

Beneath the Burning Veil

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For the ones who believed in me... and for the coffee that kept me functioning.

PROLOGUE

THE SCORCHING TRUTH

The world burned. It wasn't an inferno or a blaze but an intense heat that drastically changed the planet. The textbooks say that Earth was once a lush, thriving world. But that's not what Inferna has become. Here, survival is measured in drops of water.

It wasn't always like this. There was a time when Inferna, once called Earth, had seasons, oceans, and clouds that carried what the textbooks call *rain*. But that was before humanity turned its back on the planet's basic needs. Greed bled it dry. Factories rose higher than mountains, forests fell to concrete, and the atmosphere choked on its own fumes. They called it progress.

The warning signs came—drought here, ice caps melting there. But no one listened—not until the Great Ignition. According to our elders, no one knew for certain what triggered it—a chain reaction in the atmosphere, some catastrophic industrial accident, chemical warfare, or simply the Earth reaching its breaking point. The sun became a cruel tyrant, and the heat consumed everything. Crops withered, rivers evaporated, and the cities that once stood tall and proud collapsed.

Nations fell as the planet burned. Borders and feuds became meaningless when the world turned to ash. Some fled underground, digging

into the planet's crust, searching for coolness. Others stayed above, scavenging what they could from the ruins of humanity's selfishness. But the lucky ones—well, the wealthy ones—were the ones who built the domes.

The Haven Network was humanity's answer to extinction. Domes of reinforced glass and steel rose from the scorched Earth, each a self-contained ecosystem designed to protect its inhabitants from the sun's wrath. Inside, life continued for the wealthy and powerful. They divided the domes by purpose: VerdaniX grew the food, Ignis Forge manufactured weapons, and Solaris Prime ruled them all. The Syndicate, an alliance of the wealthiest families, took control of the domes, creating a new world government where wealth was survival.

Outside the domes, the world became a dry wasteland. The air shimmered with heat, and the ground cracked like an ancient, dry riverbed. Those who couldn't buy their way into the domes were cast out to die under the blistering sun. But humans are stubborn creatures. They adapted. Some burrowed deep into caves and created their new humanity. Others weren't so lucky. The intense heat twisted their bodies, merging man and beast into feral monsters that roamed the Barrens.

This was the world Kael Solaryn was born into. Not the lush and thriving world called Earth. But the new world of Inferna, a world of scorching sun and lies. From his earliest memories, he knew he didn't quite belong. Not in the Syndicate halls with their polished floors and fake smiles. Not among the nobles who whispered behind his back, calling him the king's *bastard*. But he had a roof over his head and food in his stomach, privileges many in Inferna would kill for. It was enough—or so he told himself.

BENEATH THE BURNING VEIL

But even within the domes, the cracks were showing. The Syndicate's power wasn't as great as it seemed. Whispers of a rebellion grew louder with each passing year. Fuel trucks vanished, and crops went missing. The Veiled—those cast out but refused to die—were rising in numbers and strength. Their ability to adapt to the Barrens' heat gave them a unique advantage over The Haven Network.

Beneath the domes, beneath the polished steel and the manufactured skies, a different kind of heat was building. It wasn't the sun. It was the truth. And the truth, once exposed, would scorch everything in its path.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SOLARYN LEGACY

The air inside Solaris Prime always felt fake to me. It carried the faint hum of machinery, a constant reminder that everything around us—every breath, every piece of food—was manufactured. No one acknowledged it, of course. To the people here, the Dome was paradise. To me, it was a cage.

The banquet hall was no exception. It was a large room with perfect floors and walls. Collums and artwork stretched out with a glass painting of the founders of the Haven Network. I found it funny how its vaulted ceilings were painted with scenes of rolling green fields and blue oceans—the way Inferna was when it was still called Earth, or so they claimed. Crystal chandeliers hung like frozen stars, throwing fractured light across murals of an impossible past. Every inch of the room was designed to remind us of what we had lost and what we had built to replace it.

I stood at the edge of the hall, in enough to be included but far enough that I could be mistaken for a shadow. The obnoxious laughter and chatter of the Syndicate's elites filled the air, as fake as the paintings above us. Lords and ladies draped in silks with jewels moved

through the room. Their conversations were filled with calculated words, each a delusional thought or a promise with strings attached.

I tugged at the stiff collar of my black tunic, wishing I could disappear into the shadows surrounding me. It wasn't the annual banquet that annoyed me—it was the people. They were masters of the game, moving the playing pieces in every which way to benefit the top one percent of the top one percent. And I was the outlier, the *bastard son* of King Alric Solaryn.

"Kael."

Her voice had a way of making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Queen Lyra approached, her emerald gown flowing like liquid poison. She was beautiful in how a venomous cobra stood and swayed its hooded head back and forth, mesmerizing yet terrifying.

"Lurking in the shadows again, I see," she said, stopping a step too close. Her lips curved into a forced smile. "It's becoming a habit, isn't it?"

"I find the shadows less crowded, Your Majesty."

"Less crowded or less scrutinized?"

I nodded as she stepped closer, and her voice became a whisper. "You know, it's strange. For all the king's strengths, he's always had that one weakness... erasing his mistakes."

Before I could respond, two more figures appeared behind her—Tarin and Edric, her sons, my stepbrothers. Tarin was the older of the two. His dark hair was slicked back with some sort of oil for hair that he continuously requested from the Ignes Forge Dome.

"Kael," Tarin said, his smirk widening as he approached. "I thought I saw you hiding back there."

"I prefer observing to performing."

Tarin chuckled and nudged Edric. "Observing? Like when you observed your mother getting killed by the Feralkind out in the Barrens?"

"Careful, brother," Edric said. "He might be one of them, or maybe he's a spy with the Veiled freaks."

I clenched my fists behind my back and used every restraint to remain silent. Years ago, I learned not to show any emotion to them, or they would use it against me.

"Enough."

The voice belonged to Captain Daris Orven, the king's top guard. He was also one of the only people in this prison who treated me equally. Lines of experience and battle scars outside the Dome marked his weathered face. His sharp eyes flicked over Tarin and Edric with disapproval.

"Your father expects you at his side," Daris told Tarin. "I suggest you don't keep him waiting."

"Of course, Captain. We wouldn't want to disappoint." He turned back to me, his smile returning. "Enjoy the shadows, Kael. It's where you belong."

They left, their laughter fading into the noise of the banquet.

Daris watched them go before turning to me. "You shouldn't let them get to you."

"Easier said than done," I muttered.

He raised an eyebrow. "You're smarter than they are. Use it."

"What's the point?"

"The point is you are the rightful heir to the throne, and once your father is gone, you will be the ruler over these fake, snot-nosed brats."

"Not unless they kill me first."

He gave me a look, the same look he gave to me when he'd catch me trying to escape the Dome or asking too many questions about my birth mother. He had taught me so much about the real world outside these fake walls but refused to tell me about my mother.

The Syndicate's power was on full display, each lord and lady representing a piece of the machine that kept the Haven Network alive.

Lady Verdanix, leader of the Agricultural Dome, is in her emerald gown, matching the deep green of the fields her Dome cultivated. Next to her was Lord Cryovek, whose family controlled the genetic archives in Cryostone. His hair was so white it could've been mistaken for frost. Their whispers were barely loud enough to hear, but their gestures toward my father told me everything I needed to know.

The representatives from Ignis Forge were more challenging to miss, their rough manners clashing with the refined elegance of the banquet. Their leader, a scarred man whose name I didn't know, raised a goblet toward Tiber in a gesture that seemed like submission with a hint of respect.

And then there was Tiber himself, seated not far from the raised platform where my father sat. His crimson robes shimmered under the chandeliers, and his sharp features carried the confidence of a man who knew exactly how much power he held. Tiber was my father's most trusted ally in keeping this machine running, but I never fully trusted him.

I watched as he leaned toward Lyra, their heads close, their conversation just out of earshot. Whatever they were discussing, it wasn't casual. Tiber had sweat running down his face, and Lyra's face looked like it had just seen a Feralkind.

Tiber's eyes glanced in my direction as I quickly looked away. My father's ancestors had built this world, an illusion of unity held together by fragile alliances and buried secrets. In it, the rich got to live in *paradise* while the poor were cast out into the Barrens to survive or die. And this blood that flows through my veins is a reminder that I am a descendant of unjust rulers who killed millions of people simply based on their wealth.

Sometimes, I wondered what my life would have been like outside the Dome. Would I have been better off in the Barrens? Or would I have simply died sooner, consumed by the heat? I sometimes fantasized that my mother was still out there, a fierce warrior with the Veiled or maybe a leader of a world we had never heard of. But then, my mind asked the question, if she was still alive, why would she leave me?

I shook the thought away. It didn't matter. This was my reality, whether I belonged here or not.

The banquet hall buzzed with conversations and whispers. On the surface, the Syndicate lords and ladies looked like a unified government with their civilized manners and coordinated wardrobes. But I knew better. Beneath the veil, this room was a den of snakes, each waiting for their moment to strike.

I stayed in my corner of the room, keeping to the safety of the shadows as I watched. The Syndicate's hierarchy wasn't just wealth or power but also perception. Every smile, every raised goblet, every whispered word was a calculated move in a never-ending game for power. And tonight was no exception. Daris had told me there were whispers of an uprising against my father over the last few months. My father didn't believe it, but Daris had spies all over the Haven Network, and they had never led him astray.

"What are you looking at?" Daris's voice broke through my thoughts.

I turned to find him standing beside me, his weathered face creased with the same wary expression he always wore in these halls. He followed my gaze toward Tiber and the Ignis Forge leader.

"Tiber's been busy," I said quietly.

"Did I ever tell you that I had a brother?."

"No," I said in shock.

"Yes, he was a timid and curious kid quite like yourself. Anyway, one day, he was a little too curious and got into trouble. From then on, I stayed in my lane and did what I should because I was scared I would get into trouble like my brother. However, I now see that maybe my brother was right; maybe we should question some things happening around us."

"Do you think my father knows what's going on?"

Daris didn't answer right away. His gaze lingered on Tiber, then shifted to the raised platform where King Alric sat, his posture as commanding as ever. "Your father sees more than people give him credit for. But even a king can't fight a war alone, Kael."

My father had spent years trying to hold this fragile world together. It was a daily struggle to balance the needs of all the Domes in the network. Strikes for more pay and Veiled raids on our crops and fuel had taken a toll on my father. Daris told me that kings would execute anyone who stood up against the Syndicate in previous reigns, but my father was not so ruthless.

"What are they talking about?" I asked, gesturing towards Tiber and the queen.

"Nothing good."

I looked at my father, seated on the platform with the Syndicate's most powerful lords. He looked calm, even commanding, but I could see the tension in his shoulders, the subtle lines of weariness around his eyes.

For most of my life, I had seen my father as unshakable. He was the king, the leader of the Haven Network, the man who had kept us alive when the world outside had turned to ash. But tonight, for the first time, I saw something else. I saw a man fighting a battle he was starting to lose.

And yet, I was powerless to stop it. I was a shadow, a bastard, an afterthought. I wasn't a warrior or a strategist. I was just a boy pretending to belong in a world that would never accept me.

Daris placed a hand on my shoulder, his grip firm. "Keep your head down tonight," he said quietly.

I nodded, swallowing the knot in my throat.

The banquet hall echoed with applause and cheers as King Alric approached the podium and raised his goblet.

"My friends, allies, and visionaries," my father began. "We gather tonight to celebrate our survival and honor the bonds that have kept the Haven Network the strongest force throughout Inferna. The Domes are thriving, and production is at a height we had never seen before. And though the sun may scorch the land outside, together, in here, we endure. Together, we prosper."

The crowd responded with a roar of applause and agreeance. My father's words were the truth. Despite immense pressures and threats from Inferna, he kept this community alive and thriving.

Across the room, Tiber's goblet hung loosely in his hand, his crimson robes pooling like blood against the chair. The queen leaned

toward him, whispering something that made his lips twitch into the faintest smiles.

As the applause faded, my father lowered his goblet and gestured toward the gathered Syndicate. "Tonight, we toast not only to our achievements but to our future. The Haven Network has withstood attacks from the Feralkind, the Veiled, and even the sun, but they have never and will never destroy us. Together, we will see this world through its darkest days."

"Raise your drinks with me." He lifted his goblet again. Around the hall, the lords and ladies followed suit; their crystal glasses glistened in the light throughout the hall. I watched as my father took a sip as others did the same.

And then it happened.

It started with a slight hesitation—a falter in his hand loosened its grip on the goblet. His expression shifted, the excitement draining from his face as his brow quivered in confusion. A sharp cough escaped his throat, followed by another, harsher this time.

My heart stopped as he stumbled back and pressed his fingers around his throat. The hall gasped in confusion and fear.

"Father?" I called, my voice breaking as I stepped forward.

The goblet slipped from his grasp, hovering in the air for what seemed like forever before it shattered against the polished floor. Foam bubbled at the corners of his mouth, and his skin changed to green and purple hues.

"Help him!" I shouted and rushed to the platform as everyone else stood still.

I reached him just as his knees buckled, catching his weight as he collapsed against me. His breaths came in ragged gasps, each more desperate than the last.

"Kael," he rasped.

Before I could respond, movement from the corner of my eye caught my attention. Tiber rose from his seat, his crimson robes trailing behind him as he stepped onto the platform.

"Why is no one helping him?" I begged.

"Tragic," Tiber said, flashing me a faint smirk before addressing the banquet hall. "We have a traitor amongst us."

"For the good of our people, we must act decisively. As King Alric's most trusted ally, it falls to me to ensure stability during this time of uncertainty."

My father's grip lessened as I squeezed it tighter. A rogue tear dropped from my eye, dripping onto his chest.

The room erupted with fear and confusion. Tiber raised a hand and silenced the crowd. "Bow to me," he commanded. "Pledge your loyalty to the future of the Haven Network, or face the consequences."

At that moment, the guards around the hall stepped forward, their weapons drawn and aimed at the crowd. The message was clear: compliance or death.

Queen Lyra was the first to step forward, bowing to Tiber while my father, her husband, lay beside them, his life draining from his body.

One by one, the Syndicate lords and ladies began to kneel. Even those who had once stood defiant now lowered their heads; their fear outweighed their pride.

"I won't bow to a treasonous coward!" one of the leaders of the Cryostone Dome called out.

"Let me show the rest of you how our ancestors did things," Tiber said.

With one shot, the man was gone. The rest of the room knelt before Tiber and the Queen.

Daris's hand gripped my shoulder, pulling me from my spiral of despair. "We have to go," he said, his voice low but firm. "Now."

"I can't just leave him," I protested.

My father used the last bit of strength in his body to raise his hand and grabbed my face. Blood spewed from his mouth as he mustered enough energy to speak his last words.

"Find Erya," he begged, blood escaping his mouth as he fumbled through his final words. "The Sunscorched Prophecy."

"Take the bastard and Captain Daris to the cells," Tiber demanded as the guards moved towards us.

"Move," Daris snapped.

Reluctantly, I let him pull me to my feet; the weight of my father's last moments clung to me like a shroud.

The banquet hall fell into chaos behind us, and Tiber's voice, commanding obedience with a few gunshots, echoed around us. Daris didn't let go of my arm as he dragged me through the winding hallways. My legs moved on instinct, but my mind was still on the platform—on my father's lifeless body.

"Keep moving," Daris said. "We don't have time for hesitation."

The hallway beyond the banquet hall was dimly lit, the faint hum of the Dome's machinery vibrating through the walls. It felt colder here; the artificial warmth of the banquet was long gone. My heart pounded in my chest, each beat a reminder of what had just happened.

"We have to reach the tunnels before they lock the exits."

"Tunnels?" My voice came out hoarse, strained. "What tunnels?"

Daris didn't answer right away. He pulled me around a corner and then pressed his hand on a corner of my father's painting. The wall holding the painting opened a secret passage I had never seen before. The walls inside were bare, the air thicker and filled with the faint smell of oil.

"Your father had them built years ago," Daris said finally. "Emergency escape routes for times like this. He knew something like this could happen again after your mother."

"What happened to my mother?"

"The Syndicate Elites discovered that your father had a bastard child and forced him to exile your mother to the Barrens, or they would have you killed. Your father chose you over her."

I stumbled over the uneven floor, the weight of his words pressed against me. My father had chosen me, his bastard son, and exiled my mother. He'd known the Syndicate wasn't as united as it appeared, that his throne was built on lies. And yet, he'd stayed, trying to hold it all together.

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"She's still alive, Kael. Find the Veiled, find Erya."

We reached an unmarked door at the end of the passage, its edges rusted from years of neglect. Daris pulled a small lever on the wall. The lock clicked open, and the door groaned on its hinges as if it hadn't been opened in years.

The air was heavy and hot, and the space beyond was darker than I expected. Pipes and conduits lined the walls, their surfaces slick with condensation. The faint hum of machinery was louder here, a con-

stant reminder that Solaris Prime was nothing more than a machine that hid its contents from the outside world.

"Stay close," Daris said, stepping into the tunnel. His hand never left the hilt of his sword. "We don't know who—or what—might be down here."

I hesitated at the threshold; we can't just leave him."

"Your father is gone, Kael. Staying behind won't change that. But if you don't survive, his death will mean nothing."

The door closed behind us with a metallic clang, cutting off the sounds of the Dome above. For the first time in my life, I was truly leaving Solaris Prime—and it felt like I was leaving behind everything I'd ever known.

We moved quickly through the tunnels. With every step, the air around us got heavier and hotter. My breaths came in shallow bursts; my mind raced with questions I didn't dare voice. Behind us, the faint sound of metal doors being opened and footsteps echoed through the passage.

"They're coming," I whispered.

"We're almost there. Just keep moving."

The sound grew louder and closer until I heard the guards' shouts. Tiber had sent them after us and wasn't content to take the throne; he wanted to erase any threat to his claim.

Daris slowed as we approached a split. He drew his sword in one motion, the blade reflecting faintly in the low light.

"Kael, listen to me," he said, his voice steady despite the tension in his eyes. "There's an exit ahead, about fifty paces down the left tunnel. You take it and keep running, no matter what happens."

"What about you?" I asked, my stomach twisting.

"I'll hold them off," he said simply. "You're what matters now. Your father's legacy depends on you."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I'm not leaving you—"

"You don't have a choice! You're the heir, Kael. They won't stop until you're dead. Now go."

He grabbed an old, dusty bookbag from a shelf, like it had been hidden years ago, and placed it on my shoulders. He stared at me briefly. His eyes radiated with love and guilt.

Before I could argue further, Daris pushed me toward the left tunnel. He nodded at me before turning to face the wrath of Tiber. I stumbled forward, my heart pounding as his voice echoed behind me.

"Move, Kael!"

I ran.

I ran harder and faster than I ever had before. Flashes of my father's face played over and over in my mind. The sounds of steel clashing and shouts faded as I put distance between us. The tunnel seemed endless as I ran toward a future I didn't understand, a destiny I didn't want.

I finally reached the end, a door similar to the previous one. I pulled down on the stiff lever as hard as possible and pushed the rusted metal open. I hesitated momentarily; every bone in my body wanted to help Daris, but I couldn't let Tiber get away with this.

With a deep breath, I stepped into the Barrens.

CHAPTER TWO

INTO THE BARRENS

The heat was the first thing I noticed when I stepped through the door. It hit me like a physical blow; the air was so dry that it felt like it was trying to steal the moisture from my lungs. For the first time in my life, I was under a real sky—not the artificial Dome that mimicked the serene blue skies of Solaris Prime. Inferna's sun was an intense ball of heat, a blinding expanse stretching forever.

I stumbled forward, and the ground beneath my boots crumbled. Sand. I had read about it in books, but none of the descriptions had prepared me for the way it shifted underfoot, fine grains finding their way into every crevice of my boots. The air carried the sharp scent of scorched earth mixed with something metallic and bitter. It was nothing like the sterile, filtered air of Solaris Prime.

My hands shook as I lowered the heavy door behind me, the metallic clang echoing into the vast emptiness. My legs felt weak, the adrenaline from the escape draining out of me. Daris's voice still echoed: "You're the heir, Kael. They won't stop until you're dead." I swallowed hard, pushing the thought away. I couldn't afford to break down—not here, not now.

I just stood there momentarily, the enormity of the Barrens stretching out before me. Rolling dunes of sand stood in the distance. What little vegetation remained was shriveled and colorless, clinging to life in a world that had long since abandoned it. The horizon shimmered with heat waves, distorting the distant ruins of structures I couldn't quite make out.

I dropped the bag Daris had given me onto the sand and sank to my knees. I tried to slow my breathing, but the intense heat threatened to suffocate me. My father was dead. Daris was likely captured—or worse. And I was alone, in a world I didn't understand, with nothing but a cryptic warning: Find Erya.

I steadied my trembling hands and pulled open the bag's frayed straps. The deteriorating fabric was rough against my fingers. Inside, I found the first object: a metal cylinder, its surface scratched and dented. When I opened it, a faint sizzle escaped from the inside, followed by the scent of musty water. I tipped it cautiously, watching a blue, gel-like substance ooze into my palm. It wasn't much, but it would keep me alive for now.

The second item was a hooded cloak made from a fabric I didn't recognize. It felt cool to the touch, like a manufactured cooling material. When I draped it over my shoulders, the difference was immediate. The suffocating heat that had been sucking the life out of me lessened, though it didn't disappear entirely. I pulled the hood over my head, and my body temperature lowered.

Next, I found an old, handwritten note, its edges yellowed with age. My father's handwriting was unmistakable, bold, and formal. I unfolded it and revealed the familiar name at the top: Erya. The letter was brief but clear—a sort of apology note for why he did what he did.

“My dear Erya,

I know you can't possibly forgive me for what I have done, but I did it for our son. I want you to know that I will explain this to our son one day, and we will find you again. I have decided to name the child Kael, after your father. Stay safe, my love.

Alric.”

It dawned on me then that this backpack was meant for her, not me when she was exiled all those years ago. But something went wrong, and she never got the bag. So, that means she never read this letter and doesn't even know my name.

The final item was a handgun, which was worn and nearly rusted. Six bullets sat in the chamber, ready for its deadly purpose. I turned it over in my hands; the weight was weirdly comforting, given my current situation. I had never held a gun before but had seen enough guards handle them to understand the basics. Ignis Forge had manufactured millions of bullets and weapons in its lifetime. This gun looked more old—ancient, even—but it was my only defense out here.

A lump formed in my throat as I thought of my father, his final moments replaying in my mind over and over again. I remember his hand gripping mine and his voice hoarse as he spoke those last, fateful words: *“Find Erya. And something about a Sunscorched Prophecy.”* He had trusted me with something big, and I had no idea where to begin.

My gaze drifted to the horizon, where the ruins of the old world stood as silent witnesses to humanity's downfall—structures swallowed by the heat and crumbling sand. This was the world my father had tried to protect me from, the world I now had no choice but to face. Every instinct urged me to run back to the Dome, to the safety of its walls, but there was no going back—not now, not ever.

I took another sip of the gel-like water, nearly vomiting at its bitter taste. It barely eased the dryness in my throat, but it was enough to keep me moving. I slung the bag over my shoulder and rose to my feet, my legs still trembling. The sun beat down ruthlessly, but I forced myself to take a step forward and then another.

As I walked, I couldn't help but wonder about the Veiled—the mysterious rebels I had heard the Elites speaking of over the years. Were they saviors, or were they as dangerous as the Syndicate claimed? And who was my mother, Erya? Was she one of them? A Veiled warrior I had daydreamed of? Or was she something else entirely?

The sand stretched endlessly in every direction. Each step was more challenging than the last; the ground continuously shifted beneath my boots as if trying to drag me under. The air was so dry that it seemed to remove the moisture from my skin, leaving a tight, cracked feeling on my face. My tongue felt thick in my mouth, and the bitter taste of the gel water remained long after I had swallowed it.

The ruins on the horizon were closer now. Their jagged silhouettes stood like broken teeth against the blinding sky. Rusted beams twisted at awkward angles, the remains of ancient structures. A faint wind carried the smell of decay and metal.

I paused to catch my breath. The cooling cloak was doing its best to keep me calm. Even so, my body wasn't built for this. Every muscle ached, and my lungs burned with every inhale. I tilted toward the sky and squinted at the sun above me. This was the real sun—the same one that had scorched the Earth and turned it into this wasteland. It felt like a cruel god punishing any and all who came in contact with it.

For years, I had dreamed of leaving Solaris Prime, escaping the stifling walls of the Dome and its artificial perfection. Now, the irony

wasn't lost on me—I would have given anything to go back. Still, a tiny part of me, deep down, thrust forward. I needed to find my mother.

I kept moving, one slow, careful step at a time. Every movement felt like a fight with my body. It took everything in me to move my feet through the thick sand. My legs screamed to stop, but I couldn't. Stopping meant giving up, and giving up meant dying out here alone.

My mind wandered back to Solaris Prime, to the life I had left behind. The cool, clean air. The food was always perfectly portioned and engineered to meet our basic needs. The ceilings were painted with scenes of a world I had never known, a world of green forests and blue oceans. It had all felt fake to me, like a prison disguised as some sort of paradise. But now, being in the reality of Inferna, I realized how much I had taken the fake paradise for granted.

A gust of wind blew across the sand, kicking up fine grains that stung my face and clung to my skin. I turned away, pulling the hood of my cloak tighter around me. The wind carried a low, groaning sound. I froze, listening intently. My heart pounded in my chest. But it was just the wind—or so I told myself.

I saw it as I forced my body to carry me over a small dune. At first, I thought it was a mirage, but it was real. It was a tall, metal ruin of a building covered mostly in endless sand, with an opening, possibly where a door or window used to be. I dragged my legs towards it and took a deep breath before walking into the dark, unaware of the ruin.

The dark was unnerving, but it was much cooler inside. My knees buckled, and I dropped to the ground. I convinced myself that I deserved a break. Solaris Prime was barely visible, letting me know how far I had walked.

A strange, ticking noise echoed from somewhere in the ruins. Was it metal twisting under the extreme heat or something else? That's when I saw it. At first, it was a distant blur, but as it emerged from the building's pitch black, I realized what it was. I had read about the Feralkind in my books.

The figure stumbled toward me, its head twitching unnaturally. My stomach twisted as I took in its strange appearance. Its skin was leathery and cracked, stretched tightly over a skeletal frame. Long, clawed fingers hung at its sides. But the eyes froze me in place—yellow, glowing faintly.

I had heard of them in whispers, stories passed around by the Dome's guards when they thought no one was listening. Feralkind, human survivors left to survive in the Barrens, their bodies twisted and mutated by years of exposure to the sun's radiation.

The creature let out a deep sound between a growl and a wheeze. I slowly picked my bag up and took a step backward. A portion of my book came to mind. One crucial fact about Feralkind was that they were blind. They relied on their other senses to find prey.

I slowly took a step back and then another. A sudden cranking noise echoed around me, and before I realized what was happening, a rope that I had mistakenly stepped on wrapped around my leg and pulled me up into the air. My head slammed onto the ground before forcing me upside down.

Pain surged into my head, and blood dripped into a pool below me. The creature screeched and ran to the blood-stained sand. Its sense of smell overpowered it. My head was dizzy as more and more blood rushed to my head, threatening to knock me unconscious.



I blinked several times, trying to clear the blurs in my vision. The light from the sun that had pierced through the holes of the building was no longer there. A dim light was all that could be seen from the entrance I came in from. Nighttime? I realized I had passed out. Below me was the creature, licking up every drop of blood in the sand as my head still bled.

In the Domes, the machines acted on an eight-hour night schedule to mimic nighttime, but from my books, I had learned that the nights outside the Barrens were shorter and posed an immense threat from predators as the temperatures declined slightly.

My hand acted swiftly and pulled the handgun from my bag that hung from my arm. I focused my vision on the creature below and squeezed the trigger. The gunshot echoed across the Barrens, a sharp crack that sent a jolt through my entire body. The bullet missed, kicking up a plume of sand just to the creature's left. It didn't even flinch.

I fired again, this time striking it in the back. It looked up at me as if it could see. A noise echoed from the shadows, followed by another, and then another. Before I knew it, the room was filled with Feralkind. They began jumping at me, biting, but just out of reach as I did what I could to dodge while suspended upside down in the air.

A blur ran by the dimly lit door, followed by a fiery arrow that flew by me into the horde. They screamed in agony as more fire spread around the room. A rogue arrow shot through the rope that hung me in the air, sending me crashing into the sand below.

"This way," the blur called out.

I jumped up and ran out of the building as fire consumed the ruins behind me. The figure forced me into a makeshift vehicle with large tires, able to glide across the sand. The engine roared to life, and we sped away from the ruins.

After moments, the figure stopped behind some large boulders and shut the engine off.

"Thank you," I said.

"Shh."

I remained quiet for hours before the figure finally turned to me. She was young, maybe my age. She pulled the hood of her cloak down and revealed the beautiful features of her face. Her dark hair was pulled back, revealing glowing, almost mesmerizing green eyes.

"You're Veiled?" I asked, already knowing the answer. My books described the Veiled as having green eyes, a mutation from their prolonged exposure to the sun's radiation.

Her clothing was practical and worn, designed for survival rather than appearance. A makeshift scarf covered her neck, and her arms were wrapped in fabric to shield them from the sun.

"You're lucky I found you," she said, her voice calm but tinged with annoyance. "What the hell are you doing out here alone?"

I opened my mouth to respond, but no words came out. My heart was still racing, and the adrenaline coursed through me, leaving me lightheaded.

She raised an eyebrow, her glowing eyes narrowing slightly. "Well?"

"I—I was..." I stammered, finally lessening the grip I didn't know I still had on the handgun. "I didn't have a choice."

Her gaze flicked to the cloak draped over my shoulders and then to the bag slung across my back. Something in her expression shifted—curiosity, maybe, or suspicion.

"You're not from out here," she said, more a statement than a question. "Let me see your eyes."

She forcefully grabbed my face, removing my hood and spreading my eyes to check it for mutations.

"No," I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Figures. Only someone from the Domes would be stupid enough to wander into a Feral nest."

The wind howled softly around the boulders, carrying the faint sound of shifting sands and the distant cries of nocturnal creatures. I sat awkwardly across from her, the girl with glowing green eyes—a *Veiled*. She kept her hand on the head of a curved blade strapped to her side. I tried not to stare, but her eyes... they were hypnotic.

Her squinted sight hadn't left me. She was studying me as if trying to decide whether I was worth the effort it had taken to save me.

"So," she said finally, breaking the silence. "Are you going to tell me why you were stupid enough to wander into a Feral nest? Or are you just naturally suicidal?"

"I didn't know it was a nest," I said, my voice hoarse. "I didn't know anything. I..." I hesitated, the reminder of my father's death and Daris's sacrifice catching in my throat. "I didn't have a choice."

Her eyes narrowed, and she leaned forward slightly. "No one ever has a choice," she said coldly. "Not out here."

She turned her attention to the horizon, where the faint glow of dawn was beginning to push back the darkness. I squinted my eyes at the oncoming bright sun as she placed dark goggles over hers, my

stomach twisting as the sheer vastness of the Barrens stretched out before me once more. She motioned to a pair of goggles on the vehicle's floor below me.

The faint rumble of distant engines broke the silence. My head snapped toward the sound. I saw them in the distance through the rising light of dawn: a convoy of massive armored trucks and tankers, their hulking forms moving steadily across the sand. Dust and sand followed behind them, the morning sun reflecting off their metallic exteriors.

"What is that?" I asked, though I knew it was either the Syndicate looking for me or the daily transport between Domes.

I couldn't tell her I was the king's son. The Veiled have been trying to defeat us for ages, and if they had me, Tiber would indeed find me in what could be a hostage trade.

"Did you crawl out from under a rock or something?" She asked with a tone of suspicion. "The Haven Network's Dome routes. That's how they keep the Domes alive. Food, fuel, weapons—everything they need to stay in their precious bubbles while the rest of us rot out here."

The trucks were heavily guarded, followed by sleek vehicles armed with mounted guns. Soldiers rode in open compartments, their weapons at the ready. The convoy moved like a fortress on wheels, impenetrable and prepared to defend. My father and Tiber had ensured that the growing threat of the Veiled would be contained with more armor and guns.

"They move at dawn," she continued, her glowing eyes fixed on the convoy. "Every Dome has a route, and every route has a purpose. Verdanix grows the food. Cryostone contains all of the ancient data of

the old world. Ignis Forge builds their weapons. And Solaris Prime is the Capital."

Her words spoke the truth but came with a hatred for the Domes. I felt a hint of guilt come over me. I kept my mouth shut, not daring to reveal who I really was.

"Do the Veiled... attack them?" I asked as if I were clueless.

"Sometimes. But it's not easy. Those convoys are built for war. The Syndicate doesn't take kindly to anyone disrupting their machine. What do you know about the Veiled?"

"In the Domes, they say you're..." I hesitated, searching for the right word.

"Monsters?" she finished for me. "Terrorists? Savages?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to." She leaned back against the hot seats of her vehicle, her eyes still locked on me. "Let me guess: you've been fed the same lies as everyone else in the Domes that we're the enemy. That we're the reason the Barrens are dangerous."

I didn't know how to respond, so I stayed silent. She shook her head, a bitter laugh escaping her lips.

"We're survivors," she said. "Nothing more, nothing less. The Veiled have adapted to this world, while your precious Syndicate hides behind their walls and pretends the Barrens don't exist. Do you think they're protecting you? They're protecting themselves. Which Dome did you say you were from again?"

I panicked and blurted the first thing that came to mind, "I was a harvester in the Verdania Dome. They caught me eating some of the fruit and exiled me."

She stared at me for a moment as if deciding if she should believe me or not. "That has to be the most pitiful thing I have ever heard. Well, we might be able to use a thief in the Veiled, but it may be a bad one."

"Ha ha, very funny."

"Now that I think about it, there's a girl, Raven, back at our camp who was also exiled from Verdania. Maybe you know her?"

The convoy's rumble faded into the distance, leaving us in silence once more. The sun rose again, allowing the heat waves to resume their daily duties.

"You're lucky I found you," she said. "But luck won't keep you alive out here. If you want to survive, you'll need to learn fast."

I nodded, gripping the straps of my bag tightly. "What's your name?"

"Aria."

"Thank you, Aria. For saving me. I'm Kael."

"A harvester named Kael, great."

She fired up the engine and tossed me a scarf from the sand to cover my mouth and nose.

"Where are we going?" I asked, loud enough to be heard over the engine's roar.

"To a place where the Feralkind won't follow," she said. "And where you can stop looking like a lost puppy."

Her words stung, but I didn't argue. She was right—I had no idea what I was doing out here. I was alive only because of her, and if I wanted to stay that way, I had no choice but to trust her.

For now.

The vehicle roared to life as Aria slammed her foot on the pedal, kicking up a thick cloud of sand behind us. I clutched the edges of the seat as we sped forward, the barren landscape blurring around us. The heat was unrelenting, but the slight breeze that the car produced while we drove was welcome. My mind swirled with questions about Aria and about the Veiled.

Aria didn't speak, her focus fixed on the horizon. Her hands gripped the vehicle's steering handles as she drove through sand dunes and around boulders. Occasionally, she would adjust our course as if she'd done it hundreds of times before.

The further we traveled, the more desolate the Barrens became. The sand was endless, with only occasional dunes shifting like something was swimming under it. There were also skeletal remains of ancient structures. Twisted metal forced their way out of the dry sand like the bones of a forgotten giant.

The silence between us stretched, broken only by the vehicle's engine and the faint whistle of wind. Finally, unable to stand the tension any longer, I cleared my throat.

"How far is it?" I asked, my voice muffled behind the scarf.

Aria didn't look at me. "Fair enough."

I swallowed hard, nodding to myself. "Is it... safe?"

Her lips twitched, almost as if she found the question amusing. "Nowhere is safe out here. But the Veiled's camp is as close as you'll get as long as you're not a Syndicate Spy."

I couldn't tell if she was being serious or not, But I could not afford to let them know my real identity.



The terrain changed as the sun descended toward the horizon, casting long shadows across the sand. The sea of sand and dunes gave way to jagged cliffs and rocky outcroppings, their surfaces scarred by deep cracks and fissures. The air grew cooler, the day's heat easing into a more bearable warmth.

Aria slowed the vehicle, guiding it carefully through a narrow canyon. The walls rose high on either side of us, their surfaces dark and rough. Vines clung to the rock in patches, their brittle leaves rustling faintly in the wind.

"Are we close?" I asked.

Aria nodded. "Almost. Stay quiet from here on out."

I didn't need to be told twice. The tension in her voice was enough to keep me silent.

The canyon twisted and turned, the path narrowing until the vehicle could barely squeeze through. Aria never flinched as we barely made it through the rocky path. The further we went, the darker it became. The towering walls blocked out the sun's fading light.

Finally, we rounded a sharp bend, and the path opened into a wide clearing. My breath caught in my throat as I saw the entrance to a massive mountain, its face carved with intricate patterns and symbols glowing faintly in the dim light.

Aria stopped the vehicle and cut the engine. The sudden silence was almost deafening after the constant roar of the motor. She climbed out, her boots crunching against the gravel, and motioned for me to follow.

I hesitated for a moment. Part of me had to wonder if this was a trap. My entire life, we were told that we couldn't trust anyone outside of the Domes. But I had to keep moving if I wanted to avenge my father's death.

The entrance was massive, a dark archway framed by painted glowing green veins. The symbols etched into the stone were unlike anything I had ever seen.

"Move," Aria said.

I scrambled out of the vehicle, nearly tripping over my own feet as I followed her toward the entrance. My heart pounded, a mixture of awe and fear coursing through me.

As we approached, the faint sound of voices reached my ears. They were low and muffled, blending with the soft hum that seemed to emanate from the mountain itself. I couldn't tell if it was machinery or something else entirely.

Two figures emerged from the shadows of the archway, their green eyes glowing faintly in the dim light. They were armed, their weapons sleek and unfamiliar, their expressions hard and unwelcoming.

"Who's this?" one asked, his voice rough and suspicious.

"An exile," Aria replied, her tone dismissive. "Found him in a Feral nest. He's lucky to be alive."

The man's eyes shifted to me. I fought the urge to shrink under his scrutiny, my hands tightening around the straps of my bag.

"He's Dome-bred," the man said, his tone accusatory.

Aria stepped between us, her stance defiant. "He's with me," she said firmly. "Let him through."

The man hesitated, his grip tightening on his weapon. For a moment, I thought he might refuse. But then he stepped aside, his expression dark.

"Fine," he muttered. "But if he causes trouble, it's on you."

"Noted," Aria said, brushing past him without another word.

I followed her into the mountain, my heart racing as the darkness swallowed us whole.

The air inside was cooler, and the heat of the Barrens was replaced by a damp chill. The walls were smooth and polished, their surfaces glowing faintly with the same green veins that marked the entrance.

As we moved deeper into the mountain, the narrow passage opened into a vast cavern. My jaw dropped as I took it in. The ceiling was so high it was lost in shadow, and the walls were lined with structures that seemed to grow out of the rock itself. Bridges and walkways crisscrossed the cavern, their surfaces lit by the same glowing green light.

People moved through the space, their voices blending into a low murmur. Some carried supplies, others weapons. All of them had the same glowing green eyes, their movements purposeful and confident.

"This is the Veiled," Aria said, her voice breaking through my awe. She turned to face me, her expression serious. "You're here because I vouched for you. Don't make me regret it."

I nodded, swallowing hard. "I won't."

She studied me for a moment, her glowing eyes unreadable. Then she nodded and turned, leading me deeper into the cavern.

As I followed her, I couldn't shake the feeling that I had stepped into another world—a world that was harsh and dangerous but also alive in a way the Domes had never been.

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"Where are we going now?" I asked.

"To figure out how we can use you."

CHAPTER THREE

SHADOWS WITHIN THE VEIL

The air in the central chamber was thick with tension. It wasn't just the humidity of the mountain air or the faint hum of bioluminescent veins coursing through the stone walls. It was the weight of eyes—dozens—watching me, judging me—my every movement, every breath.

The Veiled didn't waste resources on intricate paintings or marble statues like the Syndicate. The chamber was carved directly into the heart of the mountain, its walls lined with patterns that glowed faintly green, casting eerie shadows across the room. A stone octagon at the center served as a platform for the elders. Their eyes glowed green as they stared me down, judging my existence.

Aria led me into the room with a firm hand on my shoulder, a silent warning to keep quiet and follow her lead. Her usual sarcasm was gone, replaced by an edge of seriousness I hadn't seen before. I swallowed hard, trying to keep my face neutral, though my heart pounded loud enough to echo in my ears.

Five elders sat on stone chairs on the platform, their expressions between suspicion and curiosity. At the center was Elder Kaedin,

the leader of the Veiled. His face was weathered, showing decades of survival and leadership. Beside him sat Elder Rynna, her kind eyes a stark contrast to the hard set of her jaw. To Kaedin's left was Elder Moraak, whose sharp gaze seemed to pierce straight through me. He was the one to speak first.

"Another Dome rat," Moraak said, his voice a low growl. "Tell me, boy, why should we trust you? What's stopping us from tossing you back out into the Barrens where you belong?"

I opened my mouth, but Aria stepped in before I could speak.

"He's no threat," she said firmly. "I found him in a Feral nest. He's lucky to be alive, and we could use another pair of hands around here."

"Lucky or stupid," Moraak muttered, leaning forward. "The Barrens don't favor the weak. How do we know he's not a spy?"

"I'm not a spy," I said. "I... I was a harvester in Verdanax Dome. I was exiled for stealing food."

Elder Rynna tilted her head, studying me with an almost maternal curiosity. "And yet you survived out here. That's no small feat for someone from the Domes."

"I had help," I admitted, glancing briefly at Aria.

"She dragged him out of the fire," Moraak sneered. "Doesn't mean he won't burn us all the moment we turn our backs."

"That's enough," Kaedin said. He turned his gaze to me, his green eyes glowing. "Why are you really here? What do you want from us?"

I hesitated, my mind racing. I couldn't tell them the truth—that I was the bastard son of the king of the Syndicate that they spent years fighting. That would only end one way, and it wasn't survival.

"I just want a chance to survive," I said finally, keeping my voice as earnest as possible. "The Domes aren't what you think they are."

They're... suffocating. People like me don't have a future there. I thought... maybe I could find one here."

Kaedin's eyes narrowed, and the silence stretched uncomfortably. I could feel Moraak's glare burning into me, and even Rynna's kindness felt like a blade balanced precariously over my head.

Before anyone could respond, a man burst into the chamber, his boots scraping against the stone floor. His face was pale, and his chest heaved as if he'd run the entire length of the mountain to get here. He made his way directly to Kaedin, leaning in to whisper something in the elder's ear.

Kaedin's expression darkened. He rose from his seat, his commanding presence silencing the murmurs that had begun to ripple through the room.

"Word has come from Solaris Prime," he announced, his voice heavy with authority. "King Alric is dead."

The chamber erupted into chaos. Voices overlapped, questions and accusations flying in every direction. My stomach dropped, the words hitting me deep, even though I had known the news for days. I clenched my fists to keep my hands from shaking, forcing myself to remain still and silent.

Kaedin raised a hand, and the room fell quiet again. "The Syndicate has also announced that Captain Daris Orven and a rogue commoner are to blame. They are saying that they were spies for the Veiled. Tiber Ignarus has taken the throne and declared war on us."

The words hung in the air like a noose. I could see the tension in the Veiled's faces; their shoulders stiffened, and their hands instinctively moved toward their weapons.

"This was inevitable," Moraak said, his voice filled with bitter conviction. "The Syndicate has always wanted an excuse to wipe us out. Now they have it."

"And what do you suggest we do, Moraak?" Rynna shot back. "March on the Domes and get ourselves slaughtered?"

"Better to die fighting than to wait for them to come to us," Moraak growled.

The argument escalated, the elders' voices growing louder as their divisions became painfully clear. I glanced at Aria, who stood rigid beside me.

"This is what we're up against," she muttered under her breath. "A war we didn't ask for and leadership that can't agree on how to fight it."

Kaedin slammed his hand down on the stone chair, echoing through the chamber. "Enough!" he barked. "This is not the time for infighting. We will discuss our strategy in private. For now, we strengthen our defenses and prepare for the worst."

His gaze shifted to me, his expression unreadable. "As for you... you stay under Aria's watch. Prove yourself useful, or you'll find yourself back in the Barrens. Understood?"

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. "Understood."

"Good," Kaedin said, his tone dismissive. "This meeting is adjourned."

The elders rose from their seats, the tension in the room palpable as the Veiled began to disperse. Aria placed a hand on my shoulder, steering me toward the exit.

"You've got a lot to prove," she said quietly. "Don't screw this up."

I didn't respond. My mind was racing, torn between the weight of my father's death, the lies I was forced to tell, and the growing realization that the Veiled's fight was now my fight—whether I wanted it or not.



The stone corridors of the Veiled's mountain sanctuary twisted like a maze, dimly lit by the bioluminescent veins coursing through the walls. The soft green glow offered enough light to navigate but not enough to shake the horrible feelings I felt inside.

Aria walked ahead of me, her boots barely making a sound against the smooth stone floor. Her silence was unnerving. I had grown accustomed to her sarcasm and biting remarks, but now she seemed lost in thought, her face drawn tight with some unspoken tension.

"Where are we going?" I finally asked, breaking the silence. My voice echoed faintly in the narrow passageway.

"You'll see," she said without looking back. Her tone was clipped, giving no room for further questions.

I adjusted the bag strap on my shoulder and followed her, my mind racing. The announcement in the chamber still echoed in my ears. King Alric is dead. Tiber Ignarus has declared war. The words felt like lead weights in my chest. My father was gone, my home was in chaos, and now I was here among people who would likely kill me if they knew the truth.

We emerged into a larger cavern, and I stopped in my tracks. The space was massive, the ceiling disappearing into darkness. Platforms

and walkways crisscrossed above, with ropes and pulleys connecting various levels. The Veiled moved with purpose, their glowing green eyes flickering in the dim light as they carried supplies, sharpened weapons, and whispered in hushed tones. The air smelled of metal, sweat, and something faintly floral that I couldn't place.

"This is the heart of our operation," Aria said. "Everything we do starts here. Supplies come in, plans are made, missions are launched." She gestured to a far corner where a group of Veiled sparred with wooden staffs, their movements sharp and precise. "And that's where we train."

