me Emily.” I don’t really like that name, since mine is much prettier. My Mum gave me a better name.

I don’t remember my mother, but I remember Eli.

We are sitting at a table, in a room full of tables. We are the youngest one’s here. All the big kids are sitting and laughing with each other, so it’s just Eli and me.

“Why aren’t you eating?” He hasn’t touched anything on his plate.

“I miss my Mommy,” he answers, watching the food grow cold.

I don’t know what to tell him. This game is going on a long time. I don’t think we are going to be going home anytime soon.

“Tell me your real name,” I offer. “That will help.”

He shakes his head. “I can’t. They will hurt me. They hurt another boy. He told me about it.”

“We just have to play pretend then,” I tell him. “With them, we can be Eli and Emily. Alone, we can tell each other our real names.”

He seems to agree, but he still can’t touch his food.

I don’t remember what the name was. It seems to have been burned out of me.
I’m in a different room now, although this one still has white walls. Eli and I are standing in a doorway. There is a hand on my shoulder, pushing me towards the man in front of me.

“I don’t know how they went on this long,” someone says. “Five years, and we never caught it.”

I don’t recognize this man. He is new, probably. Hasn’t been here as long as I have been, anyway. I spit towards him. Two of the men further back in the room drag me to the chair. I kick, and I scream, but they strapped me down. I feel the instruments aligning against my head, as I shake. They step back, and though I thrash up and down, I am trapped to the chair.

“Let me go!” I try to rip my hands out of the chair, but this is useless. “What are you doing?”

The older of the two men ignores me, though the other keeps sending me nervous glances. I glance over, and see my partner moving down into the chair next to me. He shakes, but he lets them strap him in. He’s crying. Why won’t he fight back?

“Eli,” I begin, turning between him and the man in front of me. “Eli, you’ll be alright.”

“You can call him Eli,” the older man turns to me. “But you can’t call yourself Emily?”

I won’t ever go by that name.

The younger of the two scatters off, as do the men who forced me to my seat. Now, it is just the three of us in one room, strapped in.

“I’m not Emily,” I tell the man, before turning my head. “Stop crying, Eli.”

The older man walks over to Eli. He leans over top of his seat, as Eli tries to contain his sniffles. Eli can’t seem to make eye-contact with him anyway.

“What’s your name?” The older man asks.

Eli gulps, before answering. “I’m Eli.”

The older man backs away. “I don’t believe you. I don’t think you believe that.”

He leans his hand around the back of Eli’s neck. Eli yelps out in pain and begins to shake in the chair. The older man moves to me, before pricking me in the same spot. I ignore the feeling. If I don’t think about it, it isn’t there.

“What about you, Emily?” The older man asks. “What’s your name?”

I blurt something out. Some word I don’t recognize. Then, he presses the button, and a scream rips out my throat. My whole body fills with fire, and the room fills with smoke.

I don’t remember that. Or, I choose to forget it.

My body jerks forward.

“Not Emily.”

It rips itself to shreds.

“I’m not Emily.”

My bones combust
“I won’t be Emily.”

The room drowns in my screams.

“You can’t make me Emily.”

I never was Emily, at the end of it.

“I’m Eli, I’m Eli.” Eli says. “Please, please stop. I have always been Eli. I don’t know why you are doing this.”

The man, his hands grey, the room cloudy. Maybe its my vision, or maybe he is producing smoke from the fire that appears in his veins. He is a Smoke Man.

“What about you Emily?” He demands, leaning in close to me. Our faces are practically touching.

“What is your name?”

I bite his nose, and now it is his turn to scream. He grabs hold of my head, whipping me against the seat. My eyes feel hollow. I can’t see, and the ringing in my ears drowns out the rest of the sound in the room.

“Emily, just listen to him,” Eli offers. “He knows your name. Why would he be wrong?”

“I am not Emily.” I affirm.

The smoke man holds his nose, as someone bursts into the room. They have a cloth in their hand, but he ignores it. Instead, he presses the button again.

I look at the ceiling, concentrating on that. Until my vision clouds over, and my arms begin to shake.

I had seizures then too.

I am in a hospital bed. Eli is sitting next to me, holding my hand. There are tubes running in and out of my body.

“Pretend you are sleeping,” he instructs me carefully. “If they think you are better, they are going to keep hurting you.”

“What are you talking about?” I sit myself up, though my back throbs and my head pounds.

“Don’t you remember?” He asks, a puzzled expression on his face.

I don’t remember. I don’t know what happened.

“What’s your name?”

I tell him, but I can’t remember the sound anymore. I tell him his too, and he seems surprised. It washes over him, before he looks up at me.

“They told me it was Eli,” he tells me. “You must be right. It isn’t. It couldn’t be.”

That’s how they got us. It was an elaborate trick.

“Really, Emily?” The Smoke Man asks. “Are you still playing this game?”
I nod.

He presses the button, and I writhe. I can’t breathe. Fire fills my lungs, and my vision goes dark.

Eli is next to me, still.

“And Eli,” my breath is still rugged as he speaks. “I thought we agreed yesterday.”

He doesn’t answer.

Then, the Smoke Man presses the button.
We should find out what's going on

Leo Short

She is still sweating, and my eyes are getting tired from the weight of forcing them open for hours and hours. I need to observe the flush of her cheeks and the rise and fall of her chest. They’re rhythmic now, but any moment her symptoms could fluctuate, and she could have another seizure, and another, and another. It’s been two today already.

Now, her cheeks are turning red, though the rest of her skin is pale. She stops swallowing, a motion she has been doing every second, as spit wells in her mouth.

Despite this exhaustion impeding my ability to do my own basic medical duties, I don't dare let anyone else take of Ella. Not that I think they will hurt her by intention, but by omission.

"What are you doing?" Harriet asks me, as I roll Ella up onto her side.

I rub her back at the base of her spine, and she leans over the bed, throwing up on the floor.

"That's stuck," Marie mutters. I get the feeling she is their med-jack, since she is the only one besides Sonya and Harriet allowed in here. "It smells like a load."

"Thanks for your insight," Harriet rolls her eyes. "Go get something to clean it up."

Marie glares at her, before ducking out of the room. The door closes shut behind her, the sound echoing off the walls.

Harriet's scowl doesn't disappear. At least, not entirely.

Sonya leans down next to me. Delicately, she places a hand on my shoulder, and takes Ella's fingers with the other. She has the gentle touch of a Med-jack but she lacks all of the necessary medical knowledge to be one. "She'll be fine." It's more of a reassuring suggestion than a medical opinion.

I mean, this is the first time in a while that Ella has stopped screaming. Her throat is hollow, and she shakes. Every time her mouth opens, I expect her to screech. I expect the sound to tear apart the air, to freeze my feet and turn my fingers numb. Since she hasn't screamed, I bet she's lost her voice.

"She's not your first?" Harriet asks, glancing me over. Her shoulders seem to relax as I take care of the unconscious girl before me.

I shake my head, before turning my attention back to her. Ella is the fourth.

"I took care of Thomas most recently," I say, even though he tastes bitter on my tongue. I don't like the idea of him. I still am not sure what to believe. I doubt Teresa would lie. She is too kind to do that, and means to well. At the same time, I know Thomas. Maybe it's not that I can't believe her, but that I don't want to. Both options seem equally awful to me.

"You trust Teresa?" Harriet raises an eyebrow, waiting for my answer. Her face is blank, and I wonder if she is asking me the question because she has made up her own mind already, and wants to see if I agree. Everything could be a test with this girl.
Sonya leans forward and brushes a stray hair on Ella's head backwards.

I turn to look at Harriet. "Teresa means well. She helped save our lives, just like Thomas. I get that she looks kind if like a shank, but she's a good person. You know the Glade; it's difficult to live in."

"We still are living it," Sonya offers, a shadow of a smile on her face. Eventually, the shadow takes over, and her eyes drop to the floor. She absentmindedly brushes blonde hair out of her face.

The door creaks open, and Marie enters. In her hands, she has a white towel. She drops in on the floor and begins cleaning up the mess we've left.

Dawn short

No one tries to talk to me, which is new. I'm hot klunk in the Glade, but I guess that has more to do with boys and less to do with me. For the most part, the girls will only interact with me through sharp stares. Honestly, I don't blame them. I would be just as freaked out by my sudden appearance if I were them.

I'm sure they are also put off by the fact that I look like I've got no friends. It's because Leo is busy with Ella, and Michelle is so wrapped up in Teresa that I doubt she knows I exist. Maybe I haven't made this clear enough, but I don't like Teresa. She's a liar, and rude, and I don't trust her. Not one bit.

Michelle seems to have no problem with the girl, but that's Michelle's nature. She seems to have problems with everybody except those who mean trouble. First Gally, and then Winston, and now Teresa.

Dave was the exception to that rule. He doesn't count, since she dropped him before he died, even if he hasn't dropped her.

Hadn't.

I still don't like to think of Dave is past tense sense, but I've got to get used to it. Only Fry and Frankie are alive from the Kitchen. That statement feels like I'm hiding though, since saying there alive doesn't say anything about Joe and Dave.

They are dead.

I try to distract myself by eavesdrop on Michelle and Teresa's conversation, but they are talking too quietly. Everyone here seems to be whispering. I don't get what their deal is, or why we are here. My feet are itching to keep moving. I personally can't handle this stillness. Or, any stillness really. Not just of movement, but of energy. Everyone here is so quiet and calm it gives me the creeps.

For example, that girl who picked are lock? Rose? She's sitting alone too, glaring at the girls next to her. One of which is Hilde, that other girl who fought her. She keeps tossing her long black hair over her shoulder, though every few minutes it falls back in her face again. Every so often, Hilde will send a quick glance out of the side of her eye over to Rose. Although Rose pretends not to notice her glares, Hilde has a smile creep up on her face.

I can't tell why they are fighting, but it's obviously old drama. At this point, I can't hold on to any drama that isn't vital. Like, maybe I shouldn't be beefing with Teresa, but there is something about her that sets off alarm bells in my head. Otherwise, everything from the Maze is gone, over and done.
Unfortunately, and no matter how much I plead, so is Minho. Above me, I stare at the white ceiling. The cement is cracked in more than one spot, and for a second, I worry that the ceiling is going to come crashing down on top of us. Maybe if it does, I will be able to see the stars just past it. If it doesn't, maybe I will be trapped here forever.

Michelle Short

"We aren't getting out of here," Teresa whispers, glancing around.

I follow her gaze. There have got to be a dozen girls in this room, no telling how many are in the next. Unfortunately, I find myself agreeing with her, even if it's only slightly. We are trapped here for the foreseeable future. I hope that means we won't have to resort to cannibalism. Not just because they would probably eat me after Ella, but also because the idea of eating at all still makes me nauseous.

"What do you think about their leaders?" She asks me, her voice even quieter now.

I glance over at Teresa. Her black eyes glint at me. Just a few days ago, we weren't cool, and now I guess we are apparently buddies. Part of me wants to believe that she changed her mind when I saved Thomas (that was a klunk side effect of helping Leo, and I no point ever my intention), but most of me recognizes it's the change it setting that's done it.

There's something about these girls that Teresa is suspicious of. I want to know what it is, and if I should be suspicious too.

"I didn't," I say, looking around for Harriet and Sonya. "Something's off."

Teresa nods, though it is absent-minded. I don't like how she does that. Hiding behind an expressionless, pasty face and all-encompassing hair may make her look like a shell to the untrained eye, but I can tell she's thinking. Plotting too. For the first time, I'm decently sure she isn't targeting me.

"You see Rose?" She asks, glancing over to the girl across the room.

Rose glares at Hilde, digging her nails into her fists. For a second, I half expect the girl to get up and start shouting at the girl again. She doesn't, and with every passing second, I get more and more sure that she is content to complain in silence.

"I have a feeling," Teresa trails off. She bites her lip, which is already peeling, before she turns back to me. "Make friends with her."

"You think she knows klunk?" I ask, turning my attention back to Rose.

I can feel Teresa's shrug through my shoulders, as she accidentally bumps into me.

"Impossible to say," Teresa points out. "I think sooner or later, we're going to be forced to pick a side. The more people on our backs the better."

Rose is an easy target. She is angry, and sitting alone, and she's already spoken to me once. I guess Teresa and I haven't come to play.

We came to survive.
Ella short

For a second, I can feel my body again. All the bones which shatter, and all the skin which sheds. The lips which tremble, and which peel, and which seem to pop under the force of my jaw, as it clenches tighter and tighter.

All my muscles are pulling in on themselves, tightening firmer. There is a blackness in my eyes, darker than the one which brought me to the Glade. One so dark that it seems even the air is sucked into it, as the pressure of the room sky-rocks.

I scream, until I can scream no more.
I should be not okay with this

Leo 5

I wake up, and the universe is still and quiet. Only the soft huff of Dawn’s breathing fills the morning air. Even Ella has stilled to a quiet. Since there is no window, I can’t tell if it is night, or morning, or sometime in between. I think I misplaced my watch.

The world has come to a still. I exist in a place that no one else has existed before and will ever exist again.

It’s odd. As I crawl out of bed, I realise my arms are sturdier than they’ve ever been before. They tense, lifting me out of the scratchy sheets. My feet shuffle along the ground as I walk to the next room. The doorknob is cold in my hands, colder than my bare feet. I turn, the sound awakening the day.

In the room next to ours, there is a man, who wasn’t here before, sitting at a desk, that wasn’t here before. He’s reading a book.

I slink into the wall behind me trying to blend in with the shadows of the dimly lit room. He cocks an eyebrow at the sound of me shuffling.

“Take an apple,” he instructs, without lifting his eyes from the page. Carefully holding it closer to his face, he inspects the words.

There is a table in front of him, loaded with food. I take a step forward towards it, and the bowl of fruit in the center of it. There are bags of nuts, granola bars, and all different kinds of food I’ve never seen in the Glade but recognize from the time before it. Not that I remember those days. My mouth waters at the memory of chocolate.

“I thought you would be early risers. I planned on being here an hour early, but you’re the first awake with only half an hour to spare.” He still doesn’t look up, not even to glance at the silver watch on his wrist. It is thick, and heavy, and nothing like the watches we have.

I take a step closer to him, but he interrupts me. “Just take an apple. Don’t try to grab the desk. There is an invisible forcefield. Eat something and wake up your friends.”

I back away, turning to head back into our room. My hand wraps around the doorknob.

“Try to see if Ella is awake,” when he says the words, I feel myself shudder. “I’ve missed her.”

I run into the bedroom, glancing over at Ella. She continues to turn in her bed, sleeping. Untouched. I climb up to the top bunk, grabbing Dawn’s shoulder and shaking her awake.

“Lee,” she groans, stirring. She slowly sits up, shoving her hands at me. I climb back down to the ground. “Can’t I sleep in for shucking once?”

“No,” I tell her, my voice firm and steady. She can’t sleep in.

I hear Michelle shifting in her bed, and when I look over to Teresa, she is already completely upright, staring at me. Her hair is a mess around her head, but her eyes are wide awake.

“There is a man here,” I tell the girls, peering around at them. I wait for them to freak out, or react
“He’s waiting in the next room. He brought food, and he’s going to tell us what’s happening. I think.”

“Who is he?” Dawn asks, finally shuffling around in her bed. She leans off the bunk bed, trying to get a better look out the door.

“He’s got to be with WICKED,” Teresa chimes in. “He’s going to help us.”

Michelle scoffs. I expect her to be rolling her eyes, but instead she is rubbing them, trying to peel herself out of bed. Every movement is agonizingly slow.

“We need to get up and get moving.” I tell them, looking around. “I’ll get Harriet.”

I chose to ignore Ella. I move out the room, into the foyer, and then into the next.

I haven’t been in this room while the girls slept. The door stops when I bump into someone.

“Shucking watch it,” I don’t know the girl who mutters. I’ve been so distracted with Ella, I’ve only been talking to Dawn these last few days. I barely remember yesterday.

“There’s a man here,” I tell her, looking around the room

“Stuck, really?” She sits up, shimmying out of her sleeping bag. She smacks a couple of the bags next to her, trying to wake up other people.

When she steps into the light, I feel like I recognize her. She has dark black hair, pillowing around her, and warm skin.

“You just gonna stand there, stick?” She demands, pushing past me to look out the door.

“I have a name,” I tell her.

“Yeah, I know,” she is distracted, moving about the room. She gently kicks every girl she passes, causing them to grumble and mutter. No one else uses an expletive though, oddly enough. “You’re Leo. I’m Hilde. I thought you’d’ve remembered.”

I didn’t, but now I do. Her and the lock-picker, Rose, got into a fight two days ago.

“Wake up,” Hilde moves over, shaking Harriet. “There’s some stick outside.”

“That’s a load,” Harriet mutters. “You’re dreaming. Leave me shucking alone.”

“I saw him with my shucking bare eyes. I think he’s with WICKED.” Hilde persists, and Harriet reluctantly pulls herself upright.

“WICKED?” Another girl asks from around the corner. She’s the girl I think is their Med-jack. Marie, I think. She’s the one with the insulin.

Harriet is up on her feet, moving out the door. Sonya is quick to follow, and soon all the girls are up and moving out of the door. I manage to make my way through the crowd, catching up to Harriet. “Don’t touch his desk.”

“Why not?” Rose pushes past me, moving for the man. She’s a foot away from the desk when she smashes backwards, flying backwards and falling through the group of girls gathering behind her.

I move down on to the ground, pushing my way through the crowd. Rose lies on her back, her eyes
fluttering open and close. Her nose is bleeding, and she holds a hand against it.

“I don’t need your help,” she picks herself up off the ground, her joints moving slowly. Hilde is giggling behind us.

“You have 23 minutes before I can implement Phase 2 of the Trials,” the man behind the desk sighs. “So, if you’ll take advantage of this time to eat, that would be wonderful.”

At once, the girls see the table of food, and are besides themselves as they push over to access it. I hang back, moving over to the group from my Glade, who’ve already been able to access it. Dawn grabs my shoulder, pulling me back. She offers me an apple. As I take a bite, I notice Michelle is holding a wet cloth to her nose.

She notices my glance and rolls her eyes. “So, what?”

Dawn nudges her and winks, before chucking some nuts back into her mouth. “See, Rose’s doesn’t look so bad in comparison.

“Slim it,” Michelle mutters, her eyes rolling into the back of her head.

“At least we can eat,” Teresa, the eternal optimist, offers. “I don’t think he means us harm.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Michelle rolls her eyes. “The last thing you wrote on your arm was WICKED is good or whatever.”

“I believe that,” Teresa tells her, though she doesn’t elaborate as to why.

When the crowd has died down, I make my way over to the food. I take three bananas and bring them to Ella. I place them under her bed. Before he died, Jeff taught me a way to feed the unconscious. I don’t know if it will work, since I’m lacking pretty much every tool I need, but I’m willing to try.

I’ll come back for her later. Leaving the room, I turn my attention back to the food on the table. I take a couple crackers and some grapes for myself. The crackers are firm and hard against my teeth, and the grapes are bruised. Here, the food isn’t right. Something about it is off. Honestly, I would prefer to eat Fry’s food, which is saying something.

“Why are you here?” Dawn calls across the room.

The man behind the desk doesn’t bother casting an eye towards her. “I need to wait to provide you with information.”

Dawn is frustrated with this answer, but she sits down against the ground anyway. I feel badly for her since she is stuck between Teresa and Michelle. Although, the two seem to be getting on more than not lately. Still, she is caught between a rock and a hard place.

We wait in silence. Eventually, I am so full that I can’t imagine ever eating again. Michelle has barely eaten, but I don’t remember the last time I saw her eat. She’s grown thin too, now that I’m looking at her. Her skin is hollow, and so are her cheeks. They used to be so full.

“There we are,” the man drops a folder on the table. Finally revealing his face to us. He is younger than I was expecting. Especially given the position he holds.

There is a hush that falls on the room as he speaks. No one dares argue against him. The same feeling was in the air when Harriet spoke to the group. No one offered her a shred of doubt. They
reward this man with the same grace.

“So, as you may have surmised, you are not the only Glade,” he glances down over the files, his eyes raking over them. I can make out small lines of texts from here, but they aren’t thick enough to read. “You had more success than the other group as well. 31 to their 25. Over half of you lived, which is impressive.”

He glances across us, his eyes lingering on me.

“Now, much of what happened to you was to analyse the patterns in your brains,” he notes. “More specifically, your responses to stimuli in the killzone. Your group was very good at providing us with that, since you had so many run ins with Grievers. Perhaps that is why more of you survived. That’s up for further analysis before we can come to any conclusion.

“But, your data has helped us move forward towards the greatest achievement in medicinal history. And, we still have more situations to test out. Still more variables to present, and soon enough you will be rewarded. You will have saved the human race.”

I wait for anyone to interrupt, to scream at him for watching their slaughter, but the girls remain silent. Dawn is building in anger beside me. I imagine this conversation, only with our friends by our side. Minho bursting into flames, providing a welcomed distraction for Dawn. Newt, holding my hand as firmly as I want to hold his. Squeezing his aching heart into mine.

The girls don’t seem fazed. What happened to them when they went through the Changing?

“I work with WICKED,” he states the obvious. “Which may sound menacing, but is just an acronym. World in Catastrophe: Killzone Experiment Department. We are searching for the cure to the Flare. The bodies that were hanging are an example of our abilities, as they were not real, as I’m sure you’ve surmised. Sometimes the things you see will not exist, and vice versa, due to our programming. Most of that is behind you, in Phase One.

“And now we move to Phase Two, which is where things beginning to become difficult.” He instructs, carefully looking across the crowd. “You have been rewarded with the more complex task of the two, as your group has the most survivors. You must cross the Scorch in exactly two weeks. It is one hundred miles long, the Safe Haven is due North, but I am sure you can manage. Over the course of this time, Group A will be instructed do the same. Simultaneously, you must track them down, and kill a member of their group.”

He freezes, staring me down. Who is he going to say? Anybody in particular? Is that it? Do we have to decide who dies? I don’t like this, at all. We can’t just kill somebody.

“And if we don’t?” Dawn stands up, moving closer to the man, He doesn’t flinch as she stands only inches above his desk. “Then what?”

“You all have the Flare,” he tells us. “A disease which has ravaged the earth. I am sure you have already met many who suffer from the disease. Cranks, as we call them. Past the mountains, there is the Safe Zone. At the end of the two weeks, if the boy is dead and you are there, we will give you the Cure. If not, you will die.”

“Who is the boy?” Dawn presses forward.

The man leans forward on his desk. “Thomas.”

I am ashamed at the relief that washes over me. Only then, do I realise that I was begging for it not to be Newt. Part of me didn’t care who it was outside of that.
Still, I want nothing to do with Thomas’s death. I know him, only a bit, but well. Maybe better than any of the other girls.

“I have outlined how to capture him, so listen carefully. Tomorrow, you will arrive in the Scorch. You will be navigating your way through the underground tunnels. On the first night, Teresa alone will go and meet Thomas in a building. It will be marked for you to find. Her job is to make him feel as if he could be safe. Then, you will not have contact until the tenth night. Then, you will kidnap him on the tenth morning. By our calculations, you should be well into the mountain by then. Make sure to bag him until he is out of Group A’s sight. There will be a special place on the North side of the mountain to kill him.”

“At 6 AM tomorrow, a flat trans will appear.” He tells us, gesturing to the wall behind him. “It will appear to be a wall of shimmering grey. You have five minutes to cross it. Anyone who does not will be promptly executed. Understand?”

The girls nod, but I can’t find myself to agree.

“Perfect,” he stands up, cracking his shoulders. “If you’ll excuse me, I will have to be on my way. I am late for Group A.”

He crosses the desk, before sending me a look. “And Leo.”

My heart stops beating.

“I know you will not remember this for some time,” he tells me, “but I must thank you for facilitating this. Many will live due to your co-operation. Make sure to tell Ellie I say hello, and tell her I am sorry for her loss.”

As he finishes the sentence, the screen before him fills with white smoke, and then he is gone.

He left nothing in his place.

Michelle glances over at me, and I shake my head. “I’ve got no idea what he’s talking about.”

It seems this is a satisfactory answer. Not just for her either, since the rest of the room goes about its business after that.

Dawn stumbles forward, glancing around the room. She doesn’t seem to believe what she has witnessed.

“We aren’t killing Thomas.” She tells us. “We can’t.”

“I’m good for it,” Michelle yawns, standing up.

“Who’s Thomas?” Harriet asks, moving in.

Words are whipped violently around the room, becoming a blur.

“All y’all sticks calm!” Harriet shouts, sticking a hand up in the air.

Bodies migrate against the walls, as girls grumble. I don’t follow suit, and I don’t think I’m expected too. Harriet runs a tight ship. They lived because they are all obedient to her, and the operate as one body, with one will.

We have fewer, because we killed each other. From Ben, to Jackson.
“Now, who is Thomas?” Harriet asks.

“He came before me,” Teresa offers. I let her have the floor. “He was my partner. He helped design the Maze.”

“We have to kill him to live,” Harriet glances back over at Dawn. She crosses her arms over her chest. “Why shouldn’t we?”

“He saved our lives,” Dawn looks around. “Multiple times. He spent a night in the Maze, and he didn’t die.”

Whispers erupt all around us. Harriet glances at those around her.

“Stuck,” she says.

“Thomas is evil,” Teresa cuts in. Her face is still and calm. She doesn’t make eye-contact with me, or maybe with anyone. Firmly, she speaks. “He hurt me.”

Dawn spins, turning to face Teresa. Her face has gone red, frowning and then still, frowning and then vacant. Over and over. “What did he do?”

Teresa won’t make eye contact with us. She won’t speak.

“Teresa,” I begin, stepping closer.

She backs away. “I don’t want to talk about it. But, if we have to kill Thomas to live, we should do it sooner than later.”
“Are you in agreement?” Harriet asks me.

Her voice echoes around the room. If any of her girls are awake, they are busy packing their bags. I forced Leo back to sleep earlier. She keeps getting up, every couple minutes it felt like, to check up on Ella.

If we are really going to go into the Scorch, as that shank called it, then she is going to need to be restless.

“With the decision to kill Thomas?” I ask, eyeing her.

Harriet nods. Her black dreads fall into her face slightly, hiding her eyes. “Before we agree to do anything, we make sure everyone is on the same side. It isn’t a democracy. We don’t vote. We have consensus.”

“We let people disagree with us,” I try to keep my voice still, but I can feel the anger scratching at the back of my throat. “We didn’t make everyone come with us to fight the Grievers.”

“You have fewer boys because of it,” Harriet rolls her eyes. “Boys can be so dramatic. They don’t seem to understand there is a bigger picture to things. Sheil, Lott, and Jay were always starting fights. Emil was quiet though.”

I wonder which one of them died in the Maze. Maybe that’s why she is so opposed to fighting. Maybe she loved him.

I hope it’s not whichever one was supposed to be me.

Harriet turns to me. “You didn’t answer my question.”

I guess I didn’t. “I don’t know that I will ever agree to kill someone.”

“We are unanimous in everything,” she tells me. “I’m not asking you to kill someone. I’m asking if you are with us.”

“I am,” I say, although I am fairly certain I am lying. “Even if I’m not a hundred percent on killing Thomas.”

“Good,” Harriet agrees. “We aren’t a hundred percent on that either. It could change once we get through the Flat Trans. On this side though, we are one front.”

She steps away from me, moving further into the room. “Now, wake up your friends. We’ll have to be going in about ten minutes.”

She walks into her room, and I do as I’m told.

I go into our space, poking at Leo. She sits up, groaning as she lifts herself off the bed. Silently, she puts her belt on, as well as the extra bag the girls had. Apparently, only one of their boys made it out with a backpack, so Leo gets to carry the supplies all five of us need for the trip. I am guessing she has already packed all that klunk she was carrying around a few days ago, since the belt looks empty.

Leo doesn’t mention the comments that the man made yesterday. I expect her to, at any second, but
she doesn’t. I doubt she remembers whatever thing he was thanking her for, especially since he said as much, but I can’t help but wonder what she did to help before we got here.

As she stretches her arms above her heads, slowly cracking her back. I get a better look at her face. At the bags under her eyes weighing down every movement.

I know she is wondering too.

Leo moves over to Ella. She still isn’t awake.

“How long will she be out?” I ask, trying to make myself feel normal with Leo again.

“Hopefully she’ll be up tomorrow,” Leo offers, as she feels for her pulse. “Maybe even tonight if we are lucky.”

Michelle gets up from her bed, slinking across the room. Her hair is just as wild as ever, and she makes no attempt to calm it. In every direction, a different strand spout. She hasn’t taken a shower since we got here, and she both looks and smells like it. “Am I carrying her through?”

“We could leave her,” Teresa says, her voice soft. “Bringing her might get one of us killed.”

The room goes silent. Leo’s face pales as she looks from Ella to Teresa. “Are you serious?” Her voice is a harsh whisper.

“I don’t want to be,” Teresa steps closer to Leo. She delicately places a hand on her shoulder. “But she is sick, and heavy, and who knows if she’ll even recover.”

I hate to admit that Teresa has a point. Ella is sick, has always been, and will always be. It was hard enough to corral her in the Glade. Here is the open, she could disappear at any time.

“I’ll carry her,” Michelle ignores the conversation between the two, moving over to grab Ella. She is strong, but her and Ella are practically the same size. I help shift Ella in the bed, and pull Ella on to her back. “Only so you don’t complain.” Her eyes look at Leo’s.

Leo stands still, watching as the two of them exit the room. Teresa follows behind shortly them. I can tell that she is trying not to scowl, and it is only barely working.

“Was she serious?” Leo asks me, glancing out the door.

“It’s Teresa,” I manage. “Who the shuck knows when she is serious or not?”

“Do you believe her?” She doesn’t need to specify that she is talking about Thomas, and whatever he supposedly did to her.

From what I gather, Teresa is implying Thomas did to her what Ben did to me. I can’t tell if she is lying or not, but why would she lie? So that we could survive? I wouldn’t put it past her, but I also know that there is no sure way to know what anyone is capable of anymore. Thomas could have done it, and he also could not have.

It’s hard to imagine it, after the conversation I had with Thomas about Ben. I was trying to resolve him of guilt, and it messes me in the head to think that my friend could have done something so awful. Though I’m not Teresa’s biggest fan, I know you don’t say that kind of thing unless you mean it.

I am trying not to think about the past though. I choose not to think about Minho, or the baby that
grows inside me.

“I don’t know,” I walk out the door, Leo only a few steps behind.

The wall, which the man had pointed to as the Flat Trans, is already a smoky grey. It shimmers as if waves ripple in it. Girls are already falling through it, disappearing as their skin touches the grey matter. They all wear matching backpacks and have bows and arrows. Michelle is at the back of the pack, with Ella on her shoulders.

“Ready?” I ask her. She nods carefully. Leo moves up beside us, and together we walk through the Flat Trans.

Its touch is like an ice bath that I have plunged into. My skin stills at the cold, and my lungs stop moving. There is nothing but blackness, which surrounds me. I wonder if it’s the dark that is cold.

I try to reach out for help, but my friends have disappeared from around me. I can’t scream, I can’t call for them. Everything is frozen.

The darkness persists as my hands begin to tingle. A deep breath enters my lungs, but my feet struggle to hold me standing.

“Is everyone there?” Harriet’s voice rings out.

My senses are beginning to return. Eventually, I realise that this darkness is due to an absence of light, wherever we are.

“Let’s count off.” Sonya offers. “Subject numbers.”

There is a pause, before Teresa calls out to the group. “A1.”

It continues off at B3. I take it their B2 is gone. Rachel, they called her. They get all the way up to 26, counting each number in order, and then they stop.

“A57.” Leo offers, before nudging me.

“A58,” I don’t know for sure, but I figure that’s my number. It makes sense that I would come after Leo. It’s always been in that order.

“A59 and A60.” Michelle calls out the numbers for both her and Ella. The weight of the girl seems to be crushing her. I lean over to Michelle’ reaching my hands through the darkness, but she shrugs me away. She won’t share the burden.

“Let’s move forward,” Harriet yells out. “Follow my voice.”

I try my best. It’s dark, and my feet shuffle off the floor. Sticking out my hands won’t do me any good since there could be anything in here that I don’t want to touch. For all I know, we could fall off a cliff, or run into another Griever.

*Turn around.*

The voice chills me to my core.

“What was that?” Marie asks.

No one answers, but I heard it too.
A few girls erupt in whispers closer to the front, so I move up closer to them. I leave Leo and Michelle behind, but they don’t seem to mind. “What the shuck is going on?”

Someone grabs my arm, and I recognize the grip as Leo’s. She holds me back, as she has done a thousand times before.

*This is your final warning. Turn around.*

It’s a voice, whispering out loud.

“We move forward!” Harriet calls, although no one seemed to show any sign of turning around.

I feel the nerves rising in my throat. The hall is too dark to see anything. My feet continue to dredge along the ground. Are we above or below the Earth? I thought the sun was supposed to be everywhere. Maybe we’ve travelled time zones and now it is night. I thought there were stars beyond the Glade. I had wanted to see them so badly.

A girl, maybe a dozen metres in front of me, starts screaming as loudly as she can.

“Anne,” I hear a girl calling, grabbing hold of her. “Anne!”