I followed her gaze, watching as one of the fighters—a woman with short-cropped hair and arms wrapped in cloth—delivered a quick series of blows to her opponent, disarming him in seconds. She turned and caught me staring, her green eyes narrowing.

"Who's the Dome rat?" she called out, her voice carrying across the cavern.

Aria sighed. "Great. Here we go."

The woman approached. Her gaze swept over me, taking in my tattered cloak, the bag slung over my shoulder, and the awkward way I held myself.

"Name's Raven," she said, not bothering to hide the disdain in her voice. "And you are?"

"Kael."

"Kael," she repeated as if tasting the word and finding it lacking. "You don't look like much."

"He survived a Feral nest," Aria cut in.

"Did he?" Raven raised an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed. "Or did you survive it for him?"

Aria stepped closer, her shoulders squaring. "You've got a problem with him; take it up with me."

Raven smirked, but her eyes didn't leave mine. "I'll be watching you, Dome rat." With that, she turned and walked back to the training area, leaving a tension in the air that lingered even after she was gone.

"She's lovely," I said dryly.

Aria snorted. "Don't take it personally. Raven doesn't trust anyone. But she's good in a fight, and we need her. Come on. There's someone you need to know about."

She led me to a smaller chamber off the main cavern. The air here was cooler, and the walls were lined with shelves crammed with books, maps, and weapons. A single lantern hung from the ceiling, casting a warm, flickering light.

"This is Erya's space," Aria said, her voice reverent. "She's one of our elders. One of the best leaders we've ever had."

The name hit me like a punch to the gut. I had spent years wondering about my mother, piecing together fragments of memories and whispers from the palace staff. Now, here I was, standing in her world, surrounded by the things she had touched, the plans she had made.

"She's not here?" I asked, my voice cracking despite my effort to keep it steady.

"No," Aria said, shaking her head. "She's leading a mission to Ignis Forge. It's dangerous, but if anyone can pull it off, it's her."

"What kind of mission?" I pressed, trying to keep the desperation out of my voice.

Aria hesitated, her eyes searching mine. "Weapons," she said finally. "We're running low, and the Syndicate isn't exactly handing them out. If we're going to survive what's coming, we need to be ready to fight."

I nodded, my throat tight. My mother—this woman I had spent my whole life imagining—was out there risking everything for a cause I barely understood. And I couldn't tell anyone. Not Aria, not the elders, not anyone.

"She's amazing," Aria said, her voice soft. "But don't let that fool you. She's tough as nails. If she were here, she'd probably have you sparring with Raven until you couldn't stand."

I managed a weak smile. "Sounds like fun."

Aria laughed, the sound breaking through the heavy atmosphere. "Come on," she said, pulling me toward the door. "There's more to see."

Everything weighed down on me as we stepped back into the main cavern. My father was dead. My mother was out somewhere, fighting a war I didn't understand. And I was here, in the heart of the Veiled, pretending to be someone I wasn't.

The journey deeper into the Veiled's mountain stronghold revealed a world I hadn't imagined. The Veiled had built a life in this hollowed-out sanctuary, a defiance against the harsh reality of the Barrens and the Syndicate's relentless assault. But beneath the surface, there was something else—tension. I could feel how people moved, whispered conversations, and guarded looks.

Aria walked beside me, silent for once, her expression unreadable. We descended a narrow staircase carved into the stone, the air growing cooler and heavier with each step. The faint hum of the bioluminescent veins seemed louder here, their glow casting eerie patterns on the walls.

"Where are we going now?" I asked, my voice echoing faintly in the narrow passage.

"To the war room," Aria said simply. "You'll see."

The staircase opened into another cavern, smaller than the others but no less impressive. A large, circular table dominated the center of the room, its surface covered in maps, diagrams, and notes. Around it stood several Veiled, their green eyes glowing in the dim light.

Elder Kaedin stood at the head of the table, his presence commanding even in silence. Beside him stood Moraak and Rynna.

"Aria," Kaedin said. "You're just in time."

She nodded, stepping forward. "What's happened?"

Kaedin gestured to a younger Veiled, a wiry man with close-cropped hair and a nervous energy that radiated off him. "Renn has returned from his mission. He has news."

Renn stepped forward, his hands gripping the edges of the table as if he needed the support. "The Syndicate is mobilizing," he said, his voice steady despite the weight of his words. "They're gathering troops, weapons, supplies. They're preparing for war."

The room fell silent, the gravity of his statement sinking in. My stomach twisted. This was happening faster than I had anticipated. Tiber wasn't wasting any time solidifying his power and targeting his enemies.

"They've issued a decree," Renn continued. "The Veiled are officially enemies of the Syndicate. They're blaming us for King Alric's death. Every Dome has been ordered to turn over anyone suspected of working with us."

Moraak slammed his fist on the table, the sound reverberating through the cavern. "I told you this would happen," he growled. "We should have struck first, taken the fight to them before they had a chance to regroup."

"And gotten ourselves wiped out in the process?" Rynna shot back. "We're not an army, Moraak. We're survivors."

"We won't be survivors for long if we sit here and wait for them to come to us," Moraak countered.

Kaedin raised a hand, silencing them both. "Enough," he said. "This isn't the time for division. We need to be united now more than ever."

"What's the plan, then?" Aria asked.

Kaedin leaned over the table, his hands resting on the edges. "We strengthen our defenses. Increase patrols. Prepare for the worst. And we send a message to Erya. She needs to know what's happening."

The mention of her name sent a jolt through me. My mother. Out there, risking her life while the world seemed to crumble around us.

Renn hesitated, glancing at Kaedin. "There's more," he said quietly. Kaedin's jaw tightened. "Speak."

"They've... they've deployed convoys along the Dome routes," Renn said. "Heavily armed. They're transporting weapons and soldiers. But..." He paused, his hands gripping the table tighter. "They're not just preparing for war. They're preparing for extermination."

A cold chill ran down my spine. Extermination. The word hung in the air like a death knell.

"They're not just coming for us," Renn continued. "They're coming for everyone outside the Domes. Anyone who doesn't fit their vision of order."

The room erupted into chaos, voices overlapping as the weight of Renn's words settled over us. Moraak's anger flared, Rynna's worry deepened, and Kaedin's expression hardened into a mask of grim determination.

"Silence!" Kaedin's voice cut through the noise, commanding attention. "We will not descend into panic. We will prepare. We will survive. And when the time comes, we will fight."

The room fell silent, the elders exchanging tense glances. Kaedin straightened, his gaze sweeping over the room.

"Renn, you'll lead a team to intercept one of these convoys," Kaedin said. "We need their weapons if we stand a chance."

Renn nodded, though the tension in his shoulders betrayed his unease.

"And the rest of us?" Moraak asked, his voice still edged with anger.

"We'll fortify our position," Kaedin said. "Every entrance, every tunnel. If the Syndicate comes, they'll find us ready."

His gaze shifted to me, and I felt a chill run down my spine. "And you, Kael," he said, his tone unreadable. "You'll train. If you're going to stay here, you need to prove yourself useful."

I nodded, my throat dry. "Understood."

"Good," Kaedin said. "This meeting is adjourned. Get to work."

The room began to empty, the Veiled moving with purpose. Aria lingered by my side, her expression thoughtful.

"Training, huh?" she said, a faint smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth. "This should be interesting."

I managed a weak smile, though my mind was spinning. The weight of my father's death, the lies I was living, the growing threat of the Syndicate—it was all too much. But there was no time to dwell on it.

As the room emptied, I caught sight of the maps on the table, the lines marking the Dome routes, the convoy paths, and the Syndicate's growing reach. There was also a board with my ancestry lineage and a question mark under the words *King Alric's son*. When I was born, the

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Syndicate made it their mission to ensure no one outside the Dome knew I existed, and it appears as though it worked.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE EDGE OF SURVIVAL

The war room was alive with energy. Anticipation filled the cavern, its walls glowing faintly with the green-radiated veins that ran through the mountain. The Veiled moved with determination, reading weapons, gear, maps, and other tools as if they'd spent their entire lives preparing for this war.

I stood awkwardly near the edge of the room, clutching the strap of my bag like it was a lifeline. In the center of the room was a massive table where the elders and a few heavily armored men were gathered. Kaedin, as always, stood at the head of the table. Moraak leaned against a stone pillar, his eyes never leaving me.

"Kael."

Aria's voice pulled me from my thoughts. "You ready for this?"

"I guess I don't have much of a choice."

"Not really."

The room quieted as Kaedin raised a hand. "Today," Kaedin began, his voice calm yet firm, "we prepare for what's coming. The Syndicate won't wait, and neither can we. Training isn't just practice—it's survival. Those who falter will not last long in the Barrens." His glowing

green gaze swept the room, lingering on me for a heartbeat longer than I liked.

He gestured to a smaller group standing nearby. "Aria, Jax, Garren, and Nia, take our newcomer on a classic Barren training mission. Let's see if he can handle the way of the Veiled."

I recognized Aria, of course, along with three others. Jax, tall and cocky, leaned casually against a wall, his broad grin flashing as if this were all a game to him. Nia stood to his right, her slender frame taut with quiet intensity, her eyes darting around as if cataloging every room detail. Garren was the last—a hulking figure with a brooding silence that spoke volumes. His expression was as stone-carved as the room around us.

"These five will be one of many younger training groups out there. If we are to go to war, we will need the youngins to be ready."

"Sounds cheery," Jax muttered under his breath, earning a glare from Garren.

Aria shot him a warning look before stepping forward. "We'll be ready."

Kaedin nodded. "You leave at dawn."

The room erupted into motion. Weapons were distributed, maps were handed out, and supplies were checked. I stood awkwardly beside Nia as she carefully examined a sleek blade, its edge gleaming under the dim light.

"You ever used one of these?" she asked.

"Not really."

Her lips twitched into a faint smile. "Figures. Don't worry—you'll learn fast. Or you'll die fast."

"Comforting."

Aria approached, handing me a handgun. It wasn't the ancient one I had brought from the Dome; this was newer, though still worn from use. "Six shots," she said. "Make them count."

I nodded.

"You'll ride with me," Aria said. "Try not to get yourself killed."

"I'll do my best."

Jax sauntered over, a rifle slung casually over his shoulder. "You ready, Dome rat?" he asked with a grin.

"Ready as I'll ever be," I said.

"Good answer," he said, clapping me on the back with a force nearly knocking me off balance. "Stick with me, and you might just survive."

Garren joined us, his expression unreadable. "Less talk, more focus," he said, his deep voice cutting through Jax's lighthearted banter.

"Save it for the Barrens," Aria said. "We've got enough to worry about without you two butting heads."

Kaedin's voice rang out again, silencing the room. "Prepare yourselves. The Barrens are unforgiving, but so are we. Trust in each other, or die alone. The choice is yours."

The meeting was dismissed, and the groups began to disperse. I lingered momentarily, taking in the weight of what lay ahead. The Barrens, the Feralkind, the Syndicate—they all felt like insurmountable threats. But I had made it this far, and I wasn't about to give up now.

As the others moved to gather their gear, Aria caught my eye. "Get some rest," she said. "Tomorrow's going to be a long day."

I nodded, gripping the handgun tightly as I followed her out of the war room. The glow of the bioluminescent veins faded behind us, replaced by the dim light of the mountain's interior. For the first

time since I had arrived, I felt a spark of something I couldn't quite name—hope, maybe. Or determination.

Whatever it was, I would need it. The Barrens awaited, and I had a lot to prove.



The morning came with a ghostly stillness. The air inside the mountain was cool, but as soon as we stepped outside the heavy steel doors of the Veiled's stronghold, the heat of the Barrens hit like a hammer. A harsh wind kicked up the sand, carrying the scent of dust and sun-scorched metal. The vast desert stretched endlessly before us, a sea of shifting dunes and jagged rock formations. It was both breathtaking and terrifying.

My oxygen instantly escaped my lungs. I gasped hard until I caught my breath.

"Take this," Aria said.

She handed me a bag that was fixed on my back. It had a hose that came out of it and went into my mouth when I needed to breathe.

"We use these on the ones with illnesses."

I nodded to her, unable to speak at that moment.

I adjusted the scarf Aria had tossed me yesterday, wrapping it tightly around my face to keep the sand from stinging my skin. The others moved with an ease I didn't have—boots steady in the loose ground, eyes sharp and alert. They were used to this world. I was not.

Two dune buggies were parked near the mountain's entrance, their sleek black frames reinforced with scavenged metal plating. Weapons

were strapped to the sides, and thick tires were built for the unpredictable terrain. Jax whistled low, patting the side of one of them like it was a prized warhorse.

"Nothing like the roar of an engine in the morning," he said.

Garren rolled his eyes. "You act like we're taking a pleasure ride. This is a training run, not a joyride."

Jax smirked. "Says the guy who spends more time brooding than actually enjoying life."

Aria ignored them, checking the weapons mounted on the vehicles. "Everyone locked and loaded?"

"Good to go," Nia replied, securing a belt of throwing knives around her waist.

Aria turned to me. "You're with me."

I nodded, feeling a weight settle in my stomach. The last time I was out in the Barrens, I was hanging upside down with a pack of Feralkind trying to rip me apart. Now, I was willingly driving back into this wasteland.

We piled into the vehicles. Jax took the wheel of the second dune buggy, and Garren rode a shotgun while Nia hopped into the back. Aria slid into our driver's seat and gripped the wheel.

"Hold on," she muttered.

The engine roared to life, and we shot forward, sand spraying behind us. The buggy bounced over the dunes, the impact jarring my bones. I gritted my teeth and held onto the frame for dear life.

The Barrens were not empty. Ancient remnants of the old world pierced through the sand—half-buried buildings, rusted car skeletons, and shattered glass reflecting the unforgiving sun. Heat waves rippled in the distance, distorting the horizon like a mirage.

As we sped forward, Aria shouted over the engine's growl. "This mission is simple. We train against the Feralkind, test our survival skills, and make sure you're not dead weight."

"Sounds easy enough."

"Don't get cocky, Dome rat."

I turned my gaze toward the other buggy. Jax was going airborne over dunes and enjoying the ride too much. I had barely begun to breathe correctly when Aria suddenly jerked the wheel, sending us into a sharp turn.

"What the hell—" I started, but then I saw them.

Figures moved in the distance, just beyond a collapsed ruin of what might have once been a gas station or a watchtower. At first, I thought they were Feralkind, but as we got closer, I realized they weren't hunched and twitching. They stood tall.

Humans.

But not Veiled.

"Who are they?" I asked.

Aria's expression darkened. "Raiders."

The dune buggies skidded to a halt, and the dust cloud rose around us. Garren and Jax had already jumped out of their vehicle, weapons drawn. Nia moved like a shadow, her blade already in hand.

I followed suit, gripping the handgun Aria had given me. My heart pounded. I had read about rogue groups in the Barrens—mercenaries, bandits, exiles who had no allegiance except to themselves.

A group of six men and women stood ahead of us, their faces wrapped in cloth to protect from the sand, their bodies clad in scavenged armor. They carried makeshift weapons—blades fashioned

from scrap metal, rifles that looked like they had been repaired a dozen times.

One of them, a tall man with a shaved head and a scar running down his cheek, stepped forward.

"Well, well," he drawled. "Looks like the Veiled are out for a joyride."

"Keep walking," Aria warned, her bow already in her hands, an arrow nocked.

The man grinned. "Now, now. No need to be so cold. We were just passing through." His gaze slid to me, lingering. "And who's this? A fresh recruit?"

My grip tightened on my gun.

"None of your business," Aria snapped. "Move along, or we'll make you."

"The Syndicate are looking for an escapee, a boy about his size. They're offering a big reward, too."

"Try us," Garren said.

The tension cracked like a whip. The raiders shifted, their hands twitching toward their weapons. My pulse slammed against my ribs.

Then, the scarred man smirked. "Not today," he said. "The Syndicate will wipe you out, and then we'll move in to scavenge from your corpses."

He turned, gesturing to his group, and they slowly backed away, disappearing into the dunes.

Aria didn't lower her bow until they were completely gone. She let out a breath, shoulders relaxing slightly.

"They don't all back down that easily," Nia said.

Jax scoffed. "Did you guys hear what he said about a reward? Maybe the Dome rat is the Kingslayer."

"He's not a killer," Garren said. "Look at his innocent eyes."

"You guys know I can hear you, right?" I said, panicking that they may find out my truth. "Last I checked, the King doesn't live in the Verdenix Dome, where I was exiled from."

"Don't let the Raiders get your heads, guys," Aria said. "Kael isn't a killer, but we're going to change that."

I swallowed hard. I understood survival in the Barrens wasn't just about fighting the Syndicate. It was about navigating a world where trust was the most dangerous gamble.

The buggies sped across the endless expanse of the Barrens, leaving a trail of dust and heatwaves in their wake. The encounter with the Raiders had left a bitter taste in my mouth. If they knew about the Syndicate's bounty, it would only be a matter of time before more of them came looking. I couldn't afford to slip up.

"Keep your head on a swivel," Aria said, her voice breaking through the howling wind. She didn't look at me, her eyes scanning the dunes ahead. "Raiders aren't the only thing lurking out here."

"What exactly are we looking for?" I asked, gripping the metal bar beside me as the buggy rattled over uneven ground.

"Feralkind," she answered. "This is a training mission. We don't return until you prove you can survive a real fight."

My stomach twisted.

I had seen a Feralkind before. I had been *hunted* by one. But now they expected me to stand my ground against them?

Jax's voice crackled over the radio between the buggies. "I say we make a game out of it. The team who gets the most kills gets first dibs on dinner for a week."

"You know if we lose, they'll take our peaches," Nia said.

"Deal," Aria agreed before anyone could change their minds.

A loud *thunk* from beneath our buggy cut off their conversation. Aria cursed, jerking the wheel as the vehicle lurched violently to the side.

"What the hell was that?" I shouted, gripping onto anything I could.

Aria's face was pale, her knuckles white on the steering wheel. "I don't know—"

The ground *moved*.

Not in the way sand shifts beneath your feet. The *entire dune* trembled, sending ripples through the landscape.

"Tell me that's not—"

"Everyone, *move!*" Aria called into the radio.

Jax's buggy swerved hard, tires spinning in the sand, but it was too late. The ground beneath us split open with a deafening *roar*; a massive shape exploding from beneath the dunes.

A *sand wraith*.

I had read about them in books—giant subterranean predators that hunted by sensing vibrations in the sand. They were rare, but when they surfaced, they left nothing alive.

The creature towered over us, its body a combination of hardened chitin and exposed, pulsating flesh. It had no eyes—only a massive, circular maw lined with jagged teeth, gaping wide enough to swallow a man whole. A deep, ear-piercing screech tore through the air, rattling the buggies as the beast coiled upward.

"Oh, *hell* no," Jax muttered over the radio.

The wraith struck first. Its massive body slammed into the sand, sending up a wave of dust and debris. Aria gunned the engine, whip-

ping the buggy away just as the beast's gaping maw crashed into the space where we had been seconds ago.

"We need to kill it," Garren said, his voice eerily calm.

"Kill it?" I shouted. "It's the size of a building!"

"Not the whole thing," Aria snapped. "The head. Aim for the exposed tissue near its mouth!"

Nia leaned out of the back of the second buggy, her throwing knives already in hand. She let one fly, and it *sank* into the beast's soft flesh. The wraith reeled, thrashing wildly, sending sand flying in all directions.

Jax let out a loud whoop. "Now *that's* what I'm talking about!"

Aria drew her bow, notching an arrow. "Kael, take the wheel."

"What?"

"I *said take the wheel!*"

She didn't wait for me to respond. She let go, sliding onto the edge of the buggy as she raised her bow. I scrambled to grab the steering wheel, my hands slick with sweat.

Aria loosed her arrow. It struck the wraith dead center, embedding itself into the fleshy part of its gaping maw. The beast recoiled; its screech was so loud that it rattled my teeth.

Jax and Garren fired their rifles, bullets tearing into the wraith's exposed tissue. Black, tar-like blood splattered against the sand.

The wraith let out another ear-splitting shriek and *dove*.

I barely had time to react before the ground beneath us *collapsed*.

The buggy *flipped*, sending me flying from my seat. As I tumbled across the dunes, the world blurred into a haze of sand, heat, and pain. The breath ripped from my lungs as I hit the ground hard, rolling until I came to a jarring stop.

For a second, everything was silent.

Then I heard the sound of something massive *burrowing*.

I forced myself to my hands and knees, coughing up sand. My vision swam. I saw the others scrambling to their feet through the haze, weapons raised.

The wraith was *circling us*.

Aria was already on her feet, her bow drawn, blood dripping from a cut on her forehead. "Kael, get up!"

I forced myself upright, raising the gun Aria had given me. My hands were shaking. The wraith's movements sent tremors through the ground, sand shifting beneath my feet.

Jax reloaded his rifle. "He's mine!"

The creature lunged.

I didn't think. I didn't hesitate. I raised the gun and fired.

The bullet struck just beside Aria's arrow, burrowing deep into the exposed tissue.

The wraith screamed, its body convulsing violently. Garren fired another shot. Nia let loose another knife. Aria's final arrow sank into the beast's throat.

With a final, agonized screech, the wraith collapsed. Its massive body slammed into the sand, sending one last explosion of dust into the air.

Then, silence.

I stood there, chest heaving, my fingers still locked around the gun. My ears rang from the wraith's death cry.

Jax was the first to break the silence.

"Well, *damn*," he said, a slow grin spreading across his face. "Not bad, Dome rat."

I let out a breathless laugh, my body shaking from the adrenaline.

Aria lowered her bow, wiping the blood from her face. "That was reckless," she muttered. Then, after a pause, she looked at me. "But not bad."

I couldn't tell if that was a compliment or not, but right now, I didn't care.

Garren knelt beside the wraith's corpse, pressing a hand against its thick hide. "This thing's going to draw attention," he said.

Nia nodded. "We need to move. Fast."

Aria turned to me. "Congratulations, Kael. You just survived your first hunt."

"One kill for us and zero for you guys," I said.

"Yeah, we'll give you that one," Nia said.

I swallowed, my throat dry as the desert itself.

"Garren, radio back to the Veiled and tell them what happened," Aria ordered. "They'll want to come harvest the blood of this thing."

"The blood?" I questioned.

"They use it for various medicines and experiments," Garren answered.

I didn't know what I felt—fear, exhaustion, or something dangerously close to exhilaration.

Whatever it was, it was the first time since leaving Solaris Prime that I truly felt *alive*.



When we reached the abandoned gas station, the sun was sinking below the horizon, bleeding streaks of orange and red across the sky. The Barrens made the world feel endless—an expanse of nothingness stretching in every direction. But out here, in the twilight, it was something else entirely. The wind howled softly, sending sand drifting across the cracked pavement, and the rusted sign above the station groaned as if it could fall at any moment.

We had pushed the buggies as far as they would go after the fight with the sand wraith. Even Jax was quieter than usual.

Aria parked the buggy just outside the station's entrance and shut off the engine. The moment the vehicle stilled, the silence of the wasteland settled in.

"This is home for the night," she announced, grabbing her bag from the back. "It's not much, but it'll keep us covered until morning."

I climbed out; my muscles ached from the ride, and I took in our surroundings. The gas station was barely standing—its walls pockmarked with bullet holes, the roof sagging slightly. Inside, the shelves were long emptied, but the bones of the old world still lingered—dusty cans of food, faded posters, and a rusted-out cash register. A few overturned chairs were scattered near the back, and someone had once scrawled a message on the wall: *The Sun Will Guide Us*.

"Charming," I muttered, brushing sand off my jacket.

"Better than sleeping out in the open," Garren said, moving toward the entrance. "We'll take shifts keeping watch. This place might be abandoned, but that doesn't mean we're alone."

Jax sighed dramatically, throwing himself onto a makeshift bench near the door. "We just fought a giant worm from hell. What are the chances we run into more bad luck?"

Nia shot him a look. "Do you *want* to find out?"

Jax shrugged, grinning. "I like to live dangerously."

Garren rolled his eyes and disappeared into the back of the station, checking the perimeter. Aria, meanwhile, had already begun gathering supplies, rifling through her pack for food.

"You ever had canned beans, Dome rat?" she asked, tossing a dented can my way.

I caught it awkwardly, looking at the faded label. "I've had perfectly balanced nutritional portions designed to sustain the body."

Jax let out a low whistle. "And I thought *we* had it rough."

"Trust me," I said, popping the can open with a dull *click*. "It's not as great as it sounds."

We settled in, spreading out what little food we had between us. The gas station's single flickering light, powered by some ancient, failing solar panel, cast long shadows across the walls.

We ate in silence; the only sounds were the occasional creak of the wind outside and the distant howls of creatures I didn't want to think about. It wasn't until Aria shifted beside me that she finally broke the quiet.

"You held your own today," she admitted, leaning back against the wall.

I looked at her, surprised. "That almost sounded like a compliment."

"Don't get used to it."

I glanced toward the others. Jax was showing off his knife tricks to Nia, who looked mildly unimpressed. Garren had taken the first watch, standing just outside with his rifle resting against his shoulder.

"Why do you fight?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You could've run. You could've left all of this behind. But you didn't. Why?"

For a moment, she didn't answer. Then she sighed, tilting her head toward the ceiling. "Because it's not about me. It never was. The Veiled fight because we *have* to. The Syndicate doesn't want us alive. If we don't push back, we get wiped out. Simple as that."

I thought about the bounty on my head, the way Tiber had twisted my father's death to justify his war. The Veiled weren't just some rogue group fighting for survival—they were fighting because they had no other choice.

"What about you, Dome rat?" Aria asked, nudging me with her boot. "What's your excuse?"

I hesitated. "I don't know yet."

"You're a terrible liar."

I tensed, but she didn't push. Instead, she studied me for a long moment, her green eyes reflecting the dim light of the station. Then, almost casually, she said, "Fathers can be intense."

I blinked. "What?"

"You said something about Kaedin earlier. About how he runs things. I get it." She exhaled, stretching her arms behind her head. "Fathers are like that."

Something in my chest tightened.

She wasn't just talking about Kaedin.

She was talking about *her* father.

Kaedin. The leader of the Veiled.

I stared at her, the realization hitting like a punch to the gut. She had never said it outright, but it was there in the way she carried herself and the way the others looked at her with respect and expectation.

Aria was Kaedin's daughter.

I opened my mouth, but Jax's voice interrupted before I could say anything.

"Alright, lovebirds," he called out. "Some of us are trying to enjoy our last meal before we probably get eaten by desert monsters."

Aria rolled her eyes and tossed a can at him. He caught it easily, laughing.

The tension eased. The moment passed.

But as I lay back, staring at the cracked ceiling, I couldn't shake the thought.

I had spent my whole life being defined by my father's name.

And now, here I was, sitting next to someone else who carried the weight of her father's legacy—except she *belonged* in this world.

I didn't.

At least, not yet.

CHAPTER FIVE

BLOOD AND BETAYAL

The mountain stronghold should have felt like a sanctuary. Instead, the air was thick with unease when we passed through the steel entrance.

Something was wrong.

I could see how people moved—hurried, whispering in tight clusters, hands hovering over weapons. The bioluminescent veins running through the stone walls cast eerie green shadows, but they couldn't mask the shift in the air.

We had been gone for less than a day, but everything had changed.

Aria's knuckles whitened as she gripped the wheel of the buggy, her eyes scanning the figures moving within the tunnels. The second she killed the engine, she was out, her boots hitting the stone floor hard.

"Something happened," she muttered under her breath.

I followed her lead, jumping down and feeling the weight of the mountain settle over me. Jax, Nia, and Garren weren't far behind, their previous banter from the Barrens fading into silence. Even Jax—who had made a joke about our kill count five minutes ago—looked uneasy.

Renn, the wiry scout who had delivered the Syndicate war declaration, came sprinting toward us. His face was pale, his breath coming in quick bursts. "You need to get to the war room. Now."

Aria stiffened. "What happened?"

He hesitated, glancing around as if unsure who might be listening. Then, in a low voice, he said, "We were attacked."

I felt my stomach drop.

"When?" Garren asked.

Renn wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Hours ago. Just before dawn." His eyes darted toward the tunnels, then back to us. "Someone let them in."

The words hit like a punch to the gut.

Aria's expression darkened. "Are you telling me we have a traitor?"

Renn didn't answer—he didn't have to.

A sickening realization settled over me. The Veiled's defenses were tight, nearly impossible to breach without inside knowledge. If someone had let the enemy in, it wasn't just a betrayal.

It was an execution waiting to happen.

Aria stormed past Renn, and we followed, weaving through the tunnels until we reached the war room. The tension only thickened inside.

The chamber was packed. The elders sat in their usual places around the stone table, but their faces were grim, their whispered conversations clipped and urgent. The walls were lined with fighters—the strongest of the Veiled—all on edge.

Kaedin stood at the head of the table, his arms crossed over his chest. "You're back," he said, his glowing green eyes sweeping over our group. "Good."

Moraak, his usual scowl somehow deeper, slammed a hand on the table. "Now tell us, Kaedin—who's the traitor?"

The word hung in the air, unspoken but dangerous.

Kaedin's gaze didn't waver. "We don't know yet."

Moraak let out a bitter laugh. "Of course, we don't." His gaze flicked to Aria, then to me. "We waste time playing hero in the Barrens while the enemy walks among us."

Aria bristled. "We were following orders. Do you want to blame someone? Blame the bastard who let them in."

The room rippled with murmurs.

Elder Rynna—who had always been the calmest voice in these meetings—spoke up. "What do we know about the attack?"

Kaedin exhaled slowly. "They targeted the armory and supply caches. Hit us fast, moved like they knew the layout."

A cold chill ran down my spine.

"They weren't just raiders," Garren said.

"No," Kaedin confirmed. "They were trained."

Silence.

Then Nia cursed under her breath. "Syndicate."

The word sent a ripple through the room.

"If the Syndicate's already moving against us, that means the war has started," Jax said, shifting uncomfortably. "And they have someone working from the inside."

Moraak's gaze landed on me. "You. Dome rat."

I went rigid.

"You show up, and suddenly, we're under attack?" His lips curled. "That's quite the coincidence."

Aria stepped in before I could respond, her voice sharp as a blade. "That's enough."

Moraak didn't back down. "You trust him because you found him in the Barrens? That means nothing." His eyes locked onto mine. "Where do your loyalties lie, Kael?"

I could feel every eye in the room on me.

The truth lay on my tongue, sharp and ready to slip out. But if I told them—if they knew I was King Alric's bastard son—would they kill me on the spot? Or would they keep me as leverage, a bargaining chip in their war?

I swallowed hard and forced myself to meet Moraak's gaze.

"I'm here," I said evenly. "And I fought for my life in the Barrens. I have nothing to do with this."

Moraak narrowed his eyes but didn't press further.

Kaedin looked between us before making his decision. "Enough. We don't turn on each other. Not now."

Moraak's jaw clenched, but he said nothing.

Kaedin continued. "We need answers. We need to know who did this and be ready for what's coming."

His gaze shifted to me, then to Aria. "You two are going on a mission."

Aria straightened. "What kind of mission?"

Kaedin's voice was low, deliberate. "A Syndicate convoy is moving through the Barrens. Heavily guarded. We need to know what they're transporting—and if it's connected to this attack."

A hush fell over the war room.

A direct mission against the Syndicate wasn't something the Veiled took lightly. It was dangerous. Reckless. But also necessary.

Aria didn't hesitate. "When do we leave?"

Kaedin didn't blink. "Tonight."

Moraak scoffed. "Sending them alone? A couple of kids."

"Technically, we're young adults," Jax couldn't help but add.

"You'll take Jax, Nia, and Garren with you," Kaedin said. "We don't know what's in those transports, but we need to find out."

"We need a small, stealthy group we can trust out there while we lock things down here." He turned to me. "This is your chance to prove that you're with us."

I nodded, my stomach knotting.

Kaedin's final words echoed in my head as the meeting broke apart.

"This war is just beginning."



Nightfall draped the Barrens in shadow.

The heat that had blistered the land hours ago still lingered, rising in waves from the cracked earth, but the air had cooled just enough to bring a false sense of relief. The moon of Inferna hung low, casting an eerie glow over the dunes, its pale light distorting the landscape into something almost otherworldly.

We crouched behind a crumbling ridge of ancient stone, peering down at the Syndicate convoy making its slow crawl across the Barrens.

There were five transport trucks, their reinforced metal frames reflecting the moonlight in sharp streaks. Armed escorts flanked them—armored Syndicate soldiers in desert-grade exosuits, their rifles

glowing faintly with energy cells. The vehicles moved precisely as if they were guarding more than just supplies.

"There's too much security for just a weapons shipment," Aria whispered.

"Then what the hell are they transporting?" Jax muttered, adjusting the scope of his rifle.

"Only one way to find out," Garren said, his voice low. He turned to me. "What do you think, Dome rat?"

I ignored the jab and studied the convoy. The lead vehicle was the biggest—not a supply truck but a modified fortress on wheels. It had thick plating, slitted windows, and reinforced tires. That was the target.

"If they're this heavily guarded, they'll have a plan for an ambush," I said. "We can't hit them head-on."

Aria nodded approvingly. "We force them into a choke point." She turned to Jax. "You still got those proximity charges?"

Jax grinned. "You doubt me?" He reached into his pack and pulled out three compact explosives, each small enough to fit in a palm. "Set these in the right spots, and boom—instant blockade."

"Perfect," Aria said. "We funnel them into a kill zone. Take out the escorts first, then move in on the lead truck."

Garren cracked his knuckles. "Sounds like a plan."

Nia shifted beside me, her fingers tightening around the head of her blade. "This better be worth the risk."

"It will be," Aria promised.

We moved quickly, keeping low as we navigated the terrain. The Syndicate convoy moved steadily but cautiously, their headlights cut-

ting through the darkness. Every few minutes, the soldiers swept the dunes with thermal scanners.

We worked in pairs.

Jax and Garren set the charges along a narrow pass between two rock formations—a perfect ambush point. The road was naturally constricted there, meaning the convoy would have no choice but to funnel through.

Nia and I positioned ourselves along a separate ridge, lying flat against the rocks. Aria took the high ground, an arrow already loaded in her bow.

The Syndicate trucks rumbled closer.

Jax's voice crackled over the radio. "They're in position. Give the word."

Aria waited. The wind shifted, carrying the scent of scorched sand and metal. Just as the lead truck rolled into the pass, she whispered into the radio.

"Now."

Jax hit the detonator.

The night exploded.

A wall of flame erupted behind the last truck, sending shockwaves rippling through the sand. The convoy lurched to a stop as the rear vehicle was torn apart, its twisted metal frame blocking any retreat.

Syndicate soldiers scrambled from the trucks, shouting orders, their weapons raised.

I aimed. Breathe. Squeeze the trigger.

The first shot caught a soldier in the neck. He crumpled before he even knew what hit him.

The Veiled struck fast and hard. Aria's arrow sank into a soldier's visor, piercing straight through. Nia was already moving, darting between covers, slicing through Syndicate's armor ruthlessly.

Garren and Jax laid down covering fire, their rifles flashing in rapid succession.

The Syndicate fought back—hard. Their weapons hummed with deadly energy, streaks of red plasma cutting through the night. The sand kicked up around me as a blast hit too close, burning into the stone beside my head.

"Move!" Aria shouted.

I ducked behind a rock, heart hammering. The Syndicate's armor was tough, but their weak spots were exposed at the joints—the neck, the underarms. Aim there.

I popped up again and fired twice. A soldier collapsed, his rifle falling from his hands.

The fight was brutal and fast. Controlled chaos.

Then, movement from the lead truck caught my eye.

The back doors slammed open. Something stepped out.

Not a soldier. Something else.

The gunfire faltered as a figure emerged, shackled and collared, its form half-hidden in shadow. My breath hitched.

It wasn't Syndicate.

It was experimented on.

A prisoner.

But its eyes glowed a sickly blue, unlike the Veiled's green. Its skin was pale, almost translucent, and something about its movements was wrong—jerky, unnatural.

"What the hell is that?" Nia whispered.

Then, with a shriek that curdled my blood, the thing snapped its chains—and attacked.

It moved too fast. One second, it was hunched in the doorway of the lead transport truck—the next, it was on top of a Syndicate soldier, ripping into his throat with unnatural strength. The soldier barely had time to scream before his body was tossed aside like a rag doll.

"Fall back!" Aria shouted.

But the thing wasn't alone.

Six more emerged from the truck, each collared, their bodies pale and warped. Some had patches of exposed muscle, their veins glowing the same sickly blue as their eyes. Others bore metal implants along their limbs, crude enhancements fused directly into their flesh.

The Syndicate soldiers tried to fight back but weren't prepared for this. They had brought these creatures here—experiments, twisted remnants of their own prisoners—but now they were losing control.

One of the creatures turned its gaze on me.

It moved before I could react—one second standing still, the next lunging straight for me.

I fired.

The bullet hit its shoulder, but it barely flinched. Too fast. Too strong. It knocked my gun aside, its grip like iron. My feet left the ground as it lifted me effortlessly, its breath reeking of decay.

I couldn't break free.

Then—an arrow.

Aria's shot buried deep into its exposed ribcage. The creature screeched, dropping me as it stumbled backward.

"Move!" Aria grabbed my arm and pulled me up.

The battlefield was chaos. The Syndicate forces were being torn apart by the very things they had tried to contain. Their screams echoed through the dunes as the creatures ripped into them, uncaring of who they killed.

Jax fired his rifle in short, controlled bursts. "These things don't die easy!"

Nia danced between them, her blades flashing as she struck at their joints. One went down, but another lunged at her from behind.

Garren tackled it mid-air, slamming it into the sand. He pressed his rifle against its skull and fired point-blank.

The thing convulsed violently, then stilled.

I grabbed my gun from the ground, panting. "What the hell are these things?"

"Syndicate science," Aria spat. "This is what they do. They don't just kill people—they turn them into monsters."

One of the creatures—larger than the rest—let out an ear-piercing howl. The others responded in kind, their blue-glowing eyes flickering as if they were synchronized.

Then they turned on us.

"Run!"

The five of us sprinted for the nearest cover—an overturned Syndicate vehicle. The remaining Syndicate soldiers scattered, and those who could still run abandoned their posts.

One of the creatures leaped after us. Jax whipped around and fired his rifle, but it kept coming.

Then—a thunderous explosion.

The ground shook as flames erupted from the lead truck, engulfing two of the creatures. The blast threw sand and debris high into the air, momentarily blinding us.

I hit the ground hard. My ears rang, and my vision blurred from the force of the impact.

I blinked through the dust. Syndicate reinforcements were coming.

I saw them—more armored vehicles approaching from the horizon, red Syndicate insignias flashing in the dark.

"We need to get out of here!" Nia yelled, shaking me.

Aria was already hauling Jax to his feet. Garren grabbed a half-conscious Syndicate soldier—our only chance at getting answers.

We didn't wait.

We ran.

The last thing I saw before we vanished into the dunes was one of the creatures still standing in the wreckage, watching us leave.

Its glowing blue eyes never blinked.

The Barrens swallowed us whole.

We ran until the wreckage was nothing but a distant glow against the horizon, the Syndicate reinforcements chasing ghosts in the dunes. The silence out here was unnerving—a vast emptiness where anything could lurk beneath the sand.

We didn't stop running until we reached an abandoned outpost, a half-buried ruin made of crumbling stone and rusted metal, barely standing against the wind. It wasn't much, but it was shelter.

Jax collapsed against a broken wall, panting. "I hate running," he muttered between gasps.

"You should work on your endurance," Nia said, not nearly as out of breath.

"I prefer shooting things."

Aria ignored them, checking the bindings on our captive.

The Syndicate soldier sat slumped against a pile of debris, his hands and feet bound tightly with scavenged rope. His armor was dented, his face streaked with dirt, dried blood, and a scar that covered most of his face. He hadn't stirred since we threw him into the back of the buggy and made our escape.

Until now.

I saw his fingers twitch first. Then his head rolled slightly before his eyes fluttered open.

Aria noticed, stepping closer, bow in hand. "You're awake. Good. Now start talking."

The soldier groaned, his body stiff from being tied up. He glanced around at the group of us surrounding him, sizing up the situation.

"I'm not saying a damn thing," he finally muttered, his voice rough. "Especially to a bunch of kids."

"Young adults, actually," Jax added. "And these young adults just took down your entire convoy."

"You have no idea what you unleashed into this world," the soldier laughed hysterically.

Aria crouched in front of him and pressed her fingers into the wound on his shoulder. "See, that's the wrong answer. Because right now, you're the only thing standing between us and an entire Syndicate battalion hunting us down. So you're going to talk."

He spit at her feet. "Kill me or let me go. Either way, I'm not telling you anything."

Jax sighed, pulling his knife from his belt and twirling it between his fingers. "Man, I was hoping we could avoid the intimidation thing tonight."

Garren, silent until now, crossed his arms. "He's just a grunt. He probably doesn't know anything important."

"That doesn't mean he's useless," Nia said. "The Syndicate was experimenting on prisoners. We need to know what they were doing to them, how far it's gone."

"Do we?" Jax asked. "Look, I get wanting information, but we've got bigger problems. Those things back there? They weren't human anymore. And if the Syndicate is making more of them, we need to get back to the Veiled and warn them."

"We can't just let him go," Aria said. "If we do, he'll go straight back to the Syndicate and tell them exactly where we are."

The argument escalated quickly. Nia wanted to interrogate him more. Garren wanted to leave him behind in the dunes. Surprisingly, Jax leaned toward just killing him and avoiding the risk altogether.

I stayed silent.

The soldier was watching me.

Not in the way someone watches their captors, not with hatred or defiance. His gaze was as if he'd been reunited with an old friend.

Then—he whispered.

Only for me.

"I know who you are."

My mind immediately raced back to when I was younger; a man with a curled scar across his face had been assigned to the guards who looked after me. He had been promoted to leading convoys months later.

"Kael Solaryn," he whispered again. "My my, have you grown."

I felt like the ground beneath me had vanished.

No one else reacted. No one else had heard. But I did. And that was enough.

He knew.

I was dead if he told them—if he uttered a single word.

Panic clawed at my throat, but I forced my face to remain neutral. I couldn't let them see.

I crouched next to him, pressing a hand to his shoulder as if I were checking his bindings. Lowering my voice just enough.

"Keep your mouth shut," I whispered. "And I'll get you out of here."

His breathing was ragged, but his lips twitched into a smirk.

"I knew it," he murmured. "You're just like your father."

I squeezed his arm hard enough to bruise. "Shut up."

Aria's voice cut through the tension. "Kael?"

I looked up sharply, hoping my face wasn't betraying me.

She was watching me, suspicious but not yet alarmed.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said, standing too fast. "I—yeah."

The soldier's smirk didn't fade, but he said nothing else.

Aria didn't look convinced, but she let it drop. "We can't waste any more time. We're heading back before first light."

Garren frowned. "What about him?"

"Take him with us for now," Aria said. "We'll decide what to do with him when we get back to the Veiled."

I nodded as I agreed.

But my mind was spinning.

I had just made a deal with the enemy.

And I had no idea if I could keep it.



The desert night was colder than I expected.

The heat that had beaten us down during the day vanished, replaced by a bone-chilling wind that howled through the broken ruins around us. The stars above felt vast, stretching endlessly in a sky darker than anything I had ever seen inside the Domes. It was unsettling—too open, too exposed.

The soldier sat bound near the remains of an old, rusted-out vehicle, his expression unreadable. He knew my secret. And I knew that if I didn't find a way to silence him, everything I had built here—everything I was pretending to be—would crumble.

But there was a bigger problem.

Erya, my mother.

I needed to know where she was.

I clenched my fists. "I have an idea," I said suddenly.

The others looked up from where they had been gathering supplies. Aria's eyes narrowed. "Oh yeah?"

"We make a deal with him," I said. "He tells us where Erya is, and we let him go."

Jax scoffed. "You want to let him go? Are you insane?"

"He's no good to us dead," I said, steadying my voice. "And if we kill him, we'll never know what happened to her."

Garren crossed his arms. "What makes you think he even knows where she is?"

"Because he does." I turned to the soldier, locking eyes with him.
"Don't you?"

The soldier smiled, slow and smug. He was enjoying this.

"I might," he said, shifting against his bindings. "But what guarantees do I have that you'll keep your word?"

"You don't," Aria snapped. "But I suggest you take your chances."

The soldier chuckled. "Fine," he said. "You want to know where she is?" His grin widened. "Cryostone."

The name sent a shockwave through me.

Cryostone.

A Dome that wasn't just another stronghold for the Syndicate—it was where they kept their darkest secrets. A place rumored to be filled with the last remnants of Old Earth's knowledge, frozen archives of lost technology... and the Syndicate's most classified experiments.

Aria stiffened beside me. "Cryostone? That's impossible. The Syndicate doesn't take prisoners there. It's a research facility."

"Not anymore," the soldier said, his voice low. "Erya was taken there weeks ago. They're not just holding her. They're experimenting on her."

I saw red.

I didn't think. I didn't hesitate.

I moved.

My fist collided with his jaw, snapping his head to the side. He let out a grunt of pain, but I didn't stop.

I hit him again. And again.

I wasn't in control anymore. It was rage—pure, blinding rage.

His words echoed in my skull. Experimenting on her.

Images flashed in my mind—my mother, bound in a lab, subjected to whatever horrors the Syndicate had planned.

I lost count of how many times I hit him before strong hands grabbed me, yanking me backward.

"Kael, stop!" Aria's voice was sharp, cutting through the haze.

I struggled against them; my breath ragged, and my vision blurred. The soldier lay slumped against the sand, his face bloodied, barely conscious.

The others were staring at me.

Too long. Too confused. Too suspicious.

"What the hell was that?" Nia asked.

Garren frowned, wiping his hands on his pants. "You don't even know her, Kael. Why do you care this much?"

I forced my breathing to steady, forcing down the panic. I had snapped. I had lost control. And now, they were questioning me.

I had to fix this.

"I... I just hate the Syndicate," I muttered, looking away. "What they do to people. The things they get away with."

Aria didn't look convinced, but she let it drop.

Jax let out a breath, glancing at the soldier. "Well, he's barely alive, but he's alive. Guess he gets to walk free after all."

The soldier groaned, his swollen eye barely opening. He spat blood onto the sand and let out a weak laugh. "You hit like your father."

I clenched my jaw, but I said nothing.

No one else caught the words. No one else knew what he meant.

He was still playing his game.

Aria sighed, rolling her shoulders. "Fine. Let him go."

Jax cut the bindings from his wrists, and the soldier slowly pulled himself to his feet, staggering like a dead man walking.

"Walk," Aria said, nodding toward the dunes. "You go back to the Syndicate; you tell them nothing. Otherwise, next time, we won't be so nice."

The soldier gave one last smirk before turning. He limped into the desert, step by step, disappearing into the vast darkness.

No one spoke.

The moment stretched between us like an invisible thread, pulled too tight.

Then—it snapped.

The sand beneath the soldier exploded.

A monstrous screech filled the air as a sand wraith erupted from the dunes, its circular mouth gaping open.

Before the soldier could scream, it swallowed him whole.

Gone.

Just like that.

The only sound was the wind whistling through the ruins.

Jax exhaled. "Well. That just happened."

Nia shuddered. "We should go. Now."

Aria didn't hesitate. "Move!"

We scrambled into the buggies. Aria revved the engine, kicking up dust as we sped into the night.

But my mind was far from here.

Cryostone.

My mother was there.

And I was going to get her back.

CHAPTER SIX

RECKLESS HEARTS AND WAR PLANS

The ride back to the Veiled's stronghold was silent.

Not the kind of silence that came from exhaustion, though that was definitely there—the weight of the mission, the Syndicate's experiments, the encounter with the mutated creatures, and the soldier's gruesome end all settled over us like a suffocating blanket.

But this silence was different. It was heavy, lingering, filled with thoughts none dared to say aloud.

I gripped the buggy's frame as Aria maneuvered through the rocky terrain, the wind whipping against my face. Jax drove ahead, kicking up a trail of dust behind him, and for once, even he wasn't talking.

The Veiled's mountain fortress loomed in the distance, the faint green bioluminescence pulsing from the cavern openings like veins beneath the skin. It was a safe haven, but after what we had just seen, even safety felt like an illusion.

When we pulled into the underground tunnels that served as the Veiled's garage, Kaedin and several warriors were already waiting for us. His sharp green eyes scanned us as we parked, his arms crossed over his chest, his expression unreadable.

We climbed out of the buggies, the crunch of boots on gravel breaking the silence. No one spoke. Not yet.

Then, Kaedin did.

"Tell me everything."

We stood in the war room again, but this time, the weight of our words felt heavier.

Jax leaned against a table, arms crossed. Nia sat perched on a crate, her expression tight. Garren stood near the doorway, ever the silent observer. At the same time, Aria always faced the elders with the same steel in her posture.

And me? I tried to keep my hands from shaking.

Aria stepped forward. "The Syndicate was transporting something... something twisted. It wasn't just prisoners."

Rynna furrowed her brows. "Explain."

"They were experimenting on people," Aria said. "Turning them into something else."

The room stilled.

"They looked human, but they weren't," I added, forcing the words past the lump in my throat. "Stronger. Faster. Savage. Like they'd been... changed."

Kaedin's expression darkened. "And you're certain of this?"

Aria scoffed. "We fought them and even captured a soldier."

Moraak, standing beside Kaedin, let out a slow exhale, shaking his head. "This is what we feared. The Syndicate has always experimented on their prisoners, but if they've moved to full-scale mutations, this war just changed."

Kaedin studied each of us, reading between the lines. "And the Syndicate soldier you captured?"

Dead.

He was eaten alive by a sand wraith before he could tell anyone that Kael Solaryn was alive.

But I couldn't say that.

"Erya and her team are alive, taken to Cryostone," Garren said.

Kaedin exhaled sharply, turning to the other elders. They whispered among themselves, tension crackling in the air.

Finally, Kaedin turned back to us. "No more reckless missions. This was dangerous and careless. If the Syndicate is truly creating these... abominations, then we need to be smarter. No one goes to Cryostone alone. Understood?"

I clenched my fists. Erya was in Cryostone. Every second wasted was another second she spent suffering in a Syndicate lab.

But I couldn't push too hard. Not yet.

Aria, however, wasn't backing down. "Sitting around won't change what's happening. We need to act before the Syndicate turns those creatures loose on the Barrens. And if Erya is really there—"

Kaedin's glare was sharp enough to cut steel. "I said no one is going alone."

The words weren't up for debate.

Kaedin motioned to the others. "This meeting is over. Rest up. We'll strategize in the morning."

The room emptied.

But my mind was already moving.

Because waiting wasn't an option.

And I sure as hell wasn't going to let the Veiled decide if my mother lived or died.



The Veiled's mountain fortress was restless, even in the dead of night.

Faint murmurs echoed from deeper tunnels where warriors sharpened weapons, whispers of war plans drifting through the corridors like smoke. But it was quiet up here, where the air was thin, and the stars burned cold.

I sat on the cliff's edge, staring out at the Barrens. The endless stretch of sand and ruin glowed under the pale light of Inferna's moon, making it look almost... peaceful.

It wasn't.

This world was a graveyard. A wasteland filled with Syndicate monsters, Feralkind, and the worst of humanity. But even knowing that, I couldn't stop looking.

"You're brooding again."

I turned at the sound of Aria's voice.

Her arms crossed, she stood just behind me, her dark hair catching in the wind. Her green eyes glowed faintly in the moonlight, otherworldly, like they held secrets only she understood.

"Didn't hear you coming," I admitted.

"That's because I didn't want to be heard," she said, moving closer.

She sat beside me, close enough that I could feel her warmth despite the cool night air. Neither of us spoke for a moment, just watching the world below.

Finally, she broke the silence. "What's going on in that head of yours?"

I hesitated. There were too many things I couldn't say.

The truth? I was planning to sneak into Cryostone.

The bigger truth? I didn't want her to stop me.

"I don't know," I lied. "I guess I'm just thinking about what happens next."

Aria let out a dry laugh. "That's your problem. Overthinking. You don't have time for that in the Barrens. You act, or you die."

"That philosophy working for you?"

She smirked. "So far."

I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye. "You always this good at giving advice?"

"Only when it's needed." She nudged me with her shoulder, softer than I expected. "You're not as bad as I thought, Dome rat."

I raised an eyebrow. "Is that a compliment?"

"Don't push it."

A comfortable silence settled between us. The wind stirred the sand below, carrying whispers of old ruins and forgotten battles.

Then she sighed. "I don't trust people easily, Kael."

I looked at her then. Her face was unreadable, but her hands were curled into loose fists, her fingers twitching like she wanted to grab onto something but didn't know how.

"I noticed," I said carefully.

Aria exhaled sharply, shaking her head. "You came out of nowhere. And now you're here, throwing yourself into our war, fighting things you barely understand. I don't get you."

"You think I have some kind of hidden agenda?"

"People don't just run into the Barrens without a reason." She turned toward me fully now, her glowing gaze locking onto mine. "So, tell me, Kael. What's your reason?"

A fine line.

I had to balance it.

Too much truth, and I'd lose everything.

Too many lies, and I'd lose her.

I forced myself to breathe evenly. "I told you—I was exiled from Verdanix. I had nowhere else to go."

Her eyes narrowed slightly. She didn't believe me.

"You don't act like someone who just got kicked out of paradise," she murmured. "You act like someone running from something."

She wasn't wrong.

I turned back to the horizon. "Let's just say... I lost everything. And I'm not interested in watching anyone else lose what's important to them."

Aria was quiet for a long time. Then, finally—"That's the closest thing to an honest answer I've heard from you."

I risked a glance at her. She was watching me again, but something softer was in her expression this time like she was seeing me for the first time, not just as another survivor, but as someone honest.

The space between us felt smaller.

I didn't move. Neither did she.

Her breath was slow, her lips slightly parted, and for a second—just a second—I might kiss her.

Then—

"Aww, look at them," Nia's voice cut through the quiet.

Jax's laugh followed. "Oh, this is rich."

Aria snapped back so fast that she nearly fell off the cliff. I turned to see Jax, Nia, and Garren standing a few feet away, all looking way too amused.

Jax grinned. "Did we interrupt something?"

"You're interrupting my patience," Aria muttered, standing up too fast.

Nia smirked. "You guys looked pretty cozy."

Garren just shook his head. "This is cute, but we've got a problem."

The teasing dropped instantly. Aria straightened. "What kind of problem?"

Garren's expression was unreadable, but his words weren't.

"We overheard the elders," he said. "They're planning an attack on Cryostone."

Aria stiffened. "That's not possible. Kaedin said we weren't ready."

"They're doing it anyway," Nia said. "And if they go in blind, they'll get slaughtered."

My heart pounded. Cryostone. My mother. The experiments.

I stood, locking eyes with Aria.

"We have to go," I said.

She didn't argue.

She just nodded.



The news of the Syndicate's experiments spread fast, and tensions ran high. Warriors prepared weapons, runners carried messages between the elders, and hushed conversations filled the stone halls.

We had only been gone a day, but the world had changed in that short time.

Aria led the way, pushing through the winding tunnels until we reached the lower levels of the stronghold—the archives. If secrets were to be found, they would be buried here.

The chamber was dimly lit, with lanterns casting flickering shadows across shelves stacked high with old documents, scavenged maps, and books salvaged from the ruins of the Old World.

A single figure stood in the middle of the room, hunched over a table covered in parchment.

"Hello, Gramps," Aria said, kissing him on the cheek. "Kael, this is my grandfather, Tallis."

He was one of the oldest Veiled still living—his hair white as bone, his face carved with deep lines. Unlike the warriors who spent their days training, Tallis was a historian and a strategist. He had lived long enough to know more than most.

And if anyone knew what was happening inside Cryostone, it was him.

He didn't look up as we entered, his hands gliding over a yellowed page. "I heard you returned." His voice was rough but not unkind. "And I heard you lost your only lead."

I clenched my jaw. "We need information."

He sighed, finally looking at me. His eyes—once a bright Veiled green—had faded with age, but they still held a sharpness that made it clear he missed nothing. He grabbed my hands, rubbed my palms, opened my eyes wide, and checked my teeth.

"You don't even know what you're looking for," he said.

I stepped closer. "Then tell us."

"Aria, you know you're my favorite grandchild, but I can't talk to you behind your father's back."

"Gramps, I'm your only grandchild; it can be our little secret." She said, pushing an unlabeled, rusted can close to him.

"Ooh, my favorite."

Tallis studied me, then let out a slow breath. He picked up a parchment and laid it flat on the table.

A map of Cryostone.

The Dome was unlike the others. It wasn't built for agriculture or weapons manufacturing, and it wasn't designed to house the Syndicate's elite. Cryostone was a relic of the old world, a place where knowledge had been hoarded and twisted into something far worse.

"Project Genesis," Tallis murmured, running his fingers along the map. "It was never just about creating weapons."

I swallowed hard. "Then what is it?"

Tallis looked at me, his expression unreadable. "It's about playing god."

The room went still.

Jax muttered a curse under his breath. Nia leaned over the table, studying the map with a deep frown.

Tallis continued, his voice grim. "For years, the Syndicate has been experimenting with human genetics—trying to unlock something buried in our DNA. Some believe it's a way to enhance soldiers. Others think they're seeking immunity against the radiation that lingers in some places. But it's worse than that."

His eyes locked onto mine. "They're trying to make something... new."

A chill ran down my spine.

Aria's expression was dark. "And Erya?" she asked.

Tallis hesitated, his fingers curling against the table's surface. "The spies say that Erya is the only one who survived every experiment they've thrown at her."

I struggled to keep my face neutral. They've been testing on her. Torturing her. And she survived it all.

Aria exhaled. "That means they're not done with her."

"They're not," Tallis confirmed. "And if you go after her, you won't just be fighting soldiers. You'll be facing something much worse."

I swallowed past the tightness in my throat. "We're going after her anyway."

Tallis's gaze didn't waver. "Then you better be ready for what's waiting inside Cryostone. I assure you, boy, you will find more than humans there."

We nodded and went to leave as Tallis grabbed my arm. I turned back to him as the others exited.

"Syndicate royalty in my very presence," he whispered. "Don't worry. I know you're one of the good ones."

"How did you know?" I gasped.

"I was there when you were born. How do you think Erya ended up here? Your mother was a dear friend of Kaedin's, and we had to save her when we heard they were going to exile her."

"Kael, are you coming?" Aria called.

I nodded to Tallis before leaving the room.



We stood outside the supply chamber an hour later, checking weapons and gathering gear.

I pulled the straps of my pack tighter, my thoughts still spinning. The others were talking in low voices, but I barely heard them.

Aria nudged my shoulder. "You good?"

I forced a smirk. "Define 'good.'"

She rolled her eyes but didn't push further.

Nia tightened the straps on her knives. "I still think this is insane."

Jax grinned. "That's what makes it fun."

Garren remained quiet, but his presence was solid, steady. He wasn't the type to waste words, but he fought with purpose when he fought.

"We leave before sunrise," I said, my voice steady. "No one can know we're gone until it's too late to stop us."

Jax smirked. "So, a stealth mission. Always wanted to do one of those."

Nia sighed. "Just don't get us all killed."

Aria met my gaze. "You better not slow us down, Dome rat."

I smirked. "Wouldn't dream of it."

We finished preparing in silence, the weight of what we were about to do settling over us.

Cryostone was waiting.

And whether we survived or not, we were going in.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE INFILTRATION OF CRYSTONE

The Barrens stretched endlessly before us, a wasteland of cracked earth and shifting dunes bathed in the pale glow of the moon overhead. Our two dune buggies roared across the night-scoured landscape, kicking up waves of dust that disappeared into the abyss of the horizon.

The heat from the day still clung to the air, thick and suffocating, yet the night carried a bitter chill. A cruel contradiction. The Barrens were full of those.

Aria drove quickly, her gloved hands gripping the wheel as she maneuvered through the treacherous terrain. I sat beside her, one hand clutching the metal frame while the other rested on my gun. Behind us, in the second buggy, Jax whooped loudly as they launched over a dune, their vehicle's headlights bouncing wildly in the dark.

"You'd think we were going to a party," I muttered.

Aria snorted. "That's Jax for you. If he's not running his mouth or showing off, he's probably dead."

I glanced back at the others. Nia sat beside Jax, her hood pulled low, eyes scanning the desert with sharp intent. Garren was ever silent in the

back, his rifle slung across his lap. He hadn't said much since we left, but Garren never spoke unless he had something important to say.

The only sound was the steady thrum of the engines, an eerie contrast to the quiet vastness of the Barrens. For all its dangers, there was something unsettling about how empty it could feel, like the silence was waiting to be broken.

"We should be careful once we hit Cryostone's perimeter," Aria said, eyes locked on the horizon. "Syndicate patrols sweep the outer defenses at night, and the last thing we need is for them to see us coming."

"How close are we?" I asked.

She flicked a glance at the coordinates on her wrist device. "Less than twenty miles. If we keep this pace, we'll reach the ice ravine in an hour."

Cryostone.

I had heard about it for years, whispered warnings traded in the halls of Solaris Prime. The Syndicate's cold fortress stores knowledge, history, and secrets that are too dangerous to be allowed in the open Domes. But now I knew the truth—Cryostone was also where Project Genesis was born, where prisoners were turned into monsters.

And where my mother was waiting.

The thought sent a sharp, electric current down my spine.

Jax's voice crackled over the radio. "So, question—on a scale from 'mildly suicidal' to 'there's no way in hell we're getting out of this alive,' where does this mission rank?"

Nia's voice cut in, dry as ever. "I'd say somewhere between 'complete lunacy' and 'we probably should have left you behind.'"

"Harsh," Jax muttered.

"Accurate," Garren added.

Aria smirked. "The way I see it, if we get caught, we're dead. If we succeed, we will probably still die. So, somewhere in the middle."

I sighed. "Fantastic."

The joke settled awkwardly between us because we all knew the truth. This wasn't some reckless raid or desperate survival test—this was a one-way mission.

There was no backup. No second chances. If we failed, we would never see the Veiled again.

I pulled my scarf tighter over my mouth as the wind picked up, sending fine grains of sand into the buggy. I could feel Aria watching me from the corner of her eye.

"You okay?" she asked, her voice softer now.

I nodded, but the weight of everything pressed down like a vice. "I just... I need to find her."

Aria didn't push for more. She didn't need to. She just nodded and focused back on the road ahead.

I appreciated that about her. She knew when to press and when to let silence do the talking.

The landscape ahead began to change. The golden dunes gave way to a flatter, more rigid surface—black, cracked stone that shimmered faintly under the moonlight. The temperature dropped. The heat of the Barrens faded, replaced by a creeping chill that seeped into my bones.

Cryostone was close.

Jax's buggy pulled up beside us, his grin visible even in the dim light. "So, when we get in, what's the plan? Knock on the front door and ask nicely?"

Nia elbowed him. "We're taking the tunnels, idiot."

"Right, right," he waved her off. "Forgot we were breaking in a fun way."

The tunnels are ancient maintenance shafts buried beneath the facility. They are remnants of the old world before the Syndicate repurposed Cryostone into a fortress. If the intel was right, they should lead into the lower levels undetected.

"Assuming the tunnels aren't caved in," Garren added grimly.

"Optimism, Garren," Jax teased. "Try it sometime."

Aria slowed the buggy, bringing us to a stop just before the edge of a massive ice ravine. It looked like a canyon of frozen death—sheer walls of ice stretching deep into the ground, mist rising from unseen depths.

Cryostone was the first Dome to harness the sun's energy and the oil pits it sat on and convert it into frozen matter. They somehow harnessed it and created temperature-controlled Domes that I grew up in. This one, however, they kept extra cold to preserve their secrets of the past. The entrance to the tunnels was somewhere down there.

I peered over the edge, my breath fogging in the frigid air. "Well, that's... welcoming."

Aria unbuckled her harness. "Everyone out. We're walking from here."

The others climbed out, pulling their scarves tighter against the cold. I followed, my boots crunching against the frost-covered ground. The temperature had dropped by at least thirty degrees from the Barrens, and my body was adjusting uncomfortably to the shift.

Nia took the lead, activating a holo-map on her wristband, projecting an old blueprint of Cryostone's underground infrastructure. "The

entrance should be about a quarter-mile down. There's a cave system that connects to the tunnels. If we're lucky, it's still intact."

Jax rubbed his arms. "*If we're lucky?* That's comforting."

Aria adjusted her gear, eyes scanning the area. "Move fast, stay quiet. We don't know if Syndicate scouts are watching."

The five of us descended into the icy canyon, the walls towering above us like frozen sentinels. The deeper we went, the quieter everything became. The howling wind faded, replaced by the soft crack of ice shifting beneath our boots. Cryostone was the least guarded Dome on the outside because it was literary an impenetrable fortress. Even the world-ending energy of the sun couldn't hurt it; in fact, the sun fed the Dome energy to grow the ice higher and harder.

The tunnel entrance loomed ahead—a dark, gaping maw carved into the rock, leading into the unknown.

I took a deep breath.

This was it.

No turning back.

"Alright," Aria whispered, stepping forward. "Let's get inside before we freeze to death."

The team nodded, and we disappeared into the darkness one by one.

Cryostone awaited.



The tunnel swallowed us whole.

Cold, damp air clung to my skin as we stepped inside, the weight of the frozen earth pressing down from all sides. The entrance was little more than a jagged hole in the canyon wall, hidden beneath layers of ice and rock as if the world had tried to bury whatever lay within.

Aria led the way, her bow drawn, steps carefully. I followed closely behind, my fingers tight around the grip of my handgun. The tunnel was pitch black, except for the faint glow of bioluminescent veins in the frozen walls—pale blue streaks that pulsed faintly, casting eerie shadows across our faces.

Jax let out a low whisper. "Creepy. I like it."

"Try not to echo your stupidity through the entire cave," Nia muttered, checking the holo-map on her wrist. "We don't know what's waiting for us down here."

"Relax," Jax grinned. "What's the worst that could happen?"

Garren shot him a dark look. "You really need to stop saying things like that."

The ground beneath us sloped downward, forcing us into a steep descent. The ice beneath our boots was slick, threatening to grab us at any moment. I kept close to the wall, my breaths fogging in the frigid air.

The deeper we went, the colder it became.

This wasn't like the Barrens—brutal in its heat, relentless in its sun-scorched hostility. This was a different kind of death. The cold here wasn't natural. It was manufactured.

Cryostone's influence ran deep.

"How much further?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Nia scanned the map. "The access tunnels should be about a mile in. If the schematics are accurate, they'll take us directly beneath the Syndicate facility."

"And if they're not?"

Jax grinned. "Then we freeze to death before the Syndicate even gets a shot at us."

"Fantastic."

We pressed forward in silence, the tunnel stretching like an endless throat of ice. I forced myself to focus, but the cold was relentless. Sinking into my bones, it made every movement slower and heavier.

Then I heard it.

A low hum.

Not the kind of sound made by wind or shifting ice. This was mechanical—unnatural.

I held up a hand. "Wait."

The others froze.

Aria's eyes flicked to mine. "What?"

I strained to listen. The hum grew louder. Steady. Pulsing.

"Something's ahead."

Nia rechecked the map, her brow furrowing. "That's not on the schematics."

"Which means?" Jax asked.

"Which means something new is down here."

The five of us exchanged wary glances. We were about to step into unknown territory.

"Where are all of the guards?" Garren pulled out his rifle and checked the clip. "We keep moving. Carefully."

Aria nodded, her grip on her bow tightening. "Stay sharp."

We moved forward, slower now, weapons raised. The hum continued, vibrating through the walls like a distant heartbeat. The air smelled different—metallic, sterile—not like the frozen wilderness above.

And then we saw it.

The tunnel opened into a massive underground chamber.

I stopped cold.

Metal pillars lined the space, stretching high into the darkness above. Their surfaces were covered in frost, but underneath, I could see the Syndicate's unmistakable mark—a silver insignia etched into each one. The hum was coming from them.

"What the hell is this?" Jax whispered.

I stepped closer, running my gloved fingers over one of the pillars. The metal was smooth, unnaturally cold.

A small glass window on the side of the pillar sat in front of us.

My stomach dropped.

There was something inside.

I moved closer, wiping away the frost. My pulse increased as I realized what I was looking at.

A face.

Eyes closed. Skin pale and frozen.

Suspended inside the pillar.

I staggered back.

"They're people," I breathed. "These are pods."

The others rushed forward, peering into the nearby capsules.

Nia's face paled. "This isn't just storage. This is containment."

Aria's jaw tightened. "For what?"

A hiss echoed through the chamber.

I spun just as one of the pods unlocked.

Metal groaned, releasing a rush of cold vapor. The frost-covered glass slid open.

The figure inside twitched.

Then—it moved.

A hand jerked forward. Nails scraped against metal. A low, gurgling breath filled the silence.

Then the eyes snapped open.

Pale. Glowing. Wrong.

"Oh, hell no," Jax cursed. "There's your guards."

The figure stepped forward, its movements jerky, unnatural. Its skin was stretched thin over its bones, patches of dark veins running up its arms. Its breath came in ragged gasps like something not meant to wake up.

And then it screamed.

Not a human scream.

Something worse.

Something inhuman.

The other pods began unlocking.

One after another.

Aria grabbed my arm. "We need to move. Now!"

The chamber erupted into chaos.

Figures stumbled from their containment. More eyes snapped open, and their bodies convulsed as if they were relearning how to move.

Then—they turned toward us.

And they charged.

The chamber exploded into chaos.

The sound of inhuman screams reverberated off the frozen walls, sharp and guttural, a haunting blend of rage and agony. The once-frozen figures from the pods moved like broken marionettes, their limbs jerking unnaturally as they stumbled toward us. Their glowing, pale eyes locked on us with a hunger that sent a chill down my spine that had nothing to do with the cold.

"Move!" Aria's voice cut through the chaos.

I didn't need to be told twice. My legs moved instinctually, carrying me toward the tunnel we'd come from. But the creatures were far faster than they had any right to be. One of them lunged, its body contorting mid-air, and I barely had time to raise my handgun.

Bang!

The shot echoed through the chamber, and the creature dropped, convulsing on the icy floor. Black liquid oozed from the wound, steaming in the cold air. I didn't have time to process what I had done—another was already closing in.

"Keep running!" Garren yelled, his rifle firing out a rapid series of shots. "We can't hold them off for long!"

Aria let an arrow fly, striking one in the chest and pinning it to a pillar. "This way!" she shouted, gesturing toward a side passage from the main tunnel.

Nia pulled a knife from her belt, slashing at one that got too close. "We're going to get pinned down if we don't hurry!"

Jax fired his rifle at another creature, his usual cocky grin replaced by a grim determination. "I'm starting to miss those Feralkind," he muttered, reloading. "At least they don't scream like that!"

The creatures kept coming, spilling out of the pods in increasing numbers. Their bodies were grotesque—half-frozen, half-mutated,

with patches of dark veins spreading like cracks across their pale skin. Whatever the Syndicate had done to them, it had turned them into something beyond human.

And they were relentless.

We bolted down the side passage, the walls narrowing and the air growing colder. The bioluminescent veins in the ice flickered erratically as if the very mountain was alive and panicking. The creatures' screeches echoed behind us, growing louder with every second.

"They're gaining!" Nia called out, her voice tight with urgency.

Aria skidded to a halt, pulling another arrow from her quiver. "Keep going. I'll slow them down."

"No way," I said, stopping beside her. "I'm not leaving you."

She shot me a look, her green eyes blazing. "Kael, this isn't the time to play hero!"

"Then let's both slow them down!" I snapped, raising my gun.

She didn't argue. Together, we turned to face the oncoming swarm. The creatures flooded the tunnel, their distorted forms almost blending into the flickering shadows. Aria loosed arrow after arrow, each one finding its mark, while I fired until the chamber echoed with the sound of gunshots.

"Fall back!" Garren's voice boomed from further down the tunnel. "Now!"

Aria grabbed my arm, dragging me back as the creatures closed the gap. My heart hammered in my chest as we sprinted after the others, the tunnel walls blurring past us. The screeches behind us grew louder and closer.

We burst into a wider cavern, its walls glittering with frost. Jax and Garren were already there, standing near what looked like an ancient

control panel embedded in the ice. Nia was frantically pressing buttons, her fingers moving with a precision born from years of survival training.

"What's the plan?" Aria demanded, her bow still in hand.

"This panel controls the gate to the Cryostone facility," Nia explained, her voice tight. "If we can get it too close, we can trap them inside."

"How long?" Garren asked, his rifle trained on the tunnel we had just emerged from.

Nia shook her head. "I'm guessing as I go!"

"Guess faster!" Jax shouted, firing a shot into the tunnel as the first of the creatures appeared. The bullet struck its target, but another immediately took its place.

The creatures poured into the cavern, their glowing eyes gleaming like lanterns in the dark. We formed a defensive line, weapons raised, as they surged toward us. Aria's arrows flew with deadly precision, Jax's rifle fired, and Garren's steady shots took down anything that got too close.

"Come on, Nia," I muttered under my breath, firing at another creature that lunged for Aria. My hands were shaking, but I couldn't stop. Not now.

The control panel whined suddenly, and Nia's face lit up. "Got it!" she shouted. "Get back—now!"

We didn't hesitate. As one, we bolted toward the far end of the cavern, where another tunnel waited. Behind us, the control panel sparked and hissed, and a massive metal gate began to descend from the ceiling, cutting off the creatures' path.

The last of the creatures lunged, but the gate slammed down with a resounding clang, trapping them on the other side. Their screeches echoed through the ice, muffled but no less haunting.

The five of us stood there, panting, weapons still in hand. My chest heaved, my fingers trembling around the gun. The gate rattled as the creatures slammed against it, their rage vibrating through the cavern.

"That... was close," Jax said, his voice uncharacteristically quiet.

"No kidding," Aria muttered, lowering her bow. She turned to Nia. "Nice work."

Nia nodded, though her face was pale. "Let's not do that again."

Garren slung his rifle over his shoulder, his expression grim. "We can't keep running into things like this. Whatever the Syndicate is doing here, it's worse than we thought."

I looked back at the gate, the faint sound of the creatures' screams still echoing through the ice. My stomach twisted. This wasn't just about survival anymore. This was about something far bigger.

"We need to move," Aria said, her voice cutting through the tension. "Cryostone's main facility isn't far. If we're going to find Erya and stop whatever this is, we have to keep going."

The others nodded, and we started toward the next tunnel. My mind raced with questions, but one thing was clear: the Syndicate wasn't just experimenting with power.

They were playing god.

And they had unleashed a nightmare.

The deeper we traveled into Cryostone, the colder it became. The warmth of the Barrens had long since vanished, replaced by an unnatural chill that seeped into my bones. The tunnels we followed twisted

and turned, some branching into dark, unknown pathways, others blocked by collapsed ice and debris.

It felt like we were walking through the remains of a dead world.

Jax let out a low whistle, his breath fogging in the air. "I don't know about you guys, but I'm getting real sick of creepy Syndicate facilities."

Aria shot him a look. "Then maybe don't talk. It's quieter that way."

"Aw, come on, Aria. You know my voice is the only thing keeping us sane right now."

"That's debatable," Nia muttered.

Garren took the lead, his rifle held steady, his eyes sharp and alert. "Less talking, more watching. We don't know what's down here."

I exhaled slowly, my fingers tightening around my gun. After what we had just escaped from, I wasn't sure if I was more afraid of the creatures we had left behind or whatever awaited us.

The tunnel finally opened into a vast chamber, a massive underground structure carved into the ice. Unlike the earlier tunnels, this place wasn't abandoned. It was alive.

Dim red emergency lights pulsed from the walls, casting eerie shadows across the smooth metallic floors. Cryogenic pods—larger than the ones we had seen earlier—lined both sides of the room. Their glass was frost-covered but humming softly. The veins of bioluminescent ice still pulsed around us as if reacting to our presence.

But the real nightmare was what was hanging from the ceiling.

Cages.

Rows of steel cages, suspended by thick, rusted chains, filled with people. Their bodies were barely more than skeletons, wrapped in tattered jumpsuits with Syndicate markings. Some were unconscious, others barely moving, their hollow eyes staring blankly ahead.

A horrible, metallic scent filled the air—blood, oil, and something rotting.

"Dear hell," Nia breathed.

Aria's face was stone, but I saw her jaw tighten. "This... this isn't just an experiment." She turned toward the nearest console, scanning the half-functional screen. "This is a damn slaughterhouse."

I forced myself to step closer, my stomach twisting. One of the captives—a woman barely older than me—lifted her head. Her lips cracked as she tried to speak, but no words came out.

I swallowed. "Hey, we're gonna get you out of here."

Jax and Garren exchanged uneasy glances. "Kael, we don't even know how to open these things," Jax said. "And even if we do, we can't carry this many people out."

Aria exhaled sharply, her breath fogging in the cold. "We need to be smart about this. If we free them and can't get them out, they'll die in here just the same."

Nia stepped beside her. "Then we find the controls. There has to be a way to shut down the security system."

"We don't have time," Garren muttered. "The longer we stay here, the higher the chance the Syndicate finds us."

Frustration burned in my chest. These people were suffering every second we stood here. I clenched my fists, turning toward Aria. "We can't just leave them."

She met my gaze, and I saw hesitation in her eyes for the first time.

"We won't," she said finally. "But we need to find Erya first. If anyone knows how to get them out of here alive, it's her."

Jax groaned, running a hand through his hair. "Fine. Let's find Erya."

"Agreed," I said.

The sound of a metallic groan cut through the room.

We froze.

A door at the chamber's far end slid open, steam hissing as it released. Heavy footsteps echoed against the steel, steady and deliberate.

A Syndicate officer stepped inside.

He wasn't like the soldiers we had faced before. His armor was sleek, reinforced with Cryostone plating, his helmet reflecting the dim emergency lights. A high-ranking enforcer. And behind him, three more guards followed, their rifles raised.

My blood went cold.

"Intruders," the officer said, his voice calm but edged with amusement. His gaze swept over us.

"You're not supposed to be here."

We barely had time to react before the guards raised their weapons.

"Down!" Aria shouted.

The first shots rang out.

Garren yanked me behind cover as bullets tore through the air. Sparks flew as the rounds ricocheted off the metal walls. Jax fired back, his rifle barking, while Nia rolled behind a console, throwing a knife with deadly precision. It sank into the throat of one of the guards, who collapsed with a gurgle.

Aria was already moving, firing an arrow that embedded itself in another soldier's chest.

I ducked behind a support beam, my heart pounding. The officer hadn't moved—he stood there, watching us with eerie patience.

Then, he spoke.

"You don't even know what you're walking into, do you?"

I swallowed hard, my grip tightening on my gun.

"We know enough," Aria said, stepping out of cover to fire another shot.

The officer dodged with inhuman speed, his armored boots barely making a sound against the steel floor.

Jax swore. "Oh, great. He's one of them."

The experiments.

I barely had time to react before the officer lunged, grabbing Aria by the throat and slamming her against the wall. Her bow clattered to the ground as she struggled against his grip.

Rage flared inside me.

I moved.

I fired.

The bullet struck the officer's exposed neck, forcing him to drop Aria as he staggered backward. She hit the ground, coughing violently.

Garren rushed forward, delivering a brutal punch to the officer's head before slamming his rifle against his skull. The officer crumpled.

The last guard tried to flee, but Nia was faster. Her knife caught him in the back, and he collapsed face-first onto the cold metal floor.

Silence.

Panting, I reached down to help Aria to her feet. She wiped blood from her lip, eyes burning with fury.

Jax nudged the officer's unmoving body with his boot. "Well, that was fun."

I ignored him, turning toward the open door where the guards had entered. A long, dimly lit corridor stretched ahead.

And at the end of it—

A single cell.

A figure sat inside, her wrists bound, her head tilted downward. Strands of dark hair fell over her face, but even from here, I could see the faint glow of green veins beneath her skin, confirming they had done experiments on her.

Aria sucked in a sharp breath.

"Erya."

I couldn't breathe.

Jax exhaled slowly. "Well, I'd say we found her."

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. My mother.

Aria pushed forward, gripping the bars of the cell. "We're getting you out of here."

The woman lifted her head, and I met her eyes for the first time.

They were the same shade as mine.

She looked at me. Really looked at me. And smiled through the pain.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE ESCAPE FROM CRYSTONE

Erya barely lifted her head. Shackles bound her wrists to the wall, and her body slumped forward like a used puppet with torn strings. The dim, pulsing red light made it hard to see her true features, but I could make out the bruises along her jaw and the unnatural glow of green veins beneath her skin. Her breathing was shallow, and each inhale was a ragged effort.

My feet felt like lead. For years, I had imagined what it would be like to see her again—to find the mother I had never known. But not like this.

Not like this.

Aria rattled the rusted bars of the cell. "Erya, can you hear me?"

For a moment, there was no response. Then, slowly, her chin lifted. Bloodshot eyes met ours, unfocused at first, then sharpening ever so slightly.

A flicker of recognition passed through her features, not at me, but at Aria.

"Aria...?" Erya's voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper.

"We're getting you out of here," Aria promised, her hands tightening on the bars. "Can you stand?"

Erya's gaze drifted to the bindings at her wrists. Her lips pressed together as she exhaled through her nose. "They've... pumped me full of their poisons," she muttered. "Their... experiments. I'm—I'm not..."

Her voice faltered, eyes dimming.

I felt my stomach twist into a knot.

"She's too weak," Nia said, stepping forward. "If we move her too fast, it might kill her."

Jax let out an exasperated sigh, running a hand through his dust-ridden hair. "So what? We just leave her here? She could turn at any moment like those mutants from the convoy."

I shot him a glare, my hands curling into fists. "We're *not* leaving her."

"I just don't want to be eaten alive today," he muttered.

"Whatever we're doing, let's do it quick," Gareen said, guarding the door.

I turned back to the cell, my mind racing. We had to get her out of here.

I stepped closer, my voice softer this time. "Erya... do you know how to override the locks?"

She turned her gaze toward me, and for a brief second, I thought I saw something flicker in her expression—curiosity? Suspicion? It was gone too quickly, to be sure. She was exiled when I was only a few days old before she had even named me. There's no way she could remember me.

Her breath shuddered out. "Control panel," she rasped. "Across the room."

Nia was already moving, scanning the frost-covered terminal in the far corner. She wiped away a layer of ice, revealing a cracked touch-screen blinking with encrypted data. "Syndicate-level security," she muttered. "This isn't going to be easy."

Jax groaned. "I need to find new friends; you guys are always getting me into these situations."

Aria kept her focus on Erya. "What have they done to you?"

Erya exhaled, her eyes slipping shut. "Project Genesis..."

The words barely escaped her lips before a violent shudder wracked through her body.

"Hey!" Aria reached through the bars, gripping Erya's forearm. "Stay with me!"

Aria's fingers brushed against Erya's skin, and she yanked her hand back like she had been burned. "Her veins are *hot*."

I stepped forward, reaching through the bars. My fingers barely ghosted over her arm before I felt it—an unnatural warmth radiating from beneath her skin, almost like something was burning *inside* of her.

"She's burning up," I whispered.

"Ok, let's not touch the infected mutant," Jax said. "Even if she is the woman who snuck me extra peaches when I was a kid."

"Jax, shut up!" Aria demanded.

"I'm sorry. You know I can't control myself."

Erya opened her eyes, and I saw real fear in them for the first time. "They've... changed me," she admitted, her voice barely audible. "Not just me. *Others*."

A sickening weight settled in my chest.

Nia cursed under her breath as she worked the control panel. "Whatever they've done to her, we need to move fast. If the alarms haven't tripped already, they will soon."

"Focus, Nia," Garren whispered. "You're the best hacker the Veiled has. You got this."

A mechanical hiss filled the air. The lock disengaged.

The shackles at Erya's wrists clicked open, and she slumped forward. Aria and I caught her before she hit the ground, her body trembling against us.

"Easy," I murmured, steadying her. "We've got you."

Her fingers curled weakly into my sleeve, her breathing uneven. She was heavier than she looked, her body sagging between Aria and me as we lifted her.

"This place is a damn graveyard," Jax muttered, surveying the room. "Did you *see* what they had in those pods? The cages? The people?"

Erya flinched at his words, her fingers tightening around my arm.

"They were *testing* us," she rasped. "For something... something worse."

A chill ran through me, and it had nothing to do with the ice-laden air.

"We need to get her back to the Veiled," Aria said, hoisting Erya's arm over her shoulder.

"We also need to make sure we don't *lead* the Syndicate straight to them," Garren countered.

I nodded. "First, we need to get out of Cryostone alive."

Jax sighed dramatically. "Wait, what if this is what the Syndicate wanted? What if they wanted us to get her out and bring her back to the Veiled?"

We ignored Jax's theories and focused on a way to get Erya out safely.

Nia scanned the terminal. "There's a secondary exit through the ventilation tunnels. It's tight, but it's our best shot."

Aria adjusted her grip on Erya. "Then we move."

I felt Erya's fingers twitch against my sleeve. Her lips barely moved, but her voice was so quiet when she spoke that I almost missed it.

"Save the others."

I looked down at her, my breath catching in my throat.

Her eyes locked onto mine, and for a brief second, I could have sworn she *knew*.

Then, just as quickly, the moment passed.

I swallowed hard and turned my focus forward.

A distant screech of mutant creatures sent chills down my spine.

We had to get out of here.

And we had to do it fast.

The cold clung to us as we hurried down the narrow passage, Erya sagging between Aria and me. Every step felt like trudging through a frozen nightmare, our breath fogging in the dim emergency lighting. The Syndicate facility groaned around us as if the very ice had a pulse—alive and watching.

Behind us, the distant screech of the mutants sent another chill down my spine. Whatever horrors lurked back there, they weren't done with us.

"We need to move *faster*," Garren muttered, gripping his rifle as he glanced over his shoulder.

Aria adjusted her hold on Erya, her face tight with strain. "She's barely standing as it is."

"I can walk," Erya rasped, even as her legs trembled beneath her.

Jax let out an exasperated sigh. "You can *try* to walk, but let's be real—you look about five seconds from dropping dead, and I don't trust that you won't fully transform and take a bite out of my neck."

Aria shot him a glare. "Keep moving."

Jax smirked, but his fingers hovered near his rifle. "Just saying, if she starts growing fangs or growling, I *will* shoot."

Erya's fingers curled tighter around my sleeve. I glanced down at her, at how her green-veined skin looked almost translucent under the harsh emergency lighting. There was something unnatural humming beneath her skin, something that hadn't been there before.

But she wasn't one of those *things*.

Not yet.

"The vents are ahead," Nia said, her voice clipped. She stopped at a rusted panel embedded in the icy wall, prying it open with her knife. "This will take us out of the facility, but it won't be easy."

"Is it ever?" Jax muttered.

I peered inside. The tunnel stretched into darkness, barely wide enough for us to crawl through one at a time. It was lined with frost and Syndicate markings, a remnant of whatever this place used to be before it became a factory of nightmares.

Nia wiped condensation from the access panel, her fingers flying over the cracked screen. "If I can reroute the air circulation, it'll slow the security response. But we'll need to move—*fast*."

"How fast?" Aria asked.

Nia hesitated. "Before the mutants figure out where we went."

"Perfect," Jax groaned. "I love playing Beat the Monster."

A distant metallic clang echoed through the tunnels.

We all froze.

"That wasn't from behind us," Garren murmured. "That came from *ahead*."

My stomach turned to ice.

"They're moving through the facility," Nia whispered. "The mutants. They're not just *chasing* us." Her eyes lifted, dark with realization. "They're hunting."

A low growl rumbled through the vents, vibrating in the metal walls around us.

I didn't wait. I grabbed Erya and shoved her toward the opening. "Go. Now."

She barely hesitated before crawling inside. Aria followed next, then Jax, grumbling under his breath the entire way. Nia slid in after, her knife clutched in one hand, while Garren covered the entrance with his rifle.

As I prepared to go in last, I heard it.

The scraping of claws.

I turned just in time to see a silhouette lurch into the dim corridor—a mutated Syndicate soldier, its body barely human, its face twisted into something monstrous.

It let out a gurgling snarl, its dead eyes locking onto me.

"Kael, *move*!" Garren barked, firing.

The shot ripped through the mutant's chest, spraying black ichor onto the icy walls, but it didn't fall.

It lunged.

I scrambled into the vent, hands gripping the freezing metal as I forced myself forward. Behind me, Garren fired again, shaking the tunnel.

The mutant *sbricked*.

Then, the vent slammed shut behind me.

For a second, everything was silent except for our ragged breathing.

Then, *boom*.

A violent impact shook the tunnel like something massive had slammed against the metal. The walls groaned, dust falling from the ceiling. The creature wasn't giving up.

"Keep moving," Aria said.

Erya crawled ahead of us, her body sluggish but determined. The tunnel stretched forward, winding through the artificial ice. The air inside was even colder, the frost biting at my fingers as I crawled after the others.

Nia kept checking her holo map, and her breath was shallow. "We're almost there."

Another *boom*. The tunnel *lurched*.

"Not fast enough," Jax muttered.

Then, up ahead, a faint blue light appeared. The exit.

Aria reached it first, kicking at the rusted grate until it broke free and clattered into the snow-covered ground outside. One by one, we scrambled out, landing in a shallow trench surrounded by jagged ice.

I turned, my heart racing.

Garren was still inside.

"Garren!" I yelled into the vent.

Nothing.

"We have to go back for him," Nia said.

A series of shots rang from inside the vent. When I reached inside the vent to find him, his hand shot through.

He forced himself out and hit the ground. The vent behind him *collapsed*, folding inward.

Jax helped Garren to his feet. "I thought we lost you."

Erya collapsed to her knees, panting. I moved to her side, steadying her as she coughed against the cold. Her skin was hotter now, her veins pulsing faintly under the surface.

She was burning from the inside out.

Aria knelt beside us, concern flickering in her eyes. "We have to get her back to the Veiled."

Erya forced herself to sit upright, her expression hard despite her exhaustion. "*No*."

We all froze.

Her gaze locked onto mine, sharp despite the pain. "Not yet. Not without the others."

I swallowed, the memory of the cages flashing through my mind. The frozen prisoners, the test subjects locked away in the Syndicate's grasp.

The people she had begged us to save.

Garren cursed under his breath. "You're in no condition to go back in there."

"I, I have to save them," Erya said as her eyes closed and she fell to the ground.

"We have to move her before she wakes up again," Nia said.

"What about the others?" Aria asked.

"The Veiled will send reinforcements for them," Garren said.

The wind howled around us, carrying the weight of her words.
We had barely survived this escape.



The drive back was supposed to be simple.

We had made it out. We had Erya. We had survived Cryostone. But the Barrens had no mercy for survivors.

The two dune buggies tore across the endless wasteland, kicking up plumes of dust as we pushed them to their limits. The cold of Cryostone still clung to my skin, but the desert heat was already creeping back in, baking the cracked earth beneath our wheels.

Erya lay in the back of Aria's buggy, unconscious, her body still burning with unnatural heat. Her breathing was shallow, and her face was pale despite the eerie green glow pulsing through her veins. Whatever the Syndicate had done to her, it was still changing her.

And we had no idea what she would wake up as.

Jax's voice crackled through the radio. *"So... we're just gonna pretend like everything's normal and not talk about how our half-mutant hostage is probably gonna sprout claws and eat us before we get home?"*

Aria sighed. "Jax shut up."

"I'm serious," he argued. "She's *literally glowing*. That's not normal. What if she wakes up and decides she likes Syndicate experiments and—"

"Jax," Nia snapped, her voice firm. "Not now."

Jax muttered something under his breath, but he let it drop for once.

The Barrens stretched endlessly ahead, a vast wasteland of dunes and jagged rock formations scorched by the relentless sun. The drive was smooth—for a while.

Then Aria stiffened.

I followed her gaze to the horizon. At first, I didn't see anything. Then the ground shifted—small, barely noticeable dust trails rising from the dunes.

Movement.

"We've got company," Aria muttered.

I grabbed the radio. "Jax, pick up the pace."

The second buggy accelerated beside us, kicking up more dust.

"They're raiders," Garren said grimly, squinting toward the figures forming in the distance.

The telltale black flags, stitched together from old cloth and scrap metal, waved in the wind as the raiders' vehicles appeared over the dunes—three modified war rigs, armored with scavenged metal plating, their engines roaring like beasts ready to tear us apart.

"Aw, hell," Jax muttered. "I hate these guys."

"Just drive," Aria snapped. "We have to outrun them."

We pushed the buggies harder, sand spraying behind us as the war rigs gained. The lead vehicle was a rusted monstrosity, its front reinforced with spikes and a massive turret mounted on the back. The other two flanked it, riders hanging off the sides, brandishing rifles and blades.

"They're closing in!" Nia shouted.