Everyone stills. I push my way through the frozen bodies, shuck Leo.

“Stuck, stuck, stuck.” I hear the girl who called out to Anne attempting to breathe. She is on the ground, hovering over something. A body. My eyes are only beginning to adjust, but I can only make out shadows. “Anne. Anne.”

“What happened,” it’s Harriet next to me, pushing through to see the girl. “What happened Saph?”

The girl, Saph, gets off the ground and pushes past us. Her body is wet, and warm. She shoves people over, sprinting as fast as she can and offers only one word.

“Run.”

And then I start sprinting. Forward, and forward, and my feet feel like they could slip out from beneath me. I can hear others yelling, pushing forward, calling to their friends. I want to find Leo, but I can’t see her in the dark. I can’t hear her calling out to me. I bump into people as I run up towards the front of the group.

Another girl starts screaming. She teeters over, knocking into me and hitting the ground. I slip and fall, but pull my burning hands back up. Something has her. My heart is pounding so hard that I can’t tell who it is. Please not someone I know. Please, anyone else. A faceless girl in this crowd. There are so many, what are the odds it’s someone I know?

My knee hits something, and I fall forward. My body lands on an incline, diagonally from the ground.

“Klunk stop!” I shout. Someone collides into me, tripping and falling next to me but no one else follows.

“What is it?” A new voice calls out.

I feel my hands up the ground. “Stairs. I think.”

Harriet passes me, running up them. I hear another girl start screaming. Now we are at 28. I’m quick to get up and run after her. I don’t know if any of the people I know have made it now. If
they got Michelle, that would be her and Ella gone. I can mourn them when I know for sure I will live.

My head hits the ceiling, and I groan out in pain. There is a wall in front of me. We are trapped.

Then, my hand hits a button, and with a quick click, the doors to the ceiling open. The space is filled with heavy, orange air, that sinks into my skin. This is hotter than any heat the Glade ever gave me.

“Shut that, stick,” Harriet bumps into me. “We need to get used to the light.”

She presses the button for me, and using a flask, she props the door open a crack.

People begin to gather around us, waiting at the very top of this massive staircase.

“Holy shuck,” I mutter, trying to keep myself away from the button. “Did you bloody see that? Is that the shucking sun?”

“The Glade was underground, from what we gather,” Sonya tells me. “We’ve never seen the sun before, maybe even before the Maze. We’ll need to adjust.”

It’s shucking bright. My head pounds just from looking at it. The light slowly fills the hallway. I still worry that at any second we could have something else attack us.

“Saph,” I remember her name. Maybe I am better with names than I thought. I don’t know where she is, but I call out into the crowd. “What happened to Anne?”

I don’t know which one Saph is, especially in such dim lighting.

“There was a metal ball,” her voice calls out, softly. It shakes, but she isn’t crying. “It just cut off her head.”

“That’s stuck.” Someone else calls out.

“Aren’t we supposed to keep moving underground?” Rose asks. Her hand rests on her side as she cocks her head. “Wasn’t that the plan, anyway? Only Teresa’s supposed to go to the surface tonight.”

“Would you shucking like to get decapitated?” I demand. “Shuck that guys plan! He literally has killed three people.

She doesn’t answer, so I turn away. The light continues to grow on me, until it has stopped burning my eyes. Everyone is silent. It stays this way for minutes, as my arms begin to cook in the heat.

“Who else died?” Someone calls.

“Anne, for one,” someone else answers.

“I saw Ruth go down,” another voice answers.

“Parker is gone too,” someone else offers.

Three down. We sit in silence for them. Thank goodness it’s none of my friends. Eventually, I can see Michelle. She holds Ella up, but she is struggling.

“We probably just need like, five more minutes,” Harriet notes.
I take a step down, when I hear a scream. A metal ball flies through the air and takes her out from the side. She rolls down the stairs, screaming until she hits the bottom.

She’s dead. The ball rolls off her head, bloody but still in tact.

“Yeah, shuck that,” I press the button again to completely open the doors.

We charge into the Scorch. The sun is still rising as my feet pound off the sand. It’s super bright, but it is better than being decapitated I don’t know if that thing is planning on following us back up here, so I only stop to run over to Michelle. She let’s me take one of Ella’s arms, begrudgingly, and we charge forward.

We make in a couple hundred metres before the group pulls to a stop.

“Take a bag,” Harriet instructs. She takes a sleeping bag out of her backpack, draping it over a shoulder. She stops Michelle and I, tossing us the extra. I take it, draping it over me and Ella. Michelle let’s go of us, turning to get another bag.

Honestly, this blanket is no better than the sun. I could cook in this thing.

Leo moves closer to me, passing me an extra bag of water on her belt. I take a swig of it, saving as much as I can for later.

“Jog on,” Harriet instructs. “We’ve got to get to the town.”

I’ve barely paid attention to the wasteland around me. It would just depress me. There are kilometres and kilometres and eons of sand. Whatever happened destroyed the Earth. I wonder if there is still water. I’ve always wanted to swim. Maybe tonight, I will get to see the stars.

I keep jogging, choosing not to think about the fact that I was supposed to see stars for the first time with Minho. That will never happen. Aftermaybe thirty minutes of walking, Michelle comes up behind me and takes over Ella. I’m thankful for the break, since my back feels like the bones have restructured into a permanent hunch. I have no idea how long we walk after that. Eventually, I notice Harriet take Ella off Michelle.

We continue to cross the horizon. As time goes on, our speed picks up. It seems impossible, but in the first hour, we’ve probably crossed five kilometres.

“Are those Cranks?” Marie moves up beside me.

Up ahead, there are two vagrants, bumbling back and forth in the sand. I hadn’t even noticed them. I am surrounded in my own heat.

I shrug. I’ve got no idea who they are.

“Are you Cranks?” The voice shouts from ahead. I hear her voice even over the loud curling of the wind.

Harriet steps forward, her feet moving beneath her as she struggles in the sand. She holds her hand up, silently instructing the group to stop. I’m surprised they obey her so easily.

“Have you got the Flare?” The woman calls towards us.

Harriet stalks forward, and I struggle to follow her. Ella is shucking heavy.

“We need to get underground,” Harriet says. “We’ve been sent by WICKED.”
“If you aren’t Cranks you’ll be Cranks soon.” The woman is accompanied by a man, who ignores her. “Everyone here catches the Flare.”

“We need to kill a boy,” Teresa steps forward. Harriet’s eyes widen, but she remains silent.

Maybe Teresa is supposed to be the leader. At least, that’s what the man suggested yesterday. She’s the only one who can talk to Thomas.

“It’s too hot in the Scorch,” the man continues to talk.

“There are underground passages all through these buildings.” The woman adds to his conversation. I wonder if they know we are even here. The man seems worse than the woman. I guess being a Crank is a scale. “That one there is closest. It creaks at night.”

“Thank you,” Harriet offers, walking past the pair. “We move out.”

We continue walking through the heat, walking around the Cranks. I force my feet in front of each other, over and over. My shoes are filled with sand. My skin is boiling. This is suffering. I find myself moving over to Leo, who struggles to hold on to Ella. She wasn’t meant for jogging and carrying weight. I take Ella off of her but manage to lag behind the group. This would be so much easier if I had been a Runner.

I adjust Ella and continue to jog until I have to give up. This time, a girl I don’t recognize, who is much beefier than anyone else here, takes her. I’m surprised nobody passed Ella to her sooner.

I hate to think maybe Teresa was right.

We continue to jog as the sun climbs higher into the sky. I wonder where everyone else is now. One girl collapses, and that’s when Harriet calls for us to stop.

I move over to Leo as she attends to the girl on the ground. I take a swig of water, passing the flask to Michelle. The girl refuses. We don’t have much, but I am going to die of dehydration up here.

“Marie isn’t going to make it in this heat much longer,” Leo offers. She pats some water on the girl’s face, who only groans in response.

“How much farther?” Rose asks. I notice she is carrying Ella now. Or was, she dropped her when we stopped running.

“Only about another two kilometres,” Sonya offers. “At least we were only fifteen miles off to begin with.”

I groan, this completely sucks. I don’t even know how far we’ve gone. I look back to the hill we started on. It has disappeared over the horizon.

Every other second is a blur, collapsing in and onto itself over and over. We walk. We are in the building. We are in the basement. We break the door open. We are in an underground tunnel.
I should be shucking sleeping

Michelle 7

Even though we are underground and out of the desert, we aren’t okay to take a break, apparently. My whole body feels like it’s buffering. Every step is the same in this dark tunnel. I’ve heard, from the echoing voices in front of us, that we’ve been walking an hour. It’s much cooler down here, though it’s hard to enjoy the difference in temperature when I keep scrapping my arm off of rocks. We have one flashlight lit to help the group move forward, but it is barely any help. Eventually, we stop.

The crowd turns through a break in the tunnel’s wall. It’s a wide door, into a room.

The room is essentially empty, except for a lantern against the wall. The walls are brick, but cold from the Earth. The room is rather large too, enough for twenty-eight girls to sleep in. Someone lights the lamp, who I don’t recognize, and we all make our way into the room.

“It’s time,” Teresa says. “Aris told me they are about an hour off, and it already took an hour to walk here.”

“Is that that shucking telepathy again?” Dawn asks, more annoyed than usual.

Teresa nods. “As far as I can tell, Aris is on our side.”

Who the shuck is Aris? Honestly, I don’t even care. I don’t want to know. I choose to ignore all the advice they have been giving me up until this point. Ella is knocked out against the ground. At this point, she is most definitely asleep.

“I’ll be back,” Teresa begins to move towards the doorway. Her gait is light and quicker than I expected. It’s weird to see her move, and be alive, after so many days of her lying unconscious in a bed, and sitting around sullenly.

“Wait,” one of the girls gets up, and hands Teresa her backpack. “Give this to Thomas. Sheil needs to take his insulin.”

“Sheil could be dead already,” Rose rolls her eyes at the girl.

“I don’t think I can, Marie,” Teresa frowns.

“Then I am going with you,” Marie argues. “And I’ll be dead before you can stop me.”

Teresa stares the girl up and down, before reluctantly taking the backpack. Silently, she leaves the room.

I listen as her light footsteps hit the ground. It’s a rhythm, which becomes a hum, and is eventually lost. I would’ve gone with her if she had asked me to, but she didn’t. I’m kind of thankful, because I just want to fucking sleep.

Harriet gets up from the ground, the only one moving in the room. She peers down the corridor, shining her flashlight.

“Hey newbs, what’s her deal?” She turns back to the room, her eyes flashing against mine as bright as the flashlight. Brighter actually, harsher. “Is she alright in the head?”
I shrug, since I assume she is talking to me. You can’t really tell with Teresa if she’s alright or not.

“I don’t like her,” Dawn groans, pulling herself into the argument. “But that’s just me.”

“Teresa’s nice,” Leo offers. “She just is distant. It’s been hard for her. Living in the Glade is hard.”

“Boys are hard,” I say.

No one argues with that. I doubt that anyone can.

“What about that Thomas guy?” Harriet asks.

I move back against a wall and lean on it. All anyone ever wants to do is talk about Thomas. I can’t think about him right now. Honestly, I can’t think about much other than Gally living. I need to get through the Scorch to get to him though. Since, apparently, I have the Flare or whatever.

Not that I completely believe WICKED to that effect.

Dawn groans, rolling over on the ground. She seems exhausted but talks anyway. “Thomas is a good guy. He’s saved a bunch of people’s lives.”

“Didn’t Teresa say he hurt her?” Sonya cuts in.

Dawn clams up at this.

“Yeah, she did,” Leo bites the inside of her cheek. “Really, we don’t know him that well.”

“He saved our lives. He got stung to get us out of the Maze.” Dawn argues, turning her attention to Leo.

“That got him out too,” I step in now. Everyone’s eyes are on me. I like that about this group, even if it’s shucking creepy. Everyone here knows how to listen. “Everything he did served him too.”

Dawn’s cheeks, already pink, tinge further. “How did running in the Maze to help Minho-”

“It got us to trust him, didn’t it?” I recall every conversation I’ve had with Gally. “He designed the Maze, maybe even the Grievers. He knew what he was doing.”

Dawn backs down at this. She doesn’t agree with me, obviously. I have never liked Thomas. He was a shank since he hit on me on the first day, and he will be a shank until he dies. If I must kill him to live, he’ll join the list of people who’s deaths I’m responsible for. Ben, Dave, Dan, Jackson, and now Thomas.

At least Gally isn’t on the list any longer.

“So, you trust Teresa?” Harriet asks.

What a ridiculous question. “I don’t trust people. Teresa is a brat, but that doesn’t mean she’s wrong.”

Dawn rolls her eyes, shaking her head. She turns around, lying on the ground with her back turned away from me. It’s not my fault she’s all pissed off that she is blinded by her boyfriend. Thomas means nothing but harm for the rest of us.

“Should we follow her?” Marie pipes in, speaking for once. “To make sure Sheil gets the medication?”
“No.” Harriet and I speak simultaneously. She glares at me as I do so, but she continues anyway. “We don’t want to screw up the plan by accident. From what we can tell, there is more to Thomas than meets the eye. Until we know for certain what to do, we follow through with the plan WICKED gave us.”

“You’re just going to kill him?” Leo steps forward. I’ve never seen her both confused and passionate.

No one answers. Harriet looks around the room.

“We’ve got no other option as of now,” Harriet says. “We kill Thomas, or we all die.” She turns around, glancing at the group of us, before looking at Leo. “You’re their Meddy, correct?”

Leo seems taken aback, her eyebrows furrowed it confusion.

I yawn, before looking over at her. “Med-jack.”

She nods, looking back at Harriet. “Yeah, I’m a Meddy.”

“And you’ve handled people undergoing the process,” Harriet stops herself mid-sentence. “The sticks who’ve been stung by Grievers?”

Leo continues to nod. I stare between the two, who are in the centre of the room but feet apart.

“Every stick here, ‘cept you three, have gone through the Process.” Harriet continues, looking back and forth. “You don’t know what we’ve seen, and what the Flare will do to people. Sure, you’ve seen sticks see the truth too, since you work as a Med-jack, or whatever, but you’ll never understand the dark world hanging above our heads. Trust me, getting the Flare would cause your friends a thousand times more pain than the Process does. And trust me, I’d rather we all die before that happens. So, if it’s Thomas, or if it’s us, it has to be us.”

“This isn’t about want,” Sonya adds on. “It’s about need.”

I watch Leo’s face shift. The colour drains out, and she looks around. Dawn is sitting up now, staring forward. She still wears the same sour expression as she did before. Leo though, has to study every girl’s face in this room. Like she is memorizing their skin.

“I don’t like it anymore than you do,” Harriet cuts in. “But it’s the way it works sometimes. His life, or your friend Ella’s, and all your other friends.”

Leo’s face pales, before she passes by Harriet. She turns around, looking over her shoulder, “I need to walk. Don’t worry, I’m heading in the other direction. I won’t shuck up your plan.”

Sonya digs through her backpack and chucks Leo a flashlight.

Leo takes it, offering a quick and quiet thank-you, before turning down the hall. True to character, she walks off in the opposite direction Teresa went.

After that the room is silent. Dawn turns around, facing away from me. The girls begin to relax, sitting on the ground.

“First watch,” Harriet passes over to me. “Think you can handle it?”

I nod quickly. Harriet turns around the room, searching for another person to nominate.

“I’ll just do it,” Rose offers, from where she leans against a wall. “No sense in arguing over it.”
She moves out into the hall, taking a flashlight out of her bag. I take one out of Harriet’s bag and move outside after Rose. She leans down against the ground, crouching on it. I sit down in the doorway, maintaining a safe distance from her. The less we have to do with each other, the better.

“You’ve got a weapon?” She asks, eyeing me up. She rolls her eyes as she judges me, probably because I’m short or whatever. Jerk.

I adjust myself, so I can pull out a hammer from my belt. The handle was hanging down earlier, so I’m surprised she missed it.

“Let me guess,” she begins. “You were in construction?”

It’s weird to think about the Glade like this. In the past tense. She says it like being a Builder isn’t something I am anymore. The thing is, the past is part of me. It defines me. I was a Builder, and I was united with Gally and Dave, and even Doug by the end. Part of me was with them.

“I ran.” I didn’t ask her, but she chooses to curse me with speaking. “Most of us did, so it wasn’t anything special. Sixteen of us in all, with four alternates.”

We only had eight, two alternates. They are literally twice as good as us in most regards.

“We only had three jobs,” she continues. “You ran, you built, or you raised. Well, I guess we also had two Meddies, but they were Raisers primarily.”

“Raisers?” I ask. She seems to at least be trying to make an ally out of me, and I’d be an idiot to pass this up. Even though it’s dull work.

“Raisers,” she continues, “kept after the animals and the vegetables. They’re were two categories, Animal raiser and Plant raiser, obviously.”

I nod, looking at her. “Ella was a Track-hoe. She raised plants.”

“What about Dawn?” Rose looks back at the room. “She seems like a Runner.”

I shake my head. “Wanted to be. She cooked. Leo was our Keeper. She represented us at Gatherings.”

“Democracy,” Rose scoffs at me. “Everyone gets a say, but the loudest chorus wins.”

“Autocracy,” I gesture back to her group. I guess I’m not doing a great job at making allies.

Rose shrugs, looking back into the room. “Sort of. Not entirely.”

A blinding light shines down the hall, and I can hear footsteps that follow it. Rose is up on her feet, but I recognize Leo’s nervous gate. She turns off her light once she sees us, getting closer.

She nods to me, before entering the room.

“She sticking Thomas?” Rose whispers over to me.

I move closer to her, so that her voice doesn’t carry as much.

“What?” I ask.

“You know,” Rose looks at me. “Are they a thing?”
I shake my head. I can never tell who Leo is into. Half the time, I thought her and Alby had a thing, but it honestly could be anyone at this point. Or no one. She gets so invested in people, it’s hard to tell.

“No,” I answer. “Thomas and Teresa were.”

“So were Rachel and Aris,” Rose affirms. “Which was sticking weird.”

No kidding. They knew each other for like a week. I don’t understand how that klunk happens so quickly. It was like that for Dawn and Minho too. Look where that got us.

“Loving is dangerous,” I warn Rose. “Shacking is fine.”

“Wouldn’t I know it,” she laughs under her breathe.

Jay. That’s who she is talking about, it has to be. She got into a stupid argument with Hilde.

“Go on,” she rolls her eyes. “I know you want to ask me about it. Everyone does.”

I shake my head. “Your business is yours.”

“You still want to know though,” she says it like it’s a matter of fact.

I shrug. I could know, but I would live if I didn’t. If all goes well, I’ll never meet him. If I do, it’ll be just briefly anyway. Besides, it seems like a sore spot for her. Especially with Hilde’s comment the other day.

“I had a Jay,” I admit, although I don’t know why. “Trust me, I get it.”
I should be Violet

Ella 8

We are lying next to each other, on a bed with sheets too course for her delicate skin. It has been many years since I arrived, but only a few since we started sharing this room together. We've only lied like this recently, for far too short. It is our last night.

The room is cold, white, and sterile. I hate it here. It reminds me of the room I'd been in for years. Where they made me Emily. I don't know when they are sending me up, and I hate it. Perhaps, they won't send me up.

I got my wish though. I am a member of Group B. Someday soon, I will see her again.

"You're lucky you can see the boys at all," she looks sick. I guess it's the nerves that rack her body. Her hair is soft and warm though, and it is so long I can twirl it in my fingers without her even noticing. I wish she would notice though.

Instead she bites her lip. Due to the cold, it's tinged blue. Almost a violet.

I am not lucky to see him. "You don't know what he is like. What they are like. They torture me, you know. Both me and Eli."

"Yeah, but you see other boys too, don't you?" She asks. "Don't they want to send you up with their group?"

I hope not. Every night, I pray that I will escape them.

"They gave up on that. They still haven't made me forget my name," I tell her. "Just when I think they're done, they bring me in again for another week of testing. I have epilepsy now. I don't give a damn if they let me so Thomas every other week."

"Oh, please Em..."

"Don't call me that," I tell her flatly, sighing. I hate that for the first few years, they made this feel like a game of pretend. I could be Emily if they wanted me to be, but on my own I got to be me. I still know Emily's not my name, even if the one my mother gave me is slipping from my grasp. I won't be called Emily. I'd rather have a different name.

She brings her knees up into her chest, her hair sprawled along the bed behind her. She seems so small and lonely. I hate seeing her like this. I hate wanting her.

"They are taking us tomorrow," her voice cracks and creaks.

I don't think she realises she is saying goodbye to me as well. I am not going with her. They aren't done with me yet. They won't be for a long time.

"We will meet again, on the other side you know." I tell her, letting her think I am going with her. I don't want to disappoint her. She already has been damaged enough by this mess. Maybe my lies do more harm than good.

She nods, looking down. It was always her who was calm and caring, you know? Never me. This proves difficult, since I've already pretty much forgotten how to stop a girl from crying, or at a
very minimum, how to speak.

"Yeah, but I won't..." she trails off, breathing in. "It's hard, you know? I didn't choose any of this, and you didn't either. It feels like the whole world is trying to stop us from being together."

There is no whole world. Only death and decay, and a land ravaged by disease and catastrophe. Maybe what is left of the world is ripping us apart, but I won't let it.

"Promise me you'll find me again?" She is careful with her words, painting them down against the ground.

I would come back for her in a million lifetimes. She reaches for my hand, and I take it firmly within my grasp.

"I would find you, in any life," I tell her, staring at her violet lips. She is Violet. "In any universe, under any circumstance. There is nothing that could hold me back from you."

I bolt upright, panting. There is a room that I am in. One I do not recognize. It is dark, and there are bodies littering the floor.

I'm on my feet, backing away. My body slams into the wall behind me. The force rattles my spine, but I do not care. Where am I? What's happened?

I don't remember anything after that moment with her. We were lying together, and now I am here.

I close my eyes, as my head pounds. I dig my fists into my skull, pounding against it. Where was I?

I got stung by a Griever, because I needed to know. Now, I know bits and pieces. Fractions of segments. I arrived. Emily and Eli. They tortured me. I met the Violet girl, and they wanted me to be Teresa, but they couldn't torture it into me.

But I still don't understand how the four of us got here. Why we are with the boys. It doesn't make sense. It's not revenge for the torture. As far as I can remember anyway. I just wanted the Violet girl. So, why did I leave?

"She's awake?"

I don't recognize that voice, and it terrifies me. Honestly, I couldn't tell half the Gladers apart, since my mind has been so foggy. This is different though. This is a woman. This is not one of the three I know.

What world did I wake up to?

"Someone wake up Leo," it's another voice I don't recognize.

"Where am I?" I demand, looking around the dark room. "What's going on?"

A match is struck against the darkness. Then, a candle, within a lantern, and I can see the outline of a girl. She has long, black dreadlocks, and dark skin. I try to scan her face, to see if I can recognize it, but I can feel panic rising in my shoulders. Where am I?

"Ella?" She asks like she isn't sure.

The darkness around her is overwhelming.

Leo moves in next to her, the light bouncing off her face. Then, she approaches me.
"Are you alright?" She tries to grab a hold of me, but I rip myself out of her grip.

"What the Hell is going on?" I demand. "Where am I?"

"What do you remember?" The black girl asks.

I look her up and down, my eyes widening with every glance, before turning to Leo. She doesn't look any different than the last time I saw her, but she seems to trust this girl,

"Who are you?" I demand. "Are you with WICKED?"

She shakes her head.

Leo turns to me, looking around the room. "Ellie, what do you remember?"

"Stop calling me that!" I shout, turning around to face the brick wall behind me. As I look around, my heart only continues to rise in my throat.

"I need you to concentrate," she grabs my shoulders, and I spin around.

A few flashlights flick on around us. As I look around though, I get no clarity. I can't even see Dawn or Michelle, but with all the lights flashing against my skin, only the girl with dreadlocks face is illuminated.

"We... we were..." in the Maze, and I purposefully got stung, even though I didn't figure it out. I can feel bile rising in my throat. I didn't figure it out, and I went through all of that. I don't understand. How could this happen? "We are out of the Maze?" 

"Out of the frypan, into the inferno," someone calls out, another voice I don't recognize.

"Yeah," that little mutter was Michelle.

Alby is dead. I don't know why I was expecting him next, but I remember that. He was our leader. He should be here. Zart is dead too, which means most of the people I know, with the exception of the Med-jacks.

"We made it out," Leo lets me in. "You should sit down."

I shake my head. "Where the Hell am I Leo? Would you just tell me?"

"Someone's changed," Dawn's sarcasm reaches me. So, she is alive too. No sign of any boys though.

"Are we with WICKED?" I ask. "Do they have us at their headquarters?"

"I wish," it's the first voice again. Fuck, I've got no idea what's happening. I hate this. I hate this. Someone needs to tell me what is going on, right now, before I lose it. And trust me, I will lose it. 100% guarantee.

"We were rescued by a rebel group," Leo tells me.

"That's WICKED," I tell them. "No way anyone would best them. They are way too powerful."

"We figured that out," the girl with dreadlocks tells me.

"They separated us from the boys," Leo tells us.
"We're with Group B." I say out loud, looking around. That's why we are surrounded by girls. I don't know the Violet girl's name to call it out. "Where's Eli?"

There is stirring in the crowd, before the girl with dreadlocks chimes in. "Who?"

"Eli," I continue, my voice rising. My hands are shaking. "Or, his name is something like Emily, but it isn't Emily. Short brown hair, lanky. My age, probably fifteen, or something."

"Emil," the girl enunciates. "You're looking for Emil?"

Among other things, but I don't remember the Violet girl's name. And the description of pale girl with honey colour hair is not particularly helpful when that describes half the people here.

"He died," she offers.

Eli is dead? He can't be. We were together recently. He couldn't be dead. He can't be dead. We were partners. I stumble backwards, but Leo keeps me upright.

"What do you mean?" I ask, looking around.

"What do you remember?" Another voice asks. I recognize this one. It's Dawn again. Or not Dawn. I can't tell. My head is pounding.

"I remember Eli, and I remember WICKED." I continue, looking around. "I remember what they did. What do you mean he is dead? He isn't dead. I just saw him two months ago. He was talking to Thomas. He, he can't be."

"He died a week or two after Rachel showed up." The voice continues. She steps closer to the dreadlock girl, into the light and I immediately recognize her.

She is the Violet girl. Her honey hair is golden in the light. Her lips are pale, but as purple as they were last time I saw her. She's grown taller now, and older obviously. Much less of a girl now than she was before, and more of a Violet young lady. Her eyes are just as soft as I remember though, after all this time. My heart stops beating in my chest.

I don't know what to say. I doubt she even remembers me, Changing or not. Most of what I remember is about the inside world, not the outside. For everyone else except Thomas, it has been vice versa.

"Who are you?" I ask.

She smiles faintly, "I'm Sonya."

Sonya. I pause, breathing it in and out. She's the Violet Girl. She's here in front of me. She cocks a head to the side and furrows her brow. She's confused.

She doesn't remember.

"You knew Eli?" I ask, looking around. "Or Emil, or whatever his other fake name is."

She nods, closing her lips against each other. She looks down at the ground, averting her gaze from mine. "Yeah, I knew him."
It takes a few minutes for Ella to settle down, and a lot of shouting as we explain where we are and what has happened. Whoever this Eli was, or Emil, must’ve been her counterpart in their group. Everyone seems to have one, since the only difference between us is our numbers. I wonder who B57 is. I wonder what his role is in all of this. I wonder how similar we are.

“Are we out, then?” Harriet asks, packing up her stuff.

“Seriously?” Rose asks. She seems pissed. “Michelle and I got like twenty minutes of sleep. This is a load!”

Michelle doesn’t seem to mind. The bags under her eyes are no different than usual. She shrugs, rolling up her sleeping bag. She tosses it to me, and I would drop it in my backpack, but I’ve got no room. I put the sleeping bag under my arm instead. In turn, I throw her a granola bar.

She catches it, glaring at me. She eats it anyway, before taking a swig from the canteen on her belt. I didn’t know she had one before now.

“We’re moving,” Harriet takes one of the extra sleeping bags, and Sonya takes the other. My backpack is practically completely full with all the klunk I need to carry. I lug it behind me, thankful Ella can walk for herself.

Before she leaves, Harriet turns to Teresa. “How did it go?”

Teresa shakes her head. “It was awful.”

“What happened?” I ask. Dawn moves up beside me, crossing her arms over her chest.

Teresa shakes her head, before biting down on an apple. It must be bitter, because her expression only tightens. “It was a shucking mess. I made him feel safe.”

“How?” Dawn comes across as antagonistic, so I elbow her.

Teresa shakes her head. “It was shucking awful. They made me kiss him. WICKED was controlling my body.”

“They did that to Alby too,” I offer. I remember that. He almost strangled himself when he tried to tell Thomas and Newt what he remembered during the Changing. Back when he was alive, WICKED had a strong hold on him. They kept him under controlling.

“That’s stucking messed,” Marie offers.

Harriet nods. “At least we don’t have to have contact with Thomas until the tenth night.” She ignites her flashlight, before shining it out the door. “Are we good to move?”

Everyone nods in agreement, and she leads us out the door. Sonya heads up the back of the party, waiting for all of us to clear out. Other than her, I’m the last to go.

There is too much clutter on the ground for us to jog. The hallways are thin, and it is extremely dark. Even when my eyes adjust to the dim lighting, I can’t see farther than a few inches in front of me. Even Dawn is invisible.
“We’re going to walk, no breaks, until night,” Harriet calls out.

“Seriously?” Rose demands.

“Would you rather we jog?” Harriet argues.

No one agrees to that. Maybe that’s how she gets consensus. She proposes her idea, and then one infinitely worse. If those are the only two possibilities, who in their right mind would disagree?

So, we continue walking without breaks. There is no sign that we are getting any further than we have been. Maybe these tunnels are slightly curved, and we have yet to realise it. We could be walking in circles. We could be miles ahead or behind the other group. I couldn’t tell you. I don’t know where we are going. I’m in the dark, in the dark.

Dawn is silent and seething. I don’t bother talking to her, since I have a feeling she will explode and take the tunnel walls down with us. There isn’t much of a solution to this.

“We should reach the city next morning.” Teresa calls out. “If your watches are still working, you’ll be able to count down until we get there.”

I glance at my wrist, just as Dawn shines a light on it. It’s six in the morning. We’ve been out in the Scorch for only twenty-four hours. How is that even possible? We must’ve only slept like two hours, maybe three. Maybe Teresa didn’t sleep at all. No wonder my eyes feel so heavy. No wonder my feet are slipping out beneath me.

I continue walking, and every five minutes, Dawn checks the time again. Her face looks hollow. I can’t imagine how tired she must feel too. She’s pregnant too, so that must be wearing her down as well. I don’t know how to ask her about it. Maybe that’s why she is so bitter.

After about an hour, we are still silent, and there is still no break. I can feel the anger rising in the group. It’s one of the only things apparent without light.

“Where’s Ella?” I ask the darkness. “I want to check on her.”

“She’s fine,” Teresa offers. She must be trying to soothe me.

“She can speak for herself,” the voice is Ella’s and her bitterness is still new to me. Her speaking is all new.

I push through the crowd, moving up to her. Within the groups that I pass, I can here girls whispering. I tune in and out of the conversation, which is mostly gossip. Not about me, thankfully. A bit about Teresa and Thomas, but a lot of it about Jay and Sheil. And Ella’s strange outburst. I try to listen closely but I mostly catch names.

It’s weird to think that they same things that happened to me happened to them. It’s as if I’m holding myself up to a mirror, to see a reflection that I didn’t know existed.

“You feeling alright?” I ask, moving next to Ella.

She doesn’t answer. One foot in front of the other, she marches forward.

“What happened while you were out?” I ask. “What did you remember?”

“Not you,” she tells me.

“That’s not what I’m asking.”
She looks over at me, her face obscured by the darkness. I can’t imagine just waking up after all that has happened over the last few days. Suddenly, head first into the Scorch. Head first into the mission.

“Not enough to make me kill myself like Alby,” she tells me. “Not the same stuff and not all of it.”

I nod, still studying her face. She isn’t bleeding or seizing, which normally happens when she tries to tell me about before. Ella is more aware than she has ever been.

“Why did you get yourself stung?” Part of it is because the question has been racking my brain for days, and the other part of it is that I’m doing a technique I was taught to use by Jeff before he died.

After the Changing, we have to monitor the victim. We aren’t supposed to let them outside for a day, but I can’t do that with Ella. We talk through the things they saw, if they let us. As far as I can tell, only a few have ever mentioned visions they saw. Jeff wouldn’t talk about what they said. Not like he can now, anyway.

Outside of the counselling, and ensuring they are safe, we monitor their physicality. It’s a draining process. Most people are too exhausted to get up from bed, or they otherwise rack up a nervous energy, and do crazy things. Ben attacked Dawn. We let Alby have at least a week, and he died anyway.

Besides that, the memory is shot. People forget where they are, and how they got there. Obviously, the unconscious days are a blur, but sometimes people even forget the day the day they stopped Changing. Then, the days before can be lost as well.

Ella has never had a good memory, nor made much sense. I feel like she is a stranger, now more than ever, even though this is the first time she’s talked to me and seemed awake.