A crack split the air—a gunshot.

The windshield between Aria and *me* spidered with impact.

"Return fire!" Garren barked.

Jax whooped as he leaned out the side of the second buggy, firing his rifle. The raiders answered in kind, bullets kicking up the sand around us.

I grabbed my gun, aiming for the driver of the nearest rig. The shot went wide, but it made him swerve.

"They're herding us!" Aria shouted, yanking the wheel hard.

The buggies veered left, barely avoiding a rock formation. But the raiders kept pace, closing in.

Another bullet tore through the back tire of Jax's buggy.

He spun out.

"Jax!" I yelled.

Their buggy skidded sideways, slamming into a dune. Jax and Nia tumbled out, scrambling for cover as the raiders circled.

Aria whipped the buggy around, heading straight for them. Garren was already firing, picking off one of the raiders who got too close.

The lead war rig pulled up, and a raider leaped from the vehicle, tackling Jax to the ground.

Jax struggled, grappling with the attacker, but another raider raised a rifle—aiming directly at his head.

For a split second, everything slowed.

Jax was going to die.

Then, a sound split the air.

A deep growl.

The wind shifted.

Something *moved* behind us.

I turned just in time to see Erya.

She was awake.

And she was *changed*.

Her body convulsed, and her muscles looked like something inside was breaking free. The green veins beneath her skin pulsed violently, spreading and twisting. Her breathing turned ragged. Her fingers flexed, her nails elongating into curved, claw-like points.

And then she *moved*.

Faster than any human should.

She launched out of the buggy with a force that shattered the ground beneath her.

The raider with the rifle barely had time to scream before she *ripped into him*.

It wasn't a fight. It was *a slaughter*.

Erya tore through them like a force of nature, her movements a blur of speed and raw, unnatural strength. She hit the next raider with enough force to break a bone, sending him flying backward, his body crumpling against the side of the war rig.

The others turned, weapons raised—

Too late.

Erya lunged at the nearest one, her claws sinking into his chest. She yanked *hard*. Blood sprayed across the sand.

The remaining raiders froze.

For the first time, they weren't the predators.

They were *prey*.

And they knew it.

"Fall back!" one of them yelled.

Erya *pounced*.

Another scream—cut short.

The final raider barely managed to scramble onto his war rig before it roared away, speeding into the dunes and leaving the bodies of his crew behind.

Silence.

My heart slammed against my ribs.

Jax lay on his back, panting, his eyes wide as he stared at Erya.

"Okay," he gasped. "So, uh. That happened."

Erya stood in the middle of the carnage, her body heaving, blood dripping from her claws. Her breathing was uneven—shallow, ragged, like she was still *changing*.

I took a cautious step forward. "Erya?"

She flinched at my voice, her head snapping toward me. Her eyes—no longer entirely human—locked onto mine.

For a second, I thought she was going to attack *me*.

But then something *shifted* behind her gaze.

Recognition.

She staggered back, her body trembling violently. Her hands, still covered in blood, curled into fists. Her entire frame shook as if she were fighting against something inside her.

"I—" She choked on her words, her voice raw.

Then, without warning, her knees buckled.

I lunged, catching her before she collapsed.

"Erya, stay with me," I whispered, steadying her as her body convulsed.

Her eyes fluttered—then she went limp.

Aria knelt beside us, her jaw tight, her eyes flicking between me and Erya's unconscious form.

"That wasn't just *mutation*," she said quietly. "That was *control*."

Jax coughed. "Yeah, great, love the science talk. Can we just agree that our half-dead rescue mission just *ate people*, and maybe we should figure out what to do before she wakes up *again*?"

Garren exhaled sharply, surveying the bodies. "We need to move. Now."

I nodded, tightening my grip on Erya as I lifted her. Her breathing was slow but steady.

We weren't out of danger yet.

And whatever was happening to her—

This was only the beginning.

The drive back was silent.

The weight of what had just happened hung over us like a storm waiting to break.

Aria gripped the wheel, her knuckles white, eyes locked on the path ahead. The buggy jolted over uneven dunes, the familiar jagged peaks of the Veiled's mountain stronghold looming in the distance. No one spoke. Even Jax, who always had something to say, sat silently, his usual smirk absent.

Erya lay in the back, unconscious, her body still trembling. The green veins beneath her skin pulsed faintly, like something alive, something struggling to break free. I kept a hand on her wrist, checking for a pulse every few minutes. She was still burning up.

And we had no idea what she'd wake up as.

Nia's voice finally broke the silence. "Your dad is going to be pissed."

"Yeah, but he'll probably take it easy on Aria," Jax muttered. "The rest of us, not so much."

I swallowed hard, the anger already churning in my gut. Kaedin and the other leaders wouldn't just be mad—they would *punish* us for this. For going against orders. For sneaking out. For bringing *her* back.

For the first time, I didn't care what they thought.

The buggy skidded to a stop at the stronghold's entrance. The steel doors groaned open, and figures emerged from the shadows as we pulled in.

A *lot* of them.

Kaedin stood at the front, flanked by Moraak and Rynna, along with several other high-ranking members of the Veiled. Armed guards lined the walls, their glowing green eyes narrowing as we climbed out of the buggy.

Kaedin stepped forward, his expression like carved stone. "What the hell have you done?"

"We *saved* her," I said, my voice sharper than I intended.

Moraak's glare was ice cold. "You *disobeyed direct orders*."

"We did what had to be done," Aria snapped, stepping in front of me. "You weren't going to act, so we did."

Rynna's eyes widened when she peaked at Erya in the buggy. "You don't understand what you've brought here."

Several guards rushed forward, rifles raised, their focus locked on the unconscious woman in the back of the buggy.

"Get her inside," Kaedin ordered.

The guards hesitated. They didn't look at her like a rescued prisoner; they looked at her like a *threat*.

I stepped between them and Erya. "She's not dangerous."

Two of the guards grabbed Erya, pulling her from the buggy. Her body sagged between them, her face slack, her veins still glowing faint-

ly beneath her skin. As soon as they touched her, she twitched. A low, eerie sound rumbled from her throat.

"Careful!" Aria snapped.

The guards barely reacted. With swift precision, they shackled her wrists in thick iron cuffs, reinforcing them with something I didn't recognize—metal infused with a strange, pulsating energy.

"She's *not* an animal," I growled, stepping forward.

Kaedin's gaze snapped to me. "No. She's something worse."

I clenched my fists. "She *helped* us. She saved *us*."

"She *isn't human anymore*." Moraak's voice cut through the tension like a blade. "And you're a fool if you don't see that."

The guards lifted Erya's limp body and began carrying her toward the lower levels. Toward the containment cells.

Something inside me *snapped*.

"No!" I shoved one of the guards, my hands trembling with rage. "You *can't* do this!"

Kaedin's expression darkened. "Stand down, Kael."

I barely heard him. My body moved on its own. I lunged for the guard holding her, grabbing his shoulder—

Rough hands seized me before I could blink.

Two guards yanked me back, their grips like iron.

"Let me go!" I struggled, fury burning through my veins.

Kaedin stepped forward. "You brought this on yourself."

I ripped one arm free, swinging at him—

But before I could land the hit, something slammed into my gut.

Pain exploded through my ribs.

I gasped, stumbling backward as another guard shoved me to my knees. The world spun.

Kaedin's voice was a low growl. "You think you can break our rules without consequences?"

"She's not a threat!" I choked out, rage burning hotter than the pain in my ribs.

"She *will be*."

I fought against the hands restraining me, my vision tunneling with fury. My pulse roared in my ears.

Then, I felt something cold against my wrists.

Metal cuffs.

I froze.

No.

No, no, no.

"You don't have the right to do this," I growled.

Kaedin didn't even flinch. He just gestured toward the lower levels.

"Lock him up."

A hard shove sent me stumbling forward.

"Wait—" Aria stepped toward me, her eyes flashing with anger.

"This isn't right."

Kaedin turned to her, his expression unyielding. "Neither was what you did, daughter."

Moraak folded his arms. "You *all* broke the rules. You endangered the Veiled. There will be consequences."

Aria, Jax, Nia, and Garren stiffened as more guards surrounded them.

"You're stripping our ranks?" Aria accused.

"You lost our trust," Rynna said simply. "You disobeyed direct orders and put our entire stronghold at risk."

BENEATH THE BURNING VEIL

A sick feeling twisted in my gut as the guards began confiscating weapons, taking their gear, their privileges.

But none of that compared to what was happening to *me*.

The guards dragged me down the narrow stone corridors of the lower levels, their grip unrelenting. My pulse hammered, my breath coming short.

They threw me into a cold, damp cell. The metal door slammed shut behind me, the sound echoing in my skull.

For a moment, I just *breathed*.

Then I turned.

The cell beside mine was dimly lit, and the shadows were thick. But I didn't need the light to see who was there.

Erya.

She lay against the far wall, shackled, her breathing shallow. The green veins beneath her skin flickered weakly in the darkness.

I moved toward the bars, gripping them tight enough to make my knuckles go white.

She didn't stir.

Did she even know where she was?

Did she even know *me*?

I hesitated, then whispered—so softly it barely reached the cold air between us.

"You're my mother."

She didn't respond.

CHAPTER NINE

THE CELL AND THE TRUTH

The cell was quiet, except for the steady drip of water from somewhere in the stone ceiling. It was a maddening sound, each drop landing in a shallow puddle that had formed near the farthest corner. The Veiled didn't keep their prisoners in comfort—cold stone, rusted bars, and flickering light from a dim overhead bulb. It was meant to break men, to make them reconsider their actions.

But I wasn't reconsidering anything.

I sat with my back against the damp wall, arms resting on my knees, staring at the opposite cell. At her.

Erya barely moved. She had spent the last three days shifting between feverish unconsciousness and terrifying spasms. At times, she curled into herself, murmuring words in a language I couldn't understand. Other times, she convulsed so violently that the guards had to restrain her.

Her veins pulsed an eerie green, the mutation crawling deeper into her body. I had seen glimpses of what she might become—her fingernails sharpening into claws, her breath coming out in ragged growls, her body stiffening like something inside her was trying to take control.

But she always fought it.

She was still Erya.

For now.

A pair of Veiled guards entered the underground chamber. They moved without urgency, their boots echoing off the stone as they reached her cell. I had learned their routine well enough—twice a day, like clockwork, they took samples.

I watched in silence as they unlocked the barred door, stepping inside with careful, practiced movements.

“Hold her down,” one of them muttered.

The other guard grabbed Erya’s arm, pinning it to the floor. She didn’t resist—not really. She blinked sluggishly, her body too weak to fight back as they drew blood from her.

A sharp click, a needle sinking into her arm.

Her lips parted slightly, but no sound came out.

“More than usual today,” the first guard muttered, glancing at the filled vial of dark, almost black blood.

The other nodded. “Kaedin wants to know if she’s stabilizing. Or if she’s just another failure.”

Failure.

The word made my stomach turn.

To them, she wasn’t a person. She was an experiment, a liability, a monster to dissect.

They ignored me as they locked her cell again, carrying the vial out like it was more valuable than the person they had taken it from.

Once they were gone, I exhaled slowly. The tension in my shoulders didn’t ease.

Erya shifted slightly, her eyes fluttering open just a crack.

I leaned forward.

“...Erya?”

She didn’t answer right away. She just breathed slowly and shallowly.

Then, barely above a whisper—“Kael.”

I stiffened.

She had never said my name before.

I swallowed, pressing my hands against my knees to steady myself. Maybe she didn’t mean it. Perhaps she was delirious.

But then she turned her head slightly, her gaze focusing on me.

And I knew.

She knew.

My breath caught in my throat.

I had imagined this moment a thousand times, back when I was a kid staring out of a glass dome, wondering who she was and what she was like. I had built versions of her in my head—a warrior, a revolutionary, a ghost who had abandoned me.

Now, she was real.

A real person, shackled and sick, more fragile than I had ever imagined.

I didn’t know what to say.

So I just quietly asked, “How much do you know?”

Her lips trembled slightly. Then, her voice cracked, but the words were clear.

“...Everything.”

A sharp breath rushed out of me. I felt like I had been hit.

I had spent my whole life asking the question: *Why did she leave me?* And now, sitting across from her in this cold, miserable place, I realized she had never truly left.

“You knew.” My voice was hoarse. “This whole time.”

She gave the smallest nod. “Daris... he sent messages. Reports. He told me...” Her throat bobbed as she swallowed painfully. “Told me you were strong. That you never gave in.”

I clenched my jaw. Captain Daris. The man who cared for me more than anyone else in that horrible Dome.

She knew about me. She knew who I was.

For years, I had thought of her as a nameless woman who had never wanted me.

And now, after everything, I knew the truth.

She had been watching from the shadows, trying to protect me the only way she could.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

There was so much I wanted to say. To ask.

But all I could manage was—“Why?”

Erya closed her eyes briefly, exhaustion pulling at her features. When she spoke, it was barely more than a ghost of a voice.

“Because they would have killed you.”

I went still.

“The Syndicate,” she rasped. “The King’s advisors. They wanted you gone the second you were born. Alric... he fought them. He wanted to keep you. But they told him... you were dangerous.”

Dangerous.

A child. A baby. Dangerous.

BRANDON ROHRBAUGH

The rage inside me burned, slow and bitter. I had never even been given a chance.

Erya continued, voice wavering, “I never wanted to leave you. But they didn’t give me a choice.”

A pause.

Then, so soft I almost missed it—“I wanted to name you.”

The words hit me harder than I expected.

My hands curled into fists. “What name?”

She blinked, her gaze unfocused. “Kael.”

My chest clenched.

I looked down, my pulse a steady roar in my ears. “I was given that name in the Dome.”

She gave the faintest hint of a smile. “Then... at least they didn’t take everything.”

I exhaled, shaking my head. This was too much.

The silence stretched between us. Heavy. Unbearable.

Then, finally, I moved closer.

I reached through the bars.

Erya hesitated for only a moment before she did the same.

Our fingertips brushed.

And in that moment, it wasn’t about the war. It wasn’t about the Syndicate, or the Veiled, or even survival.

It was just a mother and her son.

Reaching for something they had lost.

I barely had time to process it before her body jerked violently.

A sharp cry tore from her throat.

She convulsed, her back arching unnaturally, her veins glowing brighter.

“No, no, no—Erya!”

She shrieked, the sound inhuman, echoing off the walls.

The cell door burst open, and guards rushed in.

One slammed a rifle butt against her head. Another injected something into her neck.

I was screaming. Fighting.

“Don’t touch her! Get off of her!”

They didn’t listen.

Erya went still. Too still.

And then—they dragged her away.

I fought. I yelled.

But no one listened.

The cell door slammed shut.

And she was gone.

Again.

I slid to my knees, breathing hard. The world felt hollow.

I clenched my fists against the cold stone, my body shaking with something I couldn’t name.

Then, in the silence of my cell, I whispered the only thing I could.

“...Mom.”



Time lost its meaning in the cell.

There were no windows, no way to track the passing of days—only the slow, maddening repetition of dripping water and the shuffle of boots beyond the bars. No one spoke to me. The guards came and

went in silence, dropping stale rations and water into my cell like I was nothing more than another failed experiment.

I barely touched the food.

I barely moved.

Erya was gone.

The only person in the world who truly understood what I had lost—who I was—had been dragged away into the dark.

I had fought. I screamed. But in the end, I was still locked behind bars, powerless.

Just like I had always been.

I sat with my back against the wall, legs stretched out, staring at the empty space where her cell used to be. It felt wrong. The silence was heavier now, as if her absence had left an empty pit in the universe.

A flicker of movement caught my eye.

Footsteps.

At first, I thought it was another guard. Maybe Kaedin had finally decided what to do with me. But when I looked up, Jax was standing outside my cell, arms crossed, grinning like an idiot.

"Wow, you look terrible."

"I never thought I'd be happy to see you."

He crouched down, resting his elbows on his knees. "You smell like a corpse, Kael. What, they don't offer showers in here?"

"I'll make sure to file a complaint."

"I heard what happened."

"Which part?"

Jax's smirk faltered. "All of it."

I looked away.

The memory of Erya convulsing, screaming, being dragged away—helpless in my hands—slammed into me like a hammer.

Jax let out a breath and leaned against the bars. "They took her to the upper labs."

My head snapped up. "What?"

He nodded. "We don't know much, but Aria overheard some of the higher-ups talking. They're running tests on her. They want to see if she's stable—if she's something they can control."

Rage boiled in my stomach. "I thought the Veiled were better than this."

"It's the war, it's changed them."

The Veiled. The people who had called her an experiment, who had feared what the Syndicate had done to her, were doing the same thing.

Jax hesitated, then dropped his voice lower. "Look, I know you're pissed, but we don't have time for you to sit here sulking. We've got a plan."

A plan.

I should've felt relief. Maybe even hope. But all I could think about was the Veiled guards dragging her away, the way she had reached for me like she knew it was the last time we'd ever touch.

Jax must've seen the doubt in my eyes because his expression darkened. "Don't do this, Kael. Don't let them win. We're getting you out of here. We're getting her out of here. But we need you to snap out of whatever this is and be the guy who fights back."

His words cut deep.

I swallowed, throat dry. "You think I don't want to fight back?"

"I think you've already lost in your head."

Silence stretched between us.

Then, the sound of footsteps.

More than one.

Jax straightened as Aria, Nia, and Garren appeared in the shadows, moving quickly and quietly down the hallway. They looked like ghosts in the dim torchlight, their weapons strapped to their backs, their movements precise.

"About time," Jax muttered.

Aria knelt by the lock, pulling a small device from her belt. A pulse generator. She pressed it against the bars, and a soft whirring sound filled the air as it hacked through the primitive security system.

She didn't look at me.

I should've said something, and I should've thanked them. But the words wouldn't come.

"You're an idiot," she muttered under her breath as she worked.

"Good to see you too."

The lock clicked. The door creaked open.

I pushed myself up slowly, my muscles stiff from days of barely moving.

Aria grabbed my collar as soon as I stepped out and yanked me close, eyes burning. "Do you have any idea how hard it was to keep them from killing you?"

I held her gaze. "Did you try?"

She let go. "You're lucky I like you."

Jax grinned. "Oh, *like* is a strong word."

"Shut up," Aria and Nia said at the same time.

Garren kept his voice low. "We don't have long before the next guard rotation. We need to move."

I took a breath. "Where are we going?"

Nia handed me a stolen knife. "To do something foolish."

Aria sighed. "We're blowing up Verdanix Dome."

Silence.

I stared at her. Then at the others.

Jax coughed. "I told them you'd take it well."

I ran a hand through my hair. "You're insane."

"We know," Nia said.

Garren didn't look amused. "Tiber has thrown everything at us. The mutants, the Syndicate, and even soldiers from outside the Domes. He wants the Veiled wiped off the map. If we don't hit back, we won't last another month."

Aria's voice softened. "We need a way in. You're from Verdanix, right?"

I hesitated.

This was it.

The moment when I should've told them the truth—that I had never set foot inside Verdanix. That I had been raised in Solaris Prime, far from the Dome, they thought I knew.

That I was living a lie.

But I couldn't do that. They had come to trust me, and I couldn't betray them now.

I forced a nod. "Yeah. I can get us in."

Aria studied me for a long moment, then nodded. "Then let's go."

I clenched my jaw, the weight of my lie settling deep in my gut.

I wasn't sure what was more terrifying—going to a Dome I'd never been to or knowing that my mother might not live long enough to see me again.

Either way, there was no turning back.

We moved quickly through the underground corridors, each footstep carefully placed to avoid detection. The Veiled's prison wing was cut into the mountain's core, a labyrinth of stone and steel. Still, Nia had done her homework—every rotation, every blind spot, every potential exit route.

Still, I couldn't shake the weight in my chest.

Erya was somewhere in this fortress, suffering under the same people who claimed to fight for justice. Every moment we wasted was another moment she was subjected to their experiments, their tests.

We had to get out of here.

We had to fight back.

Aria led the way, her movements sharp and purposeful. Garren took the rear, eyes scanning every shadow for threats. Jax moved confidently, making it seem like this was just another mission—a supply raid, a training exercise. But I knew better.

This wasn't just about getting me out.

This was war.

Jax nudged me as we slipped into an unguarded hallway. "So, you gonna tell me what's actually going on in that messed-up head of yours, or do I have to keep guessing?"

I shot him a look. "Not the time, Jax."

"When is it ever?"

Aria hushed us with a sharp glance, pressing a hand to her earpiece. "Two guards near the south exit. Nia, you're up."

Nia nodded, adjusting the small metallic disc in her hand—a pulse emitter designed to overload basic Veiled tech. She slid it along the floor, and the dim emergency lights flickered within seconds before cutting out completely.

A beat of silence.

Then—"What the hell—"

A guard's voice, confused. A scuffle of boots.

Aria moved first. Fast. Lethal.

A small tazer arrow buried itself in the first guard's neck before he even had a chance to react. The second guard barely had time to turn before Garren slammed his rifle against his skull, sending him crumpling to the ground unconscious.

Jax let out a low whistle. "You know, sometimes you guys scare me."

Aria ignored him, already moving toward the exit.

I kept up, heart pounding in my chest.

But the moment we stepped into the moonlight of the outer cliffs, the reality of what we were doing hit me full force.

I was leaving Erya behind.

I clenched my fists. "She's still in there. We can't just—"

"We don't have a choice!" Aria snapped, stepping closer, her voice sharp but not unkind. "We will get her back, but if we die in there, no one will. You have to trust me."

Trust.

It was such a simple word, but it felt heavier than anything else at that moment.

I inhaled deeply, forcing myself to push the rage, the grief, everything down where it couldn't get in the way.

I nodded.

Aria held my gaze for another second before exhaling. "Come on."

We climbed into the waiting dune buggies, the engines growling to life beneath us. Jax took the wheel of one, Aria the other. I slid into the

passenger seat beside her, my fingers tightening around the grip bar as she pressed the accelerator.

The wind whipped past us as we sped into the open Barrens, leaving the stronghold behind.

The Veiled would realize we were gone soon.

But by then, it would be too late.

We weren't just escaping.

We were going to end this.

The plan was reckless. It was madness.

We were going to destroy Verdania Dome.

CHAPTER TEN

A DEAL WITH THE RAIDERS

The Barrens welcomed us back with open arms. The buggies tore across the sand, kicking up dust in our wake, and the engines constantly growled against the howling wind. The sun hung low on the horizon, a dying ember bleeding into the sky, casting everything in hues of orange and red. It felt like driving straight into a fire.

I gripped the metal frame of my seat, staring ahead, but my mind was elsewhere.

How did it come to this?

I had spent my entire life in Solaris Prime, surrounded by the pristine steel and glass of a world built on order and control. Now, here I was—barreling toward a meeting with cutthroats, slavers, and murderers—hoping to trade for explosives like some back-alley criminal.

Daris would have been ashamed.

Or not. This could be the world he had been trying to prepare me for.

Jax let out a long, slow breath from the driver's seat, fingers drumming anxiously on the wheel. "You know," he said, his voice loud over

the roar of the engine, "this is easily the dumbest thing we've ever done. And that's saying something."

I glanced at him. "Worried?"

Jax scoffed. "About dealing with the people who eat each other when supplies run low? No, of course not."

Garren, sitting behind us, tightened his grip on his rifle. "They're not just slavers. They trade people. And when they can't trade them..." He let the sentence hang.

Jax whistled. "Man, I love that. I love that. Let's go make deals with them. Great idea, Aria."

Aria didn't react. She sat in the other buggy ahead of us, gripping the wheel, her shoulders stiff.

This was her plan. And she was going to see it through.

"We don't have a choice," I muttered.

Jax let out a short laugh. "No, see, that's where you're wrong. We always have a choice. And for some reason, we're choosing to waltz into a death trap."

"We need the explosives," I said.

"We need to not be cannibal stew," Jax shot back.

"We'll be fine," I said, though even I didn't believe it.

Jax just shook his head. "Famous last words."

The terrain began to shift as we neared Raider territory. The smooth dunes gave way to jagged, cracked rock formations, the remains of some ancient landscape carved by time and destruction. Shadows stretched long across the sand, eerie and unnatural in the fading light.

Scattered across the canyon walls were bodies—some hanging, others impaled on rusted metal spikes.

I exhaled through my nose. A warning.

Nia's voice crackled over the radio. "We're getting close."

Jax didn't look convinced. "Yeah? You sure it's not just Hell?"

Then, we saw it.

Bone Town.

The fortress loomed on the horizon, a nightmare of twisted architecture. Massive spinal columns, ribcages, and skulls the size of buggies made up its walls, remnants of the Sand Wraiths they had killed. Torches flickered between the bones, casting jagged shadows against the rock.

This wasn't just a hideout. This was a graveyard.

Dozens of metal towers jutted up from behind the skeletal walls, rigged with scrap metal plating and stolen Syndicate tech. Rusted banners hung limply from the heights, marked with bloody handprints and skulls—the Raiders' crude insignia.

Figures moved along the walls. Armed. Watching.

A horn blared from inside, a deep, echoing sound that sent a shiver down my spine.

"We've got their attention," Garren muttered.

Aria's buggy pulled to a stop first, and we followed, parking just outside the towering remains of a Sand Wraith's ribcage. An eerie silence settled over the canyon when the engines cut off.

Then—movement.

Raiders emerged from the shadows, stepping onto the ledges above us—dozens. Their bodies were scarred and filthy, and many of them were partially mutated—glowing veins, sharpened teeth, and eyes too bright to be human anymore. They wore patchwork armor stolen

from dead Syndicate soldiers, and their weapons were cobbled together from scraps.

Every one of them had a gun trained on us.

Jax muttered under his breath. "I hate this already."

A voice boomed from above.

"Out of your vehicles. No weapons."

Aria was the first to move. She stepped out slowly and deliberately, raising her hands just enough to show she wasn't a threat.

The rest of us followed.

The Raiders didn't lower their guns.

A massive gate, constructed from the fused bones of Sand Wraiths, groaned as it opened.

A figure stepped out.

Tall. Monstrous.

He wore a breathing mask, tubes running from his back to a series of vials strapped to his chest—filled with sickly green liquid. His skin was partially mutated, veins dark beneath his exposed arms. Long, thin white hair fell in greasy strands over his shoulders, and his left eye was missing, replaced by a rusted metal plate.

His voice came through the mechanical rasp of his mask.

"Welcome to Bone Town."

Jax leaned over, whispering, "We can still turn around."

I didn't respond.

Because I knew—we had just stepped into the lion's den.

And there was no turning back.

The massive bone gates slammed shut behind us with a thunderous clang, sealing us inside Bone Town. A gust of wind kicked up sand and ash, swirling between the skeletal remains of dead Sand Wraiths that

made up the fortress walls. The stench of rot and oil filled my nostrils, mixing with the acrid tang of gunpowder and blood.

Jax exhaled slowly. "Oh yeah. This place is really cozy."

Nobody laughed.

Armed Raiders flanked us, watching our every move with cold, predatory eyes. Their weapons weren't just for show—rusted rifles, modified Syndicate pulse guns, serrated machetes caked in dried blood. Some had mechanical enhancements, makeshift bionic arms or legs, and were likely ripped-off corpses and repurposed. Others bore unmistakable signs of mutation—elongated limbs, unnaturally sharpened teeth, veins that pulsed with the same sickly green hue as the vials strapped to their leader's chest.

At the center of it all stood Lord Varik.

He was even more imposing up close. Easily seven feet tall, his partially mutated frame was thick with scarred muscle and stretched, unnatural skin. The breathing mask fused to his face emitted a slow, rhythmic hiss, feeding him whatever toxic green substance pulsed through the tubes embedded into his back.

His one good eye scanned us like prey.

For a long moment, nobody moved.

Then, Varik took a step forward.

"So." His voice rasped through the mechanical filter, distorted and inhuman. "You come to my gates unarmed. Are you here to feed us?"

"They don't have much meat on their bones," one of them called out from the crowd.

Aria stepped forward, her shoulders squared, face unreadable. "We have an offer for you."

Varik let out a low, rattling chuckle. "You hear that, boys?" He turned his head, addressing the gathered Raiders. "The kids have a deal for us."

The Raiders surrounding us laughed—cruel, guttural sounds echoing off the hollow ribcages of dead creatures. One of them spat at the ground near Jax's feet. A green mucus-like saliva that sizzled in the heat.

Jax sighed. "Yeah, I'm really feeling the hospitality."

Aria ignored them. "We need explosives."

Varik tilted his head, intrigued. "And why would I waste my precious boom powder on a handful of children?"

I stiffened at the word. Children. We had been fighting for our survival for months, but to him, that's all we were. Scavengers. Insects.

Aria remained steady. "We're hitting Verdanax Dome."

The laughter stopped.

The tension snapped into something worse—sharp. Dangerous.

Even the Raiders, hardened killers and thieves, paused at the statement.

Varik stared at her, his mechanical breathing the only sound in the silence. Then, with a slow movement, he took a step closer.

"You." His good eye locked onto Aria. "Are either the bravest fool in the wasteland... or the dumbest."

Aria didn't blink. "Maybe both."

Varik chuckled again—this time, with actual amusement. "Blowing up a Syndicate Dome. That's a tall tale." He reached for a metal staff strapped to his back, tapping the ground with it. "You come to my city, offering nothing but words. Where is the trade?"

Aria lifted her chin. "Medical supplies. Syndicate-grade. Stolen straight from my father."

That got his attention.

The gathered Raiders murmured among themselves, and even Varik's one eye gleamed with curiosity.

"Your father?" he echoed. "And who, little rat, is your father?"

Aria's expression didn't change. "Veiled Elder, Kaedin."

A shift rippled through the crowd.

Even Lord Varik hesitated.

Kaedin was the Veiled's leader, and here was his own daughter, standing in the center of the most feared Raider stronghold, offering his stolen goods.

For the first time, Varik seemed genuinely interested.

He turned to his men. "Bring the girl a chair."

One of the Raiders kicked a rusted, half-broken stool toward Aria, who remained standing.

"I prefer to be on my feet," she said.

Varik let out another hissing laugh.

"Very well," he said, his voice thick with amusement. "Let's say I believe you. That you've come all this way to trade supplies for boom powder."

He took another step forward.

"That doesn't explain why I shouldn't just kill you and take your supplies instead. Or kill your friends here and keep you for a ransom from the leader of the Veiled."

The moment the words left his mouth, the Raiders surged forward.

I saw the chains in their hands.

They were going to shackle us.

Aria reached for a weapon she didn't have.

Jax cursed. "Ah, hell."

And then—I moved.

I didn't think. I just acted.

My hand shot to the old revolver hidden under my shirt—the one Captain Daris had given me.

Boom.

The shot rang like a crack of thunder through the stronghold.

For a second, I thought I had missed it.

Then—I saw it.

A small hole in Varik's breathing vial.

The green liquid hissed and sprayed as the glass shattered, spilling the mutagen he relied on to stay alive.

Everything stopped.

The Raiders froze. Horrified.

Varik staggered, his body jerking as the liquid leaked from the tubes in his back.

His men scrambled to patch the hole, desperate to save him.

My heart hammered. My hands shook around the revolver.

I had just signed my death sentence.

But instead of ordering my execution, Varik raised a massive, scarred hand—stopping his men.

The Raiders stilled, confused.

Varik looked at me.

Really looked at me.

His one good eye narrowed. Then, he let out a low, rattling breath.

"...A weapon like that," he murmured, his voice almost reverent.
"Old world. Vintage."

He straightened, even as his men sealed the hole in his vial.

"Boy." His gaze bore into me. "What blood do you carry?"

I swallowed. "What?"

Varik didn't answer immediately. He just let out another hissing chuckle.

Then—he nodded.

"To stand against me," he said, "to fire at me and live..." His mouth curled into something almost like respect.

"I accept your trade."

Aria blinked. "You do?"

He exhaled slowly, watching me like he knew something I didn't.

"The supplies in exchange for explosives," he confirmed. Then, with a slight grin, "And once you burn Verdanix to the ground, the Raiders will take what remains."

The deal was done.

And yet... something in how Varik looked at me made my stomach twist.

Like he recognized me.

Like he knew something I didn't.

I forced myself to breathe.

Jax let out a low whistle. "Well. That was easy."

Nia elbowed him. "That was not easy."

Garren muttered, "Let's get out of here before he changes his mind."

Varik smirked.

He lifted a thick, scarred hand, gesturing behind him.

"Give them the iron beast," he said.

The iron beast.

One of the Raiders snorted. "You want to give them that?"

Varik grinned. "They'll need it."

And that was how we left Bone Town—driving away with a reinforced armored sand vehicle, a cargo full of explosives, and the feeling that we had just made a deal with the devil.

The iron beast roared to life beneath us, its massive tires crushing the sand and bone as we rumbled out of the Raider stronghold. The engine growled like a caged animal, ready to break loose. This wasn't a simple sand buggy but a war machine.

A reinforced steel frame protected the front and sides, and scrap metal and scavenged plating layers were welded together to form an unbreakable hull. The roof had a mounted turret, rusted but functional, with belts of old-world ammunition strapped across the interior. Every inch of it was built for survival—thick tires with spiked rims, an armored engine, and a pounding exhaust that left a trail of black smoke in our wake.

I gripped the frame beside me as we kicked up dust, tearing through the narrow bone archways that led out of Bone Town. Raiders lined the pathways, watching us with a mix of curiosity and contempt, their faces hidden beneath layers of cloth and bone-carved masks. Some sneered, others laughed.

They didn't think we'd survive.

Neither did I.

Jax leaned out of the passenger window, running a hand over the mounted gun on the roof. "Now, this is my kind of ride."

"Keep your head inside," Garren grunted from the back. "If they change their minds and start shooting, you'll be the first one to lose your face."

Jax sighed dramatically. "Let me have my moment, man."

Nia was at the wheel, hands steady, eyes sharp. She hadn't spoken much since the deal was made, but she didn't need to. She was focused, leading us out of Raider territory as fast as possible.

Aria sat beside her, staring straight ahead, her jaw tight.

"You okay?" I asked.

She didn't look at me. "Not until we're out of here."

I didn't push.

We drove in tense silence for the next ten minutes, the stronghold shrinking behind us, replaced by the endless dunes of the Barrens. The further we got, the lighter the air felt—like a vice loosening around our throats.

We had done it.

We had survived Bone Town.

Now came the harder part.

I looked back at the cargo hold—stacked with crates of explosives, each labeled with Raider sigils and crude warnings in paint. Danger. Death. Burners.

One wrong move, and we'd be dust in the wind.

"So," Jax finally said, breaking the silence. "We actually gonna talk about how Kael just shot the Scourge of the Wastes and lived?"

Nia laughed softly, the first sign of levity since we had left.

"Yeah," she said, smirking at me in the rearview mirror. "That was risky but also kind of sexy."

I shifted uncomfortably. "I had to make him listen."

Jax grinned. "Man's got guts. I'll give him that."

I rolled my shoulders, still feeling the weight of Varik's stare. He had looked at me like he knew me—like he saw something in me I didn't even understand yet.

That thought sat heavy in my chest.

"I don't like him," I muttered.

"Good," Aria said finally, her voice sharp. "Because neither do I."

We fell into silence again, the tension still thick between us.

The truth was, it didn't matter what Varik thought of me. The only thing that mattered was what came next.

Blowing up Verdianix Dome.

The wind howled through the open terrain, rattling the makeshift plating of our new ride. The sun was beginning to set, painting the sky in deep reds and golds, a brief moment of beauty in a world of ruin.

We still had miles to go before we reached the staging ground—an abandoned outpost near the Veiled's western border, where we could finalize the plan before infiltrating Verdianix.

We had explosives.

We had the vehicle.

Now, we just had to figure out how we were going to pull this off.

We pulled into the remains of a rusted structure long since abandoned by whatever faction had once claimed it. The walls were crumbling, but the foundations still stood—enough to give us cover for the night.

The inside was barebones—a few rusted tables, scattered empty crates, and a firepit filled with burnt remains of old rations and bones.

Jax gave a low whistle as he stepped inside. "Really outdid ourselves with the accommodations."

"Shut up and help unload," Garren muttered, already hauling a crate from the back of the vehicle.

Nia and Aria worked on setting up the maps, laying them out on the sturdy metal table beneath the flickering glow of a portable lantern.

I sat down, watching as the plan started to take shape.

Aria pointed at the main transport routes leading into Verdanax. "Supply convoys leave every two days. That's our way in."

"Blowing up a moving convoy sounds like a great way to die," Jax pointed out.

"We're not blowing up the convoy," Aria said. "We're stealing it."

Nia tapped the map. "They disguise themselves as traders—Veiled, Syndicate, independent mercenaries. If we take out a transport before it reaches Verdanax, we can infiltrate the Dome under their banner."

I frowned. "And once we're inside?"

Aria's expression hardened. "We set the charges at the support columns underneath Verdanax. We blow it from the inside out."

Jax let out a low whistle. "Gotta say, that's ballsy."

Garren crossed his arms. "We'll need disguises. Convoy uniforms, fake credentials."

Nia nodded. "I can forge those. Give me a few hours."

Aria exhaled, rubbing her temples. "We'll only have one chance. If we screw this up, we won't make it out alive."

That wasn't an exaggeration.

The Syndicate would hunt us down.

The Veiled might never take us back.

"Hey guys," I said. "What about the innocent people working the farms in there? I know the guards and soldiers are horrible people, but there are a lot of innocent people in there."

"They're all Syndicate," Jax said. "I say blow them all away."

"Kael is right," Nia said, with Garren nodding.

"You came from Verdania," Aria said. "We will protect those like you. You have my word."

"So, we split up once we get in," I suggested. "Aria and I plant the charges while Nia and Garren get out as many people as you can."

"And me?" Jax asked.

"We're going to need a distraction," I said.

"Like put on a show for them?" he asked. "Maybe sing a song?"

"No, like a fire in the fields that forces everyone to evacuate," Aria said. "And once they are out, radio to us, and we will set the charges and meet you all outside."

Jax stretched his arms. "Alright, well, I say we drink to our impending doom." He pulled a flask from his belt, grinning. "Anyone?"

Aria rolled her eyes. "Pass."

"More for me." Jax took a swig before tossing the flask to Garren, who took a reluctant sip before passing it to Nia.

When the flask reached me, I hesitated.

Jax smirked. "Come on, Kael. You just pissed off the biggest warlord in the Barrens and walked away breathing. I don't know what does if that doesn't deserve a drink."

I took the flask.

And for the first time in days, I smiled.

Tomorrow, we'd go to war.

Tonight—we drank.

The night stretched on, the fire crackling low as we let exhaustion and adrenaline settle into something else—something that almost felt normal.

For once, we weren't running for our lives.

For once, we weren't fighting.

For once, we were just... teenagers.

In true Jax fashion, Jax was balancing on top of a crate, arms outstretched as he wobbled dramatically. His movements were exaggerated, his voice loud and theatrical as he butchered some old-world dance that looked like a mix between a Syndicate parade march and a broken marionette.

Nia and Garren sat together on a worn sack of grain, laughing at the ridiculous display. Nia leaned into Garren, her head resting lightly against his shoulder, her quiet amusement mixing with Garren's deep chuckles.

"You're a terrible dancer," Nia teased.

Jax pressed a hand to his chest, offended. "Excuse you. This is an ancient art form passed down through generations. I am honoring the past."

"You look like a dying sand rat," Garren said.

Jax gasped dramatically. "And yet, I'm still the most graceful one here."

Aria nudged me lightly. "You should join him," she said, smirking.

"Not a chance."

I let the sounds of their laughter settle in my chest, warming something inside me that had been cold for too long. It was easy to forget we were planning something that could get us all killed. That this could be the last time we sat together like this.

I turned slightly, glancing at Aria. She was still watching Jax, but her expression had softened—less guarded, less sharp. She almost looked happy.

For a long time, I had only seen Aria as a fighter—fierce, focused, unwilling to break. But here, in the flickering firelight, I saw something else. Something I wasn't sure I deserved to see.

The warmth of the fire cast a golden glow on her face, making the green in her eyes brighter, like embers catching light. Her dark hair fell loose over her shoulders, the wayward strands framing her features in a way that made it impossible to look away.

I swallowed.

This was a mistake.

I shouldn't be feeling this. Not now. Not with everything at stake.

And definitely not with the lie sitting like a weight in my chest.

She turned to me then, catching my stare before I could look away. Her head tilted slightly as if studying me. "What?"

I exhaled slowly, shaking my head. "Nothing."

She didn't buy it.

"You're brooding," she said, nudging me with her elbow again. "You always do that when something's eating at you."

I huffed. "I do not."

"You do," she insisted. "And I'd like to know what it is."

I hesitated.

I should tell her.

I should say something before it was too late—before I let this get worse.

But the words twisted in my throat, tangled between fear and guilt.

"I have something to confess," I said finally.

Aria's expression shifted slightly, something unreadable flashing across her face.

Then, before I could process what was happening, she leaned in.
And kissed me.

Her lips were soft and warm, and my mind completely blanked for a moment.

I wasn't in the Barrens.

I wasn't a liar.

I wasn't Kael Solaryn, the *bastard* son of King Alric.

And she wasn't Aria, the fierce daughter of the Veiled leader Kaedin.

We weren't members of opposing factions who were sworn enemies for generations.

I was just Kael, and she was just Aria.

The world melted away.

For a moment.

Just a moment.

Then reality slammed back into me, sharp and cruel.

She thought I meant that I wanted to confess how I felt.

That is not the truth.

That is not the lie that kept me up at night.

But gods help me, I didn't pull away.

I didn't stop her.

I let myself have this. Just once.

Even though I knew it was built on a foundation that could crumble at any second.

Even though I knew that once she found out what I was hiding...
She might never forgive me.

BRANDON ROHRBAUGH

But for now, I didn't care.

I kissed her back.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

The first rays of dawn broke over the horizon, stretching golden light across the sand. The fire from last night had burned low, reduced to glowing embers that pulsed weakly in the morning chill. The world was quiet, save for the occasional gust of wind carrying traces of ash and dust through the ruins of our makeshift shelter.

I sat up slowly, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. My body ached from sleeping on the hard ground, but that wasn't why I felt heavy. My thoughts were thick with the weight of last night.

The kiss.

I could still feel the ghost of it on my lips, the way Aria had leaned in, the way she had mistaken my hesitation for something else. And I had let her.

I should have told her the truth. I should have pulled away. But I hadn't.

Now, the guilt settled deep in my bones.

Across from me, Aria sat with her back against a rusted crate, running a whetstone over the edge of her knife. The rhythmic scrape

of metal against stone was the only sound between us. Her face was unreadable, her expression carefully guarded. She didn't look at me, didn't acknowledge what had happened.

Maybe she regretted it.

Maybe she knew something was wrong.

The fire crackled softly as a stray ember popped, breaking the silence. I swallowed hard and pulled my knees to my chest.

I should say something.

Before I could, a loud groan shattered the moment.

Jax rolled over from his spot by the vehicle. His arms stretched above his head as he yawned. "Ugh. Mornings. Why do they exist?"

Aria's lips twitched. "So you can suffer."

Jax sat up, running a hand through his tangled hair. "You hurt me, Aria." His gaze flickered to me, and his smirk deepened. "But not as much as Kael here, who looks like he saw a ghost in his dreams. Or maybe... something else."

I shot him a glare. "Shut up."

Jax's grin only widened. "Oh, so it was something else. Interesting."

Nia appeared beside him, brushing dust off her sleeves. "If you two are done being idiots, we have things to do."

Aria stood, flipping her knife in her palm before sheathing it. "She's right. Eat quickly. We need to move soon."

Jax groaned again but reached for a ration bar from his pack. He tore it open with his teeth, muttering something about how unfair life was.

I grabbed my own ration but barely tasted it. My mind was elsewhere, still tangled in last night's mistake. Not that kissing her was a

mistake, but taking advantage of the moment and not telling her the truth.

Aria moved toward the vehicle, checking the gear we had loaded. I hesitated, then followed.

She didn't look at me as she tightened the straps over the hidden explosives, ensuring they were secure. The silence between us stretched too long, too tight.

I exhaled. "Aria."

She paused but didn't turn around. "What?"

I shifted uncomfortably. "About last night..."

She finally looked at me, her green eyes unreadable.

I thought she would say something for a second, but then Jax clapped a hand on my shoulder, nearly making me choke on my breath. "Alright, lovebirds, let's get a move on. We've got a Dome to destroy."

Aria turned away before I could respond, her focus shifting to Nia, who was already setting up the convoy disguises.

I clenched my jaw.

Another missed chance.

Another lie by omission.

And now, there was no time left.

Because today, we were walking straight into the food source of the Haven Network, planning something crazy.

And if we failed, none of us would make it out alive.

The sun was rising higher now, burning away the cold edge of the night and turning the sky into a dull, unforgiving red. The air was thick with dust as we worked, prepping for what was easily the most reckless thing we'd ever done.

Jax stood beside our armored sand vehicle, adjusting his newly acquired uniform—a tattered Syndicate transport guard's jacket, still stained with old sweat and grime. He tugged at the collar, making a face. "You know, for a group of people who think they're better than everyone else, they sure don't take care of their clothes."

Aria rolled her eyes. "It's supposed to look used. If we walk in looking too clean, they'll know something's off."

Nia was kneeling by one of the crates, meticulously arranging the fake credentials she'd forged the night before. She pressed her thumb against the edge of a fabricated ID chip, watching the flickering light confirm its activation. "This will work," she muttered. "As long as no one looks too closely."

I wiped the sweat from my forehead and tried to shake off the unease crawling up my spine. Everything about this felt... too fast. Too inevitable. There was no turning back.

"You're quiet," Aria murmured, suddenly beside me.

I forced a shrug. "Just thinking."

She studied me briefly, eyes sharp, like she was trying to peel back the layers I'd carefully wrapped around myself. "Thinking about last night?"

I swallowed, my throat dry. "Among other things."

Her expression didn't change, but something in her posture shifted. A flicker of disappointment? No—maybe it was just the stress of what we were about to do.

"We should go over the plan again," Garren interrupted. He stood near the vehicle. He'd been working half the night and all morning on removing parts of it that screamed *Raiders*.

Aria nodded. "Right. We have to time this perfectly."

She unrolled the map across the hood of the vehicle, pressing down the curling edges with flat palms. "The supply convoy is scheduled to arrive at the outer checkpoint in two hours. That's our window."

Nia tapped one of the marks on the map. "We'll intercept them before they reach the Dome's main gate."

Jax leaned in, grinning. "If we actually pull this off, we might go down in history as the craziest people to ever set foot in the Barrens."

"Or the dumbest," Garren muttered.

I exhaled. "How are we taking the convoy?"

Aria traced a path along the map with her finger. "There's a narrow pass along the eastern ridge. The convoy will have to slow down there. That's our best shot."

Nia nodded. "We use the explosives from the Raiders to block the road behind them. Cut off their escape."

Jax smirked. "And then we kindly introduce them to the concept of forced retirement?"

"Something like that," Aria said. "We take them out quick. No room for error. Once the guards are down, we take their uniforms and move in with their cargo."

I felt my chest tighten. "And when we're inside?"

A shadow passed over Aria's face. "We stick to the plan. Set the charges at the support beams. Take out the food supply. And get out before they realize what's happening."

It sounded simple. Too simple.

Nothing was ever that easy.

Garren crossed his arms. "What about civilians?"

Aria hesitated. "We'll warn as many as we can. We'll get them out alive."

My stomach twisted. The people inside Verdanix weren't soldiers. They were workers. Families. People are just trying to survive. The same way we were.

But we didn't have a choice.

The Veiled wouldn't last another month if we didn't do this.

"I don't like it," I admitted. "Too many things could go wrong."

Aria's gaze met mine, unwavering. "Then we make sure they don't."

Jax stretched his arms above his head. "Alright, doom and gloom aside, let's get dressed. I wanna see Kael in Syndicate gear. Bet he cleans up real nice."

I rolled my eyes but grabbed the uniform that had been set aside for me. It smelled like rust and old sweat, like every memory of my time sneaking through the streets in Solaris Prime's lower districts.

But this time, I wasn't a prisoner in my own skin.

This time, I was choosing to walk into the lion's den.

And I didn't know if I'd make it back out.



The sun had climbed higher, beating down on the wasteland as we waited in position. The air shimmered over the cracked earth; every breath felt thick with dust and tension.

We had stripped the armored vehicle of any markings that screamed *Raider* and positioned it just off the narrow path where the convoy would pass. From here, we had a full view of the approach, the stretch of road boxed in by jagged ridges of stone.

A perfect choke point.

I crouched behind a boulder, fingers tight around the stolen Syndicate rifle slung across my back. My new uniform clung to my skin, stiff and scratchy, a sickeningly familiar weight. I had spent my whole life trying to escape the world of the Syndicate, and now I was slipping back into it like a second skin.

Nia was beside me, double-checking the detonation trigger for the explosives we had planted along the ridge. Her brows furrowed in concentration, hands steady despite the gravity of what we were about to do.

Jax sat with his back against the rock, tossing a small stone up and down in one hand. "So," he said casually, "who wants to take bets on how fast we die if this goes sideways?"

"Jax," Aria warned from her position on the other side of the ridge. She was watching through the scope of her rifle, tracking the horizon. Her posture was tense, ready.

"What?" he said, smirking. Five minutes is generous. Maybe three if they've got one of those fancy Syndicate war drones with them."

Garren exhaled sharply, shifting his grip on his rifle. "We're not dying today."

Jax snorted. "Oh, so *you're* feeling optimistic? That's new."

"Focus," Aria said. "They're coming."

The words sent a jolt through me.

I turned my attention back to the horizon, my pulse quickening.

A low rumble vibrated through the ground.

A few seconds later, the first vehicle came into view—a massive, sand-worn transport, its reinforced wheels kicking up a storm of dust as it led a convoy of three others. Each transport was heavily armored

and built to withstand ambushes. Mounted turrets gleamed in the sunlight, manned by Syndicate soldiers in dark uniforms.

They were moving fast, the engines growling as they approached.

Nia clicked the detonation trigger, arming the explosives we had buried in the rock walls. "On your signal, Aria."

Aria tracked the convoy's movement, waiting for the perfect moment.

"Hold," she murmured.

The first transport passed the marker we had set. Then, the second.

"Now," Aria said.

Nia pressed the trigger.

The explosion tore through the ridge like a lightning strike.

A deafening boom shattered the air as fire and debris rained down, collapsing part of the pathway behind the convoy. The lead vehicle swerved violently as the drivers slammed on the brakes, the entire line of transports screeching to a halt.

The dust cloud swallowed them whole.

I was already moving.

We sprinted from our cover, rifles raised as the Syndicate guards stumbled out, coughing from the dust.

Aria fired first, a sharp, precise shot that took down a gunner before he could react.

Jax and Garren flanked left, cutting off any chance of retreat.

I targeted the closest soldier, my rifle kicking against my shoulder as I fired. He crumpled, his weapon clattering to the ground.

Chaos erupted.

The remaining guards shouted orders and scrambled for cover. One of them made it to the mounted turret on the lead transport.

Before he could fire, Aria put an arrow through his throat.

I barely had time to process it before another soldier lunged at me.

I twisted, barely dodging the blade of a Syndicate combat knife as it slashed toward my ribs. The soldier was fast, stronger than I expected.

But I had spent my whole life fighting to survive.

I slammed the butt of my rifle into his face, knocking him back. He staggered, blood pouring from his nose, and I didn't hesitate—I drove my knee into his stomach, grabbed his collar, and threw him to the ground.

"Kael?" he said, looking up at me.

"That's right."

A gunshot cracked behind me, striking the man who knew me by name.

Garren finished the last soldier before the dust had time to settle.

And then it was over.

The silence that followed felt almost too sudden, too fragile.

Aria lowered her rifle, scanning the bodies. "Clear."

Jax let out a breath, rolling his shoulders. "That was easy."

I shot him a look. "Don't jinx it."

We moved fast, dragging the bodies out of sight and stripping the uniforms off the ones that weren't completely shredded. The real Syndicate convoy drivers would be found eventually, but by then, we'd be long gone.

Nia climbed into the lead transport's cab and checked the controls.

"The Engine's intact. We can still make it in."

Aria nodded, fastening the Syndicate armor over her clothes. "We move now. No second-guessing. No hesitation."

I swallowed the knot in my throat.

This was it.

We had our disguises, our stolen convoy, and our explosives.

We were officially walking into the belly of the beast.

And I had no idea if we'd walk back out.

The stolen Syndicate convoy rumbled forward, leaving behind the blood and dust of our ambush. The tires carved deep tracks into the cracked earth, and the engine's vibrations settled into a dull hum beneath my feet.

Inside the lead transport, the air was thick with tension.

Aria drove, her hands steady on the wheel, her eyes locked on the road ahead. She wore her stolen Syndicate uniform like it was second nature, the dark fabric hugging her frame, the high collar concealing the tense set of her jaw.

Beside her, Nia studied the convoy manifest stolen from one of the dead drivers. "This should get us past the first checkpoint," she muttered, flicking through the digital log on her holo-pad. "It says we're transporting grain and medical supplies from Cryostone to Verdanix. No mention of weapons or high-priority cargo. That's good—it means they won't scan us too heavily."

Jax stretched out in the back, adjusting his stolen Syndicate cap. "So, what's the plan if they do scan us?"

"Then we improvise," Garren said flatly, loading a fresh clip into his rifle.

Jax smirked. "Great. Love a good 'improvise' plan."

I sat in the passenger seat, my stolen Syndicate uniform feeling like it was suffocating me. The familiar weight of the armor plating and the stiff fabric pressing against my skin brought back memories I'd buried deep.

I had worn something like this before.

I had been one of them.

Now, I was walking straight back into their world.

Aria's voice broke the silence. "Kael."

I looked at her.

She didn't take her eyes off the road, but her fingers tightened around the wheel. "We're getting close."

I exhaled, nodding.

The rocky wasteland ahead gave way to the first signs of civilization—crumbling watchtowers and half-buried barricades from a war long forgotten. The outskirts of Verdanax Dome were littered with remnants of old battles, rusted war machines half-buried in sand, and the skeletal remains of Syndicate outposts that had fallen to time and decay.

And then, rising above it all—

Verdanix.

The Dome loomed in the distance, its translucent energy barrier casting a faint green hue over the skyline. The outer walls were reinforced with thick metal plating, dotted with automated turrets and guard towers that pulsed with Syndicate insignias. Beyond the barrier, the city inside glowed with artificial lights, a self-contained world of controlled agriculture, factories, and order.

It was bigger than I had imagined.

Colder.

Jax let out a low whistle. "So, uh... we're really doing this, huh?"

"Yeah," I muttered. "We're really doing this."

"It's been an honor fighting alongside you guys," he said.

We didn't dismiss him this time. Although he may have been joking, we knew that anything could go wrong with this mission at any moment.

"I do have to say," Nia started. "Kael, you may be a Dome rat, but you have proved yourself to be a Veiled."

The others nodded and agreed with her. I felt a sense of belonging that I had never felt before.

"Here we go," Garren said.

The road ahead funneled into a heavily guarded checkpoint. Massive floodlights bathed the area in harsh white light, illuminating the line of transports waiting for clearance. Syndicate soldiers patrolled the perimeter, their rifles slung across their backs, their visors reflecting the glow of their holo-scanners.

This was it.

Aria tightened her grip on the wheel. "Stay calm. Stick to the script."

Nia double-checked the manifest. "I'll handle the clearance. Keep your heads down, and don't say anything unless they ask."

Jax leaned back, tipping his cap over his eyes. "I'm gonna take a nap and let you guys handle this. Wake me up if we get shot at."

Aria shot him a glare. "Not funny."

Garren shifted in his seat, his hand resting near the concealed pistol at his hip. "If anything goes wrong, we don't fight. Not yet."

I nodded, swallowing against the dryness in my throat.

The convoy rolled forward, inching toward the checkpoint. The closer we got, the louder the hum of the energy barrier became, a low, vibrating drone that sent a chill down my spine.

A Syndicate officer stepped forward, raising a gloved hand. His uniform was pristine, his visor reflecting the transport's headlights as he approached.

We pulled up scarves over our mouths and noses to hide our age the best we could. Aria slowed the vehicle to a stop.

The officer rapped his knuckles against the side of the transport. "Papers."

Nia leaned forward, tapping at the holo-pad embedded in the dashboard. The stolen manifest flickered to life, displaying the details of our supposed cargo.

The officer scanned it, his visor pulsing as he reviewed the data.

"Cargo inspection?" he asked, his voice clipped and formal.

Nia didn't hesitate. "Standard rations and medical supplies for the Verdanax agricultural district. No restricted materials."

The officer glanced toward the rear of the transport, where Garren and Jax sat motionless, blending into the shadows.

A pause.

"You guys must be fresh out of the academy."

Nia nodded.

Then he nodded.

"Move along."

The energy barrier hissed as the checkpoint gates opened.

The transport lurched forward, crossing the threshold into Verdanax.

A breath I hadn't realized I was holding slipped from my lips.

We were in.

No alarms.

No immediate gunfire.

BRANDON ROHRBAUGH

Just the cold, artificial world of Verdenix stretching before us.
We had made it past the gate.
But the most challenging part was still ahead.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE FIRE BELOW

The air inside Verdanix Dome was thick with humidity, artificial sunlight beaming down from the massive structure's curved ceiling, simulating a golden morning glow. Unlike the barren wastelands outside, life thrived here—rows of hydro-farms stretched in neat, calculated lines, their crops swaying gently beneath controlled ventilation currents. The scent of fresh soil, damp earth, and something sterile—something unnatural—clung to the air.

This was a world separate from the chaos beyond its walls.

A world we were about to burn to the ground.

I gripped the edge of the supply truck as we rolled into the checkpoint, keeping my breathing steady. The convoy rumbled forward, disguised as nothing more than another shipment of agricultural goods—grain, synthetic nutrients, and purified water bound for the Syndicate's other cities. The Veiled had managed to get their hands on forged credentials, but that would only get us through the gates. After that, we were on borrowed time.

A Syndicate soldier in pristine white armor motioned for our vehicle to stop. The visor on his helmet obscured his face, making him look more machine than man.

"Authorization," he demanded, voice cold and clipped.

Now in the driver's seat, Nia held up a digital manifest. Her fingers barely trembled as she handed it over. "Routine supply transport from Red Hollow outpost."

The guard's visor tilted down as he scanned the device. I forced myself to breathe even and act like I belonged. We were dead if he noticed anything off—if he so much as hesitated.

After an agonizing moment, he handed the manifest back.

"Red Hollow," he questioned. "Wow, we don't get transports from way out there very often ever since the Lord and Lady Vael were murdered. Move along."

Nia didn't wait for him to change his mind. She eased the truck forward, and the gates hissed open, revealing the heart of Verdanix.

My stomach clenched. We were in.

Aria spoke when we turned a corner into one of the quieter loading docks.

"This is it," she murmured. "We don't have long."

We parked the truck behind a stack of supply crates, hidden from view. The Dome's workers bustled around the area, unloading shipments, restocking hydro-pods, and moving irrigation equipment. No one spared us a second glance. That was the key to surviving in a place like this—blend in, don't stand out.

We hopped out of the truck, gathering near the vehicle's rear. The metal walls of Verdanix stretched high above us, and massive ventila-

tion systems humming overhead carried cool, controlled air throughout the city.

Aria spread the map across the truck bed floor, pointing to our targets.

"We split up here." She tapped the underground schematics. "Kael and I take the lower levels. We plant the explosives."

I nodded, my pulse thrumming. This was our most dangerous role—there was no escape if we got caught beneath the city.

Aria continued. "Jax, you start the fires. Make it big, make it visible. Once the flames start spreading, the Syndicate will panic and call for an evacuation."

Jax smirked, adjusting the fuel canisters strapped to his pack. "The Syndicate will pay for what they've done to our families over the generations."

She turned to Nia and Garren. "Once people start evacuating, you move in. The farmers, the engineers—anyone caught in the middle of this war. You get them out."

Garren crossed his arms. "And if they won't leave?"

"Make them," Aria said simply.

Silence hung between us. This wasn't just a mission anymore.

People were going to die.

I looked at Aria. Her shoulders were squared, her expression unreadable. I knew she didn't want innocent people caught in this, but that didn't change the reality of what we were doing. We were collapsing a city.

I clenched my fists. This was the price of war.

Aria met my gaze. "Kael, you know the lower tunnels better than anyone. You lead the way."

I felt the blood drain from my face.

I forced myself to nod, but inside, panic gripped my chest.

I had never set foot in Verdanix.

This was the lie I had been carrying since we started. Since they looked to me on their way inside. They believed I had lived here once and knew its streets and hidden paths.

But I didn't.

I had no idea what waited for us underground.

Still, I squared my shoulders. If I hesitated now, she would know something was wrong.

Aria studied me for a long moment. Then, she gave a curt nod.

"We move fast," she said. "We meet back here before detonation."

I swallowed hard. I could do this. I had to.

Nia secured the last of the fake credentials, ensuring each of us had clearance badges stolen from the truck's original drivers. They weren't perfect, but they'd buy us a little more time.

Jax slung an arm around Garren's shoulder. "If I die, tell everyone I went out in a blaze of glory."

Garren shoved him off. "If you die, it's probably because you tripped over your own feet and lit yourself on fire."

Jax grinned. "Either way sounds like a legendary way to go."

Aria sighed, adjusting her gear. "Enough. Remember, we are here to burn the Syndicate's food source, not to kill anyone."

One by one, we peeled off, heading toward our separate paths.

Jax slipped into the fields, already uncapping a canister of fuel. He whistled lowly to himself, blending in as if he belonged. To any outsider, he was just another worker refueling equipment. But we all knew he was about to turn Verdanix into a funeral pyre.

Nia and Garren disappeared into the civilian zones, weaving through irrigation tunnels and side alleys, searching for the people who wouldn't make it out on their own.

Aria and I turned toward the stairwell leading underground.

I felt her watching me as we walked.

Felt the weight of her suspicion.

"You sure you know where we're going?" she asked, her voice light—but there was something underneath it.

I gave her a tight smile. "Yeah. Just follow me."

She didn't say anything, but I caught the way her fingers twitched toward her knife.

She didn't believe me.

And if I didn't find a way to fake my way through this... she was going to find out the truth.

I forced my feet forward as we slipped into the dimly lit stairwell, descending into the belly of VerdaniX.

The moment the door slammed shut behind us, sealing us in the darkness below, I knew one thing for certain.

This was going to be the most brutal lie I'd ever tell.

The stairwell descended into darkness, the cool, damp air of the underground tunnels pressing in around us. The scent of earth and old metal filled my nose, starkly contrasting the synthetic freshness of the farms above. The glow of the Dome's artificial sun was gone, replaced by flickering industrial lights lining the walls at uneven intervals, casting long, jittery shadows.

My footsteps echoed on the grated metal flooring, each step heavier than the last.

I didn't know where I was going.

And Aria was watching me.

She walked a step behind, silent but calculating, her presence a weight on my back. I could feel her eyes on me, even in the dim glow of the tunnels.

How long before she realizes?

I forced myself to keep moving to keep up the illusion. I studied the stolen maps and memorized the routes as best as possible. I had to fake it long enough to reach the lower level's structural supports, which was our target.

But every tunnel looked the same.

Steel walls, rusted pipes, the faint hiss of steam escaping from unseen vents. Corridors branched off in multiple directions, some marked with faded Syndicate sigils, others left abandoned and crumbling.

I swallowed hard. Left or right?

Aria's voice was soft but sharp. "You sure you remember the way?"

My pulse spiked.

I kept my face neutral as I glanced back. "Yeah. Just—" I scanned the tunnels, my mind racing. Pick a direction. Act as you know. "It's this way."

I turned left.

I didn't know if it was right, but I kept walking.

Aria didn't argue. But she hesitated before following.

We moved more profoundly, the tunnels narrowing, the floor shifting from metal grating to packed dirt. Pipes snaked along the ceiling like veins, thick with condensation. The air was colder down here, less circulated, like this place had been forgotten.

We rounded another corner—and hit a dead end.

I stopped short, my stomach dropping. Rusted barrels and scrap machinery blocked the path, piled high against the walls. No doors. No access panels. Just an abandoned section of the underbelly.

I tensed, my mind scrambling for a way to fix this. We could double back. Maybe—

Aria grabbed my wrist.

I froze.

When I turned to her, her green eyes were locked onto mine. Searching. Piecing something together.

"Kael." Her voice was low. Careful. "What aren't you telling me?"

A beat of silence.

Then another.

I felt my throat tighten.

Lie. Lie. Lie.

I opened my mouth—

And nothing came out.

Because in that moment, I saw it in her expression.

She already knew.

Her grip on my wrist tightened. "You don't know where we are, do you?"

I clenched my jaw. "I do."

She didn't let go. "Then where are we?"

I hesitated.

Too long.

Aria's gaze sharpened, her entire body going still.

"Kael," she said again, her voice colder this time. "You've never been here before."

The words hit me like a fist to the chest.

I forced myself to keep my face unreadable, but it didn't matter. She saw through it.

My silence was the only answer she needed.

Aria let go of my wrist and stepped back, her jaw tightening. She wasn't just angry—she looked betrayed.

"You lied," she whispered.

I swallowed hard. "I had to."

Her fists clenched. "No, you didn't."

I exhaled sharply. "Aria, I—"

She shook her head, cutting me off. She wasn't looking at me like a friend anymore, not like someone she trusted.

She was looking at me like a threat.

I had spent so long pretending. Pretending to be someone I wasn't. Pretending to know the Dome, to lead, to be strong enough to do what needed to be done.

And now, it was unraveling.

"You said you grew up here," Aria muttered, more to herself than to me. "You said you knew these tunnels."

I clenched my fists. "I had to say something."

Aria's eyes flashed. "No. You had to tell the truth."

Silence stretched between us. I had never seen her look at me like this.

Cold. Distant. Teary-eyed.

Like she didn't recognize me anymore.

I should have told her from the beginning. But now, we were standing in the depths of the Dome, surrounded by danger, with no plan or way forward.

Aria took a slow breath, schooling her expression. She wasn't just hurt—she was calculating.

Finally, she turned away from me and exhaled.

"We're not leaving without setting those charges." Her voice was tight. Sharp. "And since you don't know where we are, I'll figure it out myself."

She pulled out the holo-map and flicked it on, scanning the digital blueprint with narrowed eyes.

I wanted to say something. To explain.

But there was nothing I could say to undo the damage.

She had trusted me.

And now, I wasn't sure she ever would again.

I forced myself to focus. This wasn't about me.

We had a mission to finish.

I pushed down the guilt, the shame, the sick feeling twisting in my gut.

"We don't have much time," I said quietly.

Aria didn't look at me. She just nodded.

Then, without another word, she started moving.

And for the first time since this mission started, I wasn't sure if we were walking out of this together.

The tunnels grew tighter, colder, and quieter as we moved deeper into Verdanax's underbelly. The air smelled of damp metal, mold, and something else—something chemical. The further we walked, the more the ground trembled beneath our feet, a steady pulse coming from the heart of the Dome itself.

Aria led the way now.

She hadn't spoken since our confrontation, her shoulders stiff, her movements sharp and precise. She didn't trust me anymore.

And I couldn't blame her.

I followed in silence, my stomach a tight knot.

We were running out of time.

She studied the holo-map again as we reached a junction—four tunnels stretching in different directions. One was blocked by rusted barrels and collapsed support beams, and the others stretched endlessly into the dark.

Aria crouched, flicking through the holographic display. "There." She pointed to a narrow passage marked with old maintenance labels. "This tunnel leads to the primary support columns beneath the farms."

I nodded, but she was already moving.

I hurried after her, the distant hum of machinery growing louder as we stepped deeper into the tunnel. Pipes lined the ceiling like veins, some dripping condensation, others vibrating with pressure.

Then—a light up ahead.

Faint. Flickering. Artificial.

We slowed, pressing against the tunnel walls. A door loomed ahead, metal and reinforced with Syndicate markings. It was the main chamber beneath Verdanix.

This was it.

Aria glanced at me, her expression unreadable. "You place the first charge. I'll set the others."

I nodded, reaching into my pack. My fingers trembled as I pulled out the first explosive.

I tried not to think about the weight of what we were about to do.

I tried not to think about the fact that after today, this place wouldn't exist anymore.

And I tried not to think about the innocent people above us, the ones who had no idea their home was about to be ripped from beneath their feet.

Aria had promised me we would evacuate them, but that didn't erase the truth—some wouldn't make it out.

We slipped through the doorway into a massive subterranean chamber.

Rows of thick metal columns stretched up into the darkness, disappearing into the foundation of the Dome above. The room was lined with old-world generators and ventilation systems humming with life, keeping the farms above climate-controlled and thriving.

In the center of the chamber is the central structural support column.

One charge here.

That was all it would take.

Aria crouched near one of the smaller pillars, pulling out her explosives. I moved to the central column, my breaths steady but shallow.

This was what I signed up for.

This was what we had to do.

But as I knelt at the pillar's base, my hands refused to move.

A shadow of hesitation whispered through my mind.

My fingers hovered over the detonator.

This was permanent.

There was no undoing this.

Aria's voice cut through my thoughts. "Kael."

I startled slightly, turning to see her watching me.

She had already set her charge, her sharp green eyes narrowing.

She could see it. The hesitation.

"You okay?" she asked, her voice quieter than before.

I clenched my jaw. "Yeah."

Lie.

But this wasn't the time for doubt.

I forced myself to move quickly, securing the charge to the base of the column. The small red light on the detonator flickered, waiting for activation.

One push of a button.

One countdown.

Then, nothing left but rubble.

I stepped back, exhaling slowly.

Aria adjusted her pack and pulled out her radio. "Jax, you ready?"

A crackle of static.

Then—Jax's voice, full of smug amusement. "Oh, am I ready to create beautiful, fiery chaos? Yeah, sweetheart. I was born for this."

Aria rolled her eyes. "We'll signal when the countdown starts. Stand by."

Jax made a loud mock salute noise. "Roger that, boss."

Aria clipped the radio back onto her belt.

She turned back to me.

There was a beat of silence.

Then—"Let's get the hell out of here."

I nodded, but the weight of what we had just done stayed with me.

We weren't just fighting the Syndicate anymore.

We were erasing an entire piece of the world.

And no matter how necessary it was, somewhere deep inside me, I wasn't sure if I was ready to live with that.

We moved quickly, slipping back through the tunnels with the same urgency as before—but the air felt different this time.

The charges were set.

The countdown was about to begin.

And once it did, there was no going back.

Aria kept her pace steady, her movements sharp and efficient. I followed, my heart hammering faster with every step.

The radio crackled to life.

"Fire's set," Jax reported, his voice brimming with satisfaction. "The fields are lighting up like festival night. The civilians are running. We're good to go."

Garren's voice cut in, lower and tenser. "We've got Syndicate guards mobilizing. They're pushing toward the eastern gates."

Nia: "We've gotten most of the civilians out. But we need to move now. We're running out of time."

Aria pulled the radio from her belt. "Understood. Kael and I are on our way out."

We sharply turned down a narrower tunnel, the exit within reach. A faint glow pulsed ahead, leading us toward the main pathway that would take us back to the surface.

Then—

I saw her.

Lady Verdani.

Standing at the end of the passage, surrounded by a cluster of Syndicate officers and guards.

Everything froze.

She was exactly as I remembered her. Tall, regal, draped in white and gold fabrics that should have been out of place in this world of dust and ruin. Her black hair was now streaked with silver, but her cold, calculating eyes hadn't changed.

Neither had her smile.

She was smiling.

Just like she had when my father collapsed, clutching his throat, choking on his own poisoned breath.

The memory slammed into me.

The royal dining hall, with its crystal chandeliers, was full of the scent of spice and wine.

The way my father had gasped. The way his eyes widened in horror as the poison took hold.

She had lifted a delicate hand to her lips, hiding her amusement.

I couldn't move.

I couldn't breathe.

The world blurred at the edges, my vision narrowing to the monster before me.

Lady Verdanix took a slow step forward.

And then she saw me.

Her expression shifted.

Recognition dawned in her sharp eyes.

Shock. Suspicion. Then—understanding.

And just like that, her smile vanished.

“Kill him.”

The words rang out, cold and absolute.

The guards lurched forward.

“Kael!” Aria grabbed my arm, trying to yank me back.
“Move—now!”

But I couldn’t.

Not until—

A gun fired.

Aria’s pistol.

One of the guards dropped, a crimson bloom spreading across his chest.

Then—chaos.

Syndicate soldiers rushed forward. Aria shoved me backward, raising her weapon again, but there were too many—shouting, bullets, boots pounding against metal.

My breath came fast and sharp. My fingers trembled around my gun.

I should shoot.

I should move.

But all I could see was her.

The woman who had stolen everything from me.

Lady Verdanix raised a hand. “Take them both.”

The nearest guard lunged—

And then—

Garren.

A flash of movement. A blur of dark fabric and steel.

Garren slammed into me, tackling me backward.

I hit the ground hard, my vision tilting.

“GO!” Garren’s voice was fierce, desperate. “Kael, RUN!”

Aria was already moving. She fired wildly, forcing the guards back, dragging me with her as I stumbled to my feet.

But Garren—
He turned back.
I saw it before it happened.
The decision in his eyes.
He pulled a grenade from his belt.
“Garren, don’t!” Aria shouted.
But he was already moving.
Already running toward them.
He tackled two Syndicate guards simultaneously, driving them
backward and forcing them away from us.
Lady Verdanix’s eyes widened in alarm.
The countdown was still active.
The explosives beneath the Dome—seconds from detonation.
The world slowed.
Garren turned, locking eyes with me.
And then—
He threw the grenade.
Straight into the heart of the Syndicate soldiers.
BOOM.
The explosion tore through the tunnel.
Flames erupted. The air shattered.
The force hit me like a wrecking ball, hurling me backward.
I barely heard Aria scream my name.
The ground collapsed.
The walls fractured.
And then—
Verdanix Dome fell.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE LONG ROAD HOME

The world spun around me, a blur of smoke and collapsing metal. My ears rang, drowning out everything but the sound of my own ragged breathing. My vision swam with dust, the air thick with the scent of burning fuel and scorched earth. Somewhere in the chaos, I heard voices—distant, frantic. Hands grabbed at me, dragging me across the crumbling ground.

Jax and Nia. They pulled me away just as another section of the Verdanax Dome groaned and caved in, sending a fresh wave of debris into the air. My chest heaved as I coughed, trying to clear my lungs, my mind, anything.

Garren.

I twisted, trying to see through the settling dust, but destruction remained. The ground where he had stood was gone, swallowed by fire and ruin.

Jax collapsed beside me, his breath ragged. Nia stood a few feet away, her hands curled into fists as she stared at the wreckage. The weight of our actions pressed down on us, heavier than the dust coating our skin. No one spoke. There were no words.

Around us, the civilians we had freed moved in a panicked frenzy. They rushed to abandoned vehicles, engines roaring to life as they sped off into the dunes. Jax pushed himself up, stumbling toward them.

"Wait! You can't just run! You need to come with us! The Veiled can help—"

No one listened. They were too desperate to escape, too afraid to trust. The cars disappeared into the horizon, leaving us behind one by one.

Jax let out a sharp breath, his hands trembling as they curled into his hair. "We screwed up."

We sat there for what felt like an eternity, staring at the smoldering ruins of Verdanix. The heat of the flames licked at my skin, but it was nothing compared to the guilt burning inside me.

This was my fault.

If I had told the truth... If I hadn't hesitated...

Garren would still be alive.

A movement caught my eye. Aria stood, brushing the dust from her clothes. Her expression was unreadable, but her voice was cold and sharp. "We're leaving."

I forced myself to my feet, legs unsteady beneath me. Every muscle ached, but I pushed through it, stepping toward the vehicle. Aria moved faster. Before I could reach the door, she turned, her foot slamming into my chest.

I hit the ground hard, air rushing from my lungs. I stared up at her in shock. "Aria—"

"You're not coming with us." Her voice was flat, final.

I pushed myself up, wincing. "What are you talking about? We need to stick together—"

"You lied." Nia's voice was sharp, filled with something deeper than anger. Betrayal. "You told us you knew Verdanix. That you had been here before. But you didn't. You led us into this blind. If we had known the truth, we would never have gone through this." Her eyes burned, red-rimmed. "Garren wouldn't be dead."

I swallowed, shaking my head. "I— I didn't mean—"

"But you did." Nia's words cut deep, leaving wounds I couldn't defend against.

I turned to Jax, desperate. "Jax, please—"

"Did you really lie about being from Verdanix Dome?" he asked, his eyes looking away from me.

"I'm sorry," I pleaded. "I can explain everything."

"Let's go, Jax," Nia said.

A cold pit formed in my stomach. This was real. This was happening.

I looked to Aria, one last plea. "Let me explain. Please. Let me tell you the truth."

Her green eyes were stone. "I don't care who you are. You're not one of us. That's all that matters."

She turned and climbed into the vehicle. Jax followed. Nia hesitated only a second before doing the same. The engine roared to life, and the wheels kicked up dust as they sped away, leaving me kneeling in the ruins of Verdanix.

Alone.

The Barrens stretched before me, an ocean of shifting sand that swallowed everything. The heat rippled off the dunes in waves, distorting the horizon into a cruel mirage. I walked because there was

nothing else to do. Because stopping meant giving up. And I couldn't. Not yet.

Every step felt heavier. My boots dragged through the sand, sinking with each movement as if the desert was trying to pull me under. My mouth was dry, my throat raw. My last sip of water was back in Verdanix—before everything collapsed, before I was cast out. Now, my body screamed for something I couldn't give it.

Garren's last moments looped in my head, over and over, like some twisted recording I couldn't turn off. His final shove, the way his face twisted in that last moment before the explosion swallowed him whole. I should have saved him. If I hadn't lied about Verdanix if I hadn't hesitated when I saw Lady Verdanix—

I clenched my fists, shaking off the thought. I couldn't change what had happened. I could only move forward even if each step felt like it was leading nowhere.

The sun glared mercilessly, stealing every ounce of strength I had left. My skin burned, my clothes felt like lead, and my head pounded with each heartbeat. I needed water. Shelter. Something. Anything.

I stumbled, catching myself before I could collapse entirely. My vision swam, my pulse roared in my ears, and the horizon wavered. I tried to blink the haze away, but the world refused to steady itself.

I wasn't going to make it.

The thought hit me with terrifying finality. I had no supplies, no plan, no allies. Aria, Jax, Nia—they were gone. The Veiled had left me behind. I was alone in the Barrens. A dead man walking.

My knees buckled, and this time I didn't catch myself. The sand rushed to meet me, swallowing me in its suffocating heat. I lay there, breathing heavily, my body too weak to fight anymore. The sky above

twisted, the sun warping into an unnatural shape as my vision blurred at the edges.

Then—

A shadow.

It fell over me, blocking out the relentless sun. A figure loomed above, their form flickering like a mirage. My cracked lips parted, but no sound came out. Was I hallucinating?

The figure crouched beside me. Tattered robes, sun-bleached and frayed, wrapped around their frame. Their face was hidden behind a mask of sand-worn bone, its hollow eye sockets staring down at me.

“Water,” I croaked, barely recognizing my own voice.

The figure reached into their robes and produced a small, weathered canteen. They tilted it to my lips, and I drank greedily. The liquid was cool, unnervingly pure, unlike any water I had ever tasted. It slid down my throat like silk, sending an unnatural shiver through my body.

The world sharpened, but only slightly. The pain in my head dulled, but the exhaustion remained like a weight pressing against my ribs.

“You walk alone, but you are not alone.” The voice was deep, warped as if coming from somewhere far away.

I tried to focus, but the heat warped the figure at the edges. “Who... are you?”

Silence. The outcast tilted their head, studying me.

“You are not the first to be cast out.”

I clenched my jaw. “I don’t need riddles. I need—”

The outcast reached forward, pressing a gloved hand against my forehead. The world twisted, my mind splintering. For a moment, I

wasn't in the desert anymore—I was somewhere else, somewhere cold, dark. Voices whispered all around me, names I didn't recognize. A flicker of something ancient. Something powerful.

Then, just as suddenly, it was gone. I gasped, jerking away from the outcast's touch.

“What—what was that?” My breath came in short, ragged bursts.

The outcast stood, their robe billowing slightly in the wind. “You must decide. Do you let them define you? Or do you become something else?”

I tried to push myself up and demand answers, but my arms shook too much to hold me. My head spun again.

When I finally forced my gaze back up—the outcast was gone.

The wind howled through the dunes, scattering sand where they had just stood.

Had they even been real? Or was the heat finally getting to me?

I pushed myself onto my knees, my limbs trembling with the effort. I didn't have time to question it. Real or not, I was still alive. I still had a chance.

I turned my eyes toward the horizon and started walking.

The wind howled like a wounded beast, carrying the scent of scorched earth and sand that clawed at my skin. Ahead, the sky churned in violent shades of copper and black. A storm was coming—a monstrous one.

I stumbled forward, feet dragging through the endless dunes, my body an aching mass of dehydration and exhaustion. My lips were cracked, my throat raw, and every breath scraped like glass against my lungs. There was no shelter in sight, no break in the relentless expanse of the Barrens. It was just me, the sand, and the coming storm.

Then I saw them.

At first, I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me again. Dark figures moved within the storm, gliding across the dunes like wraiths. Massive shapes, impossibly fast, their forms shifting in and out of focus with each gust of wind. They were not human, not animal, not something else entirely.

Fear prickled at my spine. I forced my feet to move faster, desperate for anything to provide cover. The storm was swallowing the horizon now, a wall of sand and fury bearing down on me.

And then, through the chaos, a lone rider emerged.

Perched atop one of the monstrous creatures, they seemed more phantom than a person. Their armor was ancient-looking, crafted from bone and scavenged metal, a relic from a long-buried world. A tattered scarf wrapped around their face, trailing behind them like the remnants of a forgotten war banner. The beast they rode—if it could even be called a beast—moved with unnatural grace, its long, sinewy body blending into the storm like it was born from it.

I tried to speak, to call out, but my throat was too dry, my voice stolen by the wind. The rider said nothing, only tilted their head slightly, a silent command.

Follow.

Every instinct screamed at me to run. To turn away from this impossible figure, from the nightmare made flesh. But where would I go? The storm was almost upon me, and I had no hope of outrunning it.

So I stepped forward.

The rider didn't wait. They pulled on the reins of their beast, guiding it effortlessly toward the edge of the storm. I stumbled after them, barely able to keep up, my body protesting with every step.

Then, just as the storm hit, they disappeared beneath the dunes.

I barely had time to process what had happened before I felt the ground shift beneath me. An opening. A hidden passage swallowed by the sand. I threw myself forward without thinking, tumbling into darkness just as the storm roared overhead.

For a long moment, I just lay there, gasping for breath, the incredible underground air starkly contrasting with the scorching heat above. Then, slowly, I pushed myself up.

I was in a cavern—not a cavern—something older. The walls were smooth, carved not by nature but by hands long since turned to dust. Old-world remnants littered the space—maps with curling edges, broken technology whose purpose I couldn't guess, and blueprints of cities that no longer existed.

And standing in the center of it all was the rider.

I swallowed hard, my heartbeat thundering in my ears. “Who are you?”

They didn't answer. Instead, they reached down, grabbed a small metal canteen, and tossed it to me.

Water.

I didn't hesitate. I twisted the cap off and drank greedily, the liquid flooding my parched throat. But the moment it hit my stomach, something felt... off. Too pure. Too clean. As if it didn't belong in a place like this.

“You walk alone, but you are not alone.”

Their voice was distorted and surreal, like it was coming from somewhere else entirely. The words sent a shiver down my spine.

I forced myself to focus. “What does that mean?”

The rider tilted their head. “The end is coming.”

A sharp pain stabbed through my skull. I pressed my fingers against my temples, squeezing my eyes shut. None of this felt real. My body was too weak, my mind too clouded. Was I even awake?

“You’re not real,” I muttered. “None of this is real.”

The rider stepped closer. “Exile is not death. It is transformation. Fulfill your destiny.”

I blinked.

And suddenly, the cavern was empty.

No rider. No maps. No technology. No beast waiting outside.

Nothing.

My hands trembled. My mind reeled. Had I imagined all of it? Was I losing my grip on reality? I stared at the spot where they had stood, my pulse pounding against my ribs.

Then, slowly, I turned and climbed out of the bunker, stepping back into the endless desert.

Alone again.



I woke to fabric rustling and the distant murmur of voices. My body ached, my throat burned, and for a moment, I didn’t know where I was. The last thing I remembered was the endless sand, the burning sun, and the strange figures—mirages, I told myself. The robed man. The rider on the Sand Wraith. Had they been accurate? Or just the fevered delusions of a dying man?

The tent around me was dim, the air heavy with the scent of dried herbs and leather. A thin sheet covered me, but my clothes were stiff with sand and sweat beneath it. My head throbbed as I tried to sit up.

The entrance flap lifted, and a man stepped inside. He was tall and broad-shouldered, his long black hair pulled back from a weathered face lined with scars. Tattoos wove intricate patterns down his arms and throat. His dark eyes locked onto mine, unreadable, but something about him felt familiar.

"You're awake," he said, his voice rough but steady. "You were having quite the dream."

I swallowed against the dryness in my throat. "Where... where am I?"

He crouched beside me, setting down a small clay cup. "A village of exiles. I found you half-buried in the sand three days ago. You're lucky the Feralkind or Wraith didn't get you."

I took the cup, my hands shaking. The water inside was calm, almost too pure, like the water the outcast had given me in my dream. I drank deeply, ignoring how my stomach clenched against the sudden relief. "You saved my life," I said.

He inclined his head. "It seemed like the right thing to do."

Something nagged at the back of my mind. His face, his voice—it felt like I should know him. But that was impossible.

"What is this place?" I asked, glancing past him toward the slit in the tent's fabric. I could hear movement outside, the shuffle of feet, the distant clang of metal on metal.

"A haven for those the Syndicate cast aside," he said. "Men and women who refused to bow to the Syndicate's rule. Some of us were

born here. Others, like myself, were given a choice—serve the mad king or be exiled."

Something in the way he said it made my chest tighten. A slow realization crept over me, a feeling of inevitability that I couldn't explain.

I sat up straighter. "Who are you?"

The man exhaled, studying me for a long moment before he spoke. "My name is Kieran Orven."

The name hit me like a fist to the gut. "Orven?" My mind raced, pieces clicking into place. "You—"

"I'm Daris Orven's twin brother, and you are Kael Solaryn, rightful heir to the throne."

The world tilted. I shook my head as if I hadn't heard him right. "That's not possible."

His expression didn't change. "It is."

Daris had been the closest thing I'd had to family aside from my father. He had been the one to smuggle me out of the palace, to shield me from Tiber's wrath.

Kieran watched the shock play across my face. "Daris stayed behind. I left. That was our choice."

I struggled to process it. "The timid and curious one who got himself into trouble."

"So, he did tell you about me." He cracked a smile. "He chose loyalty to the kingdom. I chose survival. That's beside the point. We need to get you back to Solaris Prime and claim your spot. It's about time Inferna had a king who could fix this place."

I wanted to argue, to demand why he hadn't fought back and left Daris alone in that viper's nest. But I bit my tongue. I had no right to judge him. Not when I had failed in so many ways myself.

Instead, I asked, "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you need to understand what you're up against," he said. "Tiber isn't just a tyrant. He's unraveling, and the experiments the Syndicate has been running are worse than anything you can imagine. If you don't stop him, nothing will be left to save—not for you, Daris, or anyone."

A cold weight settled in my gut. I had known Tiber was dangerous, but hearing it spoken aloud, seeing the truth in Kieran's eyes, made it all too real.

Kieran stood, grabbing something from the corner of the tent—a bundle of cloth and leather—which he tossed onto the bed beside me. "You'll need supplies," he said.

I blinked. "You're letting me leave?"

"We stay out of politics, but just know we are pulling for you. Besides, I take it you need to get back to the Veiled before marching on Solaris Prime to claim the throne," he smirked.

I swallowed hard, touched by the unexpected kindness. "Thank you."

He nodded, then gestured for me to follow him outside.

The village sprawled across the rocky dunes, built from salvaged metal and sun-bleached wood. People moved purposefully, repairing weapons, tending to livestock, and reinforcing walls built to protect against something far worse than the elements.

Kieran led me to a waiting horse, its coat covered in lightweight armor that shimmered in the heat. A cooling system had been built into the plating; no doubt scavenged from old-world tech.

"She's strong and fast," Kieran said, handing me the reins. "She'll get you where you need to go."

I took them, running a hand along the horse's neck. "Where did you get all this?"

Kieran's smile was knowing. "The past isn't as buried as people think."

I swung into the saddle, heart pounding. "Daris—if I see him again, what should I tell him?"

Kieran's expression darkened, but he didn't hesitate. "Tell him I never forgot."

I nodded, unable to find the words to say anything else.

Then, I turned the horse toward the horizon. Toward the Veiled.

Toward home.

The descending horizon shimmered with the haze of heat. The wind had picked up, stirring loose sand into ghostly wisps that curled through the air like dying embers. My horse moved swiftly beneath me, its cooling armor hissing softly as it fought against the relentless Inferna sun. Every breath I took was dry, filled with the scent of dust and something else—something metallic, something wrong.

I rode hard, pushing toward the only place I had left—the Veiled. A part of me knew I was still weak from my time in the sand, but I couldn't afford to stop. Not when the weight of Kieran's words still sat heavy in my chest. The Syndicate's experiments had spiraled beyond control. Tiber was unraveling. And if I didn't act soon, nothing wouldn't be left to save.

The landscape blurred around me as I pressed on, the endless dunes giving way to the jagged, broken earth of the Barrens. Sharp cliffs and rocky outcroppings jutted up from the ground like the bones of some long-dead beast, remnants of a world crumbling under the sun's fury.

I crested a ridge, my horse's hooves kicking up loose gravel, and that was when I saw it.

Fire.

The Veiled was burning.

For a moment, I couldn't breathe. The sight before me was a vision of destruction, the air thick with smoke coiled in black tendrils against the darkening sky. Even from this distance, I could see the flashes of gunfire and hear the distant echoes of battle carried by the wind.

The massive machines that had once protected the Veiled lay in ruins, their hulking forms half-buried in the sand, torn apart as if by monstrous hands. Exploded vehicles littered the landscape, their twisted metal frames still smoldering. Bodies—so many bodies—scattered across the Barrens, their forms broken and lifeless.

And moving among the wreckage, feeding on the dead, was a horde of Feralkind.

The creatures prowled through the battlefield like carrion beasts, their movements swift and predatory. Some crouched over bodies, their elongated limbs twitching as they tore into flesh with sharp, blackened teeth. Others howled to the sky, their guttural cries sending chills down my spine. Their numbers were more significant than I had seen—hundreds, maybe more.

I clenched the reins, my heart pounding so violently it hurt. The Veiled—the last stronghold against the Syndicate's tyranny—was falling. My people were dying. And I wasn't there.

Aria. The others. Were they still alive?

The world tilted as I tried to understand what I was seeing. It wasn't just an attack. It was an extermination.

The Syndicate had done this.

Tiber had done this.

Rage surged through me, white-hot and blinding. I dug my heels into my horse's sides, urging her forward faster, even as my mind screamed at me to stop, to think. But I couldn't stop. I had to get there. I had to fight.

I had to save whoever was left.

The wind howled through the Barrens as I rode straight toward the flames, toward the chaos, toward the end of everything I had left.

And I knew, deep in my bones, that nothing would ever be the same again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ASHES OF THE VEILED

The air smelled like fire and death.

As I rode closer to the Veiled's mountain stronghold, the sky bled with the last embers of destruction. Thick black smoke curled into the heavens, stretching for miles, staining the horizon like an open wound. The closer I got, the heavier the scent of burning metal and charred bodies became.

I dug my heels into the horse's sides, pushing it harder despite its labored breath. My body ached from days of travel, my throat raw from the sand and heat, but none mattered.

Not now.

Not when I could see the ruins of my only home left smoldering before me.

The Veiled's once-mighty gates lay in shattered ruins, massive steel doors torn from their hinges. The rocky path leading up the mountainside was littered with corpses. Some burned beyond recognition, others torn apart by the monstrous Feralkind unleashed upon them.

I swallowed hard, my hands tightening on the reins.

I had been too late.

Again.

The Syndicate's war machines lay among the wreckage, twisted and broken, their massive, armored hulls ripped apart. Whatever fight the Veiled had put up cost the Syndicate dearly. But it hadn't been enough.

When my horse set foot on the scorched earth beyond the gates, a faint groan made me yank back on the reins.

I threw myself from the saddle, landing hard on my knees beside a dying Veiled warrior. His body was riddled with burns and wounds, his leather armor blackened with soot and blood.