“It’s complicated,” she tells me. “And I thought I would understand what made it that way. I still don’t.”

Maybe this angry Ella is a side-effect of the Changing. I doubt this is who she was before this mess. I can’t tell if this shift is permanent though.

“Stuck,” I hear a commotion just up ahead. I move away from Ella, out of pure instinct moving up to the sound.

“What’s going on?” Teresa calls out, shining her flashlight back at us.

I move up, spotting a girl on the ground I don’t recognize. Bleach blonde hair falls into her face, as she holds her ankle tightly in her hands. Half her leg is scraped.

“I tripped,” her voice is so calm it’s like she is just noticing she fell. I shine my light behind her. There is blood on the wall from where she skinned herself.

“I’ve got it,” Marie moves up. She spots the girl on the ground, and I watch her face turn green. She looks at me, before backing into the wall. “That’s a load.”

I almost roll my eyes at Marie as a smile creeps on to my face. It’s barely a scratch. I kneel down, moving towards the girl on the ground. I touch her ankle, and she winces.

“We need to stop,” I turn to the girls up front.
Harriet shakes her head. “We need to keep moving. Is it broken?”

“I need a minute to check.” I turn to her. “It depends. I doubt it’s a bad break if it is one.”

“You’ve got five,” Teresa offers. Her voice is harsher than I’m used to it being. Whatever Thomas did to her must’ve sucked. I don’t know when that could’ve happened. How long ago was it? How long has she been hiding it?

There is a crowd of girls hanging around my shoulders, so I turn to them. “I need space.”

Despite the grumbling, everyone moves off. Except for Marie. She kneels down next to me, knees wobbling.

“I need to see your ankle,” I tell the girl as she flinches from my touch. I begin to take off my backpack. “I’m Leo, a Med-jack. Meddy, I guess, in your words. I’m trained and have dealt with this stuff before.”

The girl nods, before slowly moving her hands back. I touch her ankle, and she winces.

“It’s not that bad,” she tells me, but her nose scrunches anyway. Her light blue eyes finally reach up to see mine. “I could probably walk on it.”

I don’t know that I want her too.

“What’s your name?” I ask, as I feel her ankle. There is swelling, and from what I can tell, it feels very sore.

“Saph,” she tells me.

She’s the girl whose friend was killed yesterday. Anne was the girl’s name. Saph told us to run. I remember her.

“I like that name,” I tell her. Even though we both know it’s not hers. “I guess WICKED likes you more than the rest of us.”

“I wish,” she tries to smile, but grunts as I push down on the muscles.

“How much does this hurt?” I ask. “And don’t lie.”

She shrugs, shaking her head. “A lot... but I can walk.” She adds the rest as an after thought, and I don’t trust it.

“That’s klunk.” I tell her. I dig through my back, searching for compression bandages. None. I can’t believe I remembered to bring sedative, but not compression bandages. I hope Saph’s the only one who falls. “Does anyone have anything thick and metal?”

Marie, behind me, digs through her stuff until she hands me her water bottle. “Sorry I’m not much help. I was assistant to our Meddy.”

That explains a lot, actually. I mean, I was an assistant too. My knowledge could never match Clint’s, nor Jeff’s.

“I’m better with numbers,” Marie tells me, turning away. “I could memorize dosages, count bandages. Keep track of check-ins. I don’t have the stomach for this though.”

I didn’t at first, but the job grew on me.
I place the metal water bottle against Saph’s ankle, and she holds it in place for me. “When you fell, did you hear anything snap, or crack?” I take out the alcohol form my bag. I dump some of the liquid on her calf, but don’t waste the bandages on the scrape. Most of it will get covered later anyway.

“I don’t remember,” Saph offers, wincing at the alcohol.

I grab bandages out and move the metal off her ankle. It’s still swelling, but we don’t have time to sit with it. These might not be compression bandages, but I doubt I need them. I’ve always wrapped boys up too tight anyway.

“Do you have tape, or cling wrap?” I ask, turning back to Marie.

“I have tape!” A girl I don’t know calls out.

Slowly, the tape gets passed to me. I take it, placing it on the ground next to me. Now, I can put on the bandages. I wrap them tightly around her heel, then up her ankle. “Your ankle isn’t crooked, and the numbness will come later. Tell me if you lose feeling in your toes. If you do, I will unwrap, and we will take a break before you keep walking. If you get any numbness as all, talk to me.”

“Okay,” Saph agrees.

I straighten her leg. Carefully, I wrap the tape around her knee and the base of the foot, until I am content that she won’t be able to move her ankle. It’s not a splint, but it will work as one for now. At least until I can get some better materials.

“Maybe that’s why he thanked you,” Saph looks up at me, watching me carefully.

“Sorry?” I glance back down, trying not to make eye-contact. Her gaze is intense, and I’d rather not think about what he said to me.

“That scientist guy. Maybe you’re helping since you are a Med-jack.”

I offer a forced smile. That’s not true, simply because he didn’t thank me for helping. He was happy I facilitated this. Sure, maybe a few people will live because I’m a Med-jack, but that has nothing to do with facilitating. Besides, he told me I wouldn’t remember what I’d done, and I remember that I’m a Med-jack.

With the last bit of tape, I attach the bottle to her ankle. It dangles haphazardly, but it’ll work for now.

“Do not bend your ankle,” I tell her. With a free-hand, I offer her a hand up. She pulls against me, and I need Marie’s help to get Saph off the ground.

“Thanks Lee,” she offers.

“I’ll watch her,” Marie offers, winking at me. I can’t help the smile on my face. She laughs at my expression. “I’ll be good for something at least.”

“I can walk,” Saph calls out, her eyes searching the crowd.

Teresa is on her feet, in front of us. “Alright then. We move out.”
I should have deserted

Dawn 10

I am escaping. Shuck this.

“What time is it?” I ask, leaning down to Leo.

She looks at her watch, before yawning. “It’s, like, 6 o’clock.”

12 hours. I have been walking for 12 hours, with only two ten-minute breaks. The whole time, Teresa’s been instructing us on how much farther, when the breaks are, what our goal is. I can’t believe no one has started screaming at her yet.

“You think we will call it a night soon?” I ask. Everything on me burns from the exhaustion. The rest of it burns with anger as I glare down the back of Teresa’s head.

Let me just point out that I called her sucking really early on.

Leo shrugs, though I can tell she is stumbling on her feet. She needs the sleep more than I do.

“We need to get out of here,” I tell her, hoping she understands that I don’t mean the underground.

Leo looks at me, taking a second to think. She sighs, and answers in a hush. “Why do you want to escape?”

Is she serious?

“Because we are trapped down here in the dark, and everything is terrible?” I offer her an answer.

Leo shakes her head back and forth. “I don’t want to be here either, but I don’t know that it’s any better up there,” she warns. “There are Cranks, and the sun is burning hot.”

“Our people are up there, Lee,” I plead. “Our Gladers, not these shucking randos. They need us.”

“So do these people,” Leo counters. “They don’t have a Med-jack. Up there, at least they have Clint.”

Sometimes it drives me nuts that Leo wants to do what is right by the universe. Mostly because I am also trying to do what’s right by us. She needs to be a bit more selfish; it would do her some good.

“We need to warn the Gladers what’s happening. Whose to say these girls won’t kill any of the other Gladers to get to Thomas?” I ask, turning to her. She winces at the thought. “I don’t trust them, Lee. Did you know they make everyone get stung by a Griever, as a right of passage? That’s shucking insane! I wouldn’t put it past them to attack Minho, or Fry-pan, or Newt.”

She doesn’t like the thought, so she remains silent.

“I know you don’t want anyone dead.” I am sure of that. Leo is too kind. She would help any living soul who needed her, Crank or otherwise. Murderer or saint. That’s probably why she’s staying here.

I don’t trust Harriet, and Sonya is too quiet to speak up against her. Never mind that it seems like
neither or their opinions are mattering much anymore. Teresa is completely terrorizing the group. All her klunk about Thomas. I want to give her the benefit of the doubt, because I owe it to her. I can’t though. No part of me believes her. I like to think I can read people well.

“I’m leaving Leo, first chance I get,” I tell her. She won’t betray me to the others. I know her too well. “Are you with me?”

She looks down, her stray hairs falling in her face. “Yeah. Yeah, I am.”

“I need you,” I affirm. I’m not using her; I’m trying to help her. If I must, I’ll go back alone, but I want her with me.

Leo nods, still not completely on board, but on board enough to follow through. Leo doesn’t like moral grey areas, but that’s the Scorch for you. I guess, in the ground beneath the sand the rules are different.

“Look at this,” Hilde is just a few paces ahead, tossing her long black hair over her shoulder. She grabs hold of the wall. “Would you two sticks help me up?”

Two girls move behind Hilde, propping themselves under her feet. She steps on their hands, and they push her further up. I don’t like those two.

“Ouch,” Joan actually says ouch out loud. Her voice is so whiny. This whole time, she’s been complaining about everything we’ve seen. Like, I get that it sucks down here, but I’ve kept most of my grippes to myself.

“Quit complaining,” Flore tells her. “You’re so annoying.”

Joan and Flore are always with Hilde, one at each of her shoulder.

“What are you doing?” Teresa pushes backwards through the crowd to yell at them.

I hang back, letting them continue to hold Hilde up in the air. She steps off them, her shoes clinging on to the wall. Hilde holds herself up, without any difficulty. She must’ve spent time climbing the walls in the Glade, like me.

I don’t hate the girl-Gladers here. They seem like decent, people, even if they are stressed out. Watching Rose and Hilde fight can get amusing, since Rose gets so angrily so easily, and Marie always has a wise-crack to offer. Sonya is so kind too. I don’t hate them at least. Teresa and Harriet are another story.

I force myself to remember that these fun girls can kill.

“There is a trap door up here,” Hilde notices. She lifts a hand up and pushes against it. “I can’t get it to open.”

“It’s not worth it then,” Teresa offers. “Besides, we’ve only got a bit farther to go.”

Hilde is about to hop down, so I shove myself through the crowd. “Wait.”

She freezes when she sees me, glancing over at me. I climb over to her, before finding the wall. She’s much shorter than me, so she needed the help to reach the grips above us.

I leap into the air, my hands grabbing the small pegs sticking out of the wall. With my feet, I scrape upwards until one has solid footing. I climb up the hole in the ceiling, a thick tunnel
upwards, until I can no longer see Teresa’s scowling grin.

“You climb them too?” Hilde asks. It’s impossible to see her in the dark, but I can feel her shoulder against mine.

I nod my head up and down. “Yeah, of course.”

She knocks on the roof, which makes a thick and resonating sound. “It won’t budge. It’s heavy as a load.”

I knock on it with my shoulder and prove her right. I turn around, calling down. “Michelle? You’ve got that hammer?”

After some grumbling from Michelle, the hammer gets passed up to just beneath us. Flore gets on Joan’s shoulders to hand it off. I thank her, before they lower her back down.

Though the cubby is tight, I swing my arm up and slam the hammer into the wooden planks. One cracks and splinters, revealing daylight.

“It’s the surface,” Hilde laughs in shock. Sand slips through the crack, but only a few grains at a time. In the gold light, it looks like the sun itself is raining down on top of us.

I hit the ceiling again. More light spills into the hall, and I can see those directly below us. Hilde’s face is clear too. There is a grin across her face and sand sparkling in her raven hair. “It’s a passage to the Scorch.”

The light leaking it is golden but dim. It’s not even blinding, not like when we first entered the Scorch. Maybe the sun is buried behind a few hills now. Or, maybe the sun is rising.

“I am never taking a load down here again,” someone calls out, and their voice mixes in with a chorus of laughter and agreements. Honestly, can’t say I blame either of them. Although I don’t wish I was named after the shank who invented flush toilets, that man is a hero.

“Get down,” Teresa calls out. “The boys could be just above us.”

Hilde rolls her eyes and sticks out her tongue at Teresa. Then, she looks up at me and winks with a grin. “Then move you sticks, unless you wanted to get crushed.”

She jumps to the ground, landing perfectly. Once she is out of the way, I follow suit, leaping down. I manage to catch myself, unlike the other times I’ve jumped and hit the ground.

That reminds me of the first time I met Minho. I can’t help the small smile that spreads across my cheeks.

“We only go up when we need to,” Teresa tells us, a stern look on her face. “Understood?”

Harriet’s arms are crossed, and she sports a bitter scowl. I can’t tell if she’s pissed at me and Hilde, or at Teresa’s control over the group. Maybe it’s just the exhaustion and the darkness that is getting to her.

Hilde brushes Teresa off, shoving past her. “Whatever.”

Teresa rolls her eyes but pushes forward. Everyone else seems to follow suit.

These tunnels how Leo and I will escape. Not tonight, obviously, but eventually. There are bound to be more of them, especially since we are supposed to remain in contact with the surface. I won’t
escape into the desert, but once we are in the town, I’m jumping out of here.

Michelle moves up next to Teresa, and I can hear them talking in hushed whispers. I guess she’s out of the plan. Ella is only a liability.

I fall to the back of the group, moving next to Saph and Marie. They both seem frustrated as they move forward. I get it, since it is so difficult for her to walk.

See, I know what I am about to do isn’t nice. However, making us trek through dark tunnels for 12 hours is also not nice. There is that whole expression about fighting fire and with fire, and I’m almost definitely going to get burned. Yet, I still speak anyway.

“Sucks that we are still going, especially with you like this,” I offer.

Saph shrugs. “I’ll live. It can’t be too bad.”

I’m not going to get anywhere with her. She’s too easily pleased, it seems.

“How long were you both in the Maze?” I ask.

“About a year,” Saph offers. “Marie’s only been here six months though.”

“Yeah, I’m a Newb,” she admits.

That’s a long time to be considered a Greenie. I still don’t get the rules they have here. They don’t make any sense to me. One month before they are forced to undergo the Process, six months and still a Greenbean, no voting. No Keepers. What’s next?

“And you’re a Meddy?”

Marie shrugs. “Not really. I mostly helped Sheil with his medication when Lott was busy.”

“Kind of sucks that she wouldn’t let you bring it to him.” I gesture up towards Teresa. “I wonder if she did.”

Marie stops, causing Saph to stumble. I’m thankful the girl doesn’t smash into the ground again.

“You think she might not have?”

“I have no clue,” that’s a truth, but I’m only talking to her to start trouble. The less power Teresa has, the better.

“Did you give Thomas the medication?” Marie calls out, leaving Saph behind. “Teresa, you never told me.”

The crowd parts ways as Marie moves through it. She approaches Teresa, but the two are far enough away that I can’t make out the expressions on their faces. “You gave him the medication right? Right?”

There is a scuffle, and someone slamming into a wall. Saph grabs on to me to help herself stand up.

“Shuck. I want to get up there and see what’s happening.

“He’ll stickin’ die without it.” Marie seethes, her chest heaving up and down. “Where is it? I’ll deliver it to him myself. Where did you stickin’ put it?”

“I left it in the building,” Teresa admits.
Someone shines a flashlight on the pair. Sonya and Harriet are pulling Marie off Teresa. She writhes in the girls’ arms, trying to attack her.

“What is wrong with you? Let me go!” Marie is angry. “Are you kidding me? If he goes five days without his medication, he’s dead!”

Klunk. I wasn’t expecting it to be true. I mean, I thought it could be. Mostly, I was hoping if I started a fight that people would decide to finally take a break. Teresa killed someone. Straight up, he’s dead now. I feel weird, because I don’t actually know the guy.

“WICKED made me do it,” Teresa says. “I already told you they controlled me. They’ll do it again. I didn’t have a choice.”

“You should’ve fought it. All of you,” Marie shrugs out of Joan’s grip, shoving the girl against the wall. “This is a load. I can’t believe you let this happen.”

“You follow, or you die,” Harriet’s voice rings out, and the folly dies down.

Marie stops moving, her chest huffing up and down. She shrugs out of the girls’ grips, before moving into the centre of a crowd which parts around her. “Seriously? The Deserter’s clause? Are you kidding?”

Harriet shrugs, as if she doesn’t mind any of it.

Marie runs a hand through her long hair, before her hand becomes a fist. Her face goes red, and I expect her to punch something. She doesn’t. Instead, Marie moves forward, as does the rest of the group.

I stay behind, looking around. Saph holds the wall and me, inching us forward though my feet can’t move.

“I didn’t mean to start that,” I tell her, lying through my teeth. People should see what kind of monster Teresa is. “Sorry Marie left you.”

Saph shakes her head. “It’s not your fault. It’s better she finds out now, rather than later.”

I nod, even though I don’t know that I agree.

“What’s the Deserter’s Clause anyway?” I ask.

Saph sigh, cut off by her grunts as I try to speed her up. “It’s this rule we agreed on in the early days. We make decisions as a group, so everyone is unanimous. Every rule that exists, everyone has agreed to follow. Not a democracy, but not a dictatorship. Only one decision. It’s a perfect system, even if all our decisions take longer than they should.”

“So the clause?” I ask.

“Other than time,” she grunts. “The system two flaws. We break these up into two clauses. The first, is those personally involved can’t vote. Like, if we are deciding who gets the new watch, or something. The contenders don’t get to vote. That’s the Involvement Clause. The second flaw is people changing their mind. Once you agree, you can’t go back on your word. Once the vote is enacted, it can’t be undone. If you desert a decision you’ve already agreed too, you die. If anyone goes back on killing Thomas, or leaves the group, that’s the consequence.”
I should prepare for the boom

Michelle 11

It’s butt-shucking early when we wake up and begin moving again. Last night we got lucky with a full six hours. Rose kicks me awake when she walks by, unaware that my eyes have been peeled open since our shift ended. Rose looks at me while I sit up, expecting me to come talk to her. Rolling my eyes, I move over to Teresa, who is packing up her stuff.

“I get why you did it,” my voice is low.

She looks up at me, from the backpack she now carries. She got to take the one from the girl whose ankle is shucked. Maybe it was to alleviate the girl from its burden, but I get the feeling its because Teresa wants the supplies and expects the girl to die in the Scorch.

With a damaged leg, there isn’t much else to expect.

“Did what?”

“Ditched the medication,” I tell her. “I’m good at telling when people are lying. WICKED didn’t make you.”

Teresa shrugs, tossing her backpack over her shoulder. She crosses her arms over her chest when she is standing up. She is just slightly taller than I am, which isn’t really a point in her favour since I’m the shortest shank around.

“I’d have done it too,” I tell her, ignoring her defensive stance. “If WICKED doesn’t want him alive, I’m not getting in their way. Besides, we have a mission. I’m not jeopardizing all of our lives for one kid, who’s probably died already.”

She nods slowly, her foot tapping against the ground. “You make sense, Michelle,” she tells me as if that’s new information. “All these idiots around here are driving me crazy.”

“Can’t blame you for that,” I mumble.

She chuckles, before stepping away from me, she moves over to address the others, as they continue to pack. “Are we moving or what? We are only a few hours out from the city.”

A couple people groan, but soon they are filing out of the hole we came through. I end up moving along with Teresa near the front of the ground. We take step after step, moving forward and forward. Every so often I shine my light up at the ceiling to look for an new exit. The places we sleep, holes in the walls big enough for all of us, appear about every six to seven hours we walk. So far, we’ve past three. The pathways up to the ceiling, as far as I’ve noticed, are spread apart by an hour’s walk or so. I couldn’t tell you how far we walk every hour. It really depends on how people are moving. This morning, it’s closer to a shuffle than it is to a run.

We past another hole in the ceiling, leading up to the surface, and I can’t help but feel a clench in my stomach. I like the dark. It’s all encompassing, and if I close my eyes there is no difference. After the Glade, I need this walk to clear my mind. It’s been so full lately that I haven’t been able to sleep without seeing all the faces of the dead flying through my head. You can still see the dead in the dark, unfortunately.

We walk another hour, pass another hole. Still no breaks. Leo is at the back, trying to tend to the
girl’s broken ankle while we walk. I can hear the chick sniffling. It’s definitely broken, but I don’t get why she is sniffling. Does she expect us to wait? Today is our third day out, which means eleven days to go. Who knows how close we are?

The ground above us rumbles.

“What the stuck was that?” Rose asks from beside me.

I don’t know.

It shakes above us again, the dirt and the ground shifting.

“Harriet,” a girl further down the line calls. Her voice is edging with panic.

Harriet continues forward, though Teresa stops with me. There is another loud crash, and the ground rumbles. Dirt begins to fall off the ceiling.

“There’s a hole a bit back,” I yell out. I reach for my pocket, and for the hammer I got back from Dawn. Rose is the only one who hears me, as the voices in the tunnel rise. “We need to get to the surface.”

“What’s that?” I can hear the panic rising.

“It’s an earthquake,” Harriet realises.

My heart rumbles like the Earth. A heavier and heavier pounding.

“I know how to get up,” I tell Teresa. “It’s only like, five minutes back a walk. We need to move now.”

There is another crash, and I don’t wait for action. I run through the crowd, trying to get back. On the way, I find Dawn instead and drag her with me. “We need to get to the surface. There’s a tunnel just a ways back.”

“We need to get up-top!” Rose is yelling as I run past her. I pay the shanks no mind, as they do their stupid before any-decision-everyone-must-agree thing. It’s not going to work. I don’t even know how long this will last.

In just a few leaps we get to the hole. I put down my hands, and Dawn climbs on them. With difficulty, I push her upwards until she grabs on to something. With a free hand, I give her the hammer.

“Open it!” I shout up.

I hear the loud bang, and the first slip of light falls down. She hits it again, and the room fills with light. The wooden planks fall down, but I duck out of the way. She opens it, heading up to the surface.

Bodies immediately plow around me, and before I know it I am pushed up, climbing to the surface. The walls around me are thick, and sand falls down as I try to pull my hands into it. From above, Dawn grabs my hand and pulls me up.

I can’t stand up, the wind pinning me down against the ground. While Dawn helps the next girl, I struggle to my feet. The sky is dark. Rolling grey clouds rush closer to us. A gust of wind comes, lifting the sand into the air. It surrounds me in a brown whirlwind. Dawn was maybe three feet
away from me, but now she’s gone.

At least, she appears to be.

Just a few feet off, lightning crashes against the ground. I hear voices screaming from underneath the sand. Lightning doesn’t just shake the ground like that. It doesn’t just happen.

“Klunk,” I run backwards from it, as more bodies pop up on the surface with me. “Get out of there!”

The wind calms for a second, revealing a crowd gathering around the pit. I’m in front, following along the line of the tunnel. From there on, it’s probably a straight path to the city. I’m not sure, but I don’t have a better guess. I turn backwards, staring at the people behind me.

“It’s a lightning storm!” Dawn is screaming, she charges past me, her feet slipping in the sand. “We have to run!”

I take off running after her, through the dark clouds. I’ve got no idea where we are going, nor who is behind me. Maybe we are moving in the wrong direction, but at least we are moving. There is so much sand, and it rolls in a tornado around us.

I stumble, falling on to my feet. Scuttling forward, I look to see what I fell on. There is a boy, screaming. Thunder booms above us, muting him for a second. It’s Winston. He’s missing a leg, howling in pain.

I look up, and see Thomas staring at me. He sees me, and he stumbles backwards. Vomit spews into the sand behind him. Minho tumbles forward into him, spotting me too.

I run off. They are here. Shuck. This wasn’t the plan. Now we are on the surface and we weren’t supposed to be. Everything is going to be different now. That man’s plan is going to change, all because of this shucking thunderstorm. Minho grabs hold of me, turning me around. He is much stronger than me.

“Where is Dawn?” I can only hear it through the mouthing on his lips.

I shake my head. She isn’t here, and if he comes looking for us than this whole mission is screwed, and then we are all going to die.

“You don’t want to know!” I scream back.

“Tell me!” He demands, grabbing my shoulders and digging his fingers into them. “Tell me where she is!”

“She died!” I tell him, shouting. “In the tunnel.”

His grip slips off me, and I turn around, running away. I have to find my group, although I don’t know that I will, nor that I can.

I keep running, veering farther off. I manage to land myself in the pack of girls as the clouds turn darker. The storm swallows us whole. I am doubling down on my claim that the tunnels are our best bet. We’re all going to die up here.

A girl falls next to me, but I’ve got no idea who she is. Then, there is another. This is not good. I keep running anyway, jumping over one of their bodies as I head forward. They’ve got no hope. One of them caught on fire.
The boys claims the first building. I bring up the back of the pack as we rush away from them. None of the boys are looking at us, and thankfully, none of us are looking at them. Water starts to pour down around us, soaking my clothing. My steps become heavy and hard. The sand is turning into a thick mud. If I thought it was impossible to run on sand, I didn’t realise that mud would be infinitely worse.

I reach the next building; its door is hung open by Sonya. She waits for us, pulling each girl inside. She does a head count as we move. I push the pack forward, into the building.

The glass windows illuminate the space. The walls are concrete and covered in graffiti. Words that are too faded to make out. The floor is the same grey as the walls. It feels like I’m back in the Slammer. The lights on the ceiling are either damaged or stolen, but I’m in a building, and I’m out of the underground.

There is shouting, and a thin man comes charging forward. His eyes are black and his skin shooting with black veins. He charges for me, and I whip my hammer out of my belt. I smash him in the face with it, and he goes straight down to the ground.

Another man charges up the stairs, faster and thicker. I pull back on the hammer, and whack him in the face as well, kicking his torso to get the hammer out of his skin. Rose moves in with a long knife and cuts his neck. Dark black blood spews out, landing on my shirt as he falls to the ground.

I try to concentrate and hear any more Cranks, but all I can hear is the ruckus behind me. So, I pause.

Nothing comes.

I walk down to the basement, opening doors and shutting them. Rose follows directly behind me, her bow and arrow held in position. Thankfully, there are no more Cranks to be found.

Their weapon choice confuses me. Almost half the group carries around bows and arrows, while the others have machetes and an assortment of knives on their belts.

We walk back upstairs. The girls continue to shiver. Sonya hasn’t shut the shucking door. She holds it open for minutes, jumping up and down to get the blood flowing in her soaking body. No one comes. I can feel the pressure in the air, searching the crowd for familiar faces. I catch Leo, holding on to Dawn, and I spot Rose. Teresa comes up towards me, her dark hair matted down against her skull. Those are pretty much all the people that I really need, other than Harriet.

Not that I like Harriet, but if she dies there is going to be a major power vacuum, and going through that struggle in the Builders after Gally disappeared was bad enough that I hope Harriet is around here somewhere.

Teresa wipes her wet hair off her face as she tries to catch her breath. Her eyes are wide and pour into me.

“Did you see the boys?” She asks, looking me up and down. She grimaces, recoiling. “Whose blood is that?”

“There were some Cranks in here,” I tell her, shrugging off her disgust. “I got them.”

Teresa nods, glancing out the doorway. Rain conditions to rush down, thunder cracking outside. “The boys. Did you see them?”

I nod, pointing out the door. “They’re in the storm too.”
“Klunk,” she puts her hands against her wet head, turning around to address the rest of the group. “Did anyone run into Group A?”

“I saw one of them,” someone else calls.


“I don’t know,” the girl says. “He was Asian, and he was on fire.”

Dawn’s face goes white at this. It could’ve been Minho.

“Hopefully it was Doug,” I call out. She doesn’t necessarily seem comforted by this, but she puts up with it. I can’t blame her.

I honestly would rather it be Minho than Doug. Which is kind of crazy, because Doug is like the only Builder left who isn’t me. However, it’s time to pick and chose. It’s not a game of want. It isn’t even survival of the fittest. It’s just plain chance.

“Anyone else?” Teresa asks. No one offers an answer, which I guess I’ll take as a no.

“Sonya, no one else is coming.” Harriet moves through the crowd closer to the girl. Thankfully, she is here.

I glance over at the blonde. Her grip tights on the door as she stares outside. I wonder if she expects anyone to come running in here, despite the heavy rainfall.

“We’re missing a few,” she says. “They could just be lost.”

Harriet begins to whisper to her. They exchange a long look. Sonya closes the door, returning to the group.

“We should do a call,” Harriet suggests.

“A1,” Teresa offers.

There is no B2, since she died before they got here. We wait for the next girl.

“B3?” Sonya looks around, spinning on her feet.

“Maya,” someone else offers. “I saw her get struck.”

The list continues, further and further down. We’ve lost eleven today, fourteen in total. Four when part of the tunnel collapsed. Seven in the lighting. Seventeen left, and I already know most of them by name.

“A60.” Ella is the last voice, and I am surprised when I see her. She stands in the doorway, leaning against the metal frame. Her clothes cling on to her, drenched and sandy. So sandy I don’t know what colour they are.

Leo moves over to her, pulling Ella into the building. She helps the girl to the ground as she shakes. No one makes a move to help the pair. Maybe it’s because they are jerks, but equally maybe because it’s freaky that Ella even made it.

I find myself in both camps. A jerk who has been and always will be creeped out by Ella.

Leo sheds off her jacket, even though it is wet, and drapes it over the girl. She then takes out her
sleeping bag, which is not completely soaked through, and searches through it for the bandages. They’re all dry, thankfully.

Leo throws her sleeping bag on Ella, placing the bandages in her lap when she sits down.

“We’ll camp until it blows over,” Teresa says. “Then we keep moving. We’ve only got a week to get into the Mountain.”
How do you handle it?” Eli and I sit together in the cafeteria. From across the table, Eli’s eyes linger on me. My hands shake as I try to force myself to have the pea soup. It’s my first day out of the hospital.

I shrug. If I don’t think about the pain, it isn’t happening. That’s what I tell myself. I’m older now than I used to be, so I’m able to brush it off better than I could’ve when I was five, like the rest. Now, I’m ten. I thought they would’ve been done by now, but they aren’t.

“They only try every four months now,” I offer. “A couple hours a year is worth my name.”

“I don’t remember my original name anymore,” he tells me. “I just know it isn’t Eli.”

“I remember yours,” I have a smirk on my face.

His jaw drops. Last time I saw him, his hair was shorter. Now, the long brown mess hangs over his eyes. I don’t like the look. There is a space between us now that wasn’t there before.

I can’t tell if he believes me or not.

“Don’t tell me,” he begs.

“I wasn’t going to,” I bring the bowl up to my lips, but my hands shake. Drops run down the side of the bowl.

“Crap,” he jumps over the table, sitting down next to me. He takes the bowl from my hands and uses a napkin to clean up my face.

“You know, we are allowed say shit,” I tell him. “They won’t torture us over it.”

He rolls his eyes, dropping the napkin down. He leans against the table, shaking his head at me. “I don’t get you.”

I don’t expect him too.

“Just tell them you think Emily is your name,” he instructs. “Then they’ll stop.”

I couldn’t. I know how much power the name holds. “They’ll stop sooner or later. I’ve been having more seizures when they try. It puts the smoke man off the whole thing.”

Eli puts his hands in his lap, staring out into the cafeteria. He loves to people watch. Mostly because we’ve been allowed to eat in the cafeteria less and less, so every time we are here is an opportunity that e can’t waste.

Lately, we’ve spent more time with the Smoke man and less time with the others. Eli and I were never hotshots to begin with, but fewer people talk to us now than before.

“You can’t know that he’ll stop,” he remarks. “We aren’t even going up for another five
years. They are still building the Maze."

I shrug. I don’t particularly care what WICKED does and doesn’t do anymore. My hands shake as I drink a swig of water.

“Emily,” a man comes up behind me. I can feel his presence.

I get out of my chair, shoving my food forward. The bowl crashes against the ground. Shards of glass and soup coat the floor. The cafeteria goes silent.

The man doesn’t tell me why he has come to collect me. I have it figured out.

I know people are staring at me when I leave, but I don’t care. This isn’t my fault.

My heart races and suddenly I’m sitting straight up. That wasn’t from the Changing. I can remember the words more now, and the textures of the world. It was a not-dream-like dream. Perhaps not even a fabrication, simply a manifestation of the past repeated. It’s all too confusing. I don’t want to think about it.

From closer to the door, I can see the Violet girl sitting with a lantern lit. She is the only one awake. It takes a bit of energy to get myself to my feet, but I walk over to her. I sit on the ground next to her. Eyes fluttering close to mine, I try to catch their beautiful colour in the dim light. It seems impossible that we are together.

“You’re awake,” she smiles. “I didn’t think you would be for a while.”

I shrug. Maybe I didn’t either, but that’s just the way it is. I’m awake now, and everyone else is asleep. I guess that even if their eyes were open, and they were walking and talking, they’d still be asleep. At least now they know about the experiment, and the dangers around us, but there is still so much they’ve yet to discover.

There’s a lot I also don’t know.

“You think more are coming? I ask.

She shakes her head, looking down at her lap. Her hair cascades in front of her, her normal braid taken out of her hair. “I wish they were.”

The rain continues to beat down against the windows, as does the wind. Sometimes it feels like the walls to this building might shatter.

“You never explained how you got back,” her legs are crossed one over the other. Folded perfectly. There is too much precision in the movements. She was always small but always intentional. This is her in a bigger body.

“I walked,” I answer, because that is honestly how I journeyed here.

The rain drums against the roof top above us. It is a sound that I try not to let blur into the background. Unlike air conditioning, I can’t remember hearing the patter of rain before. It is a sound I would like not to forget.