His eyes flickered weakly at me, barely recognizing my face.

"...Kael," he rasped, voice dry and brittle as sand.

I grabbed his hand, my own shaking. "I'm here."

A rattling breath escaped his lips. "Took... prisoners..." He swallowed, struggling for each word. "Aria... Erya... taken."

My breath hitched. "Where?"

His grip on my wrist tightened.

"Ignes Forge..."

My blood ran cold.

Ignes Forge.

An old-world factory buried in the heart of the Barrens, repurposed by the Syndicate as a weapons depot. That's where they were taking them.

I could feel the heat rising in my chest, a storm brewing inside me.

The warrior coughed violently, blood spilling from his lips. I pressed down on his wound, desperate to keep him alive for just a few more moments. "Hey, stay with me. Stay—"

His fingers trembled against my arm. His gaze was distant now, his body slackening.

“...Kael.” His voice was barely a whisper now.

I leaned in. “I’m listening.”

His hand weakly reached toward his chest, fingers curling around a small, metallic medallion hanging from a leather cord. It was old and worn with time, but the Veiled’s insignia was still carved into the metal—a reminder of everything they had fought for.

He placed it in my hand.

“...Don’t... let them win.”

Then his grip faded, and his body stilled.

I clenched my jaw, feeling the weight of the medallion in my palm. My fingers curled around it, pressing it into my skin until it burned.

Then, slowly, I stood.

The wind howled through the ruins, carrying the screams of the past—the battle, the loss, the bloodshed that had stained this place.

I turned toward the heart of the destruction.

I needed to find my friends.

I needed to fix what I had broken.

I needed to make this right.

I left the bodies behind and moved deeper into the ashes of the Veiled.

The deeper I moved into the ruins of the Veiled’s stronghold, the worse the devastation became. Smoke curled from collapsed structures, the scent of blood and burning metal thick in the air. The once-great hideout, which had felt like a last refuge, was now a graveyard.

Bodies littered the ground—Veiled warriors, Syndicate soldiers, and even some monstrous Feralkind unleashed upon them. Their twisted, half-mutated forms lay in grotesque piles, their flesh torn apart, their eyes dull and lifeless. Whatever had happened here, it had been nothing short of a massacre.

I gritted my teeth, forcing myself to move faster.

Then I heard it—a voice. A groan.

I spun toward the sound, my heart pounding. Near the wreckage of a Syndicate transport vehicle, a body shifted.

I ran toward it, my boots crunching over scorched debris. When I pushed aside a collapsed metal beam, my stomach clenched.

Jax.

He lay sprawled on the ground, his clothes stained with blood and soot. A deep gash ran along his arm, his usually cocky expression replaced by something far more fragile—pain, exhaustion.

"Jax!" I dropped to my knees beside him, my hands shaking as I reached for his wound. "You're alive."

He cracked a weak grin, his voice hoarse. "Yeah, well... not for lack of trying to be otherwise."

I helped him sit up, my fingers digging into his arm to keep him steady. "Where's Nia?"

Jax winced as he nodded toward a collapsed section of the fortress. "She's alive... I think. Got pinned under some rubble. I pulled her out, but she's not doing great."

Panic surged through me. I pushed up to my feet, scanning the wreckage. If Nia was trapped, if she was bleeding out while I stood here—

"Kael..." Jax's voice called to me. "Aria and Erya. They took them."

I nodded grimly. "I know." My throat closed up, but I forced myself to push through it. "They took them to Ignis Forge."

Jax swore under his breath. "That means they're moving fast. We don't have much time."

I helped him to his feet, letting him lean on me as we approached the rubble. Each step felt heavier than the last, the weight of everything pressing down on me like a crushing force.

We found Nia tucked between the remains of a shattered steel barricade. Her leg was twisted at an unnatural angle, bruises darkening her skin. Her head lolled to the side, her breaths shallow.

"Nia," I crouched beside her, my voice urgent.

She stirred, her eyes fluttering open. "You're... alive?"

I nodded. "Yeah. And so are you."

She let out a weak laugh, which turned into a grimace of pain. Sweat dripped down her face, and I could tell she had been fighting through whatever injury she had.

"Can you stand?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Not without a miracle," she muttered. "I can't believe you came back for us after we left you there to die."

"Well, I probably deserved it, but here I am."

Jax and I exchanged a look. We couldn't stay here, and the Syndicate was likely regrouping. If they had left survivors, it was only because they hadn't finished the job.

"We're going after them," I said. "Aria and Erya. We can't leave them with the Syndicate."

Nia's eyes darkened. "You know Ignis Forge is a death trap, right? It's not just a weapons depot, Kael. It's an entire Syndicate outpost. Reinforced. Guarded."

"I know."

She swallowed hard. "Then you know that going in there means either saving them or dying in the process."

"Then we don't go in alone."

Jax frowned. "I don't like where this is going."

I turned to him. "We need help. And I know exactly where to find it."

Jax blinked, then his face twisted into something between disbelief and horror. "Oh, hell no. No, no, no—"

"The Raiders," I said, ignoring his protests. "We go back to Bone Town. We strike a new deal. We get the firepower we need to storm Ignis Forge."

Jax threw his hands up. "Are you insane? The Raiders barely tolerated us last time, and that was because you shot their leader's life support! You think they're gonna hand us weapons and manpower?"

"Yes."

He scoffed. "How?"

"Because if the Syndicate destroys the Veiled, they won't stop there. They'll start hitting Raider outposts next. They'll cut off their trade routes and their supply lines. Varik's whole empire runs on scavenging and stealing—he needs the Syndicate and the Veiled to survive. That's our leverage."

Jax rubbed his face, clearly frustrated, but he didn't argue. Because he knew I was right.

Nia, despite her injuries, smirked weakly. "Gotta say, Kael... I think exile made you more reckless."

"I don't have time to be anything else."

Jax shook his head. "This is a terrible idea."

"It's the only one we've got."

He let out a slow breath, then nodded.

I turned to Nia. "Can you ride?"

She shifted, wincing. "I can try."

Jax helped her up, steadying her. I whistled sharply, and after a moment, my armored horse emerged from the wreckage, its plating streaked with soot but otherwise untouched.

I helped Nia onto the saddle, securing her before I swung up behind her.

Jax exhaled heavily, jumping onto a horse of his own. "Bone Town. Great. Love that place. Totally looking forward to seeing those cannibal freaks again."

I adjusted my grip on the reins. "Then let's not give them a reason to eat us."

Jax sighed. "Too late for that."

With one final look at the burning ruins of the Veiled, I turned my horse toward the horizon.

We had a war to finish.



We rode in tense silence. Nia leaned against me, her body weak from blood loss, but she refused to let go of consciousness. She was tough. Tougher than most. Jax kept pace beside us, his usual sarcasm dulled by exhaustion and the brutal reality we faced.

Bone Town wasn't far now. The remains of the Sand Wraith bones were already visible on the horizon, their skeletal remains forming monstrous silhouettes against the setting sun.

"We need a plan," Jax muttered, breaking the silence.

I nodded. "Varik isn't stupid. He'll want something in return."

"Yeah," Jax scoffed. "Like our heads on spikes."

I ignored him. "We need to make them see that the Syndicate is as much their enemy as it is ours. If Ignis Forge falls, the Raiders lose a prime scavenging ground. They'll be cut off from fuel, weapons—everything."

Jax let out a low whistle. "You really think Varik's gonna help us out of the kindness of his shriveled, blackened heart?"

"No," I admitted. "But I think he'll help us if it means keeping his own people alive."

The last stretch of land leading into Bone Town was lined with makeshift barricades—twisted metal, old wreckage, and impaled bodies left as a warning. The stench of rot hit us first, and Jax muttered a curse under his breath.

"They really went all out with the decor this time," he muttered.

Nia stirred slightly, forcing herself upright as the gates of Bone Town came into view. The entrance was a towering mass of welded iron and bone, flanked by two massive Sand Wraith skulls, their hollow eye sockets staring like empty voids.

Guards lined the top of the barricades, their weapons trained on us the second we got close.

Jax raised his hands lazily. "Easy, boys. Just stopping by for a friendly chat."

One of the Raiders, his face wrapped in bloodstained cloth, barked out a laugh. "Last time you were here, your friend nearly killed our leader."

Jax pointed at me. "Yeah, but look at him. He's changed. A whole new man."

"We need to see Varik," I demanded.

The guard's gaze narrowed. "And why the hell would we let you?"

"Because we have information that could save you from being next on the Syndicate's agenda."

A murmur passed through the Raiders above. The guard hesitated, glancing back toward the stronghold. Then, with a grunt, he signaled to the others.

The iron gates groaned as they swung open.

"Try anything," the guard sneered, "and we'll feed you to the Wraiths."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Jax said, grinning as he rode past. "Missed you guys, too."

The inside of Bone Town was as grim as I remembered. The streets were lined with makeshift shacks built from scavenged metal and old-world wreckage. Fires burned in rusted barrels, casting eerie shadows across the sand-covered pathways.

Raiders watched us from every direction—some amused, some wary, others clearly debating whether killing us would be worth the trouble.

We dismounted in front of the massive central structure, a fortress of stacked vehicles and reinforced plating. Two guards immediately approached, yanking our weapons from us.

"Straight to business," Jax muttered, raising his hands as a Raider stripped his knives from his belt.

I barely reacted as they took my gun, my knife, everything. I wasn't here to fight. Not yet.

The fortress doors swung open, and we were led inside.

The interior was just as chaotic as the outside—a dark, candlelit space filled with makeshift furniture, scrap metal tables, and weapons stacked in messy piles. Raiders lounged around, drinking from rusted canisters and gambling over old-world coins. Hanging above us were metal cages with people in them.

And at the center of it all, sitting on a throne of welded steel and bone, was Varik.

He looked the same—massive, his breathing mask still connected to the green liquid pumping into his veins. His pale skin stretched tight over muscle and scar tissue, and his long white hair hung in loose, tangled strands.

His gaze locked onto us the moment we entered.

A slow, wheezing inhale came from his mask. Then he rasped, "You've got nerve coming back here."

I stepped forward, ignoring how the Raiders shifted, ready to kill at his command.

"You need us," I said simply.

Varik let out a low, wheezing chuckle. "Bold words for a dead man."

"Hey, now we're all friends here," Jax said.

Varik's eyes gleamed behind the mask. "Quiet before I put you up in one of those cages."

I didn't let the tension stop me. "The Syndicate struck the Veiled. They are wiping them out."

The room fell silent.

Even the Raiders drinking or laughing paused, their amusement vanishing instantly.

Varik's fingers tapped against his Throne. "And why should I care?"

"Because they're moving fast," I said. "Once the Veiled are gone, who do you think is their next biggest threat?"

A flicker of interest crossed his scarred face. "And what do you propose?"

"We want in," I said. "We need your help to get inside and stop them."

Murmurs rippled through the room. Some Raiders looked intrigued. Others looked ready to slit our throats.

Varik tilted his head. "You expect me to risk my people for you?"

"For yourselves," I corrected. "You need the Veiled to remain a bigger threat against the Syndicate than the Raiders are."

Varik was silent for a long moment. Then he leaned forward, his pale lips curling into something almost like a grin.

"Where did you say you were from?" he rasped. "You seem smarter than one of those green-eyed sand dwellers."

"Hey, now, I am one of those green-eyed sand dwellers, and I'm pretty smart," Jax said.

"I'm from Solaris Prime," I said, letting my secret out. "I am Kael Solaryn, *bastard* son of King Alric Solaryn and rightful heir to the throne."

The room gasped, followed by laughs as they didn't believe me.

"I knew there was something more to you," Nia whispered.

Varik raised a hand, silencing his guards. "The KingSlayer?"

"I was framed for killing my father, but I am no King Slayer, not yet, anyway."

"Royalty with us all this time, how did I not know," Jax said.

Varik raised a hand and snapped his fingers.

The guards stepped back.

Varik exhaled through his mask, tapping his fingers against his Throne again. "Fine. We'll help you take down Tiber, but once you're on the Throne, you will include us in your trade routes."

The truth was, I had no desire to take my place on the Throne, but he didn't need to know that.

Varik's grin widened. "But if you betray me, Kael Solaryn..." He leaned forward, his voice dropping to a whisper. "I'll make sure you beg for death before the end."

"Then let's make sure it doesn't come to that."

Varik exhaled through his mask again, nodding once. "Get them a drink," he rasped to his men. "And get them some damn weapons. We're going to war, boys!"

A Raider shoved a rusted canister of alcohol into Jax's hands.

Jax blinked, then grinned. "For Garren.

"For Garren," Nia agreed.

I let out a slow breath, my mind racing toward what came next.

We had the firepower. We had the numbers.

Now, all we needed was a way inside Ignis Forge.

The war drums of Bone Town echoed behind us as we rode out under the scorching sun, the Raiders preparing for battle. Dust clouds swirled around our horses' hooves, the heat rising in shimmering waves off the sand. My mind churned with everything that had hap-

pened—the lies I had told, the truths I had finally spoken, and the war now inevitable.

Jax rode beside me, his usual grin replaced with something heavier. Determination. Resignation. A little bit of hope. Nia, still weak from her injuries, rode between us, her face set with quiet focus.

We had the firepower now. We had allies. But none of it would matter if we didn't get inside Ignes Forge.

The sun was beginning to dip toward the horizon when we spotted them.

A ragged group moving through the dunes, barely visible against the shifting sands. At first, I thought it was more Raiders or Syndicate scouts. But as we got closer, I saw the truth.

Veiled survivors.

They moved hesitantly, scanning the landscape like prey expecting to be hunted. Their clothes were torn, and their faces were streaked with ash. They had been at the Veiled Mountain when it fell.

Nia called out, "We have to help them."

I pulled my horse to a slow halt. "Of course."

The group stopped when they saw us. There were six of them, all young—teenagers, maybe a year or two younger than me—kids who had lost everything.

A girl at the front, with dark, tightly braided hair and piercing green eyes, stepped forward. She held a crude blade in one hand, her knuckles white around the grip.

"Who are you?" she asked.

I slid off my horse, raising my hands slightly. "We were at the Veiled. We fought there, too."

Her eyes narrowed. "You."

Something in her expression made my stomach sink.

"You're the one who burned it."

The words hit like a fist.

"You think I—"

"You led the attack," another boy spat, stepping beside her. His face was streaked with dirt and dried blood, his green eyes blazing with fury.

"I saw you with them. With the Syndicate."

My breath caught. They thought I had betrayed them.

Jax scoffed, swinging off his horse. "Alright, let's clear one thing up real quick. Kael didn't burn down our home."

The girl's grip on her knife tightened. "Then why did you survive when so many others didn't?"

"Because the Syndicate wanted him dead just as much as they wanted you dead," Jax shot back. "You really think he's one of them? You really think he'd be riding with us if he was?"

The group hesitated, uncertain. They had lost everything. And when you had nothing left, sometimes anger was all you had to cling to.

I swallowed hard. "I would die before I ever sided with Tiber."

The girl studied me for a long moment. Then, her gaze flicked to Jax. "Who are you?"

"Jax," he said. "Professional smartass. Pretty decent with a gun."

"And her?"

"Nia," she said simply, sitting a little straighter in the saddle despite her injuries. "You guys were in the younger training classes, weren't you?"

They nodded.

The girl's gaze returned to me. "And you?"

Jax answered before I could.

"He's Kael Solaryn. The rightful heir to the Throne of Solaris Prime."

A heavy silence fell.

The boy who had accused me of betraying them let out a hollow laugh. "You expect us to believe that?"

"You don't have to believe it," Jax said. "But if we're going to take down the Syndicate, we need him."

I stepped forward. "We're going to Ignis Forge."

The girl's expression darkened. "That's suicide."

"Not if we do it right," I said. "The Raiders are launching a full-scale assault to draw their forces away. While the Syndicate is distracted, we're going in to rescue our people."

"They took Kaedin, Rynna, and Moraak," the girl said.

"And Aria and Erya," I added.

The mention of my mother made her stiffen. "Erya was taken?"

"Yes."

The girl exhaled sharply, glancing back at her group. They were survivors of the Veiled, just like me. They had lost their home and their families. And they wanted revenge just as much as I did.

I didn't know what I expected her to say. Maybe another accusation. Another refusal.

Instead, she nodded. "Then we're coming with you."

The others murmured in agreement.

"Wait," Jax said, rubbing his temples. "Just like that? No arguing? No threats?"

The girl gave him a sharp look. "We are Veiled. We fight for our own."

Jax let out a breath. "Well, alright then."

I looked at the girl. "What's your name?"

She hesitated. Then, "Sienna."

I nodded. "Welcome to the war, Sienna."



We camped a few miles from Ignis Forge, hidden in the shadows of a deep ravine. The dry desert stretched endlessly in all directions, the wind whispering through the canyons like ghosts. Despite its intense heat, I had noticed my body was becoming acclimated to the conditions of Inferna.

The fire was low, just enough to keep the cold at bay. The new recruits sat in a loose circle, speaking in hushed tones. They were planning. They were preparing.

Jax sat beside me, sharpening a blade he had scavenged from Bone Town. "You really think they'll be useful?"

"We need numbers," I said.

"Numbers who barely know how to fight."

I looked across the fire at Sienna. She had an intensity to her—sharp edges, raw anger—the kind that didn't just burn out; it hardened into something stronger.

"They'll learn fast," I said.

A rustling sound in the distance made my head snap up.

Nia was already on her feet, gun raised.

Then we heard it. A low, gurgling growl.

Feralkind.

The shadows shifted beyond the fire's glow.

"Everyone up," I ordered, grabbing my knife.

The survivors scrambled, forming a tight circle.

A shriek split the night. Then another.

Jax cursed. "They're hunting."

A blur of movement lunged from the darkness.

I barely had time to react before the first Feralkind hit the ground before me—a grotesque, twisted thing, its body scarcely human anymore. Its jaw was unhinged as it let out a screeching wail.

Sienna drove her knife into its throat before it could move.

Another one came from the left. Then another.

I slashed, my blade catching the rotten flesh of one's arm, but it barely slowed down.

Gunfire rang out.

Jax took one down with a single shot to the head. "We gotta move!"

We fought our way toward the horses, hacking and shooting through the swarm.

Then—a massive shadow loomed from the darkness.

Larger. Faster. Stronger.

A war beast.

My blood turned to ice.

It let out a bone-shaking roar.

"RUN!"

We barely made it onto our horses before it lunged.

I kicked my mount hard, gripping the reins as we galloped into the night, the Feralkind snapping at our heels.

The ground trembled beneath our horses' pounding hooves, the beast's deep roars chasing us through the ravine. The war beast was

unlike any Feralkind we had seen before—larger, faster, its eyes glowing an unnatural shade of green. It moved with terrifying agility, its deformed limbs propelling it forward at a speed impossible for something that size.

Jax twisted in his saddle, aiming his rifle. "This thing is not normal! I swear it's got an engine in its stomach!"

He fired. The bullet struck the beast's shoulder with a sickening crunch, but it didn't slow down. Instead, it roared and lunged higher—bounding over a rocky outcrop and landing on a ledge beside us.

Sienna cursed. "It's cutting us off!"

I yanked hard on the reins, forcing my horse to turn sharply. Sand and rock kicked up behind us as we veered into a narrow pass, but the creature followed, scaling the rock walls with inhuman precision.

Nia, despite her injuries, managed to draw her own pistol. "We need to bring it down, now!"

The war beast snarled, its mouth stretching too wide, jagged rows of serrated teeth dripping with black bile. Its skin—if it could even be called that—was cracked and dark, but beneath it, pulsing green veins pulsed like molten energy.

It reminded me too much of Erya when she was fighting transformation in the prison cell.

A horrible thought clawed into my mind.

What if this had been a person? What if this was another one of the Syndicate's creations?

"Jax, aim for the throat!" I shouted.

Jax gritted his teeth, leveling his rifle. "Better work."

He fired.

The bullet ripped through the creature's neck. The war beast let out a horrific gargling screech, stumbling mid-lunge. It collapsed into the sand, its body convulsing, its monstrous limbs twitching violently before finally going still.

Silence.

Only the wind remained.

The group slowly pulled their horses to a stop, watching as the beast twitched one final time before slumping into the dirt, motionless.

My chest heaved, my pulse hammering in my skull. I slid off my horse, my boots sinking into the still-warm sand. The beast's form lay sprawled, a mix of flesh and bone, its veins still glowing faintly in the dim light.

Sienna dismounted beside me, her expression tight with disgust. "That's not... normal. That's not a Feralkind."

"No," I muttered. "It's worse."

Jax knelt beside the body, nudging it with the barrel of his gun. "I swear, if this thing twitches, I'm blowing its head off."

I took a step closer, swallowing the bile in my throat. The glow in its veins, unnatural speed, and strength all pointed to one thing.

Syndicate experiments.

They had done this. They had created it.

Just like Erya.

Nia was the first to say it. "This... this is what they're turning people into."

"Not just people," Jax said. "Veiled."

No one spoke.

If we didn't stop them and didn't end this, this would happen again and again.

And Erya—

I clenched my fists. She was next.

Jax let out a slow breath, shaking his head. "We need to move. More could be nearby."

Sienna nodded, snapping out of whatever grim thoughts had taken hold of her. "There's an old-world structure a mile ahead. We camp there, regroup, and figure out how we get inside Ignes Forge."

No one argued. Despite her being younger than us, she had no problem taking charge.

We rode hard for the next mile, leaving the beast's corpse rotting in the sand.

We reached the ruins just as night fully settled in. The place had once been some kind of bunker, long abandoned, its walls cracked and half-buried under dunes.

Nia was barely holding herself together by the time we dismounted. I helped her down, and she grunted in pain but didn't complain.

Jax kicked open the rusted metal door, peering inside. "Clear. And not filled with mutant freaks. Bonus."

The inside was cooler, the stone structure shielding us from the worst of the Barrens. Scattered remnants of the past littered the floor—old supply crates, shattered technology, and broken furniture. The place had been ransacked long ago, but it still felt like a relic of another world.

Jax plopped down on the ground with a sigh. "Alright, I vote we never do that again."

Sienna sat against the wall, her knife resting against her knee. "My father went missing a year ago while on a supply run. Do you think the Syndicate could have turned him into one of those monsters?"

I looked at her. "I hope not, but just keep hope that he is still alive and will return to you one day."

This wasn't just a monster. This was research. Data. A prototype.

The thought made my skin crawl.

"They're refining their methods," I murmured. "They're trying to make the process more... controllable."

Jax cursed. "So what, they're building an army of those things?"

The silence said enough.

That's exactly what they were doing.

I looked around the group. Exhausted. Bloody. Worn down. But we were still alive. And we still had a mission.

"We stop them," I said, voice steady. "Tomorrow, we hit Ignis Forge. We find Aria. We find Erya. We rescue the Elders."

No one disagreed.

Sienna exhaled and leaned her head back against the cold wall. "We should sleep while we can."

Jax let out a dry laugh. "Like that's gonna happen."

But exhaustion was winning. One by one, we settled in, the remnants of the old world sheltering us for just one night.

I sat near the entrance, staring out at the moonlit dunes, my grip tightening on my knife.

The war wasn't over.

It was just beginning.

And tomorrow, we will bring hell to Ignis Forge.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IGNES FORGE

The scent of burning metal and oil filled my lungs as we crept through the underbelly of Ignis Forge, our footsteps muffled by the constant hum of machinery. The Raiders had done their part—the battle outside raged, with gunfire and explosions lighting up the sky, a perfect distraction for us to slip inside unnoticed.

Jax moved ahead, his body low, scanning for Syndicate patrols. Nia kept close behind me, her breathing uneven but steady. The Veiled survivors—Sienna and the others—fanned out, keeping to the shadows of the towering industrial structures. This place was a fortress of metal and fire, built into the side of a jagged rock formation, sprawling with factories, fuel depots, and weapon stockpiles. If the Syndicate held any prisoners, they would be below.

"Stay close," I whispered to Nia as we slunk through a narrow corridor between two massive furnace towers. She hadn't fully healed from her wounds back at the Veiled, but she moved with determination.

We reached a fork in the corridor. One path led down into the processing chambers and another toward what looked like a holding sector.

Jax peered down the hallway. "Alright, fearless leader, which way?"

"We split up," I said immediately. "Jax, take Nia and the group to the processing floor. They might be forced to work there if they're keeping prisoners."

Jax looked at me and said, "Aye, aye, captain." Then, with a nod, he motioned for his team to move. They vanished into the darkness.

I turned to Sienna. "Let's go."

She didn't wait for me. She was already moving.

We descended deeper into the Forge. The air thickened with heat and smoke, and the walls narrowed into cramped, suffocating corridors. It was too quiet. There were no guards or patrols, and there was nothing but the hiss of steam pipes and the distant rumble of the machinery above.

A cold knot formed in my gut.

This was too easy.

I reached out, grabbing Sienna's arm. "Something's wrong."

She turned, eyes flashing. "We're wasting time."

I opened my mouth to argue, but before I could, a voice echoed through the corridor.

"Look at you. So eager to die."

A metallic clang rang out.

I spun—just in time to see the blast doors slam shut behind us.

Alarms blared. Red warning lights flickered on, bathing everything in a bloody glow. Heavy, reinforced gates slammed down on either side of the corridor, cutting off any escape.

We were trapped.

Sienna's hands flew to her weapons, but before she could move, the walls hissed, releasing thick, pressurized gas into the chamber. A

blinding white mist curled around our legs, filling my nose with the sharp sting of chemicals.

Then, from the far end of the corridor, footsteps.

I recognized the gait before I saw him.

Tiber.

He strode forward, smug as ever, flanked by Syndicate guards in polished black armor. His crimson cloak swayed as he walked, his hollow blue eyes locking onto me with twisted amusement.

"I was wondering when you'd finally crawl into my hands," he said.

Sienna lunged for her weapon, but a single gunshot rang out, ricocheting off the wall inches from her head.

She froze.

More guards flooded the corridor, their weapons trained on us.

Then, I noticed something that made my blood turn to ice.

Varik.

The Raider warlord stepped out of the shadows, his breathing mask wheezing as the green liquid in his tubes pulsed. His men stood beside him, their expressions unreadable.

Betrayal.

My heart hammered. I had trusted him. I had brought my people here and led them straight into this.

Tiber sighed dramatically. "Did you really think cutthroat scavengers would risk their lives for you? For what? Some noble cause? Please."

Varik met my gaze, his expression unreadable beneath his scarred face. He had made his deal. His price was our lives.

I gritted my teeth.

"You sold us out," I said.

Varik tilted his head slightly. "You don't understand how this world works, boy."

"You made me a promise."

He exhaled through his mask. "I promised to help you. And I did."

Tiber chuckled. "Indeed. You should be grateful, Kael. Without dear Varik, I might not have found you so easily." His smile was sharp, predatory. "I would have eventually, of course. But this? This saves me so much time."

A metallic rumble filled the air.

"Bring them," Tiber ordered.

We were dragged out onto a platform that overlooked hundreds of Syndicate workers and civilians. They forced us to kneel alongside Jax, Nia, Aria, Sienna, and the other teens. The factories were momentarily stopped as the artificial skies shone bright, putting a spotlight on Tiber.

Tiber, his guards, Queen Lyra, and my stepbrothers Tarin and Edric stood at the front of the platform. Tarin glanced back at me and gave me an evil smirk.

"Great people of The Haven Network," Tiber announced to the crowd through a microphone. "Today is a momentous day indeed. We have done what the Syndicate has set out to do for generations: eradicating the green-eyed monsters that lurked outside our walls. We have captured those responsible for burning our precious Verdianx Dome."

Then, from behind Tiber's ranks, three prisoners were dragged forward.

Kaedin. Rynna. Moraak.

The last remaining elders of the Veiled.

Their bodies were bruised, their clothes torn, but their eyes burned with defiance.

"These three, the Elders of the Veiled," Tiber continued. "Are responsible for the destruction that has caused you all to lose out on food. We have also discovered that they had been experimenting with their own, turning their friends and family into monsters."

Another guard rolled out a cage that held Erya. Or what was left of Erya? A green-veined monster with torn skin and hair streaks clawed at the cage bars, trying to be let loose.

"It is only right that this beast be the one who finished them off."

Aria shrieked in pain and anger, but the device placed on our faces prevented us from speaking.

The crowd began chanting King Tiber over and over again. I couldn't help but think about my father at that moment. He had spent his life trying to bring us together while, all along, the Lords and Ladies of the Haven Network were scheming behind his back.

"Let it loose!" he commanded.

The bars to the cage flung open, and several guards held onto Erya with chains. They used electric sticks to keep her in check. For a fraction of a second, Erya hesitated. Her wild, mutated eyes locked onto me. Some small part of her recognized me.

But then Tiber raised a control device in his hand—and pressed a button.

A shock collar ignited around her neck.

Erya screamed. A sound of pure agony. Rage. Madness.

And then—she attacked.

She lunged, claws ripping through Kaedin first.

Blood splattered the stone.

Sienna let out a strangled cry beneath her face covering.

Rynna and Moraak tried to run but didn't make it far.

Erya tore through them.

Their bodies hit the floor. Motionless.

The crowd roared cheers and chants.

A choked sound rose from my throat. My mother. My mother had done this.

Or, instead—they had done this to her.

I tried to speak—but the guards clamped the device over my face, silencing me completely.

I thrashed, but it was useless.

Tiber turned, grinning.

"This is the new Inferna," he declared. "The Syndicate is the future. And now, we expand."

My rage burned.

My mother was lost.

And I could do nothing.

The cheers of the Syndicate workers still rang in my ears as they dragged us away. My muscles ached from the struggle, but the restraints around my wrists and the metal device clamped over my mouth kept me from doing anything but watch. Watch as my mother was turned into a weapon. Watch as the Veiled elders were slaughtered. Watch as Tiber took everything from me.

I barely had time to process it before we were forced into an armored transport convoy, our bodies shoved forward by Syndicate guards in black tactical gear. Their expressions were cold. Indifferent. To them, we weren't people. We were cargo being hauled off to rot.

The transport vehicle was a steel cage on wheels, reinforced with heavy plating, its tires thick enough to roll over whatever wasteland awaited us beyond Ignis Forge. The inside was cramped and dimly lit, the floor slick with dried sweat and grime. The air stank of rust and despair—the scent of people who had been here before us, people who had never come back.

One by one, they forced us inside. Jax, Nia, Sienna, Aria. I was the last.

I barely had a second to breathe before Tiber stepped into the doorway, blocking the fading light behind him.

His figure loomed, his red cloak draped over his shoulders like a king surveying his broken subjects. His blue eyes gleamed with calculated amusement, and his lips curled into that smug smirk that had haunted me since my father died.

“You look just like him, you know.”

I froze.

“Alric,” he said, savoring the name like it was some old memory he enjoyed reliving. “Your father had that same look of defiance. The same fire. The same pathetic belief that the world could be better.”

My fists clenched at my sides.

Tiber sighed, almost bored. “And just like him, you’ve lost everything.” He let that sink in before adding, “You know, he begged. Not for his own life, of course. No, Alric was too proud of that. He begged for yours.”

My entire body went rigid.

A chuckle rumbled in Tiber’s throat. “He forced us to spare you when you were a child.” He tilted his head. “And look where that got him.”

A sharp, strangled sound escaped me, but the metal device strapped over my mouth muted it, reducing my fury to nothing more than a muffled growl.

Tiber leaned in close, his breath brushing against my ear. “You’ll die alone, Kael. Just like he did.”

He pulled back, tapping a gloved hand against the metal door. “Send them to the Black Pit.”

The door slammed shut.

The locks clicked into place, sealing us inside.

And then—the vehicle lurched forward, carrying us into the unknown.

I sat in silence.

The others were just as shaken.

Aria stared blankly at the rusted floor, her hands still clenched into fists, trembling. She had watched her father die in front of her. Jax leaned against the cold metal wall, his face hidden behind his hands. Sienna sat with her knees pulled to her chest, her breathing shallow. Nia hadn’t moved since we’d been locked inside.

None of us could speak.

There was nothing to say even if we could.

We lost.

The only sound was the steady rumble of the convoy wheels rolling through the endless wasteland.

Tiber had won.

For now.

I forced my fists to unclench.

For now.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE BLACK PIT

The transport convoy rumbled across the Barrens, its massive wheels grinding against the cracked earth, sending up dust clouds in its wake. I sat in the back of the armored transport, my wrists and ankles shackled, my throat dry and raw from hours of silence. The engine's hum was the only constant sound, drowning out the occasional groan of a wounded prisoner or the murmur of the guards stationed around us.

The stench of sweat, blood, and oil clung to the interior like a sickness, thick and suffocating. Across from me, Aria stared at the metal floor, unblinking and unmoving. She hadn't moved an inch since we were loaded up, her expression empty and hollow. I wasn't sure if she even registered where we were anymore.

We were prisoners. And wherever we were going, it wasn't somewhere we were meant to leave.

The convoy jostled roughly as the terrain shifted, and the first glimpse of the Black Pit came into view.

It was worse than I had imagined.

The prison was carved into the ruins of a collapsed canyon, its jagged walls rising like teeth, the natural rock formations acting as an impenetrable barrier. A massive black smog hung over the entire complex, belching from the towering chimneys of industrial forges. The air reeked of sulfur and burnt minerals, thick enough to make my eyes water.

Beyond the steel gates, I could see lines of prisoners, chained and hunched over, their bodies thin, emaciated, and covered in soot. Some carried crude mining tools, their hands raw and bleeding. Others sat slumped near makeshift tents, eyes sunken, expressions empty. They weren't just prisoners. They were ghosts.

The ground was scorched black, stained from years of sweat and suffering. At the heart of the camp, a massive central forge burned endlessly, illuminating the compound in a fiery glow. The heat radiating from it was suffocating, even from a distance.

The transport came to a lurching halt. The rear doors screeched open, and Syndicate guards in reinforced armor stormed in, barking orders.

"Out!"

We were hauled onto our feet, the metal chains clanking loudly as we were forced out into the scorching air.

I stumbled as my boots hit the ground, the heat pressing against my skin like an open flame.

I barely had time to catch my breath before a shock baton slammed into my back.

Pain exploded across my spine, and I hit the dirt, gasping.

"Keep moving!" The guard snarled.

I grit my teeth and pushed myself up, biting back a curse. Jax shot a glare at the nearest guard but didn't resist.

Nia staggered forward, her face pale, her body still weak from her injuries. Sienna was at her side immediately, supporting her weight.

And Aria...

Aria didn't react at all.

She moved when they shoved her forward, but there was no resistance. No fire. Just a hollow, empty girl in chains.

I clenched my fists but forced myself to keep walking. Now wasn't the time to fight. Not yet.

We were marched past rows of prisoners, their dull eyes barely sparing us a glance.

I noticed the slogans painted onto the walls in peeling Syndicate ink:

"Work is Honor."

"The Strong Will Rise."

"There is No Escape."

The air vents above pumped stale oxygen into the pit, which wasn't enough to mask the heat.

We were led into the central yard, a massive open area surrounded by sharp rock formations and layers of crude fencing topped with rusted barbed wire.

Then, a figure stepped onto a raised platform above the forge.

The Warden of the Black Pit.

Captain Rhyvek.

He was an older man, his head shaved bald, his skin dark and leathery from years in the sun. A scar ran down the length of his throat as if someone had once tried to slit it, but he had lived. Heavy plating

reinforced his Syndicate uniform with a long, rust-colored coat draped over his shoulders.

His eyes, however, were the worst part.

They were cold and empty, like he had long since abandoned any piece of humanity.

The guards removed the face masks that prevented us from speaking one by one. We gasped for air, although the air our lungs found was not clean or fresh.

Rhyvek raised a single hand, and the yard fell silent.

He let the moment stretch before he spoke.

"Welcome to the Black Pit."

His voice was sharp, commanding, yet utterly detached.

"You work, or you die. There are no heroes here. No kings. No rebels. Only the condemned."

He gestured toward the forge, where a group of chained prisoners were being forced to their knees.

At first, I didn't understand what I was looking at.

Then I saw the fires raging beneath them.

The prisoners began to scream.

One by one, they were shoved into the forge.

The smell of burning flesh hit me like a fist.

I turned away, my stomach twisting, bile rising in my throat.

Jax vomited at the sight.

Nia's knees gave out beneath her.

Sienna didn't move, but her jaw was clenched so tight I thought she might crack her teeth.

And Aria...

She just stood there. Unmoving. Silent.

Captain Rhyvek turned his gaze back to us.

"Some of you will last a day."

"Some of you will last a week."

"But none of you will last forever."

His lips curled into something almost like a smile.

"Welcome home."

A gunshot rang out.

A prisoner crumpled beside me, lifeless.

The guards moved in.

And the chains dragged us forward.

The air in the Black Pit was suffocating, thick with coal dust and the metallic sting of blood. My wrists throbbed beneath the iron shackles, rubbed raw from the chains that bound me to the others as we were herded toward the lower tunnels.

The ground sloped downward, the canyon walls narrowing as we were led deeper into the mining sector. The farther we descended, the darker it became—the glow of the forge above was replaced by the flickering of rusted lanterns bolted to the rock walls.

The heat was unbearable down here, even worse than outside. Every breath burned my throat, the air thick with sulfur and sweat.

Guards lined the corridors, their shock batons humming with low-energy pulses, ready to strike at the first sign of defiance.

I stole a glance at my friends. Jax's usual cocky smirk was gone, replaced with an expression of quiet calculation. Nia struggled to stay upright, her injuries slowing her down, but Sienna stayed close, ensuring she didn't fall behind.

And Aria...

She walked like a ghost. A shell of who she had been.

The fire in her had been snuffed out the moment she watched her father die.

The corridors opened into a massive underground chamber. I had expected something small and cramped, but this was an entire underground city of suffering.

Endless tunnels branched like veins, leading to coal pits, mineral deposits, and deep, narrow shafts that plunged into absolute darkness. Makeshift wooden scaffolding and rusted mining rigs loomed over us, and prisoners moved like shadows, faces hollow, their hands cracked and bleeding from endless labor.

A rusted metal structure jutted from the rock at the center of it all—a raised guard station overseeing the entire pit. I could see prison overseers pacing along the upper walkways, their rifles slung lazily over their shoulders as if they didn't expect anyone to fight back.

Because no one ever did.

A large tunnel, a choking darkness beyond its entrance, yawned ahead.

That's where they were taking us.

The mines.

I clenched my fists. There had to be a way out of this.

"Move!" A guard slammed his baton into my back, and I lurched forward, biting back a growl of pain.

We were shoved more profoundly into the tunnels, past rows of ragged prisoners digging with crude pickaxes, their eyes sunken, their movements sluggish.

And that's when I saw him.

A prisoner, barely older than me, but with the stance of someone who had seen hell and walked out the other side.

He stood apart from the others, his back pressed against a stone column, watching us. His skin was streaked with coal dust, but his sharp, dark eyes were alert and intelligent. His hair was long and unkempt, but something about him was regal, even in chains.

His gaze locked onto mine.

He knew who I was.

The guard shoved me forward again, breaking my stare, and I was dragged into the mines.



The work was endless.

They had us digging with rusted tools, hauling heavy slabs of coal and minerals from the deeper caverns to the main furnace tunnels. The heat was unbearable, sweat dripping into my eyes, mixing with the soot clinging to my skin.

The air was too thick to breathe correctly, my lungs burning with every inhale.

I had thought the Barrens were cruel.

This was worse.

Jax stumbled beside me, catching himself on a rock wall. "This is worse than being surrounded by those cannibals in Bone Town."

"Shut up and keep digging," a guard barked, slamming his baton against the nearest stone to make his point.

Jax rolled his eyes but kept working.

From across the cavern, the prisoner I had seen earlier watched us again.

This time, he moved.

He walked over, silent as the shadows, and crouched beside me as I worked.

"You're Kael Solaryn," he said quietly.

I didn't react, but my grip on the pickaxe tightened.

"Who's asking?"

The stranger smirked slightly. "I figured you'd say that."

Still bent over his own pile of coal, Jax gave him a once-over. "And you are?"

He hesitated, then said, "Ronan Vael."

The name struck something deep in my memory. Vael.

I stopped digging. Turned to face him fully.

Vael was a royal name.

"You're from Red Hollow," I said.

Ronan's expression hardened, but he nodded. "Was. Before Tiber wiped it out."

I had heard of Red Hollow, a Syndicate outpost once ruled by a noble house. Years ago, there was a sudden coup and assassination. Tiber had been in charge of transport operations then, but the moment the ruling family was dead, he had been given more power, more control.

"You were exiled," I realized.

Ronan gave a bitter smile. "After my parents were executed, I was given two choices—swear loyalty to the Syndicate or disappear."

He gestured around the Black Pit. "I chose exile."

I swallowed. "And you've been here ever since?"

He shrugged. "If you're smart, you learn how to survive."

"How?" I asked.

His eyes flickered to the guards, then back to me. "You don't. Not for long."

His meaning was clear. Everyone here died eventually.

Unless they found a way out.

Jax wiped the sweat from his brow, glancing between us. "Alright, so what's the plan, boys? Because I have no intention of dying in a hole."

Ronan studied me carefully. Then, slowly, he leaned in.

"There's a way out of here," he murmured, so low only I could hear.

My pulse spiked.

"But it's a long shot."

"Any shot is better than none," I said immediately.

Ronan's eyes darkened with something unreadable.

Then, he said, "Meet me in the lower tunnels at nightfall. If you survive that long."

And before I could ask him anything else, he was gone.

The hours dragged on like a slow execution. The weight of the pickaxe in my hands became unbearable, my muscles aching from overuse, my throat raw from the coal dust coating my lungs. The Black Pit didn't just break people—it hollowed them out, turned them into nothing.

And it was working.

Jax had stopped talking. That's how I knew things were bad. His usual jokes had faded into exhaustion, and his movements had become sluggish. Nia had barely lasted past the first shift, her body too weak from her old injuries. Sienna had done her best to cover for her, but even she struggled.

Aria, though... Aria was the worst.

She worked without expression. Without resistance.

She didn't flinch when the guards shoved her or react when they barked orders or didn't care.

And that scared me more than anything.

The Aria I knew would have fought. Would have raged, bitten, clawed her way out of this place. But this Aria... she was gone.

Tiber had taken everything from her.

And if I didn't do something soon, he would take the rest of us too.

The Black Pit never truly slept.

The fires of the central forge still burned the smell of melting minerals thick in the air. Guards patrolled the upper levels, their boots echoing against metal walkways. The prisoners had been given the only thing close to a "break" they'd ever get—four hours of forced rest before the next shift.

I waited for the right moment. Then, I moved.

Careful. Silent.

I slipped out of the sleeping rows, avoiding the eyes of prisoners too far gone to care if I lived or died. Sienna stirred as I moved past her. She barely opened her eyes, her exhaustion weighing her down.

"Where... are you going?" she mumbled.

I hesitated. "Getting answers."

Her brow furrowed, but she was too weak to stop me.

I found Ronan where he said he'd be—waiting at the mouth of one of the lower tunnels.

"You're late," he murmured.

"Hard to sneak away when you're shackled," I shot back.

His lips twitched. "Fair enough."

The tunnel he led me into was a narrow, abandoned shaft half-collapsed with rubble. The air was even hotter down here, thick with dust.

No guards. No workers. Just darkness.

"Why here?" I asked, glancing around.

"Because this is the only place they don't watch," Ronan said.

I folded my arms. "Alright, you said there's a way out of here. Start talking."

He exhaled slowly, crouching near a cracked section of the tunnel wall. He ran his hand along it, fingers brushing over symbols carved into the stone.

Old Syndicate markings.

"This place wasn't built as a prison," he said. "It was a military supply base before the Collapse. The Syndicate turned it into what it is now, but they never fully sealed off the old tunnels."

I narrowed my eyes. "You know this because...?"

Ronan smirked. "Because I've been trying to escape for years."

That made me pause.

"You've been here that long?"

His expression darkened. "Long enough to know that no one gets out alive. Long enough to know that if we wait and do nothing, we'll end up just like the others—buried under rock, forgotten, erased."

The words settled heavily in my gut.

Because I knew he was right.

I exhaled. "So what's your plan?"

Ronan gestured toward the wall. "There's an abandoned section of tunnels past this wall. If we can break through, we can follow it out of the Black Pit."

I frowned. "And where does it lead?"

His mouth pressed into a thin line. "That's the part I haven't figured out yet."

I let out a humorless laugh. "Fantastic."

"It's a risk," Ronan admitted. "But it's better than dying in chains."

A risk.

Everything in my life has been at risk lately.

But this one?

This one might be worth it.

I nodded slowly. "I'm in."

Ronan grinned. "Good. Now we just need to figure out how to make it happen before we all get killed."

The shadows pressed around us, the weight of the mines above seeming heavier than ever.

I didn't know if Ronan was telling the whole truth or if this would even work.

But I did know one thing.

I wasn't dying in this pit.

And neither were my friends.

I slipped back into camp as quietly as possible. The Black Pit was designed to break people, to make them believe there was no way out. But now, I had an exit—a chance.

That was enough to keep me moving.

For now.

Jax was waiting for me near the rusted-out remains of what used to be a mining cart, arms crossed, his expression unreadable. His boots were covered in dust, his face smeared with soot.

"You were gone a long time," he said.

I kept my voice low. "I had to be."

He studied me briefly, his sharp gaze flicking toward the tunnel where I had just emerged. "I don't like it."

I exhaled, already expecting this. "You don't even know what I'm about to say."

Jax huffed a humorless laugh. "I know enough that whenever you disappear, it usually means you're planning something insane."

He wasn't wrong.

"I met up with someone."

"Oh my god, does Aria know?" he gasped. "Wait, you two broke up before she got captured, right? Because you lied about your life."

"Jax shut up."

Jax's eyes narrowed. "Sorry, I'm nervous."

"It was Ronan. He has a way out of here."

Jax didn't look impressed. "That so?" He tilted his head, voice dropping. "And what does this Ronan want in return?"

"To not die in a mine."

Jax scoffed. "And you believe him?"

I stared at him, forcing my voice to stay steady. "I don't have a choice."

His jaw tensed. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, glancing toward the other prisoners. Nia was still asleep, too weak to stay upright for long. Sienna was keeping a close watch on her.

Then there was Aria.

She sat with her back against the rocky wall, knees pulled to her chest, staring at nothing.

She hadn't spoken. Not once.

Jax followed my gaze, his expression hardening. "We lost her, didn't we?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "No. Not yet."

Jax let out a slow breath, shaking his head. "Alright, fine. Tell me the plan."

I kept my voice low. "The Black Pit was built over an old military site. There are tunnels beneath us that were sealed off, but not completely. Ronan thinks we can break through."

Jax rubbed a hand down his face, exasperated. "Yeah, okay. I have a few problems with this already."

I looked at him. "Then don't waste time listing them. Just tell me if you're in."

He sighed, shaking his head. "You're impossible, you know that?"

"Jax."

He met my gaze.

And despite his sarcasm and exhaustion written all over his face, I knew the truth.

He was with me.

"Yeah," he muttered, cracking his knuckles. "I'm in."

A voice cut through the darkness behind us.

"So am I."

I turned—Sienna was standing there, arms crossed, her expression set.

"You were listening," I said.

She didn't even look guilty. "Of course I was. You're terrible at being quiet."

Jax snorted. "She's got a point."

Sienna took a step closer. "I don't trust your friend Ronan, but if there's a way out of this place, I'm not staying behind."

I nodded. "We'll need everyone."

Her gaze flicked toward Aria. "Not everyone is going to be useful."

"She'll come around."

Sienna didn't argue. She just studied me like she was waiting for me to wake up and see the truth.

But I wouldn't.

I couldn't.

I turned away. "Get some rest. We move soon."

Sienna nodded, disappearing into the shadows.

Jax lingered a moment longer before clapping a hand on my shoulder. "You better be right about this, man. After the whole Garren dying, Kaedin dying, and your mom turning into a monster, we sure could use a win for the group."

I nodded to him.

Then, I crouched near Aria.

She didn't react.

"Aria," I said softly.

Nothing.

I reached for her hand, but she barely flinched.

Her skin was cold.

Tiber had taken everything from her.

And I didn't know if I could ever bring her back.

But I had to try.

For her.

For all of us.

Because if we stayed here, we were already dead.



The Black Pit didn't sleep.

The sky above was nothing more than a thick haze of black smoke choking out the stars. Even at night, the forges burned. The Syndicate's hunger for minerals and fuel was endless. And as long as the furnaces stayed hot, so did the guards' vigilance.

But we didn't have time to wait for the perfect moment.

We had to act now.

Jax, Sienna, Ronan, and I moved in the shadows, slipping between rusted-out supply carts and stacks of discarded mining equipment. The air reeked of scorched metal and sweat, thick with the ever-present hum of machinery grinding away.

Ronan led the way, keeping low as we weaved between the prisoner tents. No one could know what we were doing. The wrong word to the wrong person and the Syndicate would bury us alive before we even got the chance to try.

"This better not be a waste of time," Sienna muttered.

"It won't be," Ronan said. His voice was confident, but there was a tightness to it—a flicker of uncertainty beneath the surface.

We reached the edge of the camp, where the rusted fences met the deep rock wall of the canyon. At the very bottom of the pit, the entrance to the old tunnels supposedly lay hidden.

The problem?

It was sealed shut with layers of reinforced metal plating.

Jax whistled low. "Okay, see, this is the part where I start having second thoughts."

"Quiet," Ronan hissed. "There's a gap just beneath the plating. Enough space to dig through if we loosen the bolts."

Sienna dropped to her knees, running her fingers along the rusted edges. "It's tight," she admitted. "But not impossible."

I clenched my fists. "Then let's move. Before the guards do their rounds."

We worked fast, scraping away dirt and dust, prying at the metal with whatever we could find. My hands throbbed with raw pain as I wedged an old mining pick into a seam, gritting my teeth as I pushed with everything I had.

The metal groaned.

It shifted—just a little.

Ronan crouched beside me, breathless. "We're close."

I wiped the sweat from my brow. One more push and we might actually have a way out.

Then—

"HEY!"

A shout rang out across the night.

I froze.

Boots thundered against the ground.

Sienna spun, her handmade knife halfway out, before a Syndicate rifle cracked against the back of her head.

She went down hard.

Jax lunged, but a guard smashed a shock baton into his ribs, dropping him instantly.

I barely had time to react before something slammed into the back of my skull.

The world tilted—

Then everything went black.

A throbbing, relentless pain.

I woke to the feeling of rough hands dragging me across the dirt. My wrists burned from the metal restraints cutting into them. My head swam, and my vision blurred.

Syndicate guards loomed over us, their black armor glinting in the firelight.

Jax was slumped beside me, coughing through gritted teeth. Sienna was unconscious, a bruise already forming on her temple.

And Ronan—

He knelt at the front of the line, his face twisted in fury as the Warden of the Black Pit stepped forward.

Captain Rhyvek.

The man was built like a walking nightmare—broad, brutal, and completely devoid of empathy. His Syndicate armor gleamed under the forge fires, and a long crimson cloak dragged through the dirt.

His pale, pitiless eyes swept over us.

"Attempting to escape?" His voice was smooth, almost amused. "Escape to where exactly? In case you haven't noticed, we are in the middle of the Barrens."

I clenched my jaw but said nothing.

Rhyvek motioned to the guards. "String them up."

The next few minutes were a blur of pain and force.

They dragged us toward the center of the camp, binding our arms and hoisting us up against one of the metal support beams for all the prisoners to see.

A warning.

The guards lashed Jax first.

One strike across the back. Then another.

He gritted his teeth, refusing to make a sound. But the third hit forced a strangled gasp from his lips.

Sienna came next.

She didn't cry out. Didn't beg.

She just stared at Rhyvek with pure hatred.

Then it was my turn.

I felt the sting of the whip before I even realized it had hit me.

Fire ripped down my spine.

I gritted my teeth, forcing the pain down.

Rhyvek watched with mild interest as if we were nothing more than insects.

"This will continue until you beg," he said lazily.

Ronan lifted his head, blood dripping from his temple. "Go to hell."

Rhyvek sighed. "Fine, have it your way."

He turned—and motioned toward the Forge.

Where bodies burned.

The guards grabbed Ronan first.

"No—!" I thrashed against the restraints, but I couldn't move.

They dragged him forward.

Jax shouted something—Sienna kicked at her restraints.

The heat from the Forge burned against my skin.

Ronan struggled, but he was weak. Too weak.

The guards held him inches from the fire.

I screamed.

Then—

A whistle.

A sharp, piercing whistle cut through the night.

The guards froze.

Rhyvek turned, scowling.

Out of the darkness, a figure emerged.

A prisoner.

His frame was lean but wiry with muscle, his silver hair streaked with coal dust. He moved with deliberate ease, unbothered by the scene before him.

And when his golden eyes locked onto me—

Something shifted.

Because I knew him.

Somehow, some way—I had seen this boy before.

Rhyvek tilted his head, intrigued. "Ah, Lord Corvin. Finally decided to show yourself?"

The prisoner—Corvin—didn't flinch.

"I suggest you let them go," Corvin said, his voice calm. "Before you regret it."

A slow, dangerous silence followed.

Rhyvek chuckled. "And what makes you think I care about your suggestions?"

Corvin smiled.

Then he pulled a blade from his belt—and stabbed the nearest guard in the throat.

Chaos erupted.

Prisoners sprung in from every direction, attacking the guards.
The guards shouted, lunging for their weapons.
Corvin moved like a phantom, slipping between them, striking
before they could react.
One guard fell. Then another.
Rhyvek cursed and drew his rifle.
I ripped against my restraints, forcing my raw wrists free.
Jax stumbled, barely managing to stay upright. Sienna cut her
bindings against the sharp metal of the support beam.
Ronan collapsed forward, coughing violently.
I grabbed him before he hit the ground.
"Move!" Corvin barked.
"Wait, we need to get Aria," I pleaded.
Jax and Nia quickly grabbed her up by her arms and forced her with
us.
We ran.
Shouts rang out. Guards scrambled.
Corvin led us through the maze of tunnels, twisting through old
mining paths that only he seemed to know.
We didn't stop until we reached a deeper, abandoned pit section.
The moment we were safe, I turned to him.
Corvin smirked. "Good to see you, cousin."
My breath caught.
Cousin?
Everything tilted.
Ronan let out a weak laugh. "I told you. You weren't the only one
of royal blood here."
I stared at Corvin—this stranger who wasn't a stranger at all.

BRANDON ROHRBAUGH

And I realized—
I wasn't alone.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE ROAD TO WAR

The wind howled through the Barrens, carrying with it the scent of ash and blood. The Black Pit was gone, left behind in the dust of our escape, but the weight of what we had endured there still clung to my bones. My body ached, and my muscles screamed with exhaustion, but stopping wasn't an option. Not yet. Not when we were still being hunted.

I gripped the reins tighter, urging my horse forward, its armored plates glinting in the sun's dying light. The Barrens happily invited us back like an old friend begging for a favor. Behind us, the massive black spire of the Pit shrank into the horizon, swallowed by the storm clouds rolling in from the north.

Jax rode beside me, his face unusually grim. Nia leaned against Sienna, who helped steady her in the saddle. The wound in Nia's side hadn't reopened, but she was weak, barely holding on. Aria trailed behind, silent. Empty. She had barely spoken since we left.

And I didn't blame her.

I glanced back at Corvin and Ronan, both keeping pace, their expressions unreadable. Corvin, my cousin—by blood and by the

twisted fate of our lineage—had barely begun to process what it meant to be free. He had been raised as nothing, locked away, hidden in the Pit, his name erased from history. And yet, despite everything, he had survived.

Ronan, on the other hand, was nothing like Corvin. He was sharp and dangerous, carrying the weight of an entire fallen outpost. His family had ruled Red Hollow once—a thriving hub of trade and resistance against the Syndicate until Tiber burned it to the ground.

We rode silently for a long time, the only sound of the wind whistling through the ruins.

Finally, Jax spoke.

"So... what now?"

I exhaled sharply, scanning the horizon. "We find shelter. Then, we figure out our next move."

Jax let out a low chuckle, though it was humorless. "You mean we don't already have a brilliant plan? That's a first."

I shot him a look, but I didn't argue. We had been moving on survival instinct alone, pushing forward with no real direction. That needed to change.

Corvin spoke up, his voice rough from disuse. "There's an old Veiled outpost not far from here. Or at least... there used to be."

Sienna's head snapped up. "You're sure?"

Corvin nodded. "Before I was taken, I overheard some guards discussing it. The Syndicate raided the place, but they didn't take it apart. They left it to rot. If there's anything left, it could help us."

I exchanged a look with Ronan. He nodded once. "Better than wandering blind."

I didn't need to think twice. We had nowhere else to go.

"Then that's where we go."

We rode hard, covering as much ground as possible before the sun dipped below the horizon. The Barrens became colder at night, the heat bleeding from the sand, leaving behind a world of ice and shadow.

We found the outpost just before dark.

It was now little more than a ruin buried beneath the shifting dunes. What had once been a Veiled stronghold was now a skeleton of steel and stone, its walls broken, its towers crumbling. But it was shelter. That was enough.

Dismounting, I scanned the area. "Jax, Sienna—check the perimeter. Make sure we're alone."

They nodded and disappeared into the wreckage. The rest of us entered, stepping over shattered beams and rusted weapons.

The outpost had been abandoned for years, but it still bore the scars of the Syndicate's attack. Burn marks streaked the walls. Old bloodstains painted the floors. In the center of what had once been the main hall, a Veiled banner still hung—tattered, forgotten, but still standing.

Aria stopped in front of it, staring up at the faded sigil of the wolf. The Veiled's symbol. The last remnant of a shattered people.

She didn't say anything.

I wanted to reach out. To say something—anything. But what could I say?

She had lost everything.

So had I.

And no words could fix that.

Jax and Sienna returned a few minutes later, both looking tense.

"We're alone," Jax confirmed. "For now."

I nodded. "Then we stay here tonight. Rest. Recover."

Corvin folded his arms. "And after that?"

I looked at them—the last of us. The broken pieces of something that used to be strong.

"We need an army," I said. "And I know where to find one."

Jax raised an eyebrow. "Please tell me you're not suggesting what I think you're suggesting."

I met his gaze. "The Veiled are still out there. Survivors. Fighters. We bring them together and make them see we're not done yet."

Nia leaned back against the wall, rubbing her temple. "And if they refuse?"

I tightened my grip on my knife.

"Then I'll make them listen."



The outpost was quiet, except for the occasional hiss of wind through the broken walls. We had scavenged what little supplies we could find—old blankets, rusted weapons, stale rations. It wasn't much, but it was enough to survive another day.

Jax and Sienna had taken the first watch outside the ruins. Nia was already asleep, curled up near the embers of a dying fire. Ronan sat by the doorway, sharpening a dagger, his eyes distant.

I sat against the cold stone, staring into the flames. Sleep wouldn't come. It never did. Not after what we had seen. Not after what we had lost.

Corvin sat across from me, his arms wrapped around his knees. For a while, neither of us spoke. The silence stretched between us, thick with things unsaid.

Then, finally, he broke it.

"You knew my mother."

I looked up. There was no anger in it. No accusation. Just quiet curiosity.

I nodded. "Not well. But I remember Daris telling me about my mother's sister."

Corvin let out a slow breath, staring into the fire. "I don't." His voice was rough, strained. "I was too young when it happened. But I remember... pieces."

I leaned forward. "What pieces?"

He hesitated as if trying to pull the memory from a place buried too deep. "I remember a garden. A courtyard. It must've been at one of the old outposts because it wasn't inside a Dome. The air was hot, but there was a fountain—cool water, clean. My mother was there." His voice softened. "And... so was Erya."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut.

"My mother?"

Corvin nodded. "She held me once. I don't remember what she said, but I remember how she smelled. Like something sweet. Like lavender." He exhaled, his expression tightening. "That's all I have left of them. A scent. A blurry image of her face."

I swallowed hard. "How did it happen?"

Corvin didn't look at me. He just stared into the flames. "It was before Tiber was King. Before he even had an army." His voice was detached, but I could hear the pain beneath it. "He was just another

warlord, overseeing transport routes and security for the Haven Network. But that was when he started planning. He was already looking for ways to take over, cutting out anyone who could be a threat. From what I was told, my mother was exiled shortly after yours was, and they met up at Red Hollow."

I clenched my jaw, my fists tightening.

"My parents were trying to keep Red Hollow independent," Corvin continued. "They wanted to resist the Syndicate, to stay free. But Tiber saw that as a rebellion. And he doesn't tolerate rebellion."

He exhaled slowly. "One night, his men came. They didn't march in, didn't give an ultimatum. They just... burned everything." His voice was hollow. "I was too young to understand. My mother carried me and ran with me through the fire. I remember her screaming. I remember the smoke. And then... she fell."

I didn't breathe.

"The last thing I saw was her face," he whispered. "Before the soldiers tore me from her arms. I learned piece by piece over the years from prisoners who joined me at the Black Pit that your mom got out alive, and some said she became the leader of the Veiled. Ronan's parents and my mother weren't so lucky."

Silence.

The fire crackled, but it felt like the world had gone still.

"I never knew," I admitted. "Daris never told me about you. About what happened."

Corvin's mouth twitched, but there was no humor in it. "That was the point, wasn't it? Erase our name. Erase our family. If no one remembers us, it's like we never existed."

I clenched my fists, my nails digging into my palms.

Tiber had done this. He had taken everything from Corvin just like he had taken everything from me.

But Corvin was still here. Just like me.

And we were going to make Tiber pay.

I didn't realize Aria was awake until she spoke.

"You lied to us."

Her voice was quiet. Cold.

I turned my head and saw her sitting just beyond the fire, half-hidden in the shadows. Her face was hollow, her eyes distant. But she was looking at me for the first time since Ignis Forge.

I felt my stomach twist.

I had wanted this moment—to finally explain. But now that it was here, the words felt heavier than I could handle.

"I didn't mean to," I said.

Aria's expression hardened. "That's not good enough."

I swallowed. "I—"

She stood abruptly, stepping closer, her fists clenched at her sides. "You told us you knew Verdanix that you had been there. That you could lead us through it." Her voice shook, but it wasn't with anger. It was something else. Something more fragile. "And because of that, Garren is dead. And maybe my father would still be alive, too."

The words cut deeper than any blade.

I stood, my chest tightening. "You think I don't know that?" My voice was hoarse. "You think I don't live with that every second?"

Aria's jaw clenched. "Then why did you do it?"

I exhaled sharply, forcing myself to meet her gaze.

"Because I was afraid."

She flinched.

"Because if I told you the truth, you would have left me hanging in that Feral nest. I needed to lie to save myself, but then the lie just continued, and I couldn't find a way to tell you until it was too late."

She nodded as tears formed around her green eyes.

"I grew up in Solaris Prime, Aria. I was raised inside the Dome, surrounded by luxury and lies. I didn't know anything about Verdenix. I didn't even know what the Barrens were until I was thrown into them." My voice lowered. "But I knew what Tiber was capable of. And I knew you'd never trust me if I told you who I was."

Aria let out a sharp breath, shaking her head. "And now?"

I swallowed hard. "Now I'm done running from it."

She studied me, her expression unreadable.

Then, finally, her shoulders sagged, the firelight casting shadows across her face.

"I don't know if I can forgive you," she admitted. "But," she continued, "I know that if we're going to win this war, we must trust each other again."

I nodded, unable to say anything.

Aria turned away, stepping back into the darkness.

And as I watched her go, I realized something.

This war wasn't just about revenge anymore.

It was about fixing the things I had broken.

And if I had to burn the Syndicate to the ground to do it... then so be it.

The fire burned low as the night stretched on. The weight of everything—the lies, the betrayals, the losses—settled heavily in my chest. I had told Aria the truth, but the truth didn't undo the damage. It didn't bring back the dead.

She had walked away, and I hadn't followed. I didn't deserve to.

Now, only Corvin and I remained by the fire. The others had drifted off into restless sleep or stood guard along the ruined outpost's edges.

I exhaled sharply. We couldn't keep running forever.

"We need to go back," I muttered.

Corvin looked at me, his expression unreadable. "Back where?"

"The Veiled may be scattered, but they're not gone." I ran a hand through my hair, pushing past the exhaustion in my bones. "We need to find the survivors. If we don't, the Syndicate will hunt them down individually."

Corvin studied me for a long moment. "And then what?"

"Then we take the fight to Tiber."

He let out a quiet laugh, shaking his head. "You make it sound simple."

"It's not." I knew that. I wasn't an idiot. But I also knew we didn't have a choice. "Tiber's expanding. He's going to build more Domes and fortify his hold on Inferna. If we don't stop him now, there won't be anything left to fight for."

Corvin sighed, his fingers tapping idly against his knee. "You know what your problem is?"

I arched a brow. "Please, enlighten me."

"You talk like you have an army."

"We can build one."

He gave me a skeptical look. "From where? The Veiled are scattered. The Raiders turned on you. The Syndicate has more weapons, soldiers, and resources than we hope to match. Oh, and Jax told me they now have super mutants they created in the lab."

"We don't need numbers," I said. "We need a strategy."

Corvin tilted his head slightly. "And what's your strategy?"

I hesitated. Because the truth was, I wasn't sure yet.

Tiber was too powerful. His forces stretched across Inferna like a disease. We couldn't win this war by fighting as he expected us to.

"We don't fight him head-on," I said slowly. "We cut him off at the knees. We hit his supply chains. We dismantle his control over the Domes. We take away his power piece by piece until there's nothing left for him to rule."

Corvin leaned back, his expression contemplative. "You're talking about a rebellion. I heard about what happened at Verdanix."

I met his gaze. "I'm talking about burning the Syndicate to the ground."

Silence stretched between us.

Then, finally, he smiled.

"I think I like you, cousin."

I huffed a quiet laugh. "That makes one of us."

Corvin smirked but didn't argue.

"We move at dawn," I said, pushing to my feet.

Corvin rose as well, his movements fluid despite the exhaustion weighing him down. He was a survivor, just like me.

But a voice called out from the shadows before we could wake the others.

"You're insane if you think you're going back there."

Jax stepped out from behind one of the ruined walls, his arms crossed over his chest. His usual smirk was gone, replaced by something colder. Sharper.

I exhaled. "Jax—"

"No," he cut me off, stepping closer. "You really don't get it, do you?"

I frowned. "Get what?"

Jax's eyes darkened. "The Veiled are gone, Kael. You saw what happened. You saw what they did to Aria's father. To the elders. They broke them. And you think you can just march back in and fix everything?"

I swallowed, my hands clenching into fists because that's exactly what I thought.

Jax scoffed, shaking his head. "You don't get to be the hero in this story, Kael. You don't get to fix what's broken just because you feel guilty."

His words stung because they were true.

But that didn't change anything.

"I don't care if I get to be the hero," I said quietly. "This isn't about me."

Jax's jaw tightened, but I could see the conflict in his eyes. He wanted to believe that. But he was tired. We all were.

After a long moment, he let out a frustrated sigh. "So what's the plan?"

I glanced at Corvin, then back at Jax.

"We find the Veiled," I said. "We rally what's left. And then, we finish this war."

Jax let out a dry laugh. "Great. Fantastic. Love that for us."

But he didn't walk away.

That was enough.



I should have gone to sleep after that. We all should have.

But as the fire burned lower, I stood outside, staring at the night sky.

The stars stretched endlessly above me, bright against the infinite darkness.

A sound behind me made me turn.

Aria.

She stood a few feet away, arms wrapped around herself. The wind tugged at her hair, casting shadows across her face.

For a long moment, neither of us spoke.

Then, finally—

"You're really doing this," she murmured.

I nodded. "Yeah."

She exhaled, her breath shaky. "You're going to get yourself killed."

I didn't say anything.

Aria swallowed. "And us, too."

I looked at her then, really looked at her. She was afraid. But beneath that fear, there was something else.

Something I had seen in myself.

"I can't undo what happened," I said quietly. "But I can stop it from happening again. Tiber will not stop until the Syndicate are the only ones left on Inferna."

She stared at me for a long time. Then, finally, she nodded.

It wasn't forgiveness.

But it was something.

Nia and the others joined us around the fire. Their expressions showed fear, anger, trust, and respect.

"You know, my father used to tell me a story about a boy in the old world who had nothing," Nia spoke. "But one day, he grew into a man who had everything. Do you know how he did that?"

"How?" I asked.

"He fully embraced who he was inside. He stopped feeling sorry for himself and living in the past. You're not Kael, the secret *bastard* of King Alric, exiled to die in the Barrens. You are King Kael Solaryn, Savior of the Veiled. Survivor of the Barrens. And rightful heir to the Throne."

"Maybe you can add King Slayer to that after you take down Tiber," Jax said.

"I'm no Savior."

"Look, I know it looks back for the Veiled right now," Nia said. "But the Syndicate would have found us eventually; you and only you can end the war. With you on the Throne, you can bring compromise between the Syndicate and the Veiled."

"They're right," Aria said.

Her words affected me the most. I needed her support to see this through.

"We're with you," Ronan said.

"Always," Corvin added.

"So, what's our plan, King?" Nia asked.

"We split up," I started. "We rally what's left of the Veiled, find the survivors of Red Hollow, convince Kieren Orvan in the village of exiles, poke a Feral nest, and lure the biggest Sand Wraith ever seen. We do that and head straight for the capital. There's one advantage

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we have over Tiber; we know the Barrens. It's time to use it. No more games. This is war."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SECRETS BENEATH THE SAND

The ruins of the outpost stood silent against the endless stretch of desert, the sky above fading from deep blue to the first traces of dawn. The embers of our dying fire flickered weakly, casting long shadows over the broken walls and shattered remnants of the past.

I stood at the center of our ragtag group, looking at the faces surrounding me—each battle-worn, exhausted, and carrying more ghosts than anyone our age should. Jax, Nia, Aria, Sienna, Ronan, and Corvin. We had lost too much. But we weren't done yet.

"We can't wait any longer," I said, breaking the heavy silence. "The Syndicate is tightening its grip on Inferna. If we don't move now, they'll crush whatever's left."

Jax let out a breath, rubbing the back of his neck. "I hate when you get that serious tone. It usually means we're about to do something stupid."

I ignored him. "We need an army." I glanced at Corvin and Ronan. "You two head for Red Hollow. Find anyone left from the old resis-

tance there. If they haven't been wiped out, they'll want revenge on Tiber just as much as we do."

Corvin nodded, though his jaw was tight. "If there's anyone left."

"There will be," Ronan said. "I was there before. People like them don't die easy."

I turned to Nia and Sienna. "You two go to the Veiled remnants. There are still survivors scattered across the Barrens. We need them."

Nia gave me a skeptical look. "The Veiled fell hard, Kael. You saw what happened."

"I did," I admitted. "But I also know they won't let it end like that. The Veiled don't break. They rebuild."

She hesitated, then nodded. "Alright. We'll find them."

Finally, my gaze landed on Aria. "You're going to the Village of Exiles."

She arched a brow. "Alone?"

"No. Jax is going with you," I said. "Kieran Orven has fighters. They'll make a difference if we can convince them to fight."

Aria crossed her arms. "What about you?"

I exhaled slowly, feeling the weight of my own decision settle in my chest. "I'm going alone."

The group shifted. I could feel their unease.

Jax frowned. "Yeah, no. That's a terrible idea."

"I need to find someone," I said. "I saw something in the desert, and I don't think it was a dream. The Sand Wraith Rider—he's real. If I can find him, I might be able to bring back something stronger than soldiers."

Ronan's brow furrowed. "You're chasing myths now?"

"I don't think it's a myth." I met his gaze. "I think it's real. And if it is, it could change everything."

Jax shook his head. "Or you could die of dehydration chasing after ghosts."

"Then I die," I said simply. "But I have to try."

The silence was thick with tension. No one liked the plan, but no one had a better one.

Finally, Corvin sighed. "Where do we meet?"

"Outside the walls of Solaris Prime." I let the words settle, their sheer weight hanging in the air. "Ten days from now. Whoever we have, whatever forces we can bring, we meet there. And then... we end this."

Jax let out a low whistle. "You really are trying to be a king, huh?"

I didn't answer because it didn't matter.

I didn't want a throne. I didn't care about a crown.

I just wanted Tiber to burn.

One by one, they gave their final nods. No more words were needed. We mounted our horses, the cold desert wind whipping through the ruins.

Then, without looking back—we rode in different directions.

I didn't know if I would ever see them again.

But in ten days, I would find out.

And either we would stand as an army...

Or we would die trying.

The desert swallowed me whole.

With every mile, the traces of civilization disappeared behind me, leaving only an endless stretch of shifting dunes and jagged cliffs carved by time. The wind howled across the barren expanse, stirring

up whirls of sand that clung to my skin and coated my throat with dust.

I pressed forward, my horse cutting through the dunes, its breath heavy beneath the heat. The sky was vast and cloudless, the sun burning above like relentless sentinels. There were no roads, no markers—only the whispers of the wind and the weight of silence stretching endlessly before me.

I had been riding for hours, following nothing but instinct and the vague memory of a dream that refused to let go. The Sand Wraith Rider had been real. I knew it. And if he was real, then so was whatever force he commanded.

A force I needed.

The Barrens had always been dangerous, but deep in the uncharted wastes, it was something else entirely. This was the land where no faction ruled, where sand and time had swallowed the old world, and where the creatures lurking beneath the dunes were older than any Syndicate soldier.

Where only the dead and the mad wandered alone.

I reached for my canteen, shaking it slightly. It was half empty. That's not good. I had packed enough supplies to last a few days, but if I didn't find shelter soon, the heat would do its work.

Still, I pressed on.

Something was out here. I could feel it.



The temperature plummeted as the sun dipped below the horizon, the heat replaced by a biting cold that cut straight to the bone. The desert at night was a different beast entirely—silent and predatory.

I made camp beneath the shadow of a crumbling rock formation, using what little kindling I had to spark a small fire. It flickered weakly, barely enough to keep the darkness at bay.

I sat with my back to the stone, scanning the dunes for any sign of life.

Nothing.

Only silence.

Then—a sound.

A distant, eerie clicking. Faint. But there.

My muscles tensed. Slowly, I reached for my knife, my fingers wrapping around the hilt.

The clicking grew louder. Closer.

Then—the ground trembled.

A rush of movement. A blur of shifting sand.

Then it was on me.

A massive shape burst from the dunes, its body moving like liquid shadow, its eyes glowing a deep, pulsating gold.

A Sand Wraith.

But this one was different.

Bigger. Smarter.

It didn't randomly attack. It just stood there, its elongated body partially buried in the sand, its ridged exoskeleton glistening under the moonlight. It watched me, head tilting slightly, almost... curious.

My pulse pounded. My knife trembled in my grip.

I had seen these creatures before—fast, ruthless, untamable. But this one wasn't like the mindless beasts that hunted the Barrens.

This one was waiting.

And then—

A voice.

Low, rough, edged with something ancient.

"You've come a long way, Kael Solaryn."

I froze.

Slowly, a figure emerged from the darkness, stepping into the fire-light.

Wrapped in tattered, sand-worn cloth, his face hidden behind a mask of carved bone, he moved like a shadow, his presence both immense and weightless.

The Rider.

The one I had seen in my fevered dreams.

He stopped a few feet from me, his gaze unreadable beneath the mask. The Sand Wraith beside him let out a slow rumble as if waiting for a command.

"You seek something," the Rider said, his voice like shifting sand. "But you do not understand what it is."

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to stand. "I need help."

He tilted his head slightly. "Help?"

"To stop the Syndicate," I said, my voice steady despite the chaos inside me. "To take back Inferna. To end Tiber's rule."

The Rider was silent for a long moment.

Then, he exhaled.

"You do not seek warriors." His eyes gleamed behind the mask. "You seek something far more dangerous."

I frowned. "What?"

The Rider stepped closer, his presence suddenly suffocating.

"Control."

A chill ran down my spine.

The Sand Wraith shifted beside him, its massive body rippling with restrained power. The ground beneath my feet hummed as if something deep below had stirred.

The Rider gestured toward the dunes.

"The sand remembers," he murmured. "The creatures listen. But only to those who learn to command them."

My breath caught.

"You mean—"

"You are standing on the threshold of something far older and more important than your war." He tilted his head. "The question is—are you ready to step through?"

The fire crackled between us, throwing wild shadows across the dunes.

My heart pounded.

I had come here searching for warriors.

But what if I had found something else entirely?

"I'm ready."

His eyes glowed beneath the mask.

"Then let's begin."

The Rider didn't waste time.

He turned sharply, moving toward the Sand Wraith without a word. The creature didn't recoil or hesitate—it simply lowered its head in submission as he climbed onto its back with effortless grace.

Then, he looked at me.

“Come.”

I hesitated only for a second. Then, gripping my knife tightly, I took a deep breath and stepped forward. The Sand Wraith watched me as I approached, its glowing gold eyes unblinking. It didn’t snarl or lunge—just waited.

My throat tightened. Every story I had ever heard about these creatures said they couldn’t be tamed and were mindless, savage beasts. But this one... this one understood.

The Rider extended a hand from where he sat on its back. “You must listen to the sand.”

I reached out.

As soon as our hands met—

The world shifted.

A rush of images flooded my mind, shifting like water, echoes of something deep below, the hum of something ancient vibrating beneath my bones. I gasped, my vision going dark for a second before I snapped back to reality.

I was still standing there. My hand is still in his. But something inside me felt... different.

The Rider nodded. “You feel it.”

It wasn’t a question.

I swallowed hard, still reeling. “What was that?”

“The connection,” he said. “The Barrens are not dead, Kael Solaryn. They breathe. They move. And you—” his eyes gleamed behind the mask, “—must learn to move with them.”

I exhaled slowly, willing my pulse to steady.

“Mount.”

I turned back to the Sand Wraith, my stomach twisting. This went against everything I knew. Sand Wraiths were nightmares, unstoppable predators.

And yet, I felt none of that now.

I took a step closer. Then another.

The creature let me.

I reached out, fingers grazing the rough plates of its exoskeleton. Its body was warm beneath my touch, almost thrumming with an energy I didn't understand.

I swallowed hard.

Then, I climbed.

The Wraith tensed beneath me, its powerful muscles shifting. I braced myself, expecting it to buck, to throw me into the sand—

But it didn't.

I exhaled sharply, gripping the rough ridges along its neck for balance.

The Rider nodded approvingly. "Good."

I barely had time to process what was happening before he turned and kicked off.

The Wraith moved.

Not like a horse, not like any beast I had ever ridden. It was like riding the wind—smooth, fluid, impossibly fast. The dunes blurred past us in a rush, the cool night air whipping against my skin. My heart pounded. I fought to keep my balance, my instincts screaming at me to hold on tighter—

"Let go."

The Rider's voice cut through the wind.

I glanced over. He was barely gripping his Wraith at all, moving with it instead of against it.

I gritted my teeth, easing my hold slightly.

The Sand Wraith beneath me responded instantly. Its movements became smoother and more controlled. I could feel the rhythm of the dunes and the pulse of the desert.

I wasn't riding it.

I was part of it.

The realization sent a shock through me. This wasn't just about control. It was about trust.

The Rider glanced at me, his mask unreadable. "Now you understand."

I did.

But I also knew this was only the beginning.

We rode deep into the dunes, further than I had ever been. The stars above stretched like shattered glass across the endless sky, and the desert around us shifted.

I frowned something prickling at the back of my mind.

Then, I saw it.

A dark spot in the sand, like a hole in the world itself.

At first, I thought it was a shadow. But as we approached, I realized it wasn't a hole but an entrance.

The Rider slowed his Wraith, and mine followed suit. I barely breathed as I took in the scene before me.

A hidden city.

Or what was left of one?

It stretched below the dunes, sunken into the earth like a forgotten memory. Half-buried towers jutted from the sand, ancient structures

swallowed by time. Bridges and pathways wound through the ruins, disappearing into tunnels carved beneath the surface.

And moving between them—

People.

Figures cloaked in desert robes, their faces hidden behind masks of bone and metal, walking freely among the Sand Wraiths.

My pulse quickened.

“They’re real,” I whispered.

The Rider dismounted, landing effortlessly on the sand. He turned to me, his gaze sharp. “Come.”

I slid off my Wraith, my legs shaking slightly as my boots hit the ground.

“Who are they?” I asked as we descended toward the ruins.

“The Khari.”

I frowned. “I’ve never heard of them.”

His voice was calm but firm. “No one has.”

We reached the edge of the ruins. The Khari moved between the wreckage, their bodies fluid and silent, as if they had become part of the sand itself. Some carried weapons forged from old-world metal, curved blades, and barbed spears. Others walked with their hands resting on the backs of their Wraiths, moving in perfect harmony.

A few stopped to look at us, their eyes gleaming behind their masks.

“They are the last remnants of what Inferna once was,” the Rider continued. “A people who refused to bow to the Syndicate, to the Domes, to any ruler who sought to control them.”

My breath was shallow. This place—it felt alive.

I turned back to the Rider. “Why bring me here?”

His eyes burned into mine.

"Because you are more than just a lost prince."

A chill ran down my spine.

"You are the bridge," he said. "Between the old world and the new."

The wind howled between the ruins, whispering through the bones of the past.

I clenched my fists.

I had come here searching for warriors.

But what I had found—

It was something far more dangerous.

Something the Syndicate could never see coming.

Something that could change everything.

The Rider led me deeper into the ruins.

The tunnels beneath the sand were vast, winding through the bones of the old world like veins through a corpse. The deeper we went, the cooler the air became. The walls shifted from rough sandstone to remnants of something else—metal and glass, remnants of a time long forgotten.

It wasn't just a hidden city.

It was a tomb of history.

The Khari moved silently around us, their presence more felt than seen. They carried torches with green flames, illuminating carvings etched into the walls—stories written in stone.

Stories of a world before Inferna.

Stories of Earth.

The Rider stopped before a massive chamber, its entrance framed by two jagged pillars. He turned to me. "What you see here will change how you see this world. Are you prepared for that?"

I swallowed hard. "I have to be."

He nodded once and stepped forward. I followed.

Inside, the chamber stretched wide, its ceiling arching high above us. At the center stood an altar of polished black stone. Around it, ancient artifacts and preserved texts lay in careful arrangements—scrolls, old-world books, even brittle photographs sealed in glass.

I approached slowly, my fingers brushing against a metal plaque. It was rusted but still readable.

"Earth Preservation Society—Ark Project 4."

My heart pounded.

"This is... history," I breathed.

The Rider moved beside me, his voice steady. "This is what remains of it."

I picked up a sealed photograph and held it close to the torchlight. A city.

Not the domed fortresses of the Syndicate, not the metal carcasses of war machines.

A true city. Green, vibrant. Towers wrapped in vines, streets lined with trees that stretched toward the sky. There were bodies of water that weren't dried-up basins or poisoned lakes—but oceans.

I ran my fingers over the glass, my chest tightening.

"I always imagined what it looked like," I admitted. "But I never thought... I never thought it could be real."

"It was," the Rider said. "Once."

I turned to him. "What happened?"

The Rider exhaled, then gestured toward a section of preserved texts stacked carefully along the wall. "Read."

I stepped forward, my eyes scanning the fragile clippings beneath the glass. The words were faded but still legible.

"Chemical Wars Escalate—Eastern Territories Poisoned Beyond Repair."

"Solar Cataclysm Feared as Conflicts in Outer Colonies Ignite."

"Intergalactic War Triggers Unstable Star Reactions—Earth's Sun at Risk."

"Radiation, Bio-Warfare, and Mass Industrialization—How We Doomed Ourselves."

Each headline hit like a punch to the gut.

My mouth went dry. "It wasn't just the sun, was it?"

"No," the Rider said, voice grim. "The wars poisoned the world. The Syndicate, the Veiled, the Raiders fight for scraps of land their ancestors killed."

I forced myself to keep reading.

"Solar Expansion Unchecked—Extreme Heatwaves Destroy Ecosystems."

"Mutation Crisis—The Long-Term Effects of Radiation on Human Evolution."

I swallowed hard. "So you're saying... it's happening again?"

"The Syndicate drills into the earth, searching for power they don't understand. Their chemicals poison the air. The experiments they conduct on their own people corrupt the balance further." He gestured toward the tunnels around us. "Inferna isn't dying because of the sun. It is dying because of them."

A chill ran down my spine.

If this was true—if the planet itself was decaying under Syndicate rule—then even if we won the war, we'd lose everything anyway.

I turned back to the Rider. "Then we have to stop them."

He studied me for a long moment. "And how do you plan to do that?"

I hesitated.

I wasn't sure yet.

But then, something shifted in the chamber.

A deep, resonating hum—like the desert itself was breathing.

The Rider didn't move, but I saw it in his stance.

He had been waiting for this.

"The Khari do not act without purpose," he said. "We have watched, waited, listened to the sand." He turned to me. "And we have heard whispers of a prophecy."

A torch was lifted, revealing a massive mural carved into the chamber's back wall.

It depicted a figure—a girl, standing amidst the dunes, arms outstretched.

Behind her, the sand moved like waves, rising into the shape of a beast.

And before her—a city on fire.

I swallowed. "Who is that?"

The Rider's voice was steady.

"Her name was Luna."

I stepped closer, my pulse racing. A girl my age, with short brown hair and eyes of pure blue. "Who was she?"

The Rider exhaled. "Long before the Syndicate ruled, long before Inferna was lost, there was a girl born with the ability to command the sand. She was called the Sunscorched—a child touched by the sun itself. It was said that she would either save this world... or destroy it."

"Is she real?" I asked.

The Rider tilted his head. "Every so many generations, a child is born under unusual circumstances. A child touched by the sun itself."

"I've never heard of this."

The Rider regarded me in silence. Then, finally, he said, "You are of the bloodline of the ones who brought ruin. But also of the ones who tried to save it."

A shiver ran down my spine.

Erya.

She had tried to save this world. To fight against the Syndicate's destruction.

And I had her blood in my veins.

I clenched my fists.

"I'm not Sunscorched," I said, my voice steady. "But I will save this world."

The Rider studied me for a long moment.

Then, he nodded.

"The Khari will ride with you," he said. "But understand this—destiny is not something you control. The sands will decide if you are meant to save this world."

I swallowed hard, my heart pounding.

This was it.

We had an army.

Now, we had to use it.

The sands moved differently beneath my feet now.

I could feel it—a rhythm, a pulse, a breath.

The Khari gathered in a wide ring beneath the golden glow of torchlight, their faces hidden behind the flowing scarves of their desert

robes. Their piercing eyes watched me with reverence, with expectation.

I wasn't just Kael Solaryn to them anymore.

I was the Sunscorched.

The Rider stood at my side, his arms crossed as he observed me. "The sand is alive," he said. "It has a will of its own. You must learn to listen to it before you can command it."

I swallowed hard, my body tense with anticipation.

Before me, the Sand Wraith loomed.

It was monstrous, its scaled body twisting like a serpent beneath the dunes. Its massive head, shaped like a flattened skull, bore jagged ridges along its crown. Its glowing amber eyes watched me with an intelligence I hadn't expected.

Three Khari warriors restrained the beast, their ropes woven from metallic material strong enough to withstand the creature's immense power.

One wrong move, and I'd be crushed beneath it.

A woman stepped forward, her presence radiating authority.

Her deep blue robes were trimmed with golden embroidery, and her long braids were adorned with small metal rings that clicked softly as she moved. Her eyes—black as obsidian—locked onto mine with an intensity that made my breath catch.

"This is Ashari," the Rider introduced. "She is one of our finest Wraith riders."

Ashari inclined her head slightly, but her gaze never wavered. "If you truly are Sunscorched, then the beast will not reject you."

I shifted. "And if it does?"

She smirked. "Then you will die."

The warriors around her chuckled lowly.

I exhaled sharply. Great. No pressure.

Another figure approached—younger, leaner, restless. His skin was dusted with sand, and his hair was tied in loose knots behind his head. A long spear was strapped to his back, but how he carried himself made it clear that he didn't need it to be dangerous.

"This is Rahim," the Rider said. "He believes he should be the one riding the Wraith today."

Rahim huffed. "I don't believe—I know." His dark eyes flickered at me. "This beast is a creature of the Khari, not a lost prince from the metal Domes."

Tension rippled through the gathering.

I met Rahim's glare head-on. "Then I guess we'll find out, won't we?"

His lip curled slightly, but he said nothing.

Ashari stepped closer, her voice sharp. "Enough."

She turned to me. "Approach the Wraith."

I nodded, stepping forward slowly.

The Sand Wraith hissed, its enormous body shifting beneath the sand. The ground trembled slightly beneath my boots.

I held out my hand.

I didn't know what I was supposed to do—but I could feel it.

Something deep inside me, something pulling.

The sand swirled around my fingers as if drawn to me.

The Wraith's breathing slowed.

It cocked its massive head, its glowing eyes narrowing.

Ashari whispered something in a language that I didn't understand.

And then—it lowered its head.

A ripple of astonishment moved through the crowd.

Ashari's mouth parted slightly, a flicker of something close to awe passing over her face.

Even Rahim's scowl faltered.

The Rider exhaled. "Well... it seems the beast has made its choice."

The Sand Wraith lowered its back, the ridges along its spine flattening slightly.

A silent invitation.

Without warning, Ashari cut a blade into the palm of my hand and held it out over the sand, letting the blood from my hand trickle down into the grains that surrounded the Wraith. A series of "awws" and "wows" echoed from the onlookers.

I looked back at Ashari, and she motioned for me to climb onto the creature.

I swallowed hard, then climbed onto the creature, gripping the thick, leathery ropes that served as makeshift reins.

The Wraith let out a low growl when I settled in.

Not of anger.

Of acceptance.

Ashari stepped forward, her expression unreadable. "Now, you must learn to ride it."

I barely had time to process before the creature lurched forward.

The sand split open beneath us as the Wraith dove headfirst into the dunes, its body twisting like a serpent through water. I quickly leaned forward, shielding behind an armor plate from the surrounding sand. My stomach flipped as we plunged beneath the surface, swallowed by the desert.

Darkness consumed us—then light.

We shot back up, bursting like a breaching sea beast through the sand. The wind howled past my ears, the sun blinding as the Wraith soared over the dunes.

I wasn't riding the creature.

I was part of it.

The desert was alive beneath me. I could feel every shift, every ripple, every breath.

The Wraith wasn't resisting me. It wasn't a beast to be controlled.

It was an extension of me.

The Khari watched silently as I circled back, guiding the Wraith effortlessly through the dunes.

When we finally stopped, Ashari approached again, this time with something new in her eyes.

Reverence.

"One more test," she spoke.

She led me into a larger room, similar to the banquet hall where my father had died. She held my arm as we walked to the front stage, where we could see the entire Khari colony.

"My brothers and sisters," she started. "Our ancestors have long awaited this prophecy. The day the next Sunscorcher would save us from ourselves. He has controlled the Wraith and will now drink from the Eternals."

The crowd gasped in fear and excitement.

"The what?" I asked.

"This drink will either kill you or prove to yourself that you are Sunscorched," the Rider explained.

A man cautiously carried an old, rusted bowl forward and handed it to Ashari. I peered into the bowl. A black, bubbling liquid sat inside. A feeling of fear and sickness filled my stomach.

"I don't think I can," I said.

"It's your destiny," she whispered, handing me the bowl.

I hesitated but gave in. I pressed the bowl to my lips and opened my mouth. The hot, sticky liquid flowed into my mouth and down my throat. An immediate fire radiated through my veins, threatening to consume me.

The crowd began chanting Sunscorched repeatedly as the fire in me burned higher.

I dropped to my knees and let out a screech from deep down, like something was waking. The sun's brightness flashed in my mind, scorching it with its rays. Images of destruction and chaos flashed before me.

And then it stopped.

I stood back up and wiped the remaining liquid from around my mouth.

In front of me, every person in the room was silent.

"You are the Sunscorched," Ashari murmured. "The sands have chosen you."

One by one, the Khari followed suit, lowering themselves in respect. Even Rahim dropped to one knee.

The Rider remained standing, his expression unreadable. But when he spoke, his voice carried something I hadn't heard before.

Something like belief.

"You have the loyalty of the Khari now, Kael Solaryn," he said. "You are one of us."

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I exhaled slowly, my heart pounding.

This wasn't just an army.

This wasn't just strategy.

This was destiny.

And for the first time, I wasn't afraid of it.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SUNSCORCHED

The first light of dawn broke over the horizon, painting the Barrens in a wash of deep gold and crimson. The sands, once lifeless, seemed to shift and breathe beneath my feet. It was different now—I could feel the land in a way I never had before. Every grain of sand, every ripple in the dunes, pulsed with something alive, something waiting.

It was terrifying.