After all, the present will soon become a memory. Once it does, I will actually be able to pay attention to it.
“What did you remember about him?” She asks.

“Who?”

“Emil,” she answers, quietly.

I don’t know what to tell her. Though I remember him, I don’t know him. His values, and beliefs, and opinions are all lost to time. Also, they are lost to the dirt that these girls buried him in. Our shared history is trapped in my brain, between a side that remembers remembering, and a side which has forgotten everything.

“I didn’t know him very well, but I watched over him. He was sick.”

“Sick?” I ask. I know she is talking about Eli, but I don’t bother correcting her on his name. “How do you mean?”

She shrugs, her shoulders uncertain. “He just wasn’t happy the whole time I knew him.” Every word which comes out her mouth is slow. She whispers, but she would whisper if everyone was awake. Her voice is just too loud and commanding otherwise. “He kept asking me for Emily. Do you know what he meant?”

I find myself frozen solid. Did he remember?

“Course, something awful happened to him,” she tells me. “On the first day, Marie was supposed to keep track of them while we decided what to do about the boys, but Emil wandered into the Maze. He came back, and never was the same again.”

So, maybe he did remember me. Like an echo in his brain. Maybe he got sliced by a Griever and didn’t undergo the Changing. It would be a crazy coincidence, but maybe he shot himself at an angle too. Doesn’t seem likely though.

“I don’t know what he is talking about.”

She furrows her brow. “You said, when you first got here, that his name was something like Emily, but wasn’t Emily.”

“Emil is like Emily,” I tell him. “Maybe he was just confused. Maybe he was trying to say Emil.”

She smiles, faintly, almost like she can believe me. “Yeah. It would make sense he was calling out for himself. He seemed pretty lost.”

I feel lost too. I had hoped he’d be with us and then I could find him too. He isn’t, and I can’t. Maybe I haven’t even found the Violet girl yet. I don’t recognize her in Sonya’s skin, even though she looks the same. It’s been years we’ve been apart, and memories ripped away. Maybe she is quiet, and maybe she sits perfectly, but her shoulders are slouching with a weight that I have never seen. I don’t know who she is.

I was expecting that once we got out of the Maze, the world would finally catch up with my brain because I know things that none of the others will ever know again. The farther along we get though, the more I’m realising that the few pieces I had were not half the puzzle. The puzzle is the size of this desert.

“I miss him,” she tells me. “He was kind.”
From what I remember, Eli was kind. He was also nervous. Although, maybe he changed in the time Sonya knew him. I am nothing like the Ella that popped up into the Glade. Now, I’m angrier, I guess. More determined, maybe. I am not who I was born to be, but I am not who I’ve become. The real me, the one without a name that starts with an E, was lost somewhere far off.

“I miss him too,” I look at her, my eyes falling softly on her skin.

She seems to be about to drift in and out of consciousness. She leans against the wall next to the door, keeping her eyes closed.

“Do you mind keeping watch?” She asks, casting me one final glance. “I need someone to take up after me, but I don’t have the heart to wake up anybody else.”

I nod slowly, smiling at her. She doesn’t see this though, as she leans back, keeping her eyes firmly shut. It’s another minute before she slowly drifts off into a slumber.

Though I want to sit here forever, watching her chest rise and fall, I can’t. There is work to be done. I walk away from the door, searching the room.

I know she is in here.

She is on the ground. I gently kick her, and she turns her torso shooting up. Teresa stares at me, a sour expression taking over her whole face. She must know that I know who she is, and what she has done. We both know what has happened.

I crouch down next to her, leaning over top of her. “I know who you are.”

“You don’t know anything,” she shakes her head back and forth.

“I know what you’ve done,” I continue.

She crosses her legs, her face inches from mine. I wait for her to break, but she doesn’t. “I have done nothing that you wouldn’t have.”

“That’s a lie,” I cut in. Although I don’t remember it entirely, I know who she is. I know her role, and I know it could’ve been mine. I didn’t want it. I can’t believe she did.

“WICKED is good,” she tells me.

Maybe deep down, she knows that isn’t true. I hope she doesn’t believe it anyway. Although, I wouldn’t put it past her to trust them so blindly.

“Don’t follow me,” I stand up, looking around the room. The air is claustrophobic. I need time to think. My feet move myself out the doors, and into the night.

It’s quiet out, and my feet crunch against the ground. In the night, sounds are magnified, becoming louder and louder with each passing step. The moon is fully out, and it’s the first really one I’ve seen in a long time. The stars are out too, and they swallow me whole.

The Violet girl is here, but Eli is gone. I must let the news sink into my skin. I don’t know how he died, and I don’t want to know. Thinking about it makes my throat hurt. Once, he and I meant something to one another. I don’t know what though.

And I can’t bare to be with Teresa. Part of me wants to just go back to Group A, but I won’t leave the Violet girl again. I promised I would find her. I told her that, and I told myself that,
so it must be so. We will be together again.

“Are you one of us?” A woman asks, her back hunched over. Her feet lag behind her with every step. “You’re a Crank, girlie?”

I don’t know who she is. Someone is snickering behind me. My head spins, staring up at a man. He is licking his lips as he looks at me. I don’t know who he is, nor do I know what he wants. So, I shove through the pair of Cranks, and run as fast as I can, and as far as I can.
Leo 13

I wake up, the sun streaming in the windows. The soft light is a pleasure I have missed. The sun was gone for so long, and then it was blazing, and then it was gone again. Now, it gently kisses me awake.

I wish Newt was hear with me.

I sigh, sitting up and forward. It seems so peaceful for the Scorch. Part of me wants to sit and relax, but I can’t. I know where we are going. I know what we must do.

When I look to the door, I notice Sonya fast asleep. The front door is ajar. No one else is awake yet. I rustle out of the bag, spinning around. There was no one on guard last night except for her. I was supposed to be next. Why didn’t she wake me up?

“Leo…” Teresa groans from where she sleeps next to me.

“Sorry,” I manage, moving away from her. I head to the door, moving towards Sonya. I place a hand on her shoulder, and she violently shakes awake.

She gasps for air, before looking up at me. “Hey Leo.” She always has such a pleasant smile on her cheeks. It reminds me of Newt’s.

“Good morning,” I manage, leaning down next to her. “You slept well.”

“I hope you did too,” she offers, her cheeks still tinged pink.

“Why didn’t you wake me?” I ask softly. I was supposed to be the next watch.

She yawns, looking up out the windows. “Ella told me she would keep watch for you.”

I stop, glancing around the room. Ella isn’t here. I vaguely remember her nudging me last night while I was sleeping, but then she began talking to Teresa. Maybe she was trying to wake me up.

I move to where I left Ella, curled up tight to keep her warm. The spot is empty. I glance around at the rest of the girls, scanning the sleeping bags for any sign of her. If she is here, she is hiding in one of the doors branching off from this room.

I go to the first door, opening it. Inside is a simple closet. The next is the same, and the next as well. I run down the stairs, heading into the basement. All the doors are unlocked, except for one, and if I can’t get into it I doubt Ella is in there. Still I bang on the door.

“What the bloody Hell are you off about?” Sonya is on the stairs staring me down.

“Ella isn’t here,” I turn around, letting my hand, curled up into a fist, slowly lower down off the door. The steel is cold against my hand. Cold and unrelenting.

Sonya darts back up the stairs hopefully to get Harriet, or Teresa, or someone else with some responsibility. I still have no place amongst their ranks, and while I hated the responsibility in the Glade, the lack of it here is driving me crazy.

“Ella!” I call out, banging on the door. I don’t know why she would go down here. It’s a concrete
wasteland. There is exposed piping for shuck’s sake.

Michelle comes up behind me, with her hammer, and smashes the doorknob. It clangs, rolling on the ground, and with her spare foot Michelle kicks the door open. Down underneath, is the tunnel we’ve been travelling through. No Ella.

I charge back up the stairs, pushing through the girls that have crowded on them. Everyone is staring at me. I can feel their eyes penetrating my skin. My arms start to itch, and I fend against the need to scratch them. Everyone already thinks I’m crazy.

“Ella’s gone,” I peer around the room. Talking to myself. Maybe trying to rationalized the fact that I somehow managed to let a sick girl disappear from beneath my fingers in a shucking desert.

Sonya has her head in her hands, struggling to breathe. Everyone else just continues to watch me.

“She disappeared,” I continue. “She isn’t in here. Not behind any of the doors.”

“Maybe she left for the boys,” Marie offers, quietly. She hides behind her dark black hair. Trust me, I’m not delicate. I don’t need to be coddled, especially not by a blood-sensitive Med-jack.

“Not bloody likely,” Dawn offers.

“She’s not healthy,” I continue. “She is epileptic, and we think she has a brain tumour. Her only friends that are boys are dead now, so she wouldn’t go back there. Besides, she wouldn’t know where to go. Before yesterday, she couldn’t hold a conversation.”

Harriet looks around the group, waiting for someone to come forward. No one does. I scan the eyes of people I know, and people who might know her. Marie doesn’t seem to know, and Sonya was the last to see her conscious. I doubt Ella talks to Hilde or her friends. Rose isn’t exactly friendly either, not that Ella would approach anyone anyway. She has never been one to chat with strangers. Ella is someone who you go to, or who just shows up and waits for you to speak. I don’t get why she’d leave.

I honestly don’t really get how she was capable of leaving. The most autonomy she has ever shown has been cutting her neck open and getting stung by a Griever.

“Leo,” Saph has hobbled up next to me. She places a hand on my shoulder. I would swipe her off, swipe away at her attempt to calm me down, but her ankle is shucked so if I did she would collapse. “Leo, it’s alright.”

That’s when I realise my hands and knees are shaking. I look around the group, waiting for anyone to say anything.

I gently take Saph off me, before moving away from the circle. My hands find my backpack, and I struggle to unzip it. My hands find the vials of sedative and are searching for the needle when Dawn rips them out of my hands.

“You aren’t sedating yourself,” she tells me, putting the vials back in my bag.

“Why the stuck do you have sedative?” Marie jumps in, looking at me.

“Boys get into a shuck ton fights,” I tell her, as my hands continue to shake. Dawn has to practically drag me back to the group. “We use it when people need to calm the shuck down.”

“You seem calm,” she offers.
“I’m not!” I snap. Silence follows my words, and once again everyone is staring at me. I give myself three seconds to breathe in and out, but I don’t take them. I can’t take them. Now, I need to have intense power to my words, even if I don’t want it.

They need to hear me.

“Well?” I demand, letting the eyes fall on me. “Are we going to look for her or what?”

No one answers me. Sonya’s hair is dishevelled, the blonde strands sticking about in every direction. Does she think it’s her fault? Ella is very sick. Lately, she’s seemed okay. If I had just met her, like Sonya, I’d have thought she was okay too. Unfortunately, she isn’t.

“We don’t have time,” Teresa cuts through the crowd. She holds her head high. Her entire face is exposed since her hair is pulled back, and I wish I was proud enough to show myself off like that. TO be me without any regrets.

“What?” I ask, turning to face her. “You’re kidding. We aren’t leaving her to die.”

“We’ve got to keep moving.” She tells me.

I look over to Dawn, who does not look surprised. Is this who Teresa is? I thought we were friends. I mean, I know she and Ella don’t get on particularly well, but I didn’t think she would let the poor girl die.

“No,” I turn to face her. “We are getting Ella.”

Michelle steps in towards us, grabbing hold of me. Does she actually think I would charge Teresa? I wouldn’t. It wouldn’t solve anything.

Teresa looks surprised by my reaction. She bites her lip, looking me up and down. “Leo, you have to understand…”

“I understand nothing,” I argue, biting into my tongue.

“We don’t make a decision unless it’s unanimous.” Harriet jumps in, offering up a rule that I have become very aware of.

“Well, then put me under a Banishment, or whatever you slintheads do.” I tell them.

Dawn steps in, closer to me. She nods in agreement. Michelle takes this as her chance to back out, as if she has confirmed I’m not going to attack Teresa. I’m surprised she takes their side over mine. Maybe she is picking her interests instead of people. I forget loyalty is fickle.

“That’s not what she means,” Rose rolls her eyes. “Don’t be so dramatic.”

“We aren’t going anywhere until we are unanimous,” Harriet says. “For or against.”

So, we are stuck here? That’s only going to waste Teresa’s time further. I will make us lose a whole day so be it. Surely, Teresa will give in by then.

“Initial vote,” Harriet calls out. “Yay?”

I watch as Sonya’s hand flies up, so I put mine up too. There are only a couple hands up with me, including Dawn, Saph, Hilde (surprisingly), Marie, and Michelle (surprisingly, although I can tell she isn’t happy about it). I realise that this is almost half the hands we have here. It makes me feel sick.
So many have died.

Hilde’s two friends give her a weird look. She simply rolls their eyes at them, gesturing forward. “Look, the stick obviously matters to them, and they aren’t gonna budge. If I vote for it, we can find her faster, and get out of the way. I say we search for three hours in the area, if she isn’t here, we walk an hour, and search those houses for an hour. Afterwards, we move on.”

“Second,” Harriet says, which confuses me.

“Third,” Sonya offers, gesturing her head towards me to call out.

“Fourth,” I offer.

“Fifth,” there is a ridiculous sigh in Rose’s voice. She doesn’t sound like she could be more put off by anything in the world.

“Second vote?” Harriet calls out. “Yay?”

This time, more hands are up, including one of the few girls I don’t know well. Their whole process is confusing, but exponentially faster than ours somehow. I guess they’ve sped it up to accommodate for the repeated votes. There is a lack of explanation from every person. Instead, one vote, one explanation, next vote. Pretty quick.

“Nay?” There are a few outliers still. Four, exactly, since three of the girls I don’t know are still holding out, and so is Teresa.

“We don’t have time for this,” Teresa says. “We’ve got to move.

“Seriously?” I turn to face her. “Does her life not matter to you? I know you two know each other. I saw you talking last night.”

Gears start to click in my head. They were talking, and then Ella was gone. I can’t believe I missed that. I’m so stupid.

“What did you say to her?” I demand, looking Teresa up and down. I can feel my nose tingling pink. I tried to use the rage to my control, but now it uses me. “What did you do?”

“You must’ve been dreaming.” Teresa counters, seemingly distracted. “Maybe you were remembering whatever it was that man was talking to you about. Since you are apparently working with him.”

“You know shucking well I wasn’t,” I add on. People are staring at her now. “Also, you used to work with WICKED and you trust them. Ella doesn’t, and I know she never liked you. She said she remembered bits and pieces of Thomas, so why not you too? What did you say to her last night?”

“Lee,” Dawn hisses in my ear. I realise she has had to restrain me. It didn’t occur to me that I was moving for Teresa. This isn’t me. I’m not a violent person.

There are hushed whispers circling around the room, but my blood is pumping. I can’t hear what they are saying.

“Third vote.” Harriet calls, looking at different people. “Yay?”

Almost all the hands in the room shoot up. Teresa’s is down, with her arms crossed. I can’t tell if it’s about time for her, or if she just wants to get rid of Ella.
“Nay?” Harriet asks, and I was right. Only Teresa disagrees.

“The Involvement Clause,” Dawn calls out. “It needs to be invoked.”

Harriet crosses her arms over her chest, examining Dawn. She holds her ground steady, staring the group.

“Second,” Marie calls out, her face bitter.

“Third,” Hilde agrees.

Rose calls out fourth, and then Sonya fifth, one beat after the other. The two girls with Hilde bite their tongues, lowering their hands.

“Settled,” Harriet decides. “We search for her.”

People around me begin to rush about, and I only have a few seconds to try and calm down. Teresa disappears in the crowd. Dawn grabs hold of my arm. I sigh. “What did you do?”

“There are two clauses Saph told me about,” Dawn pushes through the crowd, she quickly pulls our stuff off the ground, piling it into both of our arms. “The first, is the Deserter’s Clause. We die if we back out, pretty simple. The other, is the Involvement Clause. Those who are part of the decision don’t get a vote.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, pushing forward.

“It means,” she tells me. “At least four other people think Teresa, in part, caused Ella’s disappearance.”

Klunk.

“It means,” she continues, “that things are about to change.”

We get to the door, and are about to push out, when Harriet stops us. She looks us up and down, before spreading her feet apart and crossing her arms. Her dark lips are pressed together in a tight line. She’s trying to look powerful and intimidating, but I’m not going to let it work. I’ve still got all of this adrenaline running.

“I’m going with you Leo,” she tells me. “Dawn, you can go with Sonya. I have a feeling, since you are so savvy on clauses now, you both might be trying to avoid one.”
"We checkin' out this building?" I ask, gesturing to one just a couple hundred metres from ours.

Everyone else has already begun to scope the area, pairing off into groups off three. Leo and I were the only one's paired off in two, each with one of the leaders. At this point, we are down to seventeen, so there was no logical reason to have two groups of two, one group of four, and three groups of three. Let me tell you, it was not done as a vote of confidence.

"Seems this spots ours," Sonya agrees, staring the building down.

We stalk over, our feet trudging in the sand. The sun is heavy above us, but I don't mind. Honestly, it's better than the tunnel.

The building is massive. It's three floors, which means it outnumbers us. There aren't any windows either, so it's difficult to get a glimpse inside. Sonya stops short of the doorway, staring up in front of us. I watch her swallow. She wipes sweat and honey-coloured hair out of her eyes. Geez, I bet Leo wouldn't even be this nervous.

"Got any weapons?" I ask, looking her up and down.

She nods, reaching her hand into her backpack. She hands me a knife. It's got a short shining blade, and a heavy plastic handle. It feels weighted wrong, although I'm not used to working with knives. I don't like close range, but I'll go for this. I've taken on Grievers with less.

Sonya takes an arrow out of her quiver, pulling her bow up in front of her. At least she has a weapon she is used to using. Thankfully I don't have that shucking thing.

"You think there will be Cranks?" She asks me, her eyes fixing on the heavy metal door that waits in front of us.

Honestly, I don't even worry about Cranks. They are scary enough without me dwelling on them. Apparently, we are all doomed to become them anyway. Why fear the inevitable? I will worry when my fate bothers me.

"Could be," I shrug gently. "It's not like we couldn't take them though."

Sonya nods, accepting this reality. We move in, poising ourselves on either side of the door. She nods towards me, gesturing for my move.

"I'll open it on three," I offer, turning to face her. My hand wraps itself around the metal handle. There is the possibility it might be bolted shut. Either nothing happens now, or we run into our deaths. My heart flutters in my chest.

Sonya nods up and down. "Sounds good to me."

"One..." I count, "two... three!"

I rip the door open, stretching my knife forward. There is a crowd gathered in the centre of the room, illuminated by the high windows coming from the back of the building. The space, although a vast empty warehouse, feels constricting.
Fry-pan turns to face me. I drop my knife on the ground, and it echoes against the harsh concrete.

"Oh shuck," he says.

A few heads turn around to stare at me. I stumble into the room, Sonya close behind me. A few boys turn to stare at me, and I realise they have knives, shovels, and other weapons pointed at them. None of them are Minho.

I even see Doug, unharmed.

It was Minho who caught on fire during the storm, not some other Asian guy. I feel my heart sink into my hands.

"She's alive," Newt gasps.

Sonya grabs my hand, pulling me backwards. I tense my legs to try and stop her from pulling us out. Even though Minho is gone, I can't leave. These are my friends. I try to shake out of her grip, turning to face her and the doorway.

There is a hand on my shoulder. I turn to face Minho.

Minho.

His clothing is charred, no doubt he was set on fire, but he is alive. There are burns on his cheeks, turning bright red and peeling. He's here. His grip is tight, his eyes wide, and his head has crusted blood. None of that matters with him alive.

He firmly kisses my lips, breaking off quickly.

"Dawn," he says quickly. "Leave."

Sonya takes this as her que to pull me at the back of my jacket. Instead of listening, I ball my hands into fists full of Minho's shirt. I pull him in closer to me.

"What are you talking about?" I demand. "I'm not going."

"Please," he tries to push me backwards, and out the door. "Please run."

A few of men turn towards us, none of whom I recognize, and I back up into the wall behind us. Sonya looks over to me, sinking into the wall next to me.

"Alright muchachos," a man walks around a corner, Thomas entering just a few feet behind them. This new man is taller, older, and with very tan skin. His face wrinkles as it shifts from expressions of anger, to happiness and sadness all in a matter of seconds.

Minho stops pushing me, turning around. He stands still, and attempts to hide me from the man, as he continues to speak. "We've come up with a deal. First, we give these hombres food. I know it sounds crazy, but I think we could use their help."

I don't think he has even realised I'm in the room, or that the front door is ajar.

"Second, I am not going to kill that punk."

The crowd of Cranks fills with groans, and I can find my throat tighten. I can't make out Thomas from here, but they've surely got to be talking about him. I guess Thomas isn't being targeted by Group B alone.
"I like that smile, kid," the man points to Minho. "Glad to know you're ready for the next little headline."

"What?" Minho seems as confused as me.

"Since you decided to punch me with those tiny hands of yours, I'm gonna cut off a finger from each hand." The new man instructs as his friends cheer.

This is crazy, but I keep my mouth shut. Who are these bloody slintheads? How did Minho even get our group into this mess? I reach forward, gripping Minho's hand to prevent him from charging at the guy. His hand squeezes mine back. These guys are making my stomach curl.

They must be Cranks, but they seem to sane for Cranks. I don't like the idea that these crazy guys can blend in with the rest of us.

"Me and little Brenda here will take them too the stash, and we will meet up with you in an hour for the tour?" The man stalks forward. "Comprende?"

"But there are fifteen of them," some guy adds from the crowd. "What if they take you?"

"Thanks for the lesson on numbers," their leader argues. "I know how to count, and I've got this. Trust me. They try anything, Brenda will chop up that Minho into little tiny bits, and the rest of us them will deal with my fists."

The crowd seems satisfied by this, so they filter out of the room one by one. Minho presses me tighter but leaves Sonya out in the open. One by one, each guy passes her by. I wait for one to look up at her, or to take a double take, but nobody bothers.

It's just us in the room. Minho finally relaxes his shoulders, and I squeeze out from behind him. Me and the boys, all of whom I know but fewer than I expected.

"Is this it?" I ask, my eyes darting around the crowd.

"We lost seven," Newt admits. "Frankie was one. Winston too."

Frankie is dead. I try not to think about it, but it dwells in my head. The only Cooks left are Fry and I. How have we gotten so small?

"Who is this?" The man stalks forward, staring me down. "My name's Jorge. You a Crank too?"

"She was one of the girls I mentioned." Thomas offers, looking at me.

Minho glares at Thomas. At least he doesn't try to press me up behind him. It strikes me for the first time that I am unarmed. My knife is gone, although that isn't really the problem. If this guy, this old Jorge, wanted to hurt me, he could.

Jorge steps closer to me. He has a knife in his hands. I step back into Minho, trying to blend in with the boy.

"Oh, quit is punk, I'm not slicing off your little fingers." Jorge chuckles too himself, looking at Minho instead of me. "Not yet anyway."

I don't like this guy. He smiles too wide, which is the only thing about him that tips me off to his Crank status. The girl with him, who seems about my age, hasn't said anything yet. She looks at me behind her short black hair with dark eyes. They've called her Brenda. Probably a Crank, but at
this rate, who isn't?

"Sonya?" A voice asks.

It's one of the three boys I don't recognize. He has dark skin, and a soft smile etched across his face. Although he is tall, he's the least threatening of the three. His eyes meet mine for a second, and they still.

Who is he?

"Dawn we need to leave." Sonya interrupts my eye contact. Her eyes are small and firm. "We are supposed to bloody be here. This isn't the plan."

"I'm not going back," I tell her, plain and simple. This is my time to escape; Group B can go shuck themselves.

Sonya shakes her head. Her eyes widen, before she reaches for my hand. I shrug her off, walking away from her and Minho.

The black guy moves through the crowd. He wraps his arms around Sonya. Tightly pulling her into an embrace, the guy is forced to lean his head down low towards her.

She won't hug him back. Sonya is as stiff as a board.

"I'm so glad you are alive," he smiles. "I saw you in the lightning storm. I didn't know if you'd make it."

Sonya tears her eyes away from the boy to me. She bites her lip, caught in a lie. She said she didn't see anyone in the storm. Lying to Teresa, is she? I didn't think she had it in her. Each day, I respect Sonya and her shy smile more. She still won't make eye contact with the boy above her.

"We thought you would've died."

"Nah, WICKED has my back for once," he grins, as if that's a good thing. He doesn't elaborate how they have kept him alive and no one else, and honestly I can't help but roll my eyes.

"Are you alright?" Minho turns his attention back to me. He cups my face before pulling me into a hug. Arms wrapped tightly around me, clinging on to me with all his strength. I hold him back, even though he winces.

He pulls away to kiss my forehead, then my lips. I find myself drowning in him once again, feeling his hair in my hands. This past week without him has felt like a lifetime. I thought he was dead. Honestly, I don't know how I would live if he was.

I pull back first, so I could look into his eyes. They are the same deep brown they've always been, even if they are worn with worry and sand.

"Of course, I'm fine," I tell him.

Klunk, I was going to tell him I'm pregnant. Too little too late, at this point.

His eyes are wide and red from what I assume is a lack of sleep. The colour distracts from the brown in the center, which seems darker now, and feels distant. "Michelle told me you were dead."

That shucking slinthead. Next time I see her, I'm going to beat her so hard she'll never stop klunking. How could she tell him I was dead? When was this? Why?
"I thought you were dead," he is shaking slightly as he holds me. I touch his back, but immediately regret it when he winces.

I don't know how to comfort him, since I am alive. "I thought you were dead too."

"Is Leo alive?" Newt pushes forward, towards me.

I nod. Of course she is alive. It takes everything in me to let go of Minho and grab on to Newt. The tall boy hugs me back gently. "We've both missed you, Newt."

Then I move on to Thomas, wrapping my arms around him. I whisper into his ear, "thank you for saving Minho, again. I owe you my life."

When I hug him, Teresa's words come running back, haunting me. What did Thomas do to her? We need to talk, privately. Now isn't the time.

Thomas's cheeks tinge pink, and when I let go I am tackled by Fry. He holds on to me as tightly as possible. "I am so happy someone from the kitchens is alive. I am so happy Dawn."

I can barely hug him back, since he is on top of me. I don't mind one bit. The Gladers are my family.

"Dawn," Sonya's voice has risen. I look at her over my shoulder. Her cheeks are tighter, a scowl beginning to form on her face. "We need to go back."

She seriously thinks I'm returning. Does she not see how happy I am? Can't she tell that these are good people? None of the boys here wish anyone harm. As I glance around the room, I realise no one I have a problem with is alive anymore. The thought makes my stomach churn. So many have died.

"No shucking way," I cross my arms.

She tries to take a step closer to me, but Minho blocks her. Sonya looks over his shoulder, past me, trying to get me to come over to her. I won't though, even if Fry has let me go.

"I'm not going back," I tell her. "You couldn't shucking drag me. You're all crazy, every last one of you. Shuck your policies."

"I can't go back without you," she tells me. She bites her lip, and I can tell she doesn't know what to do. Her hands gesture for me to come back over to her, but I can't. "The Deserter's Clause will fall on me. I could've stopped you. Also, probably Leo."

I pause.

No one is holding on to me, but Sonya's face has fallen. I feel like I'm sinking into sand. I try to keep my mouth up but I'm tumbling down. Her scowl is becoming a frown. Her eyes are glossy, and her hands are shaking.

Shuck. I hate that I can't just leave her.

"What's that?" Thomas demands to know, but I offer him no response. It's too hard to explain. You need to live it to understand.

"It's complicated," the black guy brushes Thomas off. His goofy grin is gone, and he is serious. "Let me come back with you. It'll be a trade."
"You can't," Sonya shakes her head back and forth. "It's us versus you now. Marie was going to bring you insulin, but Teresa stopped her. Only Dawn can come."

No one in the room moves. The only sound is the breath hitching in Thomas's throat. He's gone pale. Does he know about the plot? I'll have to tell him later.

"You let Teresa keep the insulin?" Someone demands, stepping forward, his voice loud and incredulous. I don't recognize him from the Maze. He has dark brown hair, and crazy eyebrows. His skin has gone yellow, and his eyes enraged. Someone grabs him by the collar to hold him back. He must be Sheil.

"Are we going to leave, or what?" Jorge demands.

Sonya turns back to me. She gestures to Jorge's belt. "He's got a rope. Tie me up, gag me, and knock me out. Then you can leave."

Is she serious? Her lips are in a straight line, and there seems to be no doubt in her mind. I look at the knife on the floor.

"Sonya," I shake my head. "I'm not going to..."

"Do it," she tells me, leaning forward to shove me backwards. It's sort of playful, but also demanding. I get it. She wants to be with her people, just like I want to be with mine. This is the only option.

I grab the knife off the floor, and wait for Jorge. He eyes me up and down, before sighing. "You chicas are more than I bargained for."

Thankfully, he hands me the rope. I tie her hands behind her back, and then tie them to her waist. Sonya doesn't resist. In fact, she tries to make her body as stiff as possible, probably so I have an easier time.

"Is this seriously necessary?" Thomas asks. "This seems crazy."

"Welcome to Group B," I can't even offer a chuckle, because this is my reality. I have to tie a girl up so her own people don't kill her.

"There's a bandana in my backpack," she tells me. "You can use that to gag me. Then, knock me out with the hilt of the knife."

I do as she says, although I'm not sure exactly how to gag her. When I'm done, she can barely spit through her teeth.

"Knock. Me. Out." She turns, looking to her knife on the ground. "Hilt."

Her voice is muffled, and fumbling, but I know what she is saying. I gently guide her so that she sits on the ground. When I bend down, the knife feels much heavier in my hands. Sonya makes eye contact with me. She does not look scared. Her eyes are steady and certain. Unlike before, her body is still. She doesn't shake.

I can't help but look at her apologetically. "Thank you, Sonya. I really am sorry about this."

With the very top of the hilt in my hand, I smash down the hilt into the top of her head. She groans but stays conscious. Doug takes a step forward, lightly moving me to the side. He offers me a grimace, rubbing his hands together.
"You seem like a nice girl," he offers Sonya a faint smile. "Which is why I'm real sorry about this. Tell Michelle I say hello. She'll know exactly who I am."

He pulls her up off the ground. Doug's face falters as he throws a hook into her jaw. Sonya hits the floor, her body turned away from me. I wait for her to make a sound, or to get up, but she lies on the ground with her blonde hair sprawled behind her. Clint moves down next to her checking her pulse. She is alive but knocked out.

"Let's move then," Jorge smiles, rubbing his hands together. "Time to get some food."
"Are we seriously going in there?" Joan asks. Shuck, her voice is so annoying. "We barely have anything to protect us."

I mean, she does have a pick axe. That is certainly something. She's been complaining about how heavy it is for like thirty minutes. Honestly, I'd rather we have nothing to protect us than listen to her whine again.

The building we've been assigned to is three stories high. It will be the third we've searched in the grueling heat. My hair is sticking to my neck with sweat. Though my jacket is covering my arms, my face is tingling from the hot sun.

"Quit complaining," Hilde groans, staring the building down.

"If I knew you never shut the stuck up, I wouldn't have suggested you run," Flore rolls her eyes. It's the first thing I've heard her say since we started looking for Ella. Every other comment has been whispered to Joan or to Hilde.

Joan huffs. "You're just mad because I ran the section better than you."

"You both ran it like a load," Hilde tightens her grip on her knife. I honestly can't tell how she puts up with those two. She took out some Cranks with her hatchet in a flash a ways back. Rather than hang out with these slintheads, Hilde would be better suited to Rose. "Can we just go?"

"Do you have a problem with me?" Flore demands, turning towards Joan.

I get the feeling they intend to continue with their dumb fight. This is not what I signed up for. I never thought I would want to be with the boys, but anything is better than watching this.

"Yeah, I do," Joan walks over, until her chest is practically against Flore's.

I take this as my cue to leave. The two girls start yelling at each other, with Hilde trying to separate them. I didn't think either of them had it in them to fight, since Joan is a whiner and Flore is constantly kissing up to Hilde. If I thought their fight would be interesting, I would stick around and watch it.

I duck around the building, turning a corner. This search for Ella is useless. She has either been eaten or doesn't want to be found. Teresa is all pissed with me for voting against her, but whatever. Honestly, I don't know what my plan is. It's not a great idea to just go off on my own. Not only do I lack food and water, but Teresa would be angry enough to hunt me down.

I am surprised Teresa kept voting against Ella. She set up a crazy target for herself. I'd like to know the dirt that Ella has on her. It's got to be good.

I walk around the corner and stop.

Gally is in front of me, staring straight forward. His chest heaves up and down unevenly, underneath his torn shirt. His face is red, both from the healing scrapes along his temple and from the blood pumping harshly through him. His eyes, blood shot and blackened, scan me, but never meet my eyes.
Gally sways with the wind.

He runs away. My feet move before my brain has time to register that he is here, and he is moving. He is heaving, coughing as he runs forward. It's retched and harsh. He ducks through the alley, knocking over garbage cans and boxes as I run towards him.

It takes much more energy to leap over them then I thought it would. I don't think I've drank anything in hours. I'm dizzy. My foot clips the metal, echoing through the skinny alley. He turns left, so I follow him further down. He is stuck in the corner of an alleyway.

He turns around, staring at me. "You shouldn't be here," he charges closer to me. His fists grab me by the collar of my jacket, before throwing me backwards. "What are you doing here?"

I try to take a step forward towards him but stop. I brush the red hair which clings to my face out of my eyes. Even moving it away, I still can't see him clearly.

"I thought they were going to let me escape," his voice is but a harsh whisper. He leans in against me, pressing his body against mine. He leans me into a wall, towering above me. His breath is stale. "You need to leave."

"What?" He is holding me in place, so I really can't.

Gally shakes his head back and forth. It twitches to the side, over and over. His grip on my waist tightens, and his eyes lock on to me. For a moment, I see a glance of clarity in them. Maybe it only lasts for a second, but it is enough for my heart to race.

"They are going to use me to get to you," he tells me, his hands continue to shake against my waist. "I don't know what their game plan is, but they are shucking toying with us. I know it."

"I can't believe you are alive," I still can't. They shot him, after Thomas beat the klunk out of him. I tried to ignore it because I couldn't bare to lose him for a third time. He is here, in between my fingers, and he is alive.

Gally kisses me. My lips are on his, and his are on mine, and I feel him. For the first time in a very long time, I hold Gally. The boy who needed me, because the whole world was burning down around us. His lips are harsh, and they shake too, but they press harder in to me regardless. I try to meet his force, to feel as he does, but I'm tired.

"I love you," he pulls away, resting his forehead on mine. "I don't shucking get why, or how, but I know it. And you've got to leave, before something bad happens. I know that's their plan. It's shucking WICKED."

He let's go of me and begins walking away. I pull off the wall and grab his arm, but he shoves me off of him. I land in the sand below us. His eyes are dark as they stare me down.

Gally runs away, turning down the alley. I pull myself up and run, ducking the corner, but he is gone from my sight. Around the corner the alley splits into three different directions, and I can't spot him down any of them.

I turn around, looking for the way out. Honestly, I've got no idea how I got here, nor how much time there is left until we reconvene.

I slowly make my way out, stepping over the garbage cans. I think this is the direction I came. This is one of the many reasons why I am happy I avoided the Maze, even if I lost Gally to it.
I've got no idea when we are supposed to reconvene, but I've got to try and make my way back. The girls are at least a distraction from Gally.

There is a heavy rumbling and it sounds like thunder. My eyes shoot up, thankful to see no clouds in the sky. Loud like a wave of gunshots, the sound continues and the Earth shakes I duck through the alleyways, getting closer and closer to the sound.

I turn around the corner. A building is caving in. The roof has caved in, and the rubble on the ground falls at Group A's feet.

Klunk, they are here. I turn back, pressing my back against the wall behind me. I can hear Minho calling out, too close to be trapped in the collapse.

"Thomas!" He screams.

"They probably made it to the Underground," a voice I don't know offers. It is scratchier than the rest. "There are hundreds of tunnels down below. Brenda will know how to get back above ground."

Klunk. Thomas is underground.

I turn back, running towards the building I slept in last night. The sand shifts beneath my feet, and the sun is beating down on my face. There is a crowd gathered outside. The girls are waiting.

I get there, and Teresa bursts through the crowd to meet me.

"What happened," she wraps an arm around my neck, pulling me in closer to her. Her black hair falls in my eyes, her forehead pressed against mine. She isn't asking a question.

I'm panting. It wasn't a quick jog. "The building. It collapsed. Group A was outside. Thomas is in the tunnels below the surface... Group A is above."

Teresa nods, pulling away from me. She turns around, staring out into the crowd. I try to catch my breath, trying my best to ignore her weird behaviour.

"Still no Sonya," Harriet remarks, stepping in closer to Teresa. "No Dawn either."

I pull myself upright. Leo is hanging next to Harriet. She doesn't look up at me, and I'm thankful. I don't imagine that she could read my face, but I'd rather not risk it.

"You think they were killed?" Marie asks, looking around.

I shake my head. Unless Sonya is a klunk fighter, they wouldn't be taken. If Dawn can take Dawn a Griever, she can take a measly Crank.

"Let's check where she last was first, before we come to any conclusions," Harriet offers, gesturing towards the building just farther off.

The pack turns to stare at the large building. Despite the storm last night, I recognize the building. I move in closer to Teresa. "That's where Group A was last night."

"Stuck," Harriet mutters. She looks over at the building and then back at me.

"They're gone now," I tell her. "I didn't see the girls with them."

"Might as well go look," Harriet offers. She pushes through the crowd without another word.
Teresa crosses her arms, but eventually follows me. She is the first to climb up into the three-story building, and the rest of us push our ways in through the door.

I'm on her heels, pulling out my hammer and scanning the place. Ella sits on the ground, holding Sonya's head delicately. When we enter, Ella continues to hide beneath her massive black curls. I wonder if she even notices we are here.

Sonya's eyes are barely open; I wonder if she can even see us. Her mouth is gagged, her jaw is swollen purple, and her arms are tied up around her. Ella didn't even think to shucking help the girl.

Harriet kneels, quickly cutting through the ropes. She then, gently, lifts Sonya's head and undoes the bandana from behind. Sonya's eyes move from Ella's face over to Harriet. The leader helps the faint girl sit upright. Sonya holds on to her jaw and massages it with her hands. She takes the bandana from Harriet, wrapping it back around her head.

"What happened?" Leo asks, kneeling. She slowly helps Sonya stand to her feet. Sonya teeters a bit but manages to hold herself upright. Her sway is worse than Gally's.

"Group A," Sonya tells us, letting Harriet take to the other side. She turns her head around, a gesture a bit too large for someone so dizzy. "Where's Dawn?"

Sonya let Dawn escape. She may be is a good liar, but I can tell she is putting on an act. I know Dawn. If she's gone, she left willingly.

"Isn't she here?" Leo asks, looking around.

"They must've taken her," Sonya says. "It was an ambush. They saw us outside, I guess, or something. They tied us up and knocked me out.

"Why did they take her and leave you?" Teresa asks. "Wouldn't they want to hold you hostage.

"Probably because I was bloody unconscious, if you hadn't noticed," Sonya's voice is dull, but I can hear the bitterness to her tone. This she isn't faking. They actually punched her out. "It's a little bit hard to drag around an unconscious body in this heat."

Leo walks Teresa out of the building. We don't even bother to look for Dawn. She's long gone. We continue to walk through the streets, all of us herding around her. Not that I can blame them. For most of the girls, this is the closest they can get to understanding Group A for themselves. Not one bit of me believes any of Sonya's story, but it is convincing enough.

It's probably only going to cause the boys more trouble in the long run. It'll be easier to kill Thomas now.

Sonya glances at me, adjusting her jaw once more. "Right before I was knocked out, the stick who did it told me to say hello to you for him. The shorter Asian guy."

A bunch of girls glare at me. Of course he did. Shucking Doug.
I should have known

Ella 16

“You’re not going to sneak off again, are you?” The crowd around us has quieted, while the rain continues to rap down on the roof. It is steady, and firm. Despite the nature of the Scorch, the room feels cold.

I shake my head back and forth, leaning against the wall next to her. She holds a metal water bottle against the back of her head. There is an eruption of colour across her face, but she chooses to focus on the grey cut. The grey doesn’t mix well with her blonde hair. She and the smoke don’t belong together.

“Sonya,” the word is soft against my lips. Almost so much so that I forget it’s been assigned to her. Not a real name. Prettier than mine though.

She glances over at me out of the corner of her eyes, before looking back down. She stares into her lap, shaking her head back and forth. I follow her movements, diverting my gaze. Every time I look at her, she flinches.

“Ella?” Sonya counters.

It’s just nice to be with her again.

My hands quake, before I look up at her. There are so many words to tell her and now I can’t figure out an order to string them out in. They stumble and fall over my lips, slipping in my mouth as they try to escape.

She sighs, lowering the water bottle. The metal echoes as it touches the ground, and I wince at the sound. No one turns to look.

“It’s about Emil, isn’t it?” She doesn’t seem content to answer me. She sticks her hands out and begins to pick at the dry skin peeling off her hands. In defeat, she drops them immediately. “You want to know how he died.”

Yes, and also no. The truth isn’t something I want. I need it like air. When I think about forgetting, my throat closes in on itself and I start shaking. Ignorance is almost like drowning.

Sonya leans her head against my shoulder. Her neck tenses for a second, but then she learns to relax it. My whole body is as stiff as a board. “You remind me of him. Weird behaviour and all.”

He was much kinder than me. I am to resilient.

“He was sick,” she tells me. It’s an echo of words I’ve heard Leo use to describe me. They tell me that she didn’t know him. She was like his Zart. “Emil killed himself.”

“She’s pretty,” he smiles, his eyes darting across the lunchroom. They land on her.

She really is. I mean, like, the whole room couldn’t take their eyes off her if they tried pretty. Beautiful like nothing I’ve ever seen pretty. Beautiful like in the movies, where you see her and then everything slows down. Where our mundane days could feel energetic.

“Yeah, I guess,” I pay more attention to my food than her, which is quite the change over the last
few weeks.

“You’re lucky,” he offers, gesturing to her. “My roommate is this big dumb teenager. At least she looks like someone you could talk to.”

That’s where he’s wrong. She’s so pretty that I couldn’t talk to her even if I wanted. That’s the way things are around here.

“Does he suck that much?” I ask, looking back up.

“Big time,” he rolls his eyes. “I don’t think I’ll live through another night with him.”

“I didn’t know he was upset,” her cheeks are flushed pink, as she stares at her hands. The red lines, imprints from her bindings, still wrap around her wrists. They ensnare her and hold her in a false prison. Eli should’ve been there. He would’ve stopped it. I know him.

It’s in his nature to save.

“I would’ve stopped him if I had known,” she seems swallowed in her own grief. She doesn’t know Eli. In fact, she never even knew his real name, assigned or otherwise.

“I did,” when I speak, she snaps her head up and starts wincing. I lean over, looking at her. She is holding the back of her head again, wincing. Her hand lifts off her hair, only for a brief second, and I notice the blood staining her hand.

I reach up for her fingers, but she backs away. Carefully, she looks at her palms and notices the colour. She mumbles to herself, reaching down on the ground and picking up her bandana. Tying it around her head isn’t going to fix the problem, but I can’t figure out a way to articulate that into words she could understand.

“Why don’t you come eat lunch with us?” Her voice is quiet and kind. It slips through the dark over to me. In this lack of light, it is hard to tell that she is so far away. It feels as if she is breathing into my ear. I like having her this close. “The other girls aren’t so bad.”

I turn around, shuffling until my back faces hers. I want to tell her its because Eli needs me, and it is. But, it’s also because I need an absence of those girls. The longer this goes on, the less likely it seems I will be joining their group.

“I’m fine.” She rushes through the words, not convincing me, nor herself. Fine does not equate bleeding. In fact, bleeding indicates that there is a problem at the surface level. Hers seems to run even deeper.

“How well did you know him?” I ask.

Eli and I sit together. His head rests against my shoulder, as we wait outside the room. Result day, or something like that. Clearing us to join the others, or something like that. Something that makes my stomach twist and shout.

We’re older now, I think. His hair is turning browner. He needs to lean down, his legs stretch out behind him, to lean against me this way. It doesn’t feel as naturally anymore. We are growing into different people. Different goals.

“I don’t get why you are so insistent on joining the girls.” He laments, shuffling beside me. “You are always the one to go against everything they say. Why are you so keen to obey?”
I roll my eyes glaring down at him. He seems to sense my gesture. It’s a connection the two of us have begun to share.

He picks at the denim of his pants. “I mean, I know it would be hard. But you always have a way of Emily-ing things.”

“Emily-ing?” I demand.

“Making a big show of doing something impossible, just to piss somebody else off,” he shrugs. “You seem to do it at least three times a day.”

“He didn’t speak much,” Sonya tells me. “Emil was nice, but silent. It was impossible to get to know him.”

I can’t be here. In this room, with the pitter-patter of rain falling around us. In this blue light that he would never get to see. Eli should be here. I don’t know where he could have gone. He must be here somewhere. Deep within my thoughts, he is alive.

I turn to face her, staring straight into her face. Her eyes are light blue, and concerned, and ones that are different from those I met years ago. Eyes that have seen death. Eyes that do not recognize me.

“Don’t you want to know why we are where we are?” I ask. “Not the physicality. The motive.”

She looks out at the ceiling, staring up at the cracking white plaster. As if she expects that the solution lies within the spiderweb above us. Unfortunately, we are too tangled to get out. I don’t have the full story. I can’t comprehend.

“I know the motive,” she tells me. “They say it’s a cure.”

“I meant why this context,” I can’t explain it, and I’m getting frustrated. She places a hand on mine, but I shrug her off.

“Why does it matter?” She asks, shaking her head. “Knowing why WICKED chose to put us in the Scorch isn’t going to get us out of here.”

I don’t care to know why we are in the Scorch. Separation matters. It was because Eli and I were different. We tricked them, and we bypassed, and then we rebelled. One of our ideas, our combined efforts. We pulled it over their eyes.

“I don’t care about the Scorch. Why him?” I meant. What’s the motive for his death?

She doesn’t seem to like to dwell on this, shifting away. “He was sick, El.”

“It can’t be just that,” my voice is a harsh whisper, and I only notice because she flinches.

“He was sick,” she reaffirms, her eyes blinking rapidly. “He would always say and do crazy things. He would just keep mumbling to himself over and over again.”

“What would he say?” I hiss.

She pauses, her eyes flickering over me. As if, for the first time, realising I am here. “Romantic Authors.”

The world goes silent. I get up, without a word, running away. I don’t know where I end up, except that the room is dark, and silent, and the idea turns in my head.
Romantic authors.

Lottie, Shelia, Jane, Emily.

Charlotte Bronte, Mary Shelley, Jane Austin, Emily Dickinson.

Romantic authors.

Leo, Don, Michael, Eli.

Leonardo Da Vinci, Donatello, Michelangelo, Raphael.

Renaissance artists.

If Eli and I had really picked our own coalitions, we would not show any connection between us. A romantic author, an inventor, a scholar, maybe an explorer. If we had rebelled, there would be no similarities.

Yet, we were all named after the same people.
“You feeling any better?” I ask. My hands unwrap the tight bandages around ankle. The skin beneath is red, and slightly swollen, but it seems to be doing better. Her ankle is less rigid, at that. Maybe it wasn’t a break. At least, I hope it isn’t. I’ve got nothing to fix her with.

Saph nods up and down, staring forward. Her eyes flicker up to mine, before they glance back down. “It doesn’t hurt quite so much.”

I nod. The night has practically swallowed the Earth whole. Most people who can sleep are doing so. I’m glad Saph is up as well, and not just me. The pain is probably getting to her. Rose and Hilde are up to watch, and though it is my turn later, I can’t sleep now.

“It doesn’t seem broken,” I tell her, placing her ankle back on the ground. “So, you might just be lucky and have a sprain. You’ll have to get someone else to help you walk until I can make you some sort of crutch. No running.”

“I can’t stop running,” she tells me steadily.

I pause my work, leaning back to look at her. She glances down, averting my gaze. Her cheeks tinge pink. It’s a look I find all too familiar. A look I’m sure I’ve given Dawn before.

“You were a Runner?” I ask, trying to keep the lines of communication open between us. “Before you left, I mean.”

She shakes her head back and forth. “No, I wasn’t. I was a Raiser. Took care of the animals. Marie and I are the only two of those left. She took care of plants.”

I look around the room at the group. They’ve swindled down to less than half the originals.

“What were everyone’s jobs?” I ask carefully, glancing around.

“It’s mostly Runners left,” she tells me, looking around at the group. “Only four weren’t, anyway. Just us Raisers, and the two Builders. Misi and Sacha.”

I don’t know those girls, but I nod anyway. “Why do you care about running so much?” I ask, looking her up and down.

She looks at the ground beneath her feet. I can’t help but feel the guilt piling up in my stomach.

“Everyone who died in the lightning storm was a Builder or a Raiser.” She tells me. “Only the Runners are living. If I can’t run, it might be me next.”

My heart sinks in my chest as I think about Newt. He can run, but not well. What if his body lies out in the sand, and we simply haven’t looked for it? Perhaps he, like some of the other boys, his corpse was set on fire and he turned to ash. I don’t know if he’s alive.

That’s why I can’t sleep anymore. I think about all of us that have died, and think about the Group A. What if their numbers reflect our own? What if they are worse? With him and Dawn gone, they both could die, and I would never know what happens to them. That might be worse than the truth, because no matter how hard I try I can’t seem to imagine the pair of them living. It seems
more than impossible to picture something good out here. How could Dawn just pick up and leave us?

“You feel it too,” her voice is still and practically silent.

“Sorry?” I ask, not quite understanding.

She reclines, moving further backwards. “You remember Beth?”

Beth was their Gally. I’ve heard her mentioned briefly, in passing and in hushed whispers, but I haven’t paid much attention to their gossip. I nod carefully, moving my head up and down.

“I’ve heard about her,” I mention, turning my attention back to the bandages. After all, that’s what I’m here for.

Saph seems oddly still. It almost feels like she is holding her breath in her throat. I wait for to exhale, second after second. Continuing and continuing, waiting and waiting, until she finally breathes out.

“Beth was my Dawn,” she glances up at me, and my chest tightens.

“I don’t know what you are talking about.” I’m blinking rapidly, and my hands are shaking, but I manage to finish bandaging her. After all this time I’m still not a good liar.

Saph exhales, looking at the ground. She takes my hand in hers, running her fingertips over it softly. “It’s okay that you do, Leo.”

I stand up, snapping to attention. My hands and feet are frozen, and I can’t think, but I walk away.

I make it to the front door, where Hilde and Rose sit on the ground. Hilde lounges by the door. Her back lies against the wall, one leg propped into the air above the other, and her black hair sprawled around her. Opposite her, Rose sits straight up and still. She doesn’t look at me when I arrive, glaring at Hilde in contempt. I wonder what bad blood is between them.

“I need air,” I tell them.

“Not right now, you don’t,” Rose warns, lifting her eyes to see me only for a brief second.

“Seriously,” I say, looking between the two.

Hilde seems to be trying to pick her nails clean, even in the dim light. She shines her flashlight at them to get a better look. “Sorry stick, but we can’t let anyone out until dawn,” she smiles to herself, as if she’s made a clever joke. “or until Dawn comes back. Which ever dawn first.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, my arms dangling limply at my side. “I’ll be just a minute.”

Hilde rolls her eyes, knocking her feet down and standing up. She is slightly shorter than me, but moves in close enough to me that she feels much bigger than I am. Our chests are practically touching. “Lee, right?”

“Leo,” I correct.

She offers a small smile, glancing down at Rose. The other girl stiffens, turning her back to us. Hilde brushes back a smooth strand of my hair, before her hand lands on my shoulder.

“Listen,” she instructs. “I don’t think you are going to run off. Besides, I doubt you could outrun
the pair of us. But, I think you should know that not all the girls feel the same way as me” She looks over my shoulder, and I turn to follow her eyes. The girls are sleeping behind us, no one paying any attention.

“Dawn leaves, no big deal, less conflict even.” Hilde continues, shrugging. “Ella leaves, even better, since she is so sick it’s just a burden on our resources. You, however, are our Meddie. Not theirs. If there is any chance you are going to leave, we can’t take it.”

I feel frozen to the ground.

“Michelle doesn’t think you’re a Deserter,” Rose offers, glancing up at me. Her face is only half lit in the dim lighting. “Don’t let us prove her wrong.”

I back away, staring at the two of them. I’ve got nowhere to run.

Dawn Short

We’ve set up camp already. None of us have managed to get to sleep. Not without Thomas. He’s been gone for hours, under the rubble of a building. In the morning, we search, and if we can’t find him by nightfall, we move out. It’s the way things have to be now.

Minho has me pulled against him, leaning on the wall. He hasn’t said much since he found me. All he has managed to do is grip on to me. I can’t blame him, since we didn’t leave on the best of terms. The space seems to have healed us though. I fit firmly in his grasp, and I can feel him breathing.

I close my eyes, only for a second.

“How is Group B doing?” Newt asks, bringing me back to attention. He bites the inside of his cheek. I’ve seen that nervous tick a hundred times before, but never from him.

What does he expect me to say? We’re doing great except for the fact that everyone is fighting, and those girls are crazy?

“How serious are they about killing Thomas?” Fry asks back.

“Can’t this wait until morning?” Minho cuts in. The whole group goes quiet to listen to him. I can feel his voice vibrating through my chest. It’s warm and strong. “Obviously being there was rough enough. We don’t need to make her relive it so soon.”

Eyes around the circle cast downwards at his words. Seemingly, Minho is the de facto leader of this group.

“It’s fine,” I manage. His grip on me tightens as he listens. “I’d rather talk about it now then later, anyway.”

Minho nods, relaxing. “Sorry.”

I shrug. There isn’t any blame here. I’d rather not be pestered with questions, since I’m so tired. I’m glad he can read that off me. Regardless, these boys need to know what they are going up against. I don’t get to have things the way I want anymore.

“The girls are serious enough that they know the date and time, not that I remember it,” the
sentence sounds like a joke, but I’m dead serious. “Teresa has gone off the wall. She’s going to kill Thomas.”

“The girls aren’t that bad,” one of the boys offers.

He is one of the newcomers. I peer at him across the fire. He has short hair, cropped down to his skull, and dark skin. He has lines on his cheeks from smiling so much, and dark eyes.

“Sheil, right?” I ask, leaning forward. “The diabetic?”

He nods his head up and down, looking back and forth between the two boys next to him.

“If you had forgotten Sonya, Teresa tried to kill you only a few days ago. I wouldn’t be so quick to let them off the hook for that,” I tell him. “Even if Marie was fighting for you.”

Sheil doesn’t have anything to offer after that, looking around at his friends.

“What have you been doing anyway?” I ask, turning away from those boys. I don’t want to ask my friends who is dead. I already know Frankie is gone. His freckles, and smile, and wild eyes. I don’t want to think of anyone else.

“Just moving,” Fry answers. “Things only got interesting when you showed up.”

I wouldn’t call this interesting. Collapsing building is not entertaining, nor is being separated from Thomas. None of this is particularly exciting.

“We’ve been traveling at night,” Minho offers, leaning into me. “Is that why we haven’t seen you?”

“The girls use Underground Tunnels,” I tell the rest of the group. “Although, they might not anymore. A few died in a collapse during the storm.”

“How many are left?” One of them asks.

“With me gone, sixteen,” that is, if they found Ella. Maybe fifteen at this point. Still, they outnumber us, and they are way more organised than we are. From what I know, we just have to get over the mountain. No killing anybody, which works in my favour. “Although, I hope Leo will escape sooner or later.”

“Who’s alive?” One of the two boys I don’t know asks.

I shrug my shoulders. “Harriet, Sonya, Rose, Hilde, her two buddies—”

“She has three friends,” Sheil interrupts. “It’s a clique.”

“Well, now there are two,” I say it firmly. “Almost half of the girls are dead. I don’t think you want me listing it off. The story isn’t pleasant.”

“Marie’s alive, right?” Sheil asks. “She’s okay?”

“Last time I checked,” I sigh, exhausted. I don’t want to think about the dead. It’s too late into the evening. Too much has been happening. Now, I’m gone from all the other girls, my friends included.

Those are all the questions they seem to have. I guess in the month the boys were there, they’d only made a few friends. Perhaps maybe the rest of them have died during their escape. Honestly, I
couldn’t tell you. By the end of my time in the Maze, I had pretty much known everybody, with a few exceptions. Sheil seems to be the most engaged and know the most people. The other two, not quite so much.

“What about Anne?” He asks.

I don’t want to answer this one. I know what happened to her. It was when those balls were attacking. It got her, right next to Saph. “We were in the tunnel.”

Sheil freezes at this, his mouth zipping shut. Now he knows, at least. She’s dead. I remember Saph calling out her name over and over, to no avail.

When I glance around the room, I realise Fry and I are the only Cooks left. All the others are dead, some even long dead. I don’t want to know what happened to Frankie. His smiling face will live on in my memory. Or, I guess, he will die in my memory.

Sheil gets up, walking out of the room. One of the other boys trails after him, following him out of the room. The third guy doesn’t offer anything to me, instead choosing to sit in the silence.

The only other boy that I’ve never seen before sits far away from them, at the other side of the group. He has a mop of blonde hair, and a sour expression. He glances up at me, noticing my gaze, before pulling his feet up into his chest.

“You’re Aris,” I notice. He’s their Teresa, which I don’t like one bit. No part of me trusts him, with his uncomfortable expression, and stiff shoulders. Teresa said she was in communication with him.

“She says she is talking to you in her head, that true?” I ask, though I believe the answer to be yes. I mean, as far as I can tell, Teresa is a liar. Still, that squirrely kid looks suspicious.

“Yes,” he answers, his body stiff. All the eyes in the room land on him. At least he is being honest about it.

“What does she want?” Minho jumps in.

Newt sighs, turning to the boy. “She has been ignoring Thomas for days? Why is it you?”

Aris shrugs his shoulders.

“She says you’ve been helping her,” I continue, staring down Aris.

Aris shakes his head back and forth. “It isn’t like that.”

“Then what’s it like?” Doug cuts in, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I thought she was worried,” Aris tells me. “I heard her, and for a second I thought she was Rachel.”

Rachel. She is the one who died. Aris’s voice cracks at the end of his sentence. He gazes back down at the ground, and I watch as his eyes water. Not that I can blame him. Obviously, I don’t know this Rachel, and I doubt I ever will, but she seems important to him. I wonder if she is as important to the other boys.

“I thought maybe she had lived, like Thomas,” Aris stands up, glancing at me. “I was wrong.”

He leaves the room, trailing off into the warehouse.
I get it, Aris, I really do.

Michelle Short

Someone lightly kicks me on the leg, and I find myself popping awake. I glance over, noticing Hilde hanging over my body.

“My watch is done,” she offers, pointing to the door. “You, Rose and Harriet are on next.”

They never have three of us on at once. This is Dawn’s fault. Last time I watched was the first night. I don’t see why they even bother waking me up. Probably because they want me to think they trust me. Maybe it’s because they want me as tired as possible so I can’t run away. Who shucking knows?

I get up, moving over to the door. I plant myself in the spot next to Rose, watching as Hilde goes over to wake up Harriet. She always takes a few minutes to get up and out of bed, since the exhaustion no doubt overwhelms her much like it does the rest of us. Of course, it’s not like I can blame her. Things are rough right now.

“Morning,” Rose mutters, looking out into the night. Her dark hair falls over her face, obscuring her. “You seem awfully cheery.”

“I haven’t said anything,” I argue.

Rose gestures with her arm, before dropping it. “My point exactly.”

I roll my eyes, letting my head rest on my fist. My hair falls in my face, and for a second, it makes me so angry that I almost put it up into a ponytail. Almost.

“You never answered me the other night?” She asks.

“What?” I demand, thinking back. That was days ago. Does she really think I remember?

She sighs, looking down at her lap. Obviously dissatisfied with my confusion, she continues. “You said you had a Jay.”

“I thought you shanks might’ve respected privacy,” I tell her.

“You offered me the information,” she argues.

Yeah, not to talk about it. What does she expect, us sitting around in a circle, braiding hair, crying quietly about boys who are gone, boys who’ve died, boys who’ve shucked with us? That isn’t exactly my style. From what I can tell, I am more of a Jay than a Rose. There aren’t many stories about birds and flowers for a reason, I guess.

I clench my fist, sitting up. Looking around the room, I notice Harriet is up but hovering closer to the back of the room, which is good. The less she hears, the better.

“His name is Gally,” I tell her, assuring myself that it is Gally, not Dave. “In charge of the Builders. Bit of a slinthead.”

Rose leans back against the wall, seeming to relax. I wonder how much of this rings true if we reverse the stories.
“Who were your Keepers?” I ask.

She shrugs her shoulders. “We didn’t have anyone formally in charge.”

“Who organized the Maps?” I ask, since I know only one person could’ve done it.

She freezes. “Beth did. When she left, they were deciding between Hilde and me to replace her.”

That explains their rivalry, at least a bit. Besides the Jay thing. My bet was he was shaking them both. I see myself as more of the Jay. Although, I can’t decide here iwho is Dave and who is Gally.

Honestly, Rose is probably Dave.

I guess the comparison isn’t as direct as I thought it was supposed to be. Not that it matters. “I saw Gally today.”

Rose glances at me out of the corner of her eye. She tosses a glance further back into the room, staring at Harriet, before looking back at me.

“You ran into the boys?” She asks.

I shake my head. “He was our Beth. I thought he died.”

Rose leans back against the wall, before glancing around the room.

“No stucking load,” she mutters, before leaning back in. The light cascades over her tan skin, making it almost look a deep bronze in the light. “You tell Teresa?”

I shake my head back and forth. It hadn’t occurred to me to tell Teresa. Honestly, I only told Rose so she wouldn’t ask me anymore about the past. I’d rather live in the here and now, where Gally is alive, and everything is better than it used to be.

“I’m keeping it quiet,” I tell her, since I haven’t gauged yet exactly her damage.

She nods in agreement, seeming to calm down.

Harriet finally makes her way over to us, sitting on the ground. From then out, we are silent.

Ella Short

The room is cold, and quiet, and my feet dangle off the floor. Eli beside me is just a bit taller. His holds my hand, with a ring of purple around his wrist not entirely different from mine. They had stopped with him a while ago, until last night.

Until they decided that if I was just going to keep seizing, they were going to try a new tactic. It didn’t work.

“Recently,” the woman leans forward, ignoring the smoke man sitting next to her. “We have come to the realisation that, unfortunately, it looks like you won’t be cooperating, Emily. I am very sorry to hear this.”

My name is not Emily. I have forgotten the real one, but they will have to force my jaw open with their claws and blades before they can make me utter out Emily.
“Perhaps, you might like a new name,” she offers. “Rachel, perhaps. Maybe even Teresa.”

I have heard this before. Only a few times, but before. Weeks and months before.

I shake my head back and forth. I will not be one of them. I couldn’t be. No matter what, I would never be either of them.

“We did have an initial plan for you,” she offers, but if you are so unwilling to relent, we might switch you with one of them. I’m sure they would be eager to be called Emily.”

“Of course, Eli would have a place as well,” she offers. “Not as a Thomas, but perhaps as an Aris. That would do him just well, I think.”

I do not answer them. Eli softly rubs the bruises on my wrists. It is a pleasant attempt to remind me what is at stake here. Not just him, but also my world as well.

“No thank you,” I say it firmly. “I am content to stay where I am. So is Eli.”

The woman, white it nearly ever aspect, grimaces. Obviously, this was not the answer she wanted me to give her.

“I plan on exploring this endeavour further,” she smiles at me. “Starting today.”

We are in a white room, with white walls. Eli is hooked in, and it is my turn to go first.

“There’s a man in a train station who has misplaced his ticket.” The Smoke man begins.

“I can’t answer this,” I cut him off. The first time I hear this riddle was six years ago, but I remember it all the same. It took me a few tries then, it takes me fewer now. “I don’t know if he gets on a train.”

The Smoke man face creases, as he takes his lip into his mouth. He lets out a sigh, showing me the teeth in his mouth.

“There are three doors,” he continues, “one with the cure behind it, and the other with Cranks…”

“I switch doors, because the probability favors that I chose the wrong door.” I tell him.

The Smoke man huffs, glancing from Eli back to me. His hand is on his belt, where I know he keeps the trigger. Eli looks at me, with soft eyes and skin. He mouths carefully as his hands shake. Please.

I ignore him, turning back to the man before me.

“There are five houses on the hill.”

“And the German owns this fish.” I tell him. They have used all these problems on me before. It may have been closer to the beginning, but I forget nothing. I don’t forget my name, I don’t forget the numbers, nor the time. Despite of this so-called “exploration”.

He pauses, before turning to face me.

“There is a Maze,” his voice is calm, and still. I don’t know this riddle. “We have built this Maze, inside out. There are four different doors, each separating and leaving in two different directions. You only have twelve hours everyday to explore this Maze, over a period of two years. You have forty peers, all of whom are equal to you in skill and in strength. You cannot climb the Walls, you
must return to the center by the end of your twelve hours, and every night the Walls of the Maze shift. How do you escape?"

This is their plan. If one person solved the Maze within the 12 hours, he would escape, but not be able to bring anyone else with him. The Walls move every night. We have forty peers. We cannot climb the Walls.

The Maze cannot be solved.

“There is not enough information,” I tell him. “The Maze cannot be solved.”

He presses the button, and I hear Eli scream.

“Try again,” he tells me.

“It is the correct answer,” I insist. “If they are my peers, they think the same as I do. We give up hope.”

He shocks Eli again, and I fumble with my fingers. There is no answer. Why does he keep pressing me like this? It’s not a math problem, it isn’t attention to detail, I know the details. There is no solution. If they are my peers, then we die.

“There is a Maze,” he continues.
I could use a knife

Leo 17

I wake up far too early. Light streams in the windows. I crack my back, shielding my eyes from the bright light. My hair is dusty from the old floor. Two girls I don’t recognize are passed out against the doorframe. I wonder if they are the builders that Saph was talking about.

I shuffle out of my sleeping bag, glancing around. Everyone is still asleep. I pull myself off the floor, watching my socks creating a trail. Reaching over, I grab my backpack off the ground, and lift it over my shoulder. No one has stirred yet, thankfully.

I move my feet closer to the door, shuffling back and forth until I am in the doorframe. The girls are just in front of me, legs stretched out and waiting to trip me. If I take one step forward, I can push the door and leave. It would be just that easy. One hand, and I am out of here.

“Don’t move,” someone says behind me. I feel a knife pressed against the small of my back. The girl has pulled up the back of my shirt, letting the cold metal dig into my skin. I don’t turn around to look, so I don’t know who it is. All their voices are so old I can’t tell them apart yet.

“I thought we understood each other after last night,” the girl sighs. It’s Hilde. “I really don’t want to do this.”

Well, then she would let me go. At least some part of this is her choice. She can’t pretend the contrary. I don’t argue with her though. Instead, my throat tightens. I try to remain as still as possible.

“You can leave,” she tells me.

She lowers the knife, so I spin around to look at her. Her dark eyes, lowered by heavy bags, meet mine. She smirks, raising an eyebrow. Although she pretends to be put together, her hair hangs out of her ponytail haphazardly, and her movements are weak. She has her arms crossed over her chest, and her belt in her hand. Quickly, she shoves it around her waist.

“You’d be surprised how your brain tricks you,” she begins. “You feel something cold, and metal, and it’s a knife.”

At least a bit of relief swells in my chest. Before, I hadn’t paid much attention to Hilde. From what I could tell, she was in charge of the Runners, or was going to be anyway. She’s got a lot of clout, and the girls who follow her around seem to be blinded by her strength.

“But, I’ll let you find Dawn,” she tells me. “She’s a nice enough stick. Didn’t want to kill Thomas, and I can’t blame her.”

“Thank you,” I offer, finally finding the ability to speak. My voice is sturdy than I expected.

“But,” she freezes, moving around me, “just because I don’t think we should blindly murder the stick, doesn’t mean I don’t want all my friends to survive. So, if you’ll just give me your medical supplies, you can be on your way.”

What? “Why? None of you know how any of it works.”
“Well,” she looks around the group, “I’ll take my chances with Marie. I mean, we already have injured in our group. Without those supplies, we die.”

I follow her gaze. Hilde is right. Without me, they have nothing at all. My eyes land on Saph. She isn’t doing well, and if her ankle is broken, and not just twisted, she’s done. She needs me.

My group has Clint anyway. Isn’t it selfish for me to leave? All because I want to make sure Newt isn’t dead? I’m sure they are fine.

She seems to have caught me, so she wraps an arm around my shoulder. “I don’t think I need to tell Harriet about this. I wouldn’t want you getting into trouble. We all have our doubts sometimes, I get it.”

Does she though? Even if she offers me kind eyes, and a wink, I don’t think she understands me. Specifically, since I don’t think I understand what is going on here half the time?

Most days, I can’t even tell if I like Newt. It’s been forever since I last saw him, but those feelings don’t go away. In fact, I can’t even try to ignore them.

His soft blonde hair is just on the other side of that door. His sweet eyes, and warm skin, and all of him. Just on the other side. Within arms reach. I don’t know how much longer I can go targeting his group. They are mine just as much as this group is mine.

Dawn has always referred to Group A as us, while Michelle has called Group B home. Ella won’t talk about either, and I’d be surprised if she knew teams existed.

Me though, I seem to be caught in the middle. I can’t leave them the medical supplies, but I can’t stay either. I am my medicine. Why am I needed in two places at once? Why can’t we just form one group?

I hear Teresa yawn, as she sits up. I glance over at Hilde, who looks at me, and she digs through her pockets. Pulling out a knife, she knicks her hand, letting blood slip out. She drops to the ground, gesturing for me to come closer to her.

I jump to the ground, throwing my backpack off. Reaching in, I grab the small bottle of alcohol that is running out quickly and put a few drops on her palm. I grab a bandage from inside my bag, wrapping it around her hand once. The cut was pretty superficial, so hopefully she won’t bleed through.

“What happened?” Teresa glances over at us.

Hilde sighs, turning away from the girl. “It’s nothing.”

Teresa gets up, moving closer. I keep my eyes away from the girl. Honestly, I don’t know what is going on, so it’s best I avert my glance. As a terrible liar, Teresa would catch me in a second.

Hilde rolls her eyes, before looking up at Teresa. “I just cut myself.”

“How?” Teresa isn’t dropping this.

Teresa seems satisfied with this and walks up. I glance up at Hilde, who only offers me another wink. Honestly, I owe her my life.

Satisfied with her bandages, I let her go. Hilde goes around and begins to wake the rest of the group. We are supposed to get going after all. I roll my sleeping bag, packing it into my backpack. Dawn’s is on the floor just a few feet away from mine. For a second, I stare at it.

Moving over, I roll it up and place it under my arm. With it successfully in my grasp, I am ready to go.

“Why are you bringing that?” Michelle moves over next to me, whispering. “We don’t need it.”

“I’ll give it back to her at some point,” I swallow.

Michelle sends me a glance, before moving into my ear. “Don’t look, but Teresa is staring at you. So is Harriet. Drop the bag.”

I do as I’m told, placing it back on the ground. Michelle moves away from me, going who knows where. So, when I stand up, I stand alone until everyone else is packed and ready.

From here, we move down to the basement. Teresa leads the way, followed by a few others. I stay in the back, staring down the stairs. Hilde’s two friends linger beside me, staring at me out of the corners of their eyes. I wonder if she told them to do that, or if someone else did.

“There is no passage,” Harriet proclaims, staring down into the rooms. All of them they have broken open, with nothing inside them except empty rooms.

“So, now what?” Teresa asks. “We’ve got to get underground.”

“The boys are up on the surface,” Sonya reaffirms, looking past Teresa at Harriet. She blinks a few times. “She would send another search party?”

“After the last?” Harriet counters. She looks across the group, shaking her head. “We’re lucky only you got hurt.”

Teresa steps forward. “We check the next building, and then the next. If we find nothing, we stay on the surface for a few hours, so we aren’t just twiddling our thumbs, and then check the next few buildings. Yay?”

Everyone sticks their hands in their air, so I follow suit.

“Nay?” Harriet calls out, biting her lip.

No one answers that call.

So, we make our way back up the stairs, with me letting the others up first. Marie pulls me into the crowd. She puts me on Saph’s side. Then, Marie moves around to help Saph move while putting as little weight on her leg as possible.

“Was Teresa always like this?” Marie glances over at me, before gesturing further up.

I don’t know how to answer that, so I stay silent. Instead, I let Saph lean against me as we move her through the sand. Saph offers me a firm smile, which I don’t reciprocate. I wouldn’t know how, even if I could.
Dawn is my Beth. What does that even mean? Beth is Gally. Dawn is… well… there isn’t anyone like her. She can’t just compare us like that.

The sun is bright against my face. I tilt myself down into the sand. I can hear girls grumbling up ahead of me already. It’s going to be a long day.

We get to the first building, and I stay outside with Saph attached to my hip. Harriet is the first to step in, but she immediately slams the door behind her.

“Cranks,” she tells us. “I don’t know how many.”

The group seems to stiffen at the thought. How far gone are they? It seems to come in different stages.

“Number?” Hilde asks.

Harriet shrugs. “At least ten. Maybe more.”

“No use wasting time,” Teresa moves closer to the door, before pulling her knife out of her pocket.

“You can’t be serious?” Harriet demands.

Michelle rolls her eyes, pushing her way through the crowd. In just a second, she is up beside Teresa, opening the door, and letting herself inside.

They are serious. The door shuts behind them, and nobody moves. I drop Saph, a bit too harshly, and move forward.

I run into the building. It is very dark, and difficult to see, and I can hear voices hushing in a whisper around me. I drop to the ground, beginning to crawl. I imagine that if I can’t see the Cranks, they probably aren’t able to see me. The only thing that will give me away is my shadow in the little light let in by the doorway. I make my way across the floor, listening for movement.

I really don’t know what I was planning on doing in here. This was perhaps my dumbest idea yet.

A flashlight kicks on, and I watch as Michelle takes a hammer to a Crank’s skull. She pulls the metal out of the guy’s head, spraying her and I with blood.

She must see me on the ground, because she moves over, grabbing hold of me. She reaches into her belt, moving around, until she finds a knife.

“Use this,” she tells me, her eyes sharp and peering into me.

She can’t be serious. I don’t use knives. In fact, I barely use any weapons. If I had anything, it would be a bat, or something.

I can hear something charging towards us, and Michelle tosses me her flashlight. A Crank rambles towards us, and she kicks it in the chest. It falls to the ground, beginning to pick itself up. The man still looks human. He has dark skin, budging with black veins, and pupils so dark I can’t recognize the humanity behind them.

He charges for her, and I run for him. With the flashlight, I swing and crack him in the head with the metal. The light flicks off. He falls to the ground, and Michelle hits him in the head with a hammer, again, and again, until I think I might throw up and until he has stopped moving.
She pauses, leaning over to me and clicking off the flashlight. “Or use the flashlight, I guess.”

I wipe either blood or sweat off my face, since I can’t tell. Michelle is panting beside me.

A flashlight clicks on, blinding me. The light is diverted, and once I stop seeing spots I notice Rose, facing us.

“They’re alive still,” she calls over her shoulders. “Lucky sticks.”

Harriet moves over, and I can see the blood clinging to her shirt. It’s fresh, and wet. Sonya is behind her, hers splotched red. They came in to fight too.

“Come on,” Harriet manages. “We got them all. Let’s check the basement.”
I should be with her

Dawn 18

There is dust blowing between the buildings, and the town seems to be silent. In the bright sun, I can feel my cheeks heating up. It can't be any later than 9:00 AM, and already, the sun is too hot for me. I have my jean jacket around my waist. The damage the sun is doing can't be much compared to the weight it adds to me. And the heat it swallows me in.

"You're sure you don't want my jacket?" Minho asks next to me. "It's thinner."

"You'll burn up," Newt chides. "Seriously. You should've seen Wyck. He wouldn't stay under the tarp since it was too hot, and his skin peeled off in layers. It was nasty."

I roll my eyes, backing up until I'm in the shade of the building. "There," I offer, gesturing around me. "Happy?"

Newt and Minho exchange a glance, a raised eyebrow and a smirk, but say nothing to me. I guess nothing has changed in the time I've been gone. At least, not between them.

"How much longer until we reconvene?" I ask, glancing up at the sky. The sun swallows us whole.

Newt shrugs, before looking down at his watch. "Like, fifteen minutes."

We aren't going to find Thomas, at least I doubt it. Looking for him is like looking for a needle in a haystack. For all we know, he's already heading to the mountains. The leader guy, Jorge, insists that this Brenda chick wouldn't have died. She must be keeping him safe, or so he says. Honestly, I couldn't tell you what I think or believe. Nothing makes sense anymore.

"I'm sure he'll meet us up in the Safe-Haven," I tell them. "I doubt the Creators would let him die this early on."

"Why?" Minho asks, looking me over. "You think he's special?"

"Of course he bloody is," Newt jumps in. He looks around the corner outside the aisle, glancing around. Satisfied, he turns back to us. "Why else would they only be trying to kill him?"

There's a chuckle to his voice, and his eyes are soft. Minho scratches the back of his neck, before he yawns. I can't help but smile. Even here, we can find a few seconds of calm. Amidst all this chaos.

We're done checking our section, which means we've got a minute or two to kill before we are supposed to head back. This is the first time I've been with either of them without the rest of the group in hours. Well, I guess maybe months. It's not often I'm alone with anyone anymore.

"It's better he's disappeared then," I remark, casting a glance down the alley. "Those girls can track us easier than they can track one shank. With him gone he's safer."

Minho and Newt nod, distracted. Both are looking down the alley, out into the sand. I listen for a second, a hear nothing. Neither of them looks serious, but there is something in the air that I don't like. It doesn't sit well on my tongue.

"You trust the new boys?" I ask, trying to make conversation. I guess, maybe I am actually curious.
They didn't say much of anything to me yesterday.

Minho cracks his neck, leaning off the wall behind him and stepping farther away from me. "Newt does, for some reason."

"They're fine," Newt rolls his eyes, before glancing back at me. He bites his lip for a second, then shrugs his shoulders. "He's just paranoid."

"I don't like that Jay guy," Minho remarks. He scrunches his nose up and wipes the sweat off his forehead. With his free hand, he plays with the "He's a pompous slinthead, who only speaks to correct me."

"Aris and the others are fine," Newt shrugs forward, his hair acting as a visor. In the harsh light, it is difficult to see. In fact, it is almost painful. I choose not to look at his hands, chapped from the wind, not the bloodstained under his fingernails.

Newt looks at me. I can feel how heavy his eyes are. His movements are more sluggish than normal, and his limp seems to be acting up while he paces. The sun is beginning to leak into the alley from above us. The shade is disappearing second by second. Newt, who is normally bright, is bleaching out. He is burning so strongly he looks like he is disappearing.

"Next time you see Leo, you've got to tell her," I look up at Newt. The words strangle out my throat, since they need to be said now. Right this second, he needs to hear them.

His smile fades away, until his lips are straight. He struggles to offer me anything resembling a grin. Even his eyes have seemed to fade away. Minho looks over at me, before glancing back at Newt.

"So, you do like her?" He asks, his voice quiet and still. Minho forces a smile from cheek to cheek, but it doesn't reach his eyes.

Newt rubs his chin with his hand. His jacket is fraying at his elbow, and it is only now I realize that his face is much dirtier than I remember. There is a cut on his lip, and in his hairline.

"Yeah, shank," he looks down at the ground, before looking up at Minho. "I really do."

"How long?" Minho asks, before stepping forward. His fingers slowly trail off of mine. I want us holding each other again, but the moment is gone as quickly as it arrived.

Newt shrugs, stepping back. Almost stumbling at the weight of the idea. "At least a month now, I reckon. Maybe longer."

Minho only can nod, before he places a hand on Newt's shoulder.

"You're going to see her again," I tell Newt. That's what's happening, right? They think she's as good as gone. I can't help the heavy swallow I gulp down. Leo shouldn't be talked about in the past tense. I mean, they haven't seen her in a while, but for me, it's been practically nothing.

Minho and Newt only offer me a glance. "We should head back."

I move forward, into the sun. Minho puts a hand towards me, in a comforting gesture, but I knock his arm away. His face is still, jaw agape, but Newt's is softer.

I take a step back from the pair. "You guys think she is as good as dead?"
Minho sighs, stepping closer. "We're lucky to have found you, Dawn."

"She's not going to die," I tell them, so certain the words make my legs stronger. Leo couldn't just evaporate off the Earth.

Newt's face turns sour. He gives us a friendly wave, walking off and leaving me and Minho in the dust. I expect him to wait for us, but he doesn't. My feet shuffle forward, but Minho stops me. His callused hand delicately lands on my shoulder. He sighs, before rubbing the other hand on the base of his neck. He is dirty too, filthy even. Bags weigh his eyes down.

"Newt's lost a lot," Minho says, his voice lower than before. He carefully glances over his shoulder to ensure Newt is far away. "He's more sensitive than the rest of us. Losing Alby took a real toll on him. While you were gone, he had finally accepted that he'd probably never see you again. I can't blame him for not wanting to keep his hopes up."

He says it with such finality, like we are all going to die, but we can't. Really, we must be immortal. All of us. It's still doesn't make sense in my head that Frankie and Dave and the lot are dead. Whenever I think about it, I imagine them laughing in the Glade. They can't be dead. Leo wouldn't die on me.

"Did you give up hope on me?" I ask.

Minho pulls me into his chest, practically before I can finish the sentence. "Wish I could've. You smell like klunk."

I laugh, shoving him backwards playfully. He smirks, kissing me on the forehead, before grabbing my hand and leading me back towards our hideout.

Newt is not too far off in front of us, moving towards our meetup. He moves slowly, almost dragging his feet in the sand, which already is moving in the wind. My smile drops when I see Newt lower his head.

Fry rounds the corner, with Doug and Wyck behind him. They are sprinting forward. Wyck is one of the boys I don't know all too well; I don't even know his job. Doug was a Builder, and I only know that because I'm used to listening to Michelle complain about him.

Wyck has to catch his breath for a second, while the other two continue running. Doug is much faster, since he was an alternate, than Fry. He passes by Newt, moving straight for Minho.

"We found Thomas." Doug manages, his voice still and steady. Fry is about to catch up to him, and I can hear his heavy breath from here. "He's just over there." He points way far off.

Minho moves away from me, pushing through Fry and Doug, past Newt. He heads over in the direction the group came from.

"Klunk," Doug mutters, turning around and chasing after Minho.

I follow them, pushing through the sand on my feet. It's quite difficult to run in this heat, with the ground slipping beneath us. As far as I know, this is the only day where the boys have been travelling during the day.

Minho spins around the corner, heading into the alleyway. It diverges in two different spots. Minho turns, unsure which direction Thomas is. I still haven't even caught up to him, but Doug is thundering past me. There is an urgency in his steps.
Minho arrives at a corner. He looks to the right, and then to the left, and he scrambles backwards. He knocks me over as he moves away from the corridor, and I hit the ground.

Newt is beside me, gently helping me up off the ground. I rub my hand along my spine, which aches but seems to be fine. Survival. Minho is far back, with Doug holding on to his shoulder. I look back at him, about to shout that he should be more carefully, but I can see the panic on his face. They are whispering rapidly.

Ignoring the boys, gathering far behind me, I stick my head around the corner. Peaking forward, I spot Thomas. He is with a group of Cranks, Brenda amongst them. They disappear as soon as I see them, shoved down a set of stairs. One of the Cranks turns around, and I spin around, behind the wall. In his pale and sickly hands is a gun.

My heart is racing. How the shuck do they get a gun out here? We can fight people with weapons, easily, because that is what we are good at. Skill on skill, strength on strength. If there is one thing I trust less than a Crank, it's a Crank with a gun.

Fry grabs hold of my hands, standing in front of me. He nods once, looking into my eyes. His irises are so dark they almost seem the same colour as his pupils. For a second, the never-ending black distracts me, as does the crease in his eyes. He nods again, and I nod back, my chest ceasing to heave.

A group of the boys gather further up in the alleyway, paying me no mind. Fry grabs my shoulder, before gently pulling me over to the group. Once we are there, we are only missing the boys I don't know. The ones from Group B.

I guess, there are a ton here I don't know as well. All of my friends have died. Sure, I know Fry, Newt, Minho, and Clint, but that's about it. Since I switched, the girls are practically equal to the boys in number.

"What the shuck is going on?" Newt asks, staring at Fry. "Where's Thomas."

Fry sighs, letting go of me to turn his attention to Newt. "Captured by some Cranks. They've got weapons. A knife."

"A gun," I finish. Everyone seems silent at that, the syllable echoing through the corridors.

"What do you mean a gun?" Dmitri asks. He is the youngest of the boys here, probably fourteen. He was a Runner, and despite his skills, seems perpetually confused.

"What do you think shuckface?" Hank demands. He is much louder than Dmitri, and much more serious. Hank would probably have taken over as head of the Runners if anything happened to Minho. Either him or Aidan, who worked his section as well.

"How did they get their hands on a gun?" Dmitri asks.

"You think I know?" Hank's voice is almost a shout. "I didn't even see it."

"I did, if both you shanks would slim it," Doug cuts in, looking around the group. I really like Doug. He seems to actually get how things work around here, and he is a good person. In this mess, he is one of the only people to seem calm.

"Now," he cuts in. "These Cranks aren't completely past the gone. They're a decent way in, sure, and they want to eat Thomas, but we might be able to reason with them."
"No, we won't," when Minho cuts in, the attention turns to him. There has been a weird dynamic shift here, one which confuses me. It wasn't like this too long ago. Newt was in charge, with Minho and Thomas close seconds behind him. Now though, people barely give Newt a second glance. I can't figure out what happened.

"We fight our way in there," Minho says, with all the power in his throat. "We get Thomas back."

"You're crazy," Hank argues. "They have a gun!"

"We don't even know if it has bullets," Aidan offers. I expect Hank to offer some clever, pointed retort, but he doesn't. Instead, he just looks down at the ground.

No one has suggested we leave Thomas behind. With that knowledge, I know I have definitely picked the right group to go with.

Jorge rounds the corner, with the boys behind him I don't know. My eyes scan them, before Jorge's land on Newt.

"What's happen here?" He scans the crowd.

Minho crosses his arms over his chest, obviously still upset by Jorge's threat. It is on Newt to answer.


Jorge rubs his beard. The man is fairly old, with grey hair. His skin isn't as pale as it ought to be for a Crank. The longer I've been here, the more I've realized that being a Crank is a wide-ranging scale, much like being a good person. Sure, Hank is a bit of a shuck-face, but he has saved more than one life in the past. Same goes for Dmitri. There are dozens of people in this world that I won't ever get to know.

"Before we go in guns abizin'," Jorge lowers his eyes to the ground, as he racks his brain for any single thought. "We're gonna need a better plan. We'll go tomorrow. Deal?"

Everyone looks to Minho, waiting for him to answer. When Minho nods, we are in.
Michelle 19

It is almost as sweaty underground as it is above ground. Blood stains to my clothing, which, despite the heat, is struggling to dry in the absence of light. I thought it would be cooler, but now I am so close to all the other bodies that the room is a furnace. Maybe the blood is dry, and instead I’m sweating profusely.

I really hate the dark. Like, I’m not afraid of it or anything; it’s just unbearable. I’d much rather see what is around the corner, but that’s just me. How does anybody know that there aren’t more decapitation spheres down here, waiting to take us out? I certainly have got no clue.

We’ve only been walking for an hour, and as far as I am concerned, we have no sense of direction. Are we walking further into the Scorch? Or are we walking home? I’d rather we actually survive than walk aimlessly, but that’s just me.

I hear a groan behind me, and I roll my eyes. Teresa chuckles beside me.

“You’d think they’d get used to moving if they’d want to live,” she has a faint grin.

Right? Some of these shanks annoy the klunk out of me. Always complaining and moaning about moving. If they are so content to gripe, they should just stay here and wait for the Flare to kill them.

I look over Teresa, before sighing. “You know, when I voted against you, I was voting to get it over with. I knew Leo wouldn’t budge.”

Teresa nods, looking forward. I don’t think she respects my answer, but I guess I wouldn’t if I were her either. See, I am not the biggest fan of Ella. To this day she makes me nervous. Keeping her around, however, is less of a pain then listening to Leo and Dawn whine about her. I guess now, just Leo.

“Leo’s a bit of a problem,” Teresa offers, looking over. “Somehow more than Dawn.”

I’m surprised that I agree. Dawn has hated Teresa pretty much from day one, but up until yesterday (shuck, it was only yesterday), Leo was fine. Now, she’s been pretty distraught. Obviously, Ella matters a lot to her, as annoying as it is.

“Hopefully now that she lost Dawn, she’ll have learnt her lesson.” Teresa offers.

“Which is?” I ask, since there could be a million answers.

Teresa looks over at me, with her dark eyes. In the dim lighting, it looks like they are only one colour. The glance is unnerving.

“That she isn’t right all the time,” Teresa offers, sighing. “Would you check on her?”

I nod. Teresa offers me a faint smile in return, moving forward. I stand still, letting a few girls walk around me so I can move further back. Leo is near the rear of the pack, with Harriet.

“Hey,” a girl asks beside me.

It’s Sonya. She’s never gone out of her way to talk to me before. Maybe we haven’t even spoken at
all. She gestures for me to move with her. I glance up at Teresa, noticing her distraction, before continuing next to Sonya.

“Your friend, who hit me,” her voice is a quiet whisper. “He was really nice.”

It’s a hint.

It’s hard to read her, in this dim lighting. It strikes me that she is trying to save my friend’s image, for some reason. I don’t know that I would do the same, given the colour of her bruise. It’s still fresh and purple, since she was only hit yesterday.

“What was his name?” She asks, continuing to trudge forward.

“Doug,” it’s a simple offer, but it’s there none the less. My voice is gruff and low. I don’t want Teresa to hear me, and I’m not entirely sure why.

She nods, scratching the bandana on her head. “He apologised before he did it.”

“Still did it,” I mutter, trying to prove to her that I’m not with Doug on this. Really, I’m never with Doug. He’s just some guy that I put up with, because he is the only builder left.

“Only as hard as I needed him too,” Sonya lets her eyes linger on my face.

So, she asked him too. I figured it was more than she was letting on. I thought Dawn had done it, maybe, and it wasn’t the kidnapping she suggested. I wouldn’t have put it past Dawn to beat on the second-in-command so that she and Minho would be united at last. Although, I guess now I know I shouldn’t put much past Sonya.

“It’s only Leo that Harriet wants.” Sonya clarifies, her voice lowering to a hush. “Don’t blame her, either. Leo’s bloody brilliant, and a great Meddy. We need her.”

Yeah, if only she wanted to be here. The thing is, I don’t have much against any of these girls. They are all pleasant enough, even if they complain about dumb klunk.

For a second, I think Sonya is going to place a hand on my shoulder. The gesture would be both odd and uncomfortable, so instead, she just smiles. I let her pass until I am at the back of the group with Leo.

She trudges along, her feet kicking up the sand that coats the bottom of the hallway. Sparing me a brief glance, she returns her gaze to the clouds raising up beyond her feet. Harriet is just on our tails, though Leo doesn’t seem to mind.

“You good?” I ask.

She looks up at me, her eyes wide. A smile cracks on her face, and she breathes out in a laugh that isn’t Leo at all. One that makes a shiver go up my spine, one I have never felt before. It’s an unease that makes all the air in the tunnel go cold.

“Yeah,” she tells me. “I’m good.”

I shake my head back and forth, trying to get the feeling off my skin. “You’re sulking. You look like a slinthead.”

She glances back at me, and I half expect her to snap me in half with the intensity behind her eyes. Instead she sighs, glancing down at her feet.
“I didn’t think Dawn would just leave us,” she says us, but I hear what she really means. There is no us. She didn’t think Dawn would leave her here to rot underground. She didn’t think Dawn would abandon her to the wolves.

“Running won’t solve that.”

She stops dragging her feet. I really wish it wasn’t so hard to see her. I’m good at reading people, but the thing about reading is that it requires light to do so.

“You think I will leave the group like that?” She demands. Her voice is still quiet, but that’s just a coincidence. She isn’t trying to keep it quiet. Leo needs to watch her damn mouth, before someone else hears her lack of conviction.

“What do you want me to think?” I ask, glaring at her. “First, you’re all fine and then you are suddenly screaming at Teresa—”

“Teresa was going to abandon Ella,” Leo argues. Her voice is climbing now. “You think I’m just going to sit around and let that happen?”

Yes. “Ella is a liability, and she is sick,” I argue. “None of us should waste our lives trying to save her.”

“It’s not a waste,” Leo’s louder now, and people are starting to turn. She’s already stopped walking.

“We didn’t even know if she was alive,” I argue, crossing my arms over my chest. I guess this is happening now. “What if Dawn had died in the search for her, huh?”

“You don’t get to throw Dawn around like that!” Leo’s voice stabs forward towards me, harsher than any knife.

“She’s my friend too!” I shout, realising I might actually be telling the truth. Even if we don’t talk that much, I care about Dawn too. Leo acts like she has a monopoly on giving a klunk about people. She doesn’t. “Dave and Gally were my friends too!”

I’m not sure what I’m trying to prove now.

Leo stops, breathing slowly. The rage has taken the air out of her lungs. She leans against the wall behind her.

“Are you two done?” Teresa pushes through the crowd, until she is the midst of our mess.

“No.” “Yes.”

I glare at Leo. She is aggravating the situation, and she knows it. Obviously, this whole thing has gotten Leo off her rocker. For a second, I watch the realisation flash in her eyes, as if she remembers who she is and where we are.

“Well then, go.” Teresa crosses her arms over her chest. “If you are so intent on fighting, fight her.”

“I’m not going to hit her, are you insane?” The emotion takes over Leo again, as she gently shakes her head.

“You’re the one who is insistent on stopping the group.” Teresa’s voice is calm and still. Leo looks
crazy next to the girl. I never noticed how intense the act Teresa has is. I mean, I respect it, but I don’t have to like it.

“Teresa,” I begin.

“Every second we don’t move, is a second closer we inch to death,” Teresa argues. “Or are you too wrapped up in your love life to remember that there are lives at stake?”

“Excuse me?” Leo demands. Her voice echoes between the crammed bodies, getting louder and louder.

I step forward, between the two girls. Teresa smirks at me, since I am exactly where she wants me. She doesn’t care that I would rather be anywhere but here. This isn’t intentional. There are girls around us, staring. Harriet’s eyes are lowered to the ground, as if she pays no mind. Since when does she back down to Teresa?

“Dawn’s going to die, Leo,” Teresa’s voice has sympathy in it, although it is for the audience. I’m not sympathetic either. For half a second, I close my eyes and exhale. I know she is right, but it is hard to hear. “If she decided to join those boys, that’s her right or whatever, but we can’t both make it out alive.”

“So, you are just going to leave them for dead?” Leo asks. “After all they did- Thomas did to save you? We nursed you back to consciousness, we protected you from violence, and we did so asking nothing in return. The least you could do is shucking leave them alone.”

I wince. Why can’t she just be angry secretly? I have never seen Leo rage before, and now is not the damn time. Part of me wonders if Teresa knew she was this volatile. From her faint smile, to her calm demeanour, it seems like she suspected this would happen. Even worse, it seems like she wanted this to happen.

Why did this have to escalate so quickly?

“Leo, it’s us or them,” Teresa tells her, as if the sentence is as easy as that. Maybe everything to Teresa is that simple. It used to be for me too. I choose not to think about Dave. I choose not to think about Gally, and his confusion, and his lips, and everything he did. How can he just show up and run out on me again? I need him.

Just like I need Leo, and Leo needs Dawn, and Dawn needs us. That’s something Teresa doesn’t get. No matter how much I pretend, it isn’t that simple.

I may come first, but they are important too, and I feel myself stretching between two opposing forces.

“So, it’s that easy just to leave them to die?” Leo asks, glancing around the group. She is searching for an answer, and I almost worry she is going to push past me. I keep my hands up, in case she decides to. “Not just to abandon, but to murder?”

“You want to protect them?” Teresa asks. “After what Thomas did to me? After what Ben did to Dawn?”

“Watch your mouth Teresa,” I warn, although it is an empty gesture. It’s too late.

“You weren’t even there!” Leo shouts, she moves closer to Teresa. She bumps up against me, pushing forward. “You don’t even know what happened!”
“I know that you let it happen,” Teresa offers.

I feel Leo’s shirt move, and I pounce. Before she is moving on her feet, I slam her back into the walls behind us. It is mostly rock, and I hear a sound close in her throat, and I hear her stop to breathe.

“Enough,” I tell her, straight.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do,” she spits, shoving me off. I let her go. She turns to glare at Teresa. She cracks her neck to the side.

“I see your game,” she tells Teresa. “I can tell what you are trying to do. It’s not going to work.”

Leo glances at me, with a creased brow and a sour expression that makes my stomach turn. I messed this up. Leo just shakes her head at me, pushing onward. The crowd parts for her as she backs up and pushes through.

Teresa is staring at me, waiting for me to act. It’s hard, but I follow after Leo.

“Where are you going?” Teresa asks me, as I go further down the tunnel.

“I’m walking,” I tell her. “If you want to be safe so bad that you bring up Ben, then you should do the same.”
I should notice

Ella 20

I crack my back as I sit up. My shoulders hurt, and so does my neck. It’s not as bad as it could be though. I remember worse.

I remember.

Leo, Dawn, Michelle, and Ella. Eli, Sheil, Jay and Lott.

I don’t understand how I didn’t see it before. I was too focused on the past. I am still focused, but I missed that one important detail.

What are the odds that we rebelled against WICKED with a group of girls named after Renaissance painters? Slim to none. So small that they are practically nonexistent. It didn’t happen. Obviously, it couldn’t have happened. I don’t remember the rest of that story though.

I get why me, but why the others?

Leo is still sleeping, although it isn’t peacefully. From here, I can see how her face has been spoiled by the heat and exhaustion. Maybe this is her normal face. I don’t know if I’ve ever looked at her before.

Leonardo Da Vinci. My doctor, who was always calm until yesterday’s detonation. I don’t get how she can be wrapped up in such trivial things, especially when the mystery around us permeates into our skin.

Michelangelo is across the room, lying by herself in a corner. She seems at least a little bit aware of the situation which drowns us, but not enough to question it. No one is as awake as I am.

Donatello is the furthest gone. I don’t even see her in the room. Vaguely, I recall that she left the Violet girl alone. Probably for a reason, I wouldn’t get anyway.

Sonya. I have to repeat the name, over and over. Sonya is awake. She is here, and alive, and has forgotten me. Every time I awake, I must remind myself that once again I am alone. No Eli, no Violet girl. No one knows all that I do, which means that it is up to me to end the suffering that surrounds us. It’s all WICKED’s fault after all. They always seem to do stuff that causes pain. They took her away from me, after all.

She’s gone now too.

I get up. Moving my foot forward, I realize there is a body in front of me. One behind me too. I kneel, forcing my hands to run along the ground until I find a bag. Inside, I grab a flashlight. The click is loud, and the light bright. The flashlight guides me through the maze of sleeping girls.

Here’s the thing; I’m not used to being. Physicality is entirely foreign, so when I step forward and backwards, I must strain my eyes and legs to pay attention. One side effect of living in your head is the inability to interact with the environment. Sure, I know far more than everybody on the floor, but I don’t know how to use my feet. These hands are useless too. They practically dangle on strings as I’m forced to drag them around. This whole existence thing is quite useless if we are honest with each other.
I shine the light further ahead, finally past the bodies. Walking forward, hoping she is this way since this is the way that feels most like her. The air is warmer, that I feel, and it is simultaneously lighter.

I stumble, shining my light down. Rocks. Right.

Up ahead, I hear retching. I stare forward and cast the flashlights to glow on her. Her knees are in the rocks, and her fists dig further into them. She is throwing up on the ground.

I bend over, placing a hand on her back, using the other to delicately hold her hair. Being with her reminds me that bodies are important. She is soft, and tangible, and real, even though she is sick. She stops, leaning backwards and sitting down. I move past her vomit, sitting next to her and holding on to her side.

She coughs, sniffing, before rubbing her face with her hands. Her skin is moist and glistening. She takes off the bandana, refolding it, before putting it back on her head.

“I get sick when I’m hungry,” she tells me. “Nausea. Counter-intuitive, I know.”

I don’t remember that about her.

I get up, moving past her. She needs fresh air.

Quickly, I flash the flashlight on the ceiling. I find one of the breaks, moving over to it.

“What are you doing?” She asks.

She’s gotten up to follow me. I make my best effort to climb the wall, to no avail. She laughs, although her attempt faint.

“You need fresh air,” I tell her since apparently, she hasn’t noticed.

She smiles, sniffing once more. She wipes her eyes dry with the collar of her shirt, before moving over to the wall. Carefully, she climbs. Once she reaches the ceiling, she seems unsure of what to do.

I dig my fist into the walls, struggling to find any grip. It takes work, and I actually have to look at the walls. My hand reaches upwards, and I feel Sonya’s foot carefully nudge me into a grip. I look up, and she smiles down at me.

She guides my next hand, and I somehow make do myself with the footing, and after what feels like an excruciating hour I am up next to her. I used to be great at telling time, but whenever we are apart, even if only a few feet like just now, every second is agonizingly long.

Sonya smiles at me. “Now what?”

She still looks green and is swaying slightly, but apparently, she is well enough to hold herself on a wall.

I take the flashlight, which I had stored in my jacket (it is only now that I notice that I have clothes on) and hit the ceiling above with it. There is hardly a sound from my hit.

Sonya takes the flashlight from me. She grips onto it, carefully, and with one quick gesture she smashes it up into the ceiling. With another, it cracks, letting in sunlight.

She pauses, breathing in the air, but it isn’t enough. Though the light is blinding, she needs more
access to clean oxygen. I take the flashlight from her, smashing open the roof.

“What are you doing?” She hisses.

With one more hit, it breaks open. I climb out, into the morning sun. It is barely rising, which is the only reason I don’t collapse from the shining light. It hurts my skin too, even in these few seconds.

“Ella!” She calls after me.

We are in an alleyway. I climb up, boxes surrounding me. Stumbling forward, I look around. On the wall, in front of me, there is graffiti.

THOMAS, YOU’RE THE REAL LEADER.

I stumble backwards, colliding into the dirt ground of the hallway. My head is dizzy, and my headaches. I try to stand up, the Violet girl holding me at my side, and I fall back down. She manages to catch me. I can’t really hear anything. Gently, I feel the ground rising beneath me. It meets my back, and I roll down. I feel drool coming down my lips.

I roll my head to the side, staring down the hole. The Violet girl is gone. Teresa pops up to the surface. She pays me no mind, running around. More girls are arriving, slowly they blur together until they are one hue of grey. Green and red mix in, moving with the crowd, but no blue. No violet. I peel myself off the ground. Teresa is yelling and pointing.

I stumble closer to her, hands guiding me the way there.

I stop in front of her, and she turns to face me. Clouds of smoke are rising around us.

My fingers tremble forward, as I shove them closer to her. Pointing at her. “I remember you.”

Then, I fall.
I should use scissors

Leo 21

“I remember you,” it’s all Ella offers.

She’s stumbling and swaying on her feet. I didn’t believe Sonya, when she came running over, and said that Ella was on the surface. I didn’t believe she had it in her to break her way up top, nor did I think she had the ability to stand, albeit barely, and accuse Teresa of God knows what.

Ella falls to the ground. Her body writhes, and spit flies out her mouth.

Another seizure.

Girls are moving in all around her, yelling and panicking. Marie was the closest, though she failed to catch Ella as she fell to the ground. I try to break through and get to Ella, though Michelle grabs me. She pulls me away from the crowd, turning to face me.

“Run!” She tells me. I try to shrug off my backpack, but she pulls the straps back on my shoulder.

“I need to help Ella.” I try to push my way past her, but she is and has always been, too strong for me.

“You can’t,” Michelle’s voice is firm. Her eyes are steady, her mouth pressed into a tight line.

“You won’t be able to slip away again. She’s fine. You need to go.”

She shoves me backwards firmly. My feet slip beneath me, but I catch myself on the wall. I turn around to face Michelle, but she shoos me off once more.

Ella has epilepsy. The way to get her through a seizure is to wait for it to end, then help her afterwards. Ensure she isn’t concussed and bandage any place she is cut open. You have to remain calm, and kind, and helpful.

Anyone can do that. They don’t need me for her.

I run away. Barrelling down the corridor before anyone can see me. I round down the side, stopping to pant for a just a second before I continue sprinting. No idea where I’m going, or where Dawn is, or Newt, or anyone else.

Next time I see Michelle, I need to thank her. She’s putting herself at risk, letting me go. This is her way of apologizing, and I forgive her. Honestly, I doubt I could’ve stayed mad for longer than five minutes.

I duck out into the sun. It’s still early in the morning, so the sun is rising. I don’t see any Cranks hanging around, not that it matters. I don’t have a weapon.

As I sprint, I knock over a garbage can. I pause, moving back to it. There is only rotting food inside. I need a weapon, which I never thought I’d hear myself say, and yet here we are.

I continue moving until I am in the centre of the road. Down either side are buildings. Beneath the sand, which shuffles in the light wind, there is a harsh concrete road hiding. I’m already sweating, and dawn has barely broken. I shudder as I look at the abandoned buildings as if I expect any of them to collapse at any moment, or for a hoard of Cranks to come running out of them.
Funny how the Grievers have easily replaced the Cranks as a threat. Like, I’m so used to running that it is a natural instinct. By funny, I mean anything but funny. If anything, I mean how cruel.

I hear a sound, and my hand flies to my waist. The only thing I have is a pair of scissors, which make me nervous to hold. Not that I don’t like blood, but it’s unsettling that these scissors help me heal people and are also a weapon. Honestly, I much preferred the bat I had in the Maze. The bat felt less dangerous, which was part of its appeal.

Here, it doesn’t really matter which appeals to my sensibilities. I take the scissors out of my belt, holding them in my hand.

The last I heard of Dawn, Michelle had seen her in a building that had collapsed. That’s further back then where I am now, but that was also days ago. Every second out here feels like a decade, which I guess is no different than the Maze. We’ve only been gone nine days, and this is what we’ve come to. Already, I’ve succumbed to the violence.

When I’m satisfied the sound was just that, a sound, I step forward. My feet crunch against the sand. Every step of the way is going to be painful, isn’t it? That’s how this seems to be going anyway.

I move aside, to the buildings. Walking alongside them provides me with some peace of mind, if not a lot. They may not be able to watch my back, but they don’t leave me as vulnerable. In the early morning sun, it’s easy enough to blend in with them anyway.

I step closer to an alleyway, before stopping. I hear something coming. A blur runs past. I hold out my scissors, watching a man streak across the road. He is laughing, a crazy roar that echoes across the buildings and fills the air. It only serves to illustrate how silent it is here.

I bend down, kneeling over and looking down through the alley. No one else is down there. Quickly, I stand up and skid past it, to the safety of the next building.

I wish Michelle had come with me. At least then I’d feel a bit safer than I do now. In the building, she helped me take down those Cranks. Raw strength, that’s what she’s got. Can’t call it anything else after all.

I don’t know how much longer I can do this on my own.

I take a second to breathe, resting my head against the building. I’m exhausted. Last night, I couldn’t fall asleep, and I was woken up so abruptly this morning that I still feel like I’m sleeping. Maybe this is all a dream, and I will wake up in the Maze. I hate that it’s a safe alternative to being here. It doesn’t feel all that safe.

There’s a hand on my shoulder, and I spin around. A man, with no teeth and sagging skin, leans over top of me. He attempts to smile, even though his grey tongue dangles lifelessly on his chin. My breath hitch in my throat as I stumble back. He falls forward with me, landing just below my feet. I scramble backwards, my hands scrapping against the ground. The scissors flew back, several feet away. With my feet, I attempt to kick him away, but he follows me. His face is bleeding, and his eyes are bloodshot.

“What are you doin’ pretty lady?” I turn around to see an older woman stumbling forward. “Is he bothering you?” I scramble to my feet, backing away from the both. The woman kicks her foot forward, knocking the man in the jaw. His face cracks and he hits the ground.

The lady turns to me, her head twitching to the side. “Sometimes Hershel can be so mean.”
She’s a Crank. I can tell from her torn clothes and her slipping gait. It comes down to how far past the gone she is. I’ve seen some crazy Cranks, but some who aren’t so far.

“You should thank me,” she smiles. “He’s so past the gone he’d eat you.” She laughs softly and then freezes. Her fists clench at her side, and her jaw hardens. She drops her head, so it is practically leaning against her shoulder. “Why, pray tell aren’t you thanking me?”

I can’t say anything. I still can’t remember how to breathe. “Sorry?”

“Thank me!” She snarls, charging forward. She tackles me, and I scream. Her hands claw at my face, gouging into my skin. I knock her off with my feet, spinning to look for the scissors.

I turn forward to grab them, and she shoves my face into the concrete. She lifts my head up, about to slam it down, and I roll over. She tumbles to the ground. I grab the scissors, turn around. She’s on top of me again and I stab her.

She freezes for a beat, then moves again. Once more, I stab her. The scissors cut through her decaying muscles, requiring all more force. I can’t do this. I can’t.

Finally, her body slumps against mine, blood flowing out. I can’t breathe. Using all the force in my upper body, I shrug her off. Her body continues to bleed on the ground, her blood impossibly dark. I scramble backwards until I bump into the building behind me. My chest is heaving. She’s dead. Her lips are frozen, her jaw is wide open, and I killed her. Just myself.

My hands and knees are shaking. I can’t move. I can’t breathe. I can feel this panic coming on again. I hate it. This feeling causes the blood to rise in my chest. It makes me more than uncomfortable.

I lie against the building, letting my chest rise and fall, and concentrating on the feeling of the sand between my hands. It is harsh and full of small bits of stone. I can feel it though, almost caressing my skin. The building is harsh against my back. Its bricks scratch me, though I don’t mind. I close my eyes, breathing in and out again and again.

I feel something cold against my neck, and my eyes fly open. There is an Asian boy, kneeling in front of me. He has jet black hair, scruff to match, and dirty skin. His face is still and stiff. He squints at me, through his dark brown eyes.

“Stand up,” his voice is low and gruff, and he enunciates every syllable carefully.

He hoists me in the air, shoving me forward. The knife remains against my neck. I lift my hands into the air defensively. He knocks me forward with his shoulder, pushing me in front of his body. His heavy tingles my ear. I wish I could see his face. I wish I could know what he is thinking.

“Would you knock it off?” A boy asks, gesturing forward. He has warm brown skin, and eyes to match. The warmth doesn’t meet his face though, as he questions the boy behind me. “Leave her be.”

“She just stabbed someone.” I can feel his heavy words echo through my chest. My heart is pounding. “She’s covered in blood.”

I look down, noticing that he is right. My hands begin to shake.

The other boy doesn’t seem to like this, but he sighs. He rubs a hand across his face, covering his smile lines. He shakes his head back and forth but does nothing. This boy looks soft, even behind his harsh windbreaker. The boy beside him doesn’t.
The third boy stares forward at me, with hollow eyes. He has brown hair too, like the boy beside him, but instead of the clean-shaven face that the other boy has, his hair is wild. It sticks up in every direction, blowing in the wind. I doubt he notices though. He stares at me beyond the layer of dirt that coats him.

They’re Cranks. Seemingly new, although I can’t be sure how new they are.

“She’s frightened,” the second boy offers. He steps forward, gently grabbing my arm. His eyes meet the boy behind me, waiting for the okay. When he nods, the boy behind me lets go. I stumble forwards, almost slumping into the arms of the boy who holds on to me.

“Hey,” he offers a kind smile, wiping the blood off my chin. “You’re alright.”

“She could be well past the gone,” the boy behind me warns. I still haven’t turned to look at him, focusing on the boy in front of me instead.

“Nah, she isn’t.” The boy in front of me remarks. “Look at her eyes. They’re too bright.”

The remark causes my cheeks to warm. The boy in front of me offers a soft chuckle, before straightening his back. He’s really tall, in fact, they all are. Over six feet for sure. I wonder what is in the water out here.

“Sheil,” the first boy warns.

I freeze, staring at the boys. They are from Group B. Sheil, I’ve heard them say his name maybe a thousand times. Emil is dead. Sheil is alive (apparently). The other two’s names slipped my mind.

“You’re Sheil,” I turn to the kind one.

The rest freeze, turning to stare at me.

“Marie, she’s mentioned you,” I turn, looking at the boys. “You’re diabetic, right? We thought you’d be dead.”

Sheil looks up at the other boy. The one with hollow eyes finally glances up, turning to stare at me. He places a hand on his chin, crossing the other arm across his chest. Like he is dissecting me.

“You’re with Group A?” The first guy asks.

I nod my head up and down, glancing across the group.

“Which one is she?” He asks, turning to the rest of the group. “Can’t be their Emil.”

“She might be there me,” Sheil offers. “Kind enough anyway.”

“Dumb enough anyway,” the first one counters.

“You think she’s the violent one?” The third boy finally offers, as if his brain is tuning in and out of this conversation.

“Doubt it,” Sheil offers. “Probably their Meddy.”

“Not their Dawn, that’s for sure,” the first offers. “Think Dawn’s their me.”

“You’re just saying that because she’s pretty,” Sheil rolls his eyes.
The first boy smirks, shrugging.

“I’m the Meddy,” I have to cut in to get a word edge wise. These three seem to be the melody to one song, filling in the holes where everyone else is missing. As if they’ve been together much longer than I know they have. I wish Michelle, Dawn, and I could focus like that. Maybe, I wish things worked out better for us. Of course, they didn’t.

“What one’s that?” The first boy asks. “Lucy? Lemon?”

“Leo,” I correct, brushing off the fact my name could’ve been Lucy, or anything else. Leo is just what they call me.

“Leo,” Sheil smiles. He reaches over and takes my hand. His handshake is firm but kind. His eyes light up, and his smile lines grow across his face. “Obviously you know me. I’m Sheil.”

“Jay,” the first guy offers. He doesn’t try to shake my hand and offers me more contempt than anything else. “That guy over there is Lott.”

Lott only glances at me, before turning his focus back to the ground. He actually seems a bit crazy.

“Where are the others?” I ask.

Sheil gestures behind me. “Just a ways back, you know. We can take you there.”

Jay tenses at the mention of the group. He cracks his neck, before finally putting his knife in his pocket. “You guys take her. I’ve got some business to attend to.”

With that, he stalks off. There’s no way he has business in the middle of the Scorch, but I don’t question it. In fact, I remain silent to the matter. Sheil’s smile fades for half a second, but it returns when he sees me.

“Well, we better get going.” He looks over his shoulder, back at Lott.

Lott nods slowly, absentmindedly. Sheil ignores his friend’s emptiness, grabbing me by the shoulder and steering me back to the rest of the group.
I shouldn't have trusted her

Dawn 22

Minho kicks the door open, running in. Knives in both hands, he charges through the crowd. I follow him, a blade identical to his, charging into the room. Minho’s job is to go downstairs and find Thomas, so I leave him to it. The rest of us are supposed to control the Cranks up here.

The men and women in the room freeze. They stare at us blankly. No one moves. The air is still, and I remain silent.

One is off his feet, charging forward. He collides with Jorge, who with a quick kick sends him flying backwards. Another picks himself off the ground, charging for Newt.

I step in front of the boy, stabbing the Crank. He flinches around the knife, freezing in his path, before falling to the ground. Newt turns and stares at me, and I shrug. It’s rough, yeah, which is why I wasn’t going to make Newt do it. I’ve had my fair share of run ins with Cranks already, and I’ve prepared myself to kill one.

It was hard, but not as hard as I imagined. I pull the knife out.

Jorge slices through a Crank using his machete, and Fry does the same. Aris, with his practically non-existent body-strength, stands frozen.

People are screaming. Bodies start scrambling around. Someone comes running for me, shoving past me. I stumble into Newt, taking him to the ground with me. There is a hand on my collar, lifting me off the ground. A Crank shoves my back against the wall, screaming into my face. I start shouting, clawing at his cheeks with my hands, which have lost the knife.

Fry rips him off me, stabbing the Crank. Newt is already off the ground, moving deeper into the room. I grab my knife off the ground, following him. People still shove past me though, scrambling for the exit. A man darts forward, grabbing my neck with his fist. I stab him with the knife. Blood spouts out, dotting my face. He lets go, and begins to choke on his own blood. I keep the knife wielded this time, ready to swing it when I need to. Eventually, the room stills.

No one else comes for us. There are a few men and women still here. A couple bodies, but mostly people sleeping, or clinging on to each other.

Shucking Cranks. I can’t imagine what their lives must be like. At the end of this, I will have the cure, so thankfully I won’t end up like him.

“We don’t want trouble,” Jorge says. “We just don’t want to fight, alright muchahoes?”

Everyone stands still. Jorge, Newt and Aris begin circling the group. I’m in charge of watching the door, in case anything bad happens. I move back there, coughing. There are a few others stationed outside, since they are our first line of defense. In a nearby tower, we have another couple shanks watching us. This sting operation proved easier than anticipated with the fifteen of us.

I am finally catching my breath. It’s hard and requires my full attention. My throat feels like it is constricting against itself and swallowing me whole. Fry hits my back, and hits it kindly, for good measure.

“Where have you guys been?” I look up to see Thomas and Minho, walking down the stairs.
Brenda is up a few steps behind them both.

“Look at the shank,” Fry laughs, standing next to me at the door. “Ugly mug still, at least its intact.”

Thomas nods, walking over towards Newt, I storm through the crowd, making my way over to him, despite Fry’s attempt to stop me. Quickly, I throw my knife in a pocket in my jacket.

“Can I have a second?” I ask, glancing to Minho.

Minho seems confused. Since Thomas disappeared, I haven’t brought up Teresa’s allegations. I was planning on doing it in private, but I feel like I’m about to explode. It’s been what, a week? I still don’t know the truth, and I need to.

“With me?” Minho asks.

I shake my head gesturing for Thomas.

The other boy seems confused, but he steps forward. He’s gotten thinner, but he still looks as shocked as ever. His dark hair clings to his forehead in a nervous sweat. He wipes at it, before moving closer to me.

I pull him into a hug, holding tightly on to him. For a second, I felt myself fade away into the feeling. For a while, I thought he was dead. However, the nervousness ticks back into me, when I remember what Teresa said. “What did you do to Teresa?”

He quickly pulls back. “What?” The colour has drained from his face. His eyes scan mine, waiting to see my resolve break it doesn’t. I step closer, grabbing hold of his collar.

“I asked you a question,” I pull his face down closer to mine, until we are only a breath apart. His Adam’s apple bobs against my knuckles as he gulps.

“Dawn?” Minho asks from behind me.

Though I let go of Thomas, shoving him backwards, I don’t acknowledge Minho. Biting my tongue, I force myself to ask another question. “What did you do to her?”

“Nothing, what…” Thomas asks, glancing around. “What are you talking about?”

“Did you try to force her?” I ask, stepping closer to him. He backs away from me until he pins himself against a wall. I want to move forward, but knees stay firmly beneath me. Even if my mouth must ask these questions, my body still stops me. It still doubts Teresa. I breathe in and out, calming down the blood that thumps through my veins before I speak. “Because she says you did, and I’ll be shucked if I protect you after that.”

Thomas shakes his head back and forth. “No, no way. I’d never do that to her. Never, Dawn, I swear.”

I scan his wide eyes for a flicker of omission or of malice but find nothing. Not that I’m particularly good at reading people, but I can hear his heart thumping in his chest from here. I nod, relaxing my shoulders. His body relaxes too, and he takes a step closer to me. His eyes plead as they stare me down.

“Has she been telling people that?” He asks, his voice about to crack. “Why would she lie about that?”
“To get to me,” I answer what I honestly think. It’s been a game for her from the beginning.

Thomas drops his gaze. He grabs hold of me, pulling me into a hug. I can feel myself about to fall apart once more, as I think of Ben. I choose to ignore it, and I choose again, and I choose again.

“What the shuck was that?” Newt asks from across the room. “She’s claiming he forced her to…”

I let go of Thomas, nodding to face Newt. Everyone in the room is quiet.

“That’s how far she’s going,” I back away from Thomas, moving in towards the center of the room. “She’s telling all those shanks, and now their pissed.”

“Are you alright?” Minho asks, his voice asking a simple question. I offer him a careful nod. He doesn’t seem convinced, every feature on his face dropping a centimetre. He is about to move forward towards me, but I shake my head ever so slightly. He freezes, his face closing down.

“Scared the klunk out of him, didn’t it?” Fry laughs.

“Got the answer she needed,” Doug offers. When I catch his eye, he offers me a wink. Doug is quite the character, the more I get to know him. Not so bad, which just adds to the list of people Michelle has failed to read.

Thomas nods up and down, moving up beside me. I put my hand on his shoulder, trying to calm him down. He offers me a faint smile, though it disappears.

“I get it,” he whispers, glancing around the room. I doubt anyone can hear him. “Just please don’t ever scare me like that again.”

“Am I intimidating?” I ask, a smile on my lips.

“Course you are Dawn,” Thomas smiles.

He takes a step forward, closer to Minho, who offers me a faint smile, but shakes his head back and forth. I shrug, and he smiles once more, before looking at the ground. He turns his attention back to Thomas, talking in a hushed voice.

Brenda looks rather uncomfortable, so I move closer to her. She flinches when she sees me stroll up, tightening the grip around her arms.

“What’s wrong?” I ask her gently.

She rolls her eyes. “Nothing.”

Not offering me a second glance, she moves over to Jorge. The interaction leaves me baffled. It wasn’t rude, although that was the intention. There’s something there that I can feel, and I don’t get it. Honestly, I barely know her, so I don’t think I can have an opinion on the behaviour.

“Alright then,” Minho breaks away from Thomas, addressing the Cranks on the ground. “We’ll just be on our way. Follow us and die. Makes more sense to stay put, where we won’t bother ya, good that?”

None of the Cranks offer any answer, still frozen in place. Not that I am necessarily surprised. Nothing surprises me anymore.

The door opens, and I pull my knife out of my pocket. On the other side is one of the boys, who’s name I don’t know. He doesn’t smile as he walks in and chooses to lean in the doorway instead of
closing the door.

“What now?” Minho asks, glancing at the boy. “What did you see in the tower?”

“Some girl,” he answers. Quickly, his dark eyes meet mine.

“Group B?” Thomas asks. “There here?”


“Seriously?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

The boy in the doorway rolls his eyes. “Relax there, hothead. Stick is slang, not a description of her.”

Sure it is, but I doubt he meant it that way anyway.

It takes a second for it to click in my head, but if it is a girl he doesn’t know, she is probably from our Glade.

Leo.

I run out the doorway, into the alley. I sprint over to the main street, looking around. There isn’t anyone. The sun beats down on my neck. Where could they have taken her? Looking for her is a needle in a haystack, and we’ve already spent a day getting Thomas out of safety. They wouldn’t hurt her, would they?

“What did she go?” Newt yells.

I turn around to see him shoving this boy, who playfully pushes him off. Newt isn’t so kind, hitting charging at the guy’s chest. The boy, who is much taller than Newt, doesn’t budge while his face turns sour. Minho grabs hold of Newt, ripping him back.

“Didn’t realise the stick mattered that much,” the boy pauses, looking us up and down. I begin to pace, ignoring the guy. I try to block the sun as I look up at the sky. If I could get on top of these buildings, I could see her. Without vines twisting along the walls, I am more helpless than in the maze.

“Lott and Sheil took her,” he answers. So, this is Jay, with his nice hair and sparkling grin. He does have the sort of aura that would make girls fall all over him. From experience, I can tell he’s really just a cocky slinthead. “Trying to get her to lead them back to Group B.”

“They left?” Minho demands. “And you just let them?”

“What was I supposed to do?” He leans backwards, shaking his head. “The stick didn’t trust me. I saw her get in a fight with a Crank, so I held a knife to her neck. Next thing I know, she’s asking to be brought back to you shanks, and Lott and Sheil give each other a look, since they’ve been planning to sneak away, and they take her.”

“She’s got half the medical supplies, you thought she didn’t?” Doug asks, rolling his eyes. He too doesn’t buy Jay’s game. Neither do I.

“Leo can’t have gone far,” Thomas offers, looking around. As if she’s going to pop out from behind a tree, in the middle of the desert.
I stare up at the buildings around us. There are dozens, and any one of them could be hiding Leo. I can’t believe she is gone, again. We were so close. I glare over at Jay, and he winks at me.

What is it with these guys and winking?

“Hey!” I spin around to see a man I don’t recognise. He’s got blonde hair and a crooked grin, and his lips are curled in on themselves. He has a gun in his hand, which he waves back and forth. He takes a step forward, and Minho leaps on me, throwing me behind him.

The blonde man points the gun and shoots it. The bullet rips past us.

The world is silent, except for one sound.

Thunk.

I am spinning around to stare at the person who was hit. Thomas. Blood sprays out of his arm. His body contorts, falling to the ground.

I can feel my throat ripping apart as I scream, but I hear no sound. Minho has let go of me, charging after the man. My feet move, leaving my brain behind. I take of my jean jacket, placing it on his arm. Thomas screams, even though it doesn’t offer much help. The boy has gone pale and is sweating more than when I saw him. Clint is down on the ground, focusing his attention on him, so I back away. Newt is there too, holding on to Thomas.

Doug and Fry are struggling to pull Minho off of the Crank.

“We’ve got to move him out of the city,” Jorge says.

I nod, even though he isn’t talking to me. Even though Thomas’s blood is on my hands.
My head hurts. I sit up, in the dark, looking around. There are bodies littering the floor, not at all unlike the space when I went to sleep. The Violet girl is beside me. I can hear her breathing. The push of her lungs and her heart, thumping together against her chest. Her warm breath fills the empty space hanging over our heads. Her arm lies delicately across my stomach, hanging out of her sleeping bag. I’m carefully tucked into mine, and I suddenly wish I wasn’t. Without the layer, her skin would be that much closer to mine. The first thing I really want to feel is her.

I drag my hand across the ground, moving over to her side. I placed it there, unsure of how to make it fit properly. No matter where I place my hand, it doesn’t seem to slot into the right position. I turn onto my back, and the movement causes her to stir. I look over to her face, which is barely a shadow in the dark. I can’t make out any of her features, but I hear her yawn.

It a sweet sound, light and airy.

“You’re awake,” the sound is husky, as it scrapes across the inside of her throat.

I nod, though I doubt she can see the movement. The sleeping bag beneath me rustles with ever subtle twitch of my body. Normally, I can feel her smile across the room, but now, she doesn’t let it take over her.

I lean a hand over, placing it on her forehead, and recoil. Her body is aflame. Clammy, and sweaty, and not like her. It’s practically melting.

“What’s…” I begin, scrambling backwards. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m fine,” she says, but the words are an after thought. They seem to struggle out of her mouth. “You’re the sick one. You just woke up.”

It doesn’t matter that I’m sick. My body isn’t that important, but hers is. I have spent far too long imagining it to let it slip away this quickly. Though she breathes, she struggles, and that makes me nervous.

“Besides, we’ve got no Meddy,” she groans, rolling over. “No supplies.”

Leo has left, I guess. Our coalition is crumbling. I stand up, moving around the room. There are no stars above us. Are we underground? My brain rattles in my brain. Hands flying up, crumbling down against a wall, trying not shake; I can’t seem to be alive. What could I do to help her? Not that I would know if I saw it. I doubt that I could help myself if I was presented with the opportunity.

“What’s going on?” Someone is awake, and moving around, but I can’t speak. Instead, I clutch my ears as I lie against the wall. Thunder rolls through my head, crashing inside my ears. Don’t think about it. Forget it. Don’t remember.

The girls are leaving me, one by one.

“I don’t like this plan,” Eli’s voice is quiet, and his hands are practically compressed in his lap.

“Why not?” It’s a great plan. I’ve already started to work out the kinks.
“I don’t know that it will work,” he shakes his head, refusing to touch the food before him.

He just doesn’t get people. Can’t read them properly, not that I can blame him. It can be hard sometimes. I get up, off my chair and move next to him, so that we are sitting side by side. The cafeteria has filtered out, so it’s practically empty.

“See the girl at the table in the corner?” I begin, turning my head to look at Eli so we aren’t both staring. “She’s the one facing us.”

Eli nods, though he doesn’t seem convinced. “She’s the one they brought in from the Right Arm?”

I nod carefully. “I take it you know the boy they stole too?”

Though it is just a rumour, I’m inclined to believe it. If there is any chance we can get in the room, it’s her.

“So, what, we just break in and destroy it?” Eli demands. “Why? Because we think she, at age four, was taught the skills to hack the cameras?”

“You’re telling me you don’t think there is a single member of the Right Arm spying in here?” I ask. “And that they won’t jump at the chance to sabotage the experiment?”

Eli frowns, picking at his plate with his fork. Though he still refuses to eat, he doesn’t argue with me. There is nothing to argue about, anyway.

“So, you think we stage a break in?” He demands. “That’s your solution?”

“With their help?” I ask. “Of course.”

I look over to the table. The three girls sit together laughing. Leo, Dawn, and Michelle. They always seem to be together, anyway. If I can get one of them to turn, they will all go up.

No.

I pull myself backwards, slamming my head into the wall. The feeling rings out, tingling my teeth and my jaw. Tossing my head to the side, I let the pain seep out and slip on to the ground.

A girl with light blonde hair is holding on to my shoulders. She struggles to lift me up, falling on a bad knee. My whole body is limp, so I’m unable to help her. The feeling is slowly returning to my fingertips, which I reach forward. They trail over her arms, and she stiffens. Glancing back down at me, she waits for me to move my own feet.

I do, though the tips of my shoes struggle to find footing. I push through the confusion, and the tilting world, to get myself upright. Though she offers me her support, she holds herself up.

“You’re awake?” She asks, leaning in closer.

I nod, carefully.

“You said you remembered Teresa, and then passed out,” I didn’t know that. She reminds me quietly, as if she can read my mind. I didn’t remember. “What do you remember?”

I don’t know how to answer that. Teresa exists as if she were a faint shadow in every room. Her presence hangs about, her origin unknown, yet all the light is dampened by her existence. She was me, in another life.
“Because as soon as you said that, Leo disappeared, and Beth showed up,” she continues, her voice light and airy. There is an edge of panic in it. “That can’t be a coincidence, can it?”

I don’t know what to tell her, because it probably is. As far as I can tell, people are individuals, with stories that intersect. Sure, we affect one another, but every single individual has a path they must lead.

Besides, none of that is important now. “Sonya.”

The girl in front of me nods. “She’s fine. Sleeping.”

I shake my head back and forth, pointing over to her. “No, she’s sick.”

The girl in front of me breaks off. She shines her flashlight over to Sonya. Taking painful steps over, she gets closer until she can see the girl. Already, Sonya is asleep. Her sleeping bag, as well as her forehead, are drenched in sweat. Her jaw is a deep purple shade from where she was hit. Her braided hair is out from beneath the bandana, and on her head, there is a blood. Almost exploding in her hair, from a dark center.

It oozes on to the sleeping bag below it. A sickly dark green.

“Marie,” the girl backs away. “Marie!”

Another girl stirs, and another. They sit up one after the other, as the girl beside me shines the flashlight around.

“Would you shut it, Saph?” Harriet asks. “Remind me never to assign you to watch aga-”

“Sonya is bleeding!” The girl, Saph, turns through the crowd. Her limp isn’t as awful as I expected as she moves over to the girl she was calling. Marie, I guess, gets up, moving over through the crowd, tripping over someone. The girl beneath her complains as Marie makes her way over to Sonya.

“What’s going on?” Teresa asks. She is sitting up, staring at me. Everyone is beginning to shine their flashlights. “What time is it?”

“We slept three hours, if that’s what you are asking,” another voice calls out, who I don’t recognize. Honestly, I barely recognize any of them.

A throat gargles behind me, and I turn to see Marie throwing up on the ground. She has a soft stomach.

“Seriously?” Harriet calls out. “Get it together Marie!”

“What is it?” Sonya mutters, her head tilting side to side. Her eyes flutter open, and then shut once more.

“Who is it?” Teresa gets up, moving closer. She glares at me, stepping past. On the ground, she notices Sonya. Her eyes crack open, her hands reaching forward.

“Klunk,” Teresa mutters, before stepping backwards. “That’s infected. That’s infected for sure.”

Harriet is up, moving closer. Teresa grabs her, holding her back from Sonya. For a second, I see Harriet’s face contort in anger.

“Don’t disturb her,” Teresa corrects Harriet. “She’s obviously sick.”
“I’m fine,” Sonya pulls herself sitting up.

“We aren’t going to leave her!” Harriet shouts.

“You think I’m that evil?” Teresa asks, crossing her arms over her chest. “Just because I didn’t want to waste time looking for a girl who was probably dead? Who would probably escape again? Who made herself sick by purposefully getting stung when we were about to escape the Maze? Ella’s a danger to the group, and Sonya is nothing but kind. Of course, we are going to bring her. Let’s let her sleep for at least a shucking hour.”

“I can’t heal her,” Marie stumbles forward, who Saph has to hold up. It’s difficult, but she manages. “I don’t know what’s wrong with her, and I don’t even have bandages.”

“I am fine,” Sonya insists, yawning. “It’s just… I must’ve scratched my head on the ground. Reopened the wound.”

“Don’t use anything make-shift,” Teresa instructs, taking control of the room. She ignores Sonya, talking to Marie. “And throw out that damn bandana. It could be causing the infection, for all we know. We will need to get her to the safe-haven so that it can be treated.”

She cuts herself off, glancing around the girls on the floor. Everyone is listening, and Teresa smiles. For a while, she almost lost control. My departure did that. I guess she voted against finding me. Now though, people only offer me daggers. Sonya was injured when they were looking for me. They can hate me all they want. By trusting Teresa, they are bringing their own deaths upon themselves.

“We have ten more days,” Harriet seems exhausted. “She might die before then.”

Teresa pauses, looking around the girls once more. When she is satisfied all the attention is on her, she relaxes. “When we get Thomas back, which is only supposed to be in five days, we take Leo with us. She’ll be able to help Sonya. Deal?”

When no one argues with her, Teresa turns to me. She flashes me a grin, and winks.
We trudge through the early morning sun, ignoring all the heat. The sweating is awful, but if I take off my jacket then my skin will blister in the heat. I had to leave the sleeping bag behind when I fled, so it won’t provide any coverage in the light. My cheeks are already bright red.

"How is everybody, anyway?" Sheil asks. It's getting late enough for us, so we should be camping out soon. He wants to get at least another hour in of walking though. For the most part, we've been silent this whole time, with the exception of Lott's muttering.

"Good," I tell them, remembering the group. "When I left, there were sixteen alive."

"Sixteen?" Sheil asks, from slightly in front of me. "That's so few."

I nod. Beside me, Lott pulls out a flask and drinks from it. He offers me a nasty glare, which causes me to speed up until I am next to Sheil.

"What about the boys?" I ask.

"Fifteen," he answers. "Though, that's because one of your friends converted over."

"Who's alive?" I ask, since I need to know.

"Minho," Sheil offers. "Fry, Newt-"

I can't help but exhale when I hear Newt's name. That was all I needed to know. He's made it this far. I will see him soon. Honestly, I couldn't bare showing up to Group A without him there. I don't know what I would do.

"Clint?" I ask, jumping back in.

"He's fine," Sheil tells me, though he shudders. "Bit off his rocker though. Can't think too clearly."

It's because Jeff is dead. The thought lowers my heart to my feet. The Grievers got him. I choose not to think about all of that though. Memories of Jeff burn my chest. Remembering how we got here is no easy task. Life here is no better than life in the Maze. It's just different.

"How much further up is it?" I ask.

Sheil casts a glance back to Lott. His face is hollow, and almost seems to be falling off his skull. When he sees my eyes, Lott takes another swig from his canteen, almost chipping a tooth in the process.

"Not far," Sheil bites his lip, turning his head too quickly away from me. Something is up.

I want to give them the opportunity to clarify themselves, so I continue. "What errand was Jay running?"

Lott chuckles behind me. I turn to face him. He is staring at the palms of his hands, shaking his head back and forth.

"Just grabbing supplies for the group," Sheil tells me, racing through the words. He still won't look
at me. "There was a building a bit of a ways back with supplies. He figured we needed more."

That building collapsed. Michelle mentioned that she saw it. We all heard the rubble hitting the ground. For some reason, Sheil doesn't want me to know. He looks around the corners, as if he is unsure where we are going next.

They have no idea where our group is, and from what I know of Sheil, he isn't hiding that from me out of pride.

I start running, moving forward as fast as I can. My bag slows me down, but I won't leave the medical supplies behind. Of course, the sedative is on me, which I could use against them, but it's in my backpack. Besides, if I got one of them, I doubt the other one would let me. I'd be tied up before I'd get anywhere.

I duck through an alleyway, crashing into the garbage which litters the ground. I turn a corner and run forward.

At the end of the passageway, there are Cranks. Three of them mulling about, who've all spotted me. Sheil comes running around, colliding into me from the back. We both go sliding forward into the sand. He quickly scrambles off me, brushing off his chest. He pulls out a machete from his belt, circling it in his hand.

"Lott!" He calls out, turning behind him. "Lott!"

Lott slowly jogs around the corner, spotting the group. He takes a knife out of his belt, handing it to me, before he gets out his own club.

He winds up, as the first Crank runs towards us, and swings at the first man who approaches us. The bones in his jaw crack, and he falls to the ground. His head is twisted at an impossible angle.

The other two come charging forward, and Sheil shoves me to the side. He slices one through the stomach, kicking it off the blade. Lott knocks the other in the head, and it quickly falls down. He pulls out another knife from his belt and kills the thing beneath our feet. I find myself stumbling backwards, realising why Group B was so much better at surviving.

Lott spits on them, throwing the club back in his belt. He glances up at me, staring me down. "You don't particularly like killing, do ya?"

When I don't answer, he sighs. He cracks his neck, before putting his knife away. He gestures to the one in my hand. "Keep it. You'll have to get used to it."

I stare at the bodies on the floor, then up at the boys. All of us have blood on our clothes, which will quickly dry in the sun. Still, they protected me, after essentially kidnapping me. I don't know what their game plan is.

"What do you want?" I demand. My hands shake as I put the knife in my backpack.

Sheil sighs, scratching the back of his head. He is still holding a machete. "We didn't want this to happen. We were hoping you could lead us back to Group B, but things got out of hand. I'm sorry for lying to you, but I felt like there was nothing else I could do. I miss my friends."

He looks up at me, his eyes creasing yet still soft. I find myself melting. I get it, like he does. I just want to be with my friends too. Not just because I can help them, but because I need them. I need Newt. The longer we are apart, the more I forget who I am. He needs to know I love him. I've got to tell him.
I'm sure Sheil has the same regrets I do.

"I don't know where they are," I tell them. "They are travelling both above and below ground. They could be in the Mountains already, for all I know."

"That's the problem," Sheil admits. "We waited to long. Who knows where Group A is either."

Klunk. I guess that means we are stuck together. I like Sheil, and it seems that even Lott is growing on me. He offers me a quick flick of his frown, into a straight face, which I imagine is the Lott version of smiling.

"So, do you agree to travel with us?" Sheil asks. "Even if we've gotten off on the wrong foot?"

I nod. I can't get to the Safe-Haven alone. We will probably run into the boys eventually.

Sheil offers me a faint smile, and then continues walking. He gestures for me to follow him. I linger back, letting my eyes land on Lott. He is frozen for a second, before he moves on, essentially crawling forward. His gate is slow, and I wonder for a second if he has broken every single one of his toes.

I move forward, walking with Sheil. The sun is once again hot above us. We continue as if I didn't just try to flee. Every so often, Sheil turns back around and offers me a faint smile. He is much less scary than I had expected. Lott on the other hand, follows us in the rear.

After an hour, Sheil stops and scopes out a building. Though he is tall, and probably heavy, he moves nimbly through the sand. Once he has glanced around the building he turns to the door. He opens it staring inside for a few seconds. I take the flashlight out of my backpack passing it to him. He mutters a quick thank you, before entering.

We walk around the darkness, expecting there to be any sound, but there is none. The light of the morning barely fills the room, with it's dark and thick brick walls. The little light comes in through the door.

It slams shut behind us. I turn on my feet, Sheil pulling me back and shining the light forward. It's Lott, smirking. He begins to whistle as he steps forward, looking around the building.

"I hate when he does that," Sheil sighs, stalking forward. He can't help the smile on his cheeks. "Every single stucking time."

"Brings them out, doesn't it?" Lott turns around, tossing a grin behind his shoulder.

I listen in the building for any creaking sounds, but none come. When Sheil's steps get softer and softer, I run forward, moving after him.

Lott continues to whistle, his feet tapping on the floor. Sheil is rolling his eyes. "It's like you want to be attacked."

"You caught me," Lott chuckles. His laugh is clipped.

"You're quiet," Sheil remarks, looking down at me. "Never been in a building before?"

"It's not that," I yawn. My eyes are getting heavy, but I will be damned if I'm the first to fall asleep. We are at a set of stairs, which we climb. "You're just nice for kidnappers, is all."

"You're lucky we aren't Jay," Lott responds. "That guy is crazy."
"Jay's not so bad," Sheil rolls his eyes. "You just don't like him because he's sleeping with Rose and Hilde."

"You just don't like him because he's sleeping with Rose and Hilde," Lott repeats, his voice going up in pitch to mock Sheil. Instead of getting angry, like I expect, Sheil rolls his eyes and smiles. He leans over, and playfully shoves Lott, who laughs at the gesture. It's as if Lott has been switched off, and there is a different boy hiding underneath, who I can only glimpse at for a second.

"Don't air me out like that," Lott rolls his eyes. It seems Sheil has a way of picking people apart and calling them out on their klunk. I sort of like it. He really knows the others.

It doesn't seem like any of them have a leader. Instead, they sort of coexist, accepting their differences and their fates.

"Tell us about your group of girls," Sheil offers, trying to get me to join the conversation. "I've had my suspicions on them, but I can't figure it out."

"Sorry?" I ask.

"Here he goes again," Lott rolls his eyes.

Sheil sits down, pulling me to the ground with him. His eyes open up, and he gestures wildly. "So, as soon as we were put in the second group, I've been trying to match us up. I can't figure out who goes with who, anyway."

"Sorry?" I ask.

"Well, this is all connected," he begins, looking up in the air, as if the strings hang above him. "Emil noticed it first. He was convinced there was someone missing, a girl. He called her Emily. Now, I suspect it's a girl from your group, but I don't know who. Have any of you died?"

I shake my head back and forth.

"And there is no Emily?" He clarifies.

I shake my head again, and he leans backwards, snapping his fingers.

"He's talking about Ella," I tell Sheil. His eyes peer into mine, and he gestures for me to keep talking. "Well, she remembered a whole ton of stuff. The process didn't work properly on her. She has epilepsy."

"See, we think Emil had schizophrenia," Sheil says. "He saw things, and heard things, that are only starting to make sense now."

"Ella's the same," I continue. "There is something wrong with her brain. She can't focus or form new memories."

"We suspect," Sheil looks over to Lott, who is paying no attention to our conversation. He's playing with broken glass on the floor, brushing it around. "Well, I suspect, that something is wrong with the area of the brain that controls the memory. I don't know what, but I think they are living the past, in the present. Just my theory."

"Sounds solid," I tell Sheil.

"Well, so here's the thing," he continues. "What is Ella's Subject name?"
I shake my head back and forth. I honestly never checked. I never thought it was important. "Honestly, I don't know."

Sheil rolls his head back, closing his eyes. "That's a load."

He snaps for a minute, racking his brain for anything. I like the way he thinks. At first, he just seemed like a nice guy, but he's put more thought into our history than I have. Not because he thinks it's more important, I don't think, but because it's a mystery to solve.

"So, I've been trying to figure out our counterparts," Sheil says. "I can't make sense of it in my head. It's definitely Emil and Ella, right? That makes the most sense. Dawn hasn't really talked to me, but I suspect that's because Jay is a jerk and always stares at her like he's going to eat her alive. For a while, I thought Michelle and I weren't counterparts, because our names are so similar. What are your subject names?"

It takes me a second to realise he is waiting for me to talk. "I'm the Anchor. Dawn is the Roots, and Michelle is the Hermit."

"Tell me more about Michelle," he prompts. "What's she like?"

I blow a strand of hair out of my face. "Well, she's pretty quiet, and rather full of herself. She sleeps around, which is fine, and is pretty violent."

"See, that reads like Jay," Sheil explains. "Other than the quiet part. The Rat, his subject name, is nothing like hers. And Michelle and Sheil sound the most similar. I'm the Wires though, which sounds like Dawn, the Roots. Leo and Lott sound pretty similar, and his subject name is the Elastic. Personality wise, nothing really seems to be matching up, except I think you and I are similar enough. It's really frustrating, don't you think?"

"Why does it matter so much to you?" I ask, leaning forward.

He sighs, looking over at Lott. Lott simply shrugs, causing Sheil to exhale harshly. "I think it's important. I think there is more to our story than WICKED lets on. We know that Aris is the trigger, and your Teresa. Rachel and Thomas were in on it too, since they helped design the Glade, but what did they do. We are named after four famous authors, I've gathered. Mary Shelley, Charlotte Bronte, Jane Austen, and Emily Dickinson. It's been planned from the beginning. I just want to know why."

Can't blame him for that. None of it makes sense. I hadn't thought about it much before, but I still can't manage to focus on it with Newt out there, without me.

"Stop boring her and let the stick sleep," Lott yawns. "I'll take first watch."

Sheil sighs, lying down on the ground. It is harsh beneath him, just as it is beneath me. I copy his gesture.

"We will talk more in the morning," Sheil offers. "With our combined knowledge, I'm sure we can solve this."

I believe him.
We should blend in

Dawn Short

My back is stiff, and I am turned away from the group. I let my eyes linger on my shadow, cast by the light of the flames which Jorge has lit. Ignoring the cries of Thomas is harder then it seems since they are trying to clean the wound. Eventually, I close my eyes. No matter how hard I try, I can't turn off the sound. My ears split open as his gasps cut through the air. No one else is talking.

Hands are on my side, and I feel Minho next to me. He holds me firmly, only letting go to brush my hair out of my face. I took out the braids earlier today, and now my hair is blowing in the wind through the open window. Minho presses a kiss into my shoulder and turns my chin to face him.

"Are you okay?" He asks.

I nod, though I feel absent. The vomiting took a lot out of me. It doesn't help that I am still listening to Thomas crying out in pain. I can't help him, and Leo is out there stuck with those girls, and I am so very lost.

"Before we left, you said you'd tell me something when we were safe," he begins, testing the waters.

"We aren't safe," I answer, shrugging my head away. The wind is strong, and my eyes sting. I can feel tears in the corners of my eyes.

"We aren't going to be safe for a long time." Minho doesn't take no for an answer. "What was it, Dawn?"

Sure, maybe I should tell him, but I can't. Needing and wanting are different things. We need to get out of the Scorch. We need water, and we need food, but I don't need to tell him. Maybe I want him to know but wanting isn't enough.

"I love you," Minho continues, squeezing me. "I just need you to be alright."

I need that too. Unfortunately, we are stuck here, and I can hear Thomas groaning.

I turn around, to see Jorge attempting to clean the wound. With the few bandages we have left, he tries to cover up Thomas. It won't work though. Clint sits frozen on the ground, staring forward. He doesn't seem to blink, or breath, or do much of anything.

"Clint," I breathe.

Minho sighs. "He's been like that since Jeff died. I don't know how he managed to run through the storm."

My eyes scan the crowd. Faces I recognize, but names I have trouble remembering. I knew more boys than this. Once, we were in the thirties, maybe even forties. How did we let this happen? What did we do to deserve this?

"I can't watch anyone else hurt," I begin, staring out into the group. "I can't, Minho."

He wraps himself further into me, and I hold him too. Despite the difficulties, it forces me to undergo. I don't know where I would be without him. Alone in this group, staring out into the
Scorch, and uncertain of my future. Not much is different now, but I feel as though with him I can conquer anything.

Michelle Short

Teresa sits across the way from me, fuming. She has said nothing to me in hours. At least, I have said nothing to her either.

"Ignore her," Harriet offers. She sits down next to me, leaning over. "Her and I discussed Leo's escape. We've decided you had nothing to do with it."

"No vote?" I raise an eyebrow.

"No time," she sighs.

Yeah, that's what I would've thought.

There are four or five flashlights bouncing light off the walls. Even though we are supposed to be sleeping, no one can manage to. The room has been abuzz since Beth and Gally's appearance. Obviously, the others are just as curious about their current whereabouts as I am.

"Michelle?" I turn and spot a girl I don't know. She is trying to talk to me, but Harriet shoos her off.

"Not now," she interjects. The other girl face freezes, inch by inch stilling. She lies back down, rolling until her back is turned to us.

She clicks out her light.

Neither Harriet nor I say anything for a few seconds. We listen to the chatter, catching whispers here and there. My name, and Beth's, and Gally's.

"Saph used to be with Beth," Harriet whispers, gesturing to the girl on the ground. "Obviously she was devastated when they showed up."

I don't bother answering since it's not my place to have an opinion about this.

"What can you tell me about Gally?" Harriet asks. "Teresa doesn't know him, and Ella is..."

"Yeah," I mutter. Gally would've disappeared closer to the time that Teresa woke up, but probably before. Not that I remember much of that. All of those days blur together. Maybe it was yesterday, but I'll be damned if it doesn't feel like it was eight years ago. Every time I've seen him since he's been strung out of his mind. Not a word out of his mouth makes sense.

Harriet waits for a response, but I am out of shucks to give. She sighs, turning her attention to the floor.

"Beth oversaw the maps," Harriet tells me. "She wasn't particularly fond of Rachel, our Thomas, but didn't hate the stick either. Kept warning us about her though, since she remembered Rachel from before. I mean, almost all of us remembered Rachel, and what she did. She spent her first week and a half in jail until she told us she could solve the Maze."
"Then Beth came back one day from the Maze, strung out, attacked Rachel, then was taken by a Griever," I finish the story. "Then she came back, and stabbed Rachel, but wasn't in control of her body."

"Pretty much," Harriet nods, waiting for me to continue.

I roll my eyes since it seems like I have to get in this. "Gally was the same. He didn't like any of us girls though. Bit of a conspiracy nut. He disappeared, got taken by a Griever, and then killed Chuck. Happy accident."

"Nothing else special about him?" Harriet asks. "Why did he show up to talk to you?"

I hate these questions, and I hate Teresa's staring. I'm not putting up with another night of these questions.

"I barely knew the shank," I bite through my teeth. "Nothing special about him. We never got along anyway."

Ella short

I sit down, twirling her long blonde hair in my fingers. It's difficult to ignore the dark roots, soiled. In this dark lighting, lit up by only a few flashlights, I choose to concentrate on the things about her I can't see. The smell of her skin, sunburnt and dirty. The soft feeling of it, despite it's sweat and its callouses. The sound of her breath, as her chest rises and falls.


I feel as if we are on a boat, at the mercy of the ocean. Swaying, rocking, and gentle. Then, a wave. Hiccup. Capsized. Rinse, recycle, repeat. Day in and day out.

"I remember you," I whisper into her hair, leaning forward. Her skin is sickly pale. She isn't okay. She is sick. She is unconscious and swaying and sick.

"I remember how cold your hands were," I begin, moving mine down to hers. They are burning up. Skyrocketing above us, closer and closer to the sun. "I remember how soft your voice was, and how scared you were. I'm sorry I didn't follow you."

If I had the opportunity to redo everything, I would. Even in this state, I would've sent myself up into the Maze off girls, and chased after the Violet girl, or Sonya, or whatever damn name they are going to call her next.

"I still love you," I manage, even though the words hurt my throat.

Maybe I don't know her. It's been so long since we last saw each other, and we were going by names different from our own. Mine different from the one which wears me now. Everything was different. There wasn't a ghost of Eli, and there wasn't a plot, and there wasn't, perhaps, the manipulation of that plot. No group of four. Nothing complicated or ridiculous, and nothing separating us.

"I am your Emily." I mean it. I truly do, even if she doesn't remember me. Even though I can accept that she never will.
I get up to a crashing. Whipping out my knife, I look around the room. I can feel the sweat pooling on my forehead, and my heart racing out of my chest. Where did it come from? Are there Cranks around?

I hear feet slipping on the concrete and turn to see I am alone. Lott's feet dart away from me, and I roll up onto my feet, following after him.

He moves over next to Sheil, who lies on the ground. Lott's hands are shaking, as he dumps out the pouch along his belt. His fingers search the ground, running along with various needles. He grabs a bottle, and a needle, glancing back at me.

I kneel down next to him, placing my hands on his. He continues to shake, though his dark eyes look up at me. I offer him a faint smile, taking the bottle from his hands. I open it, holding out my other hand for the needle.

He hands it to me, hand on the tip. It's dirty now, infected. I get up, holding the needle and making my way back to the bag. I carefully dip the tip into the container of alcohol I have. Lott doesn't ask me what I'm doing.

I get back, finally placing the needle in the liquid.

"Draw to the green line," he tells me.

I follow his instructions, filling the needle. As soon as I'm done, I close the lid of the container.

"In his leg," he grunts, gesturing to the boy on the ground.

Lott pulls down Sheil's pants slightly, just so that the top of his thigh is exposed beneath his underwear. I inject the boy, who is muttering words I don't understand.

Lott takes the used needle from me, putting it in another pouch he carries. I get up, walking back over and bringing the alcohol with me. Though I don't know if this will work, I carefully dip the tips into the bottle. Lott helps me, though his hands shake as he does.

"We should leave them in here for a couple of hours, so they sterilize properly," I tell him, my voice a light whisper. "I didn't have the luxury with the other needle. Let's just hope he doesn't get sick."

Lott stiffens as he places the needle in the bottle, staring down at the liquid.

"Alcohol," I tell him, before clarifying. "Rubbing."

He nods, distracted. His eyes spin as they follow the swirling liquid. His spine is completely rigid, and his arms shake from the firmness of his muscles flexing. His dark eyes dart away, and he leans back. Attempting to relax doesn't help him at all. I can tell from the way his eyes flicker across the room. From how his dark face, obscured by shadows, hits mine.

"Don't tell him," Lott begins, closing his eyes for half a second. "He doesn't need to worry about me."
I nod my head, although I’m not entirely sure what exactly he is asking of me. He gets up, walking
back to the place we were sleeping earlier. He lies down, turning his back away from me.

I turn back to Sheil, who has quieted down. His breathing is soft, yet still enough. My fingers dart
to his pants, which are still down. I struggle to pull them up, buttoning them carefully, before lying
down on the ground.
I shouldn't be corralled

Dawn 26

I move over to the wall closest to us, analyzing it. We had come to this place last night for shelter when it was too dark to see the walls. Now the sun is going to set, and the bright light peaks in through the windows. Everyone else is packing around us, but I'm distracted. We didn't sleep at all, but if we don't get moving now, we will be forced to travel through the sun today. Exhaustion over burning skin, I guess.

This wall in front of me is stained with blood, not dissimilar in pattern and structure from the one in the Slammer. The one which has blood coming from beneath my skin. The desert is suddenly freezing.

"You ready to go?" Fry asks, leaning over to me.

I shake my head back and forth, staring at the wall. My feet move backwards, ignoring the rest of the group until I get downstairs. There are several doors, and I crack into each of them, shoving my weight forward. They each bust open upon contact, one after the other, after the other. They are all empty and abandoned. The final one is locked though. I kick at it with my foot, and it doesn't budge open.

"What are you doing?" Minho has chased down the stairs after me. He holds my shoulders, pulling me in closer to him. "You're going to wake up every Crank on the shucking block!"

"There's a passage again," I tell him, pulling back and gesturing to the door. If it is the only one that is locked, then we can get underground. This is always a habit I do before we leave, even if I usually do it more quietly.

Minho sighs, looking over at the door. He scratches the back of his neck, before pulling me in closer to his chest. Shaking his head, he calls upstairs. "Hey, Clint? You still got that spraying paint?"

"Yeah?" Clint calls back down.

Holding on to me, Minho walks up the stairs. We turn towards Clint, who holds the can of spray paint in his hand. I take it from him, turning to the wall covered in blood. I shake the can and open the lid.

"What day is it?" I ask over my shoulder.

"Seven," Doug calls out.

I begin to spray, in messy black letters.

_Lion. Desert today. 7. Morning Sun._

"Keep writing that much, and you'll run out of spray paint before tomorrow," Doug takes the can back from me, throwing it into his bag.

I shrug. Everywhere we've slept, I've left a similar message, always the same. For Leo, where we are headed, what day it is, from me. A simple and easy format that she will understand for sure, but perhaps no one else will.
Newt is uneasy. His shoulders are hunched up, curled in on themselves. I can't say her name around him. He always becomes like this. A shadow of a boy I used to know.

Minho is distracted, moving away from me. We've got to keep running, so he and Doug haul Thomas off the ground. The boy screams out in pain, but they have no choice except to leave him to die. His head dips up and down as they walk, much like I imagine his subconscious does. I move with the flow of the boys, my head dizzy and murky, and not what it once was. Is this what insanity feels like? Existing separate from everyone else?

We make it outside, crawling about under the night. Jorge tries to help the boys carry Thomas without him falling over, and Brenda is a little less distant now, but she still isn't talking to me, Minho is too busy with the group to actually be here, and I miss my friends. I miss Leo, and I never thought I'd say this, but I miss Michelle. I miss the Glade. This isn't fun. I always wanted to explore the Earth, but everything is sand, and the closest star burnt us, and I feel like my life is eclipsing.

Then, the stars above us disappear. There is a loud roaring, filling the air. It gets closer and closer. I grab on to Fry next to me, grabbing at his shoulder. He turns his attention towards me, before staring up at the sky.

"What the shuck?" He asks, staring up at the sky. His voice is obscured by the sound.

I grab his torch out of his hands, flashing the light up at the sky. Above us is a metal ceiling, hanging down over us.

"What is that?" I demand, staring up into the sky. "Does anyone see that?"

Everyone's torches fly up towards the massive structure above us. My clothes are whipping around, my hair swallowing me whole. I put my torch between my knees, beginning to tie up my hair.

"Berg!" Jorge screams, running away.

Minho drops Thomas, running back from the thing. Sand is beginning to pick up around us, blurring into the crowd. I push forward to him, watching as Brenda runs to Thomas over his shoulder. The sand beats into my face, and I am forced to close my eyes. I continue searching, my hands thrown out in front of me, as I try to navigate.

"Minho?" I screech, though I can barely hear myself above this impending drum. "Minho!"

The whirring is overwhelming. I slip on the sand beneath me, falling to the ground. There is an arm on my elbow, lifting me up. Newt is behind me, hoisting me to my feet.

"Where's Thomas?" He demands, looking around.

"You left him?" I ask, gripping on to Newt's shoulder.

The sand is throwing around us, beating against my face. He stands there, holding on to my arm. Eventually, I lose sight of him, but can still feel him holding me. The sand is a wall around me.

Then, the sand seems to settle down. It falls to the ground slowly. I shake my head, letting it fall out of hair. Cascading like a waterfall to the ground. Newt is clear, but his body is covered in sand. His hair a more golden blonde than before. It strikes me, suddenly, how similar to Sonya he looks. How similar they sound when they speak. My accent is different, but theirs are identical.

Newt lets go of me, turning around the group. He spins around, looking for others. Darting over, he starts to dig out Clint, whose body is half covered in the sand. Though his eyes are blank, I can see
Clint's chest rising and falling, over and over. He's alive. I doubt he's injured. Did he just lie there during the entire storm?

I spin on my feet, looking around. We are out in the open, with no one else around. I spot Brenda and run over to her.

"What happened?" I ask the brunette, eyes raking her up and down. "Where did everyone go?"

"They took Thomas," she tells me, finally speaking. She cocks her head to the side, letting sand shake off her clothes. "They got him."

"Who?" I ask.

"Who do you think?" Her tongue is venomous, her eyes sharp. "WICKED took him."

I turn around, staring across the desert sand. It's only the four of us in the streets. Newt, Clint, Brenda, and me. They took Tommy? Who else did they take?

Minho is gone. I stick my hands in my hair, running them through, ignoring the knots I rip out of my head.

"Minho!" I scream, looking around the area. "Minho!"

He's gone, again. Already. Half of our group is gone. Screw Group B, WICKED was our bigger threat. None of my friends are here.

"Dawn?" Doug pops out of the door of a building. Behind him is Fry. They jog across the sand, staring around.

"Where did you go?" I ask, staring at the pair of them.

"We ran inside when the sand hit," Doug tells me, his voice low and serious. He crosses his arms over his chest, glancing around the sand. He squints, as though the stars aren't providing enough light.

"Were you out here?" Fry asks. "Jorge said being out here was suicide, with the Berg coming in. Said they were probably collecting more Cranks to experiment on."

They wouldn't need to collect us; this is already an experiment. Why did they take Thomas then?

"Did Minho come with you?" I ask.

Fry's face falls, and Doug shakes his head.

Shucking damn it. I turn around, staring at the group. Two of the boys I didn't know come out of the building, trailing after Jorge, but no Minho. They took him since he's the leader. Despite what the signs are saying about Thomas. I'm the Roots, and he is the Leader, and he is gone again. What are they doing to them?

"Who are we missing?" Newt calls out, gesturing for us to come over. We look around the group, scanning faces.

"Wyck," Dmitri calls out. He's the only one of the boys I don't know who is gone. Aidan and Hank are clinging on to each other beside Jorge.

"Minho," I say as well.
"Jay," Aris says, scanning the circle.

"Thomas," Brenda says. She is late, huffing as she arrives. "WICKED took him."

"You think they took Wyck?" Aidan asks.

"I hope they did," Hank answers.

It's only a few of us. Me, Newt, Fry, Doug, Jorge, Brenda, Clint, Dmitri, Hank, Aris, and Aidan. We lost almost half of us in three days. Is this what is going to keep happening?

"Help!" I hear a voice scream.

"Jay," Aris's eyes light up. He pulls out a knife from his pocket, following the voice. The rest of us run after him, brandishing our own weapons as we chase him down.

He rounds a corridor but backs away immediately. I hit his back, and we crash down.

I pull myself off the ground, following the boys who have pushed me back around the corner. There are Cranks, maybe half a dozen, charging at us.

I pull out my knife, stabbing the first one that approaches me. It shoves me against the wall. I doubt it can even feel the wound. A hand on my neck, strangling me against the wall. My throat feels like it is closing in on itself. I take my knife, stabbing its stomach over and over again. It drips darker black blood on to my clothes, slumping against me. I throw it to the ground, looking around.

Doug stabs the last one, pulling out his knife from within the creature's gullet. He looks up, wiping the blood off his face.

There are corpses all over the ground. Dead Cranks, paving the sand. Dmitri is on the floor, leaning over a body and shaking it. Wyck. Dmitri sobs, as he holds the dead boy in his arms.

I glance around the otherwise empty, noticing everyone else is doing the same. We are all breathing together, all drenched in blood, and all confused.

"What was that?" Minho's voice rises the closer to the end of the sentence he gets. He spins to stare at Jay. The boy holds up his blood-streaked hands in defence.

"I didn't know they'd be back here," he stutters, looking around the circle. "I swear."

There is sweat pooling on his forehead, his voice is low, and his eyes are wild. Minho grabs the boy by the collar of his shirt, slamming him into the wall behind him. Fry runs over, as do many more in the group to pull Minho away. I don't know what to think anymore.

"Wyck's dead now!" Minho shouts.

"I was just trying to get away from the Berg!" Jay says, his voice cracking at the end of the sentence. "I didn't think."

"You didn't think!" Minho shouts.

"Would you both slim it?" I shout, jumping into their conversation. "Thomas is gone. WICKED got him."

Minho's body tenses. He glares at Jay but ultimately rips himself out of Newt's grip. Jay's shoulders are huffing as he breathes. Neither boy makes a move for the other, trying to come down. Minho's
eyes are bloodshot, and I could describe how exhausted he looks again, but it isn't going to change anything. We're all tired. I don't trust Jay, but I get the feeling he is being genuine, for once.

"What do we do?" Doug asks since he is the only one who is willing to ignore emotions in any situation. "We're going to keep moving, right?"

"Seriously shank?" Minho looks over at Doug, gesturing around. "Thomas is gone, Wyck is dead, and you want to know if we are going to keep moving."

"He's right," Jorge answers, stepping forward. "You hombres are running short on time."

Minho shoves his way through the circle, heading out of the alleyway. Newt follows after him, but I stand on my feet, unable to move. It's no better in this group than it was in the last. If anything, we are all being ripped apart. My body is shredded.

Fry puts an arm around me, corralling me out of the alley with the rest of the Gladers. A mindless army, intent on pushing forward.

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