It was exhilarating.

I had barely slept, the fire of the Eternals' Drink still burning in my veins, making my thoughts run wild. The Khari had declared me the Sunscorched, their prophesied savior, but I didn't feel like a savior. I felt like an imposter wearing a title too heavy for his shoulders.

But I couldn't afford doubt. Not now. I had only a few days left before meeting with the others at the Capital.

A circle of Khari warriors had gathered in the early morning haze, their long scarves wrapped against the rising wind. The Rider stood at their center, his arms crossed, while Rahim paced near the edge, restless as ever.

"If you're truly one of us," Rahim said, "then prove it."

The challenge sent a murmur through the gathered warriors.

"And how do you suggest I do that?"

Rahim smirked, throwing a leg over his Sand Wraith, its gold-hued scales catching the light as it shifted beneath him. "A race." He nodded toward the towering dunes behind us. "The old way. No tricks, no magic—just the sand, the beast beneath you, and your instincts. The first one across the valley wins."

I exhaled slowly. Racing was one thing. Racing across the deadliest dunes in Inferna while barely knowing how to stay on my Wraith? That was something else entirely.

But I couldn't refuse.

I turned toward my own Sand Wraith, the massive beast waiting just behind me, watching with those glowing amber eyes. It had chosen me. Now, I had to prove I was worthy of it.

I climbed onto the creature's broad back, gripping the thick reins of woven leather. Its massive body trembled beneath me, eager, waiting.

Across from me, Rahim leaned in close to his Wraith and muttered something in the old Khari tongue. His beast released a low, rattling hiss, its tail coiling in anticipation.

I swallowed.

This was it.

The Rider raised his arm. "At the drop of the blade, you ride!"

The warriors roared in anticipation.

Then—the blade fell.

I barely had time to brace before my Sand Wraith lurched forward, diving into the dunes like a living bullet. The wind tore past my face,

the ground vanishing beneath me as the beast twisted and surged forward.

Rahim was fast. Too fast.

He shot ahead, his Wraith skimming the surface of the sand like a shadow, its movements fluid and precise. My beast was strong and powerful but not yet as controlled.

I grit my teeth, lowering my body against its back, trying to become part of it.

The dunes rushed toward us in uneven waves, the sand shifting unpredictably. Rahim took the high ground, his Wraith leaping over a ridge while I was forced into the valley below.

I felt the shift in the terrain before I saw it.

A sand trap.

The dunes ahead trembled, shifting in an unnatural ripple. The sun bleached the landscape into a golden haze, but I could see the warning signs—a pitfall waiting beneath the surface.

Rahim was already ahead, his path clear.

If I tried to follow, I'd sink.

I gripped the reins, pressing a hand against the Wraith's side. I didn't know why I did it—but something in me told me to listen.

The beast shuddered beneath me.

Then, before I realized what was happening, the sand moved.

It lifted. Shifted. Changed.

Instead of swallowing me, the dunes rolled upward, creating a new path. A bridge. A way through.

Gasps rang out from the watching Khari warriors.

I barely had time to process it before my Wraith surged forward, taking the new path at full speed. The sand wrapped around us like a guiding force, pushing us toward the finish line.

Rahim saw what was happening. He whipped his reins, urging his beast faster, but it was too late.

I passed him in the final stretch, tearing across the valley and launching over the last dune.

The moment my Wraith landed, the entire Khari erupted into cheers.

I slid off the creature's back, my breath ragged, my heart still hammering in my chest. The ground beneath my feet felt different now—like it belonged to me.

Rahim slowed his beast, his expression a mix of frustration and something else. Respect.

He jumped down, dusted himself off, and stepped toward me.

For a long moment, he just studied me.

Then, finally—he dropped to one knee.

"You are Sunscorched," he murmured.

One by one, the Khari warriors followed, bowing their heads.

I stood there, overwhelmed, the desert stretching endlessly around me.

I had won the race.

I had controlled the sands.

And for the first time, I felt it in my bones.

This wasn't just luck.

This wasn't just fate.

I was meant for this.

"My mother would have loved to see this day," Ashari said as we ate around the large table. "She was an amazing leader."

"What happened to her?" I asked.

"We don't see Syndicate or Veiled, Raiders or Exiled. We see good and evil. We are responsible for what happens to Inferna."

"I understand that now. But I must return to my people soon to help them take down the evil people."

Ashari continued. "Inferna is dying—not from the sun, but from the people who refuse to stop what started this in the first place. The drilling, the experiments, the weapons the evil you call *Syndicate* is creating... they are killing the land faster than any war ever could. Before the Syndicate, there were others,"

My mind reeled.

"This is what the Syndicate doesn't want you to see," Ashari murmured. "This is what your father died trying to prevent."

I swallowed hard. My father.

"He knew?" I asked.

"Passed down through the generations, whispers, secrets, and prophecies, only known by great leaders. Your father and father's father and so on knew the truth."

"His last words to me were, '*You must know. Every king knows. The Sunscorched Destiny. The end is coming.*' I never thought about what he meant. I was too worried about what had just happened."

I stepped back, my hands curling into fists. "So how do we stop it?"

"Let me share a story with you," she started, laying out a series of weathered scrolls with drawings and markings. "Thousands of years ago, after the Great Ignition, there was a Mad King. He was the first to begin experiments of genetic augmentation, warriors engineered

to be faster, stronger, and impervious to pain. Through forbidden sciences, chemical enhancements, and ritualistic trials of the flesh, they became more than human—unstoppable engines of war. Their minds were sharp, their bodies nearly indestructible. They had no fear, no hesitation, no limits.

But the First Sunscorched, Luna, knew defeating the Mad King meant more than breaking their machines and tearing down their Domed cities. She had to break their warriors.

So, she turned the desert against them.

Legends say she called upon the very essence of Inferna, using the power of the sun and sand to weave an unbreakable curse. The Mak King's warriors were stripped of their intelligence and purpose—their minds shattered. The augmentation that once made them powerful now twisted them into something grotesque. Their bodies withered, their flesh rotted, and their once-proud armor fused to their warped skin.

Without the will of their masters to guide them, they became feral.

The once-great warriors became what you know as the *Feralkind*. These mindless beasts roam the wastelands in endless hunger, attacking anything that moves. They lost their voices, strategy, and ability to think as soldiers. All that remains is instinct—the desperate need to kill, to consume, to destroy.

Some still bear the remnants of their past lives—tattooed runes burned into their flesh, armor plates fused to their spines, rusted weapons permanently lodged in their hands. But whatever they once were is gone.

The Khari believe that the Feralkind is the last reminder of the Mad King's sins, a warning of what happens when men push too far and

try to become more than human. They whisper that the Feralkind will rise again one day—not as mindless beasts but as something worse.

And now, with the Syndicate tampering with genetic experiments and creating their own war-beasts, the Khari fear that history is repeating itself—that the Mad King's army was never truly destroyed—only waiting.

Waiting for the Sunscorched to rise again.

Waiting for the cycle to begin anew."

The Rider and Ashari exchanged a glance.

"You cannot change fate," the Rider said carefully.

I scowled. "What does that mean?"

Rahim stepped forward, arms crossed. "It means Inferna is past saving."

I shook my head. No. That couldn't be true.

Ashari studied me for a long moment. "The new prophecy," she finally said.

I frowned. "A prophecy?"

The Rider reached for another scroll, far older than the rest. The edges were crumbling, the ink barely legible.

In the time of fire and ruin, when the sands cry for vengeance, the Sunscorched will rise.

Born beneath a false sky, he will walk the lands between the buried cities, command the beasts of the deep, and bring balance where none remains.

He will hold the power of the lost kings and the fury of the burning star. He alone will choose the fate of Inferna.

My blood ran cold.

I stepped back, shaking my head. "You think this is about me?"

Rahim scoffed. "You rode the Wraith. You controlled the sands. You survived the drink of death. What more proof do you need?"

Ashari's expression was unreadable. "The Sunscorched is meant to save Inferna—or destroy it. The choice has always been his to make."

My stomach twisted. "I'm not a god."

"No, not a god," the Rider agreed. "You are Inferna's last hope."

"What happened to Luna?"

The room fell into silence.

The weight of their belief settled onto my shoulders like an unbearable force.

"With sacrifice comes peace," Ashari answered. "Her body was never recovered, but her sacrifice healed Inferna. Until now."

I clenched my fists. I wasn't ready for this.

But it didn't matter.

Because Inferna was dying—and if I didn't stop Tiber, if I didn't take the throne and end this war, there would be nothing left to save.

I exhaled slowly.

I had to be ready.

"History has a way of repeating itself," she said.

"Then let's begin," I said.

Ashari smiled faintly. "Then go, Sunscorched. Fulfill your destiny."



An ocean of shifting dunes and cracked earth became alive beneath me, the wind carving ripples into the sand like the surface of a restless sea. I rode alone, my Sand Wraith moving beneath me with serpentine

grace, weaving effortlessly through the shifting landscape. The sun hung high, a merciless inferno in the sky, yet it no longer burned me as it once had.

Perhaps it never had.

The Sunscorched. That was what they called me. A name, a title, a prophecy. But its weight settled heavily on my shoulders as I rode, the Khari's words still echoing in my mind.

I had believed that the Syndicate was the beginning of Inferna's suffering for years. That it had been their greed, their relentless hunger for power, that had turned this world into a wasteland. And yet, in the halls of the Khari, surrounded by relics of the old world, I had seen the truth:

Inferna had been dying long before the Syndicate ever existed.

Before the Domes, before the Veiled, before the Raiders, before the exiles who had tried to carve out a place among the ruins—there had been the Mad King. An ancient army that ruled with an iron grip, forging soldiers in the fires of genetic augmentation, turning men into monsters, their bodies enhanced beyond recognition, their minds sharpened into blades of war.

And they would have taken everything.

Would have crushed whatever resistance remained beneath their boot.

If not for the First Sunscorched.

Luna.

A girl born not to rule but to save. A leader not by blood but by fire. She had not fought the Hollowborn in the way a soldier would. She hadn't met them on open ground, blade to blade.

No—she had fought them with Inferna itself.

She had turned the sands into her weapon, commanding the Wraiths and bending the desert to her will. With that power, she had broken the Mad King and twisted his great warriors into mindless husks—monsters without purpose.

And now, thousands of years later, those husks remained. The Feralkind.

All this time, I had thought of them as nothing more than creatures of the wasteland. Rabid, senseless, dangerous—but nothing more than failed Syndicate experiments or some byproduct of a broken world. But the truth was far worse.

They had been men once.

Warriors. Soldiers.

Now, they were just a remnant of a war long forgotten, a curse lingering across the sands. It is a warning of what happens when people try to push beyond the limits of what they were meant to be.

And yet, the Syndicate was doing it again.

They were repeating history, playing with the same dangerous ideas, ambitions, and madness that had led the Mad King to ruin.

Had Tiber even known? Had my father known?

Every king knows *The Sunscorched Prophecy*.

Those had been his last words to me. His final breath.

Had he known this war was never about the Veiled or the Syndicate? Had he known that Inferna itself was on the verge of collapse, that history was spiraling toward the same bloody conclusion as before?

And if he had...

Why hadn't he done anything to stop it?

I clenched the reins of my Wraith, gripping them tight. The beast responded instantly, sensing my frustration. Its body moved faster, diving into the sand and surging forward with powerful strides beneath the surface.

If this was the truth... if this was the war I had been born into... then nothing I had done until now had mattered.

Burning Verdanix wasn't enough.

Escaping the Black Pit wasn't enough.

Learning to command the Wraiths wasn't enough.

If Inferna was dying, then taking the throne wouldn't fix it.

But maybe... maybe I had never been meant to be a king.

Maybe that was the lie.

Maybe I was never meant to rule Inferna.

Maybe I was meant to save it.

The realization settled in my chest like burning coals. The thought had been creeping at the edges of my mind ever since I drank from the Eternals, ever since the Khari had kneeled before me, their voices ringing in unison:

You are the Sunscorched.

I had wanted to reject it. I had wanted to be angry, to push back, to tell them that I was just a boy—just Kael Solaryn, the exiled bastard prince who had barely survived the Barrens, who had lost everything and everyone.

But I wasn't just Kael anymore.

I wasn't just a prince.

I had felt it.

When I rode the Wraith. When I commanded the sand.

Something inside me had woken up, something that had been waiting for this moment, waiting for the right time to take its first breath.

And it terrified me.

Because I didn't know if I was strong enough to control it.

The wind howled as I crested another dune, the Barrens stretching before me, endless and vast, filled with shadows of things past and future.

The others would be waiting for me.

Nia. Sienna. Aria. Jax. Ronan. Corvin.

They had all gone to rally their own people, to bring together whatever survivors they could find.

And I was heading straight for the capital. Alone.

Tiber thought he had already won.

He thought he had wiped out the Veiled and that he had crushed the rebellion. That he had broken me.

But he had made one fatal mistake.

He had let me live.

And now, I was coming for him.

For the Syndicate.

For Inferna itself.

I pressed forward, urging my Wraith to move faster, the wind screaming around me, the sands parting like waves in my wake.

The sun burned hotter, the sky stretching endlessly above me.

For the first time, I didn't feel the heat as pain; I felt it as peace—a peaceful feeling that fueled me.

Because I wasn't running anymore.

I was rising.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE GATHERING STORM

The Dome of Solaris Prime loomed ahead, a silver monolith rising from the Barrens like a god watching over a dying world. It was more than just a city—the Syndicate’s beating heart, the final stronghold of those who had shaped Inferna into what it was.

But it wasn’t invincible.

The sky above shimmered with heat, casting waves of distortion over the fortified walls. The towers glowed beneath the artificial clouds, their massive turbines pumping filtered air into the Syndicate’s world. At the same time, the rest of us choked on dust and sand.

For years, this place had been untouchable. Unreachable.

But not anymore.

I dismounted from my Wraith at the top of a dune and watched as it disappeared back into the sand. The wind howled, kicking up dust, but I wasn’t afraid.

They would come.

They had to.

Then—movement.

A single figure emerged over the ridge, followed by a slow, steady march of others.

I exhaled sharply as Jax led a small but hardened force of Veiled survivors toward me. Battle-worn, dust-covered, but alive, their eyes burned with a vengeance, and their steps were unwavering.

Jax grinned when he saw me. “Still in one piece, huh?”

I smirked, my throat dry. “You sound surprised.”

“I am.” He pulled off his sand-covered scarf, revealing a cocky smirk beneath. “Figured I’d be giving you a proper burial by now.”

I rolled my eyes but didn’t argue. Weeks ago, he might have been right.

Then, my gaze shifted—because she was here, too.

Aria.

She stood a few feet behind Jax, her green eyes unreadable. Her face was smudged with dust, her hair tied back in a loose braid, but her posture was rigid—strong but wary.

She had come, but she hadn’t forgiven me yet.

And I couldn’t blame her.

Jax followed my gaze, his smirk faltering just slightly. “She’s here because she wants to be,” he muttered under his breath. “Just... don’t screw it up.”

I nodded once, unable to say anything else.

More figures approached, and soon, another group emerged from the dunes.

Nia and Sienna.

They moved like shadows, flanked by a handful of Veiled elders—survivors of the massacre. Some were too old to fight, but they

had something just as valuable: loyalty to their people and respect for Inferna.

Sienna ran up and hugged me. “Took you long enough.”

I smirked. “Good to see you, too.”

She exhaled, crossing her arms. “We lost too much already, Kael. We can’t afford to lose this.”

I nodded. “We won’t.”

Then—more.

A third force rose from the dunes, its figures lined with makeshift armor and its weapons slung over its backs.

Ronan and Corvin.

And behind them—Red Hollow’s survivors.

Rough. Scarred. Fighters who had spent their whole lives running, hiding, waiting for a moment to strike back.

Now, that moment had come.

Corvin slid off his speeder, shaking his head as he took in the sheer size of Solaris Prime. “This might be the dumbest thing we’ve ever done.”

Ronan smirked. “That’s what makes it fun.”

I huffed a laugh, shaking my head. It was madness. But it was the only way.

Then—one last group.

They came from the deepest dunes, their cloaks blending seamlessly with the sand. Their movements were quiet and controlled.

And at their head...

Kieran Orven.

And the Exiles.

But Kieran had brought more than just warriors. He had brought knowledge.

As he reached me, he pulled a small, rusted device from his belt and tossed it to me. I caught it, frowning.

“What is this?”

Kieran smirked. “Your way in.”

I turned it over, and the holographic map flickered to life, displaying the entire layout of Solaris Prime: entrances, tunnels, and weaknesses.

I looked back at him in disbelief. “Where did you—?”

“You’re not the only one with secrets, Kael.”

I clenched my jaw, staring at the glowing pathways of the city. We had our people, and we had our entrance.

Now, we just had to win.

I turned back to the group, taking in the faces of those who had followed me here. They were waiting. For orders. For direction.

For me.

Jax exhaled loudly. “So... did you find them?”

I glanced at him. “Find who?”

He gave me a look. “Your mysterious sand dream.”

I hesitated for a fraction of a second.

Then nodded.

“Yeah.”

Silence stretched between us as they waited for me to explain. I didn’t.

Not yet.

Aria, for the first time, spoke. “And?”

I exhaled. “And now we have more than just an army.”

I let the words settle. They didn't need the details. Not yet.

Jax grumbled. "You're really going to be cryptic about this, aren't you?"

I smirked slightly. "You'll see."

Kieran motioned toward the capital. "We don't have much time. The moment Tiber gets word that we're out here, he'll shut every exit."

I nodded. "Then we move fast."

I turned to the others. "This isn't just about taking the city. We're not here to burn Solaris Prime. We're here to take back Inferna."

I pointed at the Dome. "The Syndicate wants us to be savages. They want to call us rebels, outsiders, monsters. They want to control the story."

I met their gazes one by one. "We show them the truth."

Aria crossed her arms. "And how do we do that?"

I clenched my fist around the holographic map. "We cut Tiber off at the knees."

Nia raised a brow. "Meaning?"

I inhaled deeply. "We take the Dome without destroying it."

Silence.

Jax blinked. "I'm sorry. What?"

"We make the people see. We cut off Tiber's control without turning this into a massacre. If we want Inferna to survive, we must change the story."

I turned back to the glowing Dome in the distance.

Tiber thought he had already won.

He thought he had crushed us.

He thought Inferna belonged to him.

But he had made one fatal mistake.

He had let me live.

And now, I was here to take back everything.

The wind howled across the dunes, carrying the scent of scorched sand and the distant hum of Solaris Prime's towering machines. A false city built on the suffering of everyone standing before me.

They had come from the farthest reaches of Inferna. Survivors. Fighters. Outcasts.

The Veiled, who had once hidden in the shadows, now stood with their heads held high. Their numbers were smaller than before, but their spirits were unbroken. They had lost their home and their leaders—but not their will.

The Exiles, men and women cast from the Domes for refusing to kneel to the Syndicate's rule watched with guarded expressions. They had survived in the wild, in the ruins of the old world, making something out of nothing.

The Red Hollow survivors, hardened warriors who had evaded the Syndicate's grasp for years, stood with Corvin and Ronan, their faces lined with vengeance. They had been hunted, slaughtered, and erased from history—yet here they were.

And then—Kieran Orven and the people of the Village of Exiles. Once forgotten, once discarded, they had built their own strength in the Barrens, scavenging from the ruins of the past to build their future. And now, that future would be decided here.

I stood before them all, my heart pounding, the weight of a thousand histories pressing down my shoulders.

This wasn't about me. This wasn't about vengeance.

This was about Inferna itself.

I stepped forward onto the rise of the dune, raising my voice so that all could hear me.

"We have all been told the same lie that the Syndicate is the future. That the Haven Network is the only way to survive. All of us are nothing more than the waste left behind after they built their perfect world."

I turned, scanning the faces before me, absorbing the scars, hardened gazes, and quiet pain that had shaped them all.

"Look around you. How many of us were forced into exile? How many were told that we didn't belong? How many watched our families starve because the Domes hoarded food and water for themselves? How many of our people have been burned, buried, experimented on—forgotten?"

Silence.

And then—rage.

Not shouted, not spoken, but felt.

A shifting tension, a silent agreement.

I gritted my teeth, my fists clenching.

"My father—King Alric Solaryn—tried to change this. He tried to save our planet. He knew the truth that the Syndicate had spent generations hiding. Inferna isn't dying from the sun. It's dying because of them.

Tiber. Queen Lyra. Every Lord and Lady sits behind those walls, pretending that they hold the keys to survival.

They lie.

They send their armies to slaughter us. They unleash our experiment on friends and family as super mutants to devour us. They let us

fight over their scraps while they sit safely in their artificial paradises, watching. Laughing.

But we are not their discarded people.

We are Inferna.

And we are done watching our world, which he shares, be destroyed. We must do better than our ancestors. We must save Inferna."

I took a breath, my hands shaking—but not from fear.

From power.

"Today is not about destruction. We will not burn Solaris Prime to the ground. We will not reduce this city to dust. That is not our way. What we did to VerdaniX was not the way to go. I was wrong, but I know the truth now.

Today is about taking back what was stolen.

We will show the people inside those walls the truth.

We will show them that Tiber is not their savior—he is their executioner.

That the Syndicate is not the future—we are.

And we will fight, not for revenge, death, or life.

Inferna can be saved. It can be healed. It can be more than this. But it needs all of us."

I let the words sink in, my chest rising and falling with every breath.

Then, I lifted my hand.

A slow rumbling sound shook the dunes beneath our feet.

The sand began to shift.

Whispers rippled through the crowd as the ground trembled, and then—

The Sand Wraiths rose.

From beneath the dunes, the Khari emerged.

Their massive Wraiths erupted from the earth, towering above the gathered forces. Their scaled bodies twisted through the sand like living shadows, and their amber eyes gleamed in the firelight.

Gasps, startled shouts, awe.

The Khari Riders stood among them, cloaked in flowing robes of desert gold, their armor etched with the markings of their ancient ways. The lead Rider—Ashari—sat upon her beast with effortless grace, her dark eyes unreadable as she surveyed the gathered armies.

Sienna's hand moved to her knife. "Kael... what is this?"

I turned, meeting their stunned gazes.

"There is more to Inferna than you know."

They stepped back as the Wraiths circled, their massive forms shifting the sand beneath them.

The Veiled warriors whispered amongst themselves.

The Exiles stared, their hands gripping their weapons.

The Red Hollow survivors froze.

Fear.

But also wonder.

"They are not our enemies," I assured them. "They are Inferna's first defenders. They were here before the Syndicate, the Veiled, and the Raiders. And now, they stand with us."

Rahim narrowed his eyes at the crowd. "Are these the warriors you would follow into battle? Those who would have killed you in the Barrens? Those who abandoned their own war long ago?"

I turned back to them, my voice steady.

"We all carry the scars of the past, Rahim. We all made mistakes. But today—we fight together."

I looked out over the gathering.

BRANDON ROHRBAUGH

"We are the forgotten. The cast out. The broken.

But we are not weak.

We are not done.

And we will not be erased."

I stepped forward, feeling the sun's heat above, feeling the sand shift beneath my boots like it was alive, breathing with me.

"Stand with me," I said. "Not as exiles. Not as rebels. Not as enemies.

Stand with me as Inferna's last hope.

Stand with me as the ones who will change our future.

Stand with me—as one."

For a moment, no one spoke.

No one moved.

Then—

Sienna dropped to one knee.

Her hand clenched into a fist over her heart.

Nia followed.

Then Corvin.

Then Ronan.

Then, one by one, the Veiled, the Exiles, the survivors of Red Hollow—

All of them.

They knelt.

Some looked at me as their King.

Some looked at me as their Leader.

Savior.

Friend.

Family.

Sunscorched.

But titles didn't matter anymore.

This wasn't just about me.

This was about all of us.

And as I looked out over the gathered warriors, the sand shifting, the Khari watching in silence, the Wraiths prowling through the dunes—

I knew.

This was the beginning.

Not of a war.

Not of a kingdom.

But of something greater.

A new Inferna.

And I would burn the Syndicate to the ground to see it reborn.

The ground trembled beneath our march. Thousands of feet pressed into the shifting sands, banners whipping in the wind, the sun casting long shadows over the golden dunes. The weight of what we were about to do pressed against my ribs like an iron chain.

This wasn't just another skirmish. This wasn't Verdania or Ignis Forge.

This was the end.

I rode at the front, my Sand Wraith shifting beneath me, its great body gliding just below the surface of the sand like a phantom. The Khari flanked our sides, their Wraiths keeping pace, their golden armor glinting beneath the sun. Behind us, the Veiled, the Exiles, the Red Hollow survivors, and the scattered remnants of Inferna's forgotten people marched in formation; their weapons clutched tightly in their hands.

Before us, Solaris Prime loomed.

It rose out of the dunes like a monolith, its steel walls stretching skyward, reflecting the harsh sunlight like a mirror. The Dome was closed—a cage for those inside, a fortress for those who ruled.

We stopped just a hundred yards from the gates.

The air felt thin, stretched, vibrating, anticipating what would come.

Then—a loud groan of metal.

The great gates of Solaris Prime swung open.

And the Syndicate marched forth.

Rows upon rows of black-armored enforcers poured from the city, their lines disciplined and precise. Shields locked together, rifles gleaming beneath the sun. They outnumbered us two to one.

At the front, flanked by his elite guards, stood Tiber.

His crimson cloak billowed in the hot wind, his expression unreadable.

Beside him, Varik, the Raider warlord, leaned on his staff of tubes and breathing masks, his grotesque features twisted into something close to amusement.

Tiber raised a speaker to his lips.

“Kael Solaryn.”

The sound of my name echoed across the desert, reverberating through the bones of every soul gathered.

“Thank you.”

His voice was smooth and polished. A king addressing his subjects.

“For so long, we have hunted the remnants of treasonous exiles, the parasites of Inferna who refuse to understand the truth of survival. And now—you have gathered them all in one place.”

He let the words sink in. The trap was set. He had been waiting for this.

He smiled. "You have made this so easy for us."

A murmur rippled through my forces. Doubt. Uncertainty.

I clenched my fists. I couldn't let them falter.

Tiber lifted a hand and motioned to his guards.

A figure was dragged forward, bound in chains, and forced to its knees.

I didn't recognize them at first.

The hood covered their faces, but something about how they knelt and slumped their shoulders sent ice slicing through my spine.

Tiber let the silence stretch, milking the moment before he leaned into the speaker again.

"This is your last chance, bastard."

He let the insult hit and waited for a reaction. I gave him nothing.

"Turn back now," he continued, voice dripping with mock generosity. "Take what's left of your people and run. If you do, I will not pursue you. I will let you live. I will let them live."

The hooded figure shifted slightly.

With a casual flick of his wrist, Tiber grinned and then ripped the hood away.

A sharp inhale shot through my teeth.

Captain Daris Orven.

His face was bloodied. His armor is broken. His once-proud gaze was now clouded with exhaustion and pain.

Behind me, a strangled sound.

Kieran.

He tried to push past me, his body trembling, his breath ragged.
“Daris—Daris!”

I grabbed his arm, holding him back.

Kieran struggled, his hands shaking violently. “Kael—we have to get him!”

Daris lifted his head.

Our eyes met.

For a second, I wasn’t in the Barrens. I was back in Solaris Prime, back in my father’s palace.

I saw the man who had shielded me from everything evil in that place. The man who had trained me when no one else would. One of the only people in the world who had ever looked at me and seen something worth saving.

Tiber saw my hesitation. He knew.

“Make your choice, Kael.”

I could feel every eye on me. Waiting. Watching.

Waiting for my command.

Waiting for me to save him.

I wanted to. Every fiber of my body wanted to.

But I knew.

If I turned away now—Inferna would never be free.

Kieran was shaking. “Kael—please!”

I stood still.

I didn’t react.

I didn’t move.

I just stared at Daris.

His expression didn’t change.

And then—he smiled.

It was small, barely there, but I saw it.
Our father-son bond was an unspoken one.
Then—
Tiber exhaled dramatically.
“Pity.”
A gunshot split the world in half.
Daris crumpled.
Kieran screamed.
I didn’t breathe.
I couldn’t.
Everything stopped.
Everything froze.
And then, before I could react—before I could do anything—
Tiber lifted a hand.
The Syndicate soldiers parted.
More cages were wheeled forward.
I barely had time to process before the metal doors swung open.
The Super Mutants burst free.
Massive, grotesque monstrosities, their veins glowing green with
Syndicate augmentation, their muscles pulsing unnaturally beneath
stretched skin.
They snarled and screamed, their distorted bodies twisting as they
charged.
Straight.
At.
Us.
The rebellion braced.
“STAND STRONG!” I roared.

BRANDON ROHRBAUGH

And then—

The battle began.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

A STORM OF BLOOD AND FIRE

The first Super Mutant reached us in seconds, its massive frame moving with terrifying speed. It was a hulking monstrosity, its body twisted with unnatural muscle and its skin a sickly mix of metal plating and pulsing green veins. Its eyes—once human—were now dark, empty voids.

It roared, the sound vibrating through my bones.

Then it struck.

The mutant swung its clawed arm, sending two Veiled warriors flying like broken dolls. They hit the sand, unmoving.

A second mutant tore through a group of Red Hollow fighters, ripping one apart with a single swipe of serrated fingers. The others barely had time to scream before it charged again.

Chaos erupted.

"HOLD THE LINE!" I bellowed, my voice barely cutting through the screams and gunfire.

Jax and Nia fought side by side, their weapons spitting fire and steel into the oncoming horde. Aria was a blur of motion, her twin blades slicing through Syndicate soldiers who rushed in behind the mutants.

The Khari riders emerged from the dunes, their Sand Wraiths bursting from below like shadows in the storm. The beasts released a piercing screech, their armored bodies slamming into the mutants with terrifying force.

Ashari rode at the front, her spear crackling with electricity as she drove it straight into the chest of a charging mutant.

The creature shrieked, its body convulsing before collapsing into the sand.

One down. Dozens more to go.

I gritted my teeth and turned to face the enormous mutant in front of me.

It was nearly ten feet tall, its back laced with cybernetic spines, each glowing with an eerie green light. It was more potent and faster than the others.

A failed experiment turned into a weapon.

And it was coming straight for me.

I barely had time to react before it lunged.

I rolled beneath its arm, the sand kicking up around me as it struck the ground where I had been standing just seconds before. The force of the impact cracked the earth beneath us.

The creature released a guttural snarl and turned, its glowing eyes locking onto mine.

It was intelligent.

I gripped my sword tighter. Good.

It would know what was coming.

The mutant lunged again, but this time, I was ready.

I dodged left, slicing my blade across its exposed ribs. Sparks hissed from the contact, but the wound barely slowed it down. It spun, backhanding me with enough force to send me skidding across the sand.

Pain exploded in my ribs.

I sucked in a breath, forcing myself to my feet.

The mutant roared in triumph, lifting a massive foot to crush me.

Then—

A blur of black and gold slammed into it.

Rahim.

His Sand Wraith tackled the mutant from the side, sending it staggering backward. He leaped from the saddle, his twin curved blades flashing in the sunlight as he struck—one blade sinking into the mutant's throat, the other into its spine.

The creature let out a strangled gurgle, its green-lit veins pulsing erratically before it collapsed into the dirt.

Rahim landed beside me, breathing hard.

"You're too slow, Sunscorched."

I huffed out a breath. "And you're reckless."

"Maybe," he smirked, "but I'm still alive."

A bloodcurdling howl split the air.

More Super Mutants swarmed toward us, their monstrous bodies shifting and twisting unnaturally.

And behind them—the Syndicate's main forces marched forward.

Sleek black-armored enforcers, rifles locked and ready, moving in perfect unison. A massive Syndicate tank rumbled into view, its cannons already turning toward our forces.

Tiber stood behind them, watching. Waiting.

He wasn't fighting. He was letting his monsters do the work.

I growled, gripping my sword tighter. Not today.

"JAX!" I roared.

Jax turned, his rifle slung over his shoulder. "Yeah, fearless leader?"

"Get rid of that tank!"

He flashed a wild grin. "Thought you'd never ask."

Jax turned, waving a signal toward the Khari. A group of their warriors peeled off, moving swiftly toward the battlefield's side flanks.

The tank fired—

A deafening BOOM split the sky.

Sand exploded, sending several Veiled warriors flying. The heat from the blast seared my skin.

More gunfire rained down on us from the Syndicate's higher vantage points.

We were outnumbered. We were outgunned.

But we had something they didn't.

I took a deep breath, pressing my hand to the sand.

And I called.

A deep rumble shuddered beneath us.

The sand shifted. Moved. Answered.

A dark shape burst from below, a Sand Wraith twice the size of the others. It uttered a deep, resonating cry, shaking the ground beneath us.

The Syndicate hesitated.

I climbed onto its back, gripping the reins, my heart pounding like a war drum.

"Now we fight."

I kicked forward, and the battle raged on.

The Sand Wraith beneath me lunged forward, its massive form slicing through the battle like a shadow of death. The Syndicate forces hesitated, their rigid formations crumbling in the face of something they did not understand—something they could not control.

I leaned forward, gripping the creature's thick reins and guiding it toward the Syndicate's first line of soldiers. The moment we hit them, the Wraith's jaws snapped shut, crushing an enforcer in his armor as if it were paper.

The rest broke.

Screams rose as the Syndicate soldiers tried to retreat, but the Khari descended upon them. Their Sand Wraiths burst from the dunes, leaping onto vehicles, tearing through soldiers, and ripping through their lines with terrifying precision.

Ashari led the charge, her spear glowing with electric energy as she hurled it forward, impaling one of the remaining Super Mutants. It convulsed, its cybernetic limbs twitching violently before collapsing to the ground.

"NO MERCY!" she bellowed.

The warriors behind her answered, driving forward with renewed fury.

The Syndicate's tanks fired again, but Jax and the Red Hollow survivors had already made their move. Explosions erupted along the dunes, sending flames and debris high into the sky.

Jax whooped, leaping down from his perch atop an old-world wreckage. "BOOM, BABY!"

One of the tanks erupted, flames shooting from its vents as it crashed into the sand, burning.

Another sputtered, its turret spinning wildly before a Veiled archer launched an explosive arrow, hitting it square in the cannon. It detonated, taking out a wave of enforcers behind it.

I pushed forward, cutting through another wave of soldiers. The Syndicate's lines were breaking, but they weren't falling back.

They were stalling.

And that's when I saw him.

Tiber.

Standing at the back of the battlefield, watching. Waiting.

His expression was calm, unreadable, and as if this wasn't even a fight—just another game of strategy.

And then he nodded.

The ground beneath us shook.

I barely had time to react before the dunes exploded.

Massive metal constructs rose from beneath the sand, and Syndicate technology was unlike anything we had ever seen.

Four-legged machines, plated in thick black armor, their bodies towering over the battlefield. Their eyes glowed an eerie blue, and long-barreled cannons protruded from their backs.

The Syndicate's final weapons.

Sand Striders.

A horrifying hybrid of machine and mutant, engineered for one purpose—to wipe out everything in their path.

One of them moved unnaturally fast, its massive legs crushing soldiers—Veiled and Syndicate alike—beneath its weight. It turned its weaponized gaze toward the Khari warriors, launching a pulse of energy that sent half a dozen Wraiths into the air, their riders screaming as they fell.

Another lunged forward, its massive claws snapping a Raider clean in half.

The battlefield turned to hell.

I didn't hesitate.

"TAKE THEM DOWN!" I roared, my voice carrying over the chaos.

The Khari charged, their Wraiths leaping onto the Striders, clawing at their armor, trying to rip them apart. But the machines were too strong, their limbs reinforced with syndicate-grade alloys.

Jax slid in beside me, panting. "Okay, WHAT THE HELL ARE THOSE?"

"Tiber's last play," I gritted out.

"Great," Jax muttered. "You got a plan, oh, fearless leader?"

I glanced at the battlefield, then back at him.

"Yeah. We bring them down."

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, brilliant. I never would've thought of that."

"Jax!" I snapped. "Focus."

He nodded quickly, reloading his weapon. "Okay, okay. You got an idea, or are we just winging this?"

I turned toward Rahim and the other Khari riders.

"We go for the joints. The legs. Bring them down piece by piece. We need to expose their pilots—if they even have any."

Rahim nodded. "I'll take my riders and strike first."

"Good."

Rahim spurred his Wraith forward, his warriors following close behind.

The Khari weaved between the Sand Striders, using their speed and agility to stay just ahead of their deadly attacks.

One Strider turned sharply, trying to crush them, but Rahim vaulted from his saddle, landing on the creature's back.

With a feral yell, he drove his blades into the exposed seams of the armor, cutting deep into the machine's inner workings.

Sparks erupted, and the Strider staggered.

Ashari followed, driving her electrified spear into the creature's chest, sending a jolt of energy through its systems.

It convulsed, shrieking in a half-mechanical, half-living sound before collapsing onto its knees.

One down.

But there were still three more.

I gritted my teeth.

We had to win this.

We had to end this.

I turned to my Wraith, feeling the pulse of the desert beneath me.

It was alive.

It was waiting.

I reached out.

And the sands obeyed.

The roar of war drowned out everything.

The screech of metal, the thunder of explosions, the desperate cries of the dying.

My grip tightened around my sword as my Sand Wraith surged forward beneath me, weaving through the carnage. The battlefield was a sea of fire and blood, with the Syndicate and rebellion locked in brutal combat. The striders loomed over us, their glowing blue eyes scanning for the next kill.

And then—

One of them struck.

The Syndicate Strider lunged forward, its razor-sharp claws slicing through the air like a death sentence.

It caught a Sand Wraith mid-leap.

The Khari warrior atop it barely had time to scream before the Strider's claws tore through the Wraith's side, ripping it open in one horrific movement. The beast howled, thrashing in agony as its lifeblood spilled onto the sand.

Its rider was thrown violently, landing with a sickening crack before the Strider's massive foot crushed him where he lay.

I felt the impact in my bones.

I bared my teeth, rage curling through me like wildfire.

"BRING IT DOWN!" I roared.

The Khari reacted instantly. Ashari flung herself onto the Strider's leg, plunging her twin daggers into the seams of its plating. Sparks erupted as she ripped at its wiring, severing the mechanical tendons that kept it upright.

Rahim vaulted off his Wraith, landing on the Strider's back, his blade slashing through exposed cables.

The machine let out a mechanical shriek, its legs buckling, its movements jerky and uncontrolled.

"NOW!"

Jax, still perched on the wreckage of an overturned transport, fired a rocket straight into its core.

The explosion rocked the battlefield.

The Strider collapsed, crashing into the sand in a heap of twisted metal and exposed flesh.

A victory.

But only for a moment.

Because then I heard it.

A sound that cut through the chaos like a death bell.

A howl.

Then another.

And another.

I turned, my stomach twisting.

No. No, no, no.

The horizon boiled with movement.

Figures rushed toward us, their forms misshapen and grotesque.

Hundreds of them.

The Feralkind.

The battlefield turned to madness.

They swarmed in like locusts, tearing into anything that moved—syndicate enforcers or rebel warriors. It didn't matter.

They were beyond reason, beyond loyalty, beyond control.

One of them leaped onto a Syndicate soldier, its clawed hands ripping through his armor like wet paper.

Another latched onto a Veiled warrior, tearing her throat out in a single savage bite.

A Raider screamed as he was dragged beneath the horde, disappearing beneath a pile of writhing, mutated flesh.

The Striders faltered, confused.

Even Tiber's forces hesitated, realizing they had no control over this.

"HOLD THE LINE!" I bellowed, slashing my sword through the nearest Feralkind. Its flesh split open, blackened blood spraying across my armor.

Jax stumbled back beside me, his gun shaking in his hands. "Okay, I did NOT sign up for this!"

Nia and Sienna fought back-to-back, barely keeping the Feralkind from overwhelming them.

Ronan had taken a blow to the ribs, blood running down his side, but he still drove his blade into one of the creatures, snarling through the pain.

Aria stayed beside me, firing every last arrow she had until she was out.

Corvin was nowhere in sight.

I whirled, searching for him.

"Corvin!" I called.

A blur of motion—

A Feralkind lunged at me.

I barely had time to react before its teeth clamped down on my shoulder, tearing through fabric and flesh.

Pain flared white-hot.

I roared, driving my blade upward, straight through the creature's jaw. It convulsed, gurgling before I kicked it off me.

More were coming.

I could barely tell who was fighting who anymore.

The rebellion. The Syndicate. The Feralkind.

Everything was breaking apart.

I could hear Tiber laughing, watching from the safety of the walls.

He had expected this.

He had planned this.

He had set us against each other, knowing the Feralkind would come.

I gritted my teeth, wrenching my sword free from another fallen enemy.

I had to end this.

Now.

I turned my gaze toward the fortress walls.

The capital stood untouched, protected behind its gates.

But not for long.

I wasn't done.

Not yet.

"Suns scorched," Rahim called out to me. "We'll hold them back. Finish this."

"FORM UP!" I shouted, riding forward, cutting a path through the chaos.

The battle wasn't over.

Not until Tiber was dead.

And I was going to make damn sure he knew it.

The battle was chaos, but through the storm of blood and fire, I had one goal.

Tiber.

He was still out there. Watching. Waiting.

And I was going to cut through anything in my way to get to him.

Jax, Nia, Aria, Ronan, Corvin, and Sienna moved with me, cutting through Syndicate enforcers and Feralkind alike. The lines between friend and foe had shattered, the battlefield now a lawless storm of death.

I blocked an incoming blade, spinning to drive my sword through a Syndicate soldier's ribs. The man gasped, blood spilling from his mouth as he collapsed.

I kept moving.

The Syndicate's outer defenses were breaking. The city loomed ahead, Solaris Prime's walls towering over the battlefield like a monument to oppression.

We were close.

Too close.

Because then, the earth trembled.

A deep roar split the battlefield apart.

And from behind the Syndicate lines, a massive shape emerged.

A war beast.

No.

Not just any war beast.

My steps faltered.

It moved differently than the others—more controlled, more precise. Its veins pulsed a sickly green, its flesh stretched and warped beyond recognition, but I knew.

I knew.

My mother.

My heart slammed against my ribs as I stared at the creature that had once been Erya.

Her arms were too long. Her claws curved like scythes. Her face was barely human anymore, twisted into something monstrous, but her eyes—

Her eyes were still there.

A flicker of recognition.

A moment.

I stepped forward, my throat dry, my sword heavy my hand.

She froze.

The battlefield blurred away.

Nothing else existed.

Just her.

Just me.

A ragged breath tore from my chest. "It's me. It's Kael."

She twitched, her massive frameshifting.

A low snarl rumbled from her throat.

Behind me, Jax hissed, "Kael, we need to go. Now."

But I couldn't move.

I couldn't breathe.

This was what they had done to her.

This was what the Syndicate had turned her into.

"You don't have to fight." My voice cracked. "Please. I know you're still in there. I know you can hear me."

For a moment—

For one agonizing second—

She hesitated.

Her clawed fingers curled.

A flicker.

A shred of something buried deep beneath the mutation, beneath the horror.

Then—

Tiber's voice rang out.

"End him."

Erya's body convulsed.

And then she lunged.

Faster than I could react.

Faster than I could stop her.

Her claws slashed toward my throat—
And I barely managed to raise my sword in time.
Steel clashed against bone.
And the war between us began.
Her claws slammed into my sword, nearly knocking me off my feet.
Sparks flew as steel met bone, the impact rattling through my entire
body.
I barely had time to react before she lashed out again.
I twisted, dodging by inches as her claws ripped through the air
where my head had been. The sheer power behind her strikes was
inhuman—because she wasn't human anymore.
She was a war beast. A weapon.
She was Syndicate's greatest experiment.
But she was also my mother.
"Erya! Stop!" Kieran's voice roared from somewhere in the chaos.
But she didn't stop.
Didn't hesitate.
Because Tiber had given the order.
And whatever was left of my mother was drowning beneath the
monster they had made her into.
She lunged again, her massive, mutated form moving too fast for
something her size. I barely managed to sidestep as she crashed into
the ground, sending sand and blood flying into the air.
She came at me again.
And this time, I wasn't fast enough.
Her claws raked across my chest.
White-hot pain exploded through me.

BRANDON ROHRBAUGH

I stumbled back, gasping, the world spinning as blood dripped onto the sand.

I looked down.

Four deep gashes tore through my armor, through my skin, searing pain burning into my ribs.

She had nearly gutted me.

I fell to one knee, my breath shuddering.

"Kael!" Aria's voice was sharp with panic.

But I didn't look away.

I couldn't.

Because she was still there, looming above me, chest heaving, eyes wild.

I forced myself to my feet, sword trembling in my grip.

"Mother," I whispered.

She froze.

Tiber's voice cut through the battlefield, sharp and cruel.

"Kill him."

Her body convulsed.

She let out a monstrous shriek.

And all hesitation vanished.

She lunged again.

This time, I didn't move fast enough.

Her claws slammed into my side, lifting me off the ground.

I felt something crack.

Then I hit the earth hard.

The impact knocked the breath from my lungs, my vision blurring from pain.

I heard shouting.

Swords clashing.

The battle raged around me, but all I could see was her—towering over me, her shadow swallowing everything.

She raised her claws.

She was going to end this.

End me.

I tried to move.

Tried to fight.

But I was too slow.

Too weak.

Then—

A blur of movement.

A figure slammed into her from the side, knocking her off course.

I heard snarling, struggling, and the crash of bodies colliding.

I blinked through the haze of pain, trying to focus.

And then—

I saw him.

Kieran.

He was standing between us, his blade raised, his chest heaving.

He had saved me.

"Erya," Kieran said, his voice low, careful. Begging. "I know you're still in there. I know you can hear me."

She staggered, claws flexing, body shuddering.

For one second—just one—her breath hitched.

Like she knew that name.

Like she knew him.

"Please," Kieran whispered. "Come back to us."

Her eyes flickered.

BRANDON ROHRBAUGH

Her hands trembled.

Then—

Her head snapped toward Tiber.

The dictator stood on the ridge above us, watching with bored amusement.

And then—

He pressed something in his hands.

A small device.

And whatever was left of my mother shattered.

She screamed.

A horrible, broken sound.

Then she turned back to me.

And this time—

There was nothing left.

No hesitation.

No mercy.

No mother.

Just a monster.

She charged.

And I knew—

There was only one way to stop this.

There was only one way to free her.

I clenched my bloodied sword.

And this time—

I ran straight at her.

I charged, sword raised, fury and sorrow warring in my chest. The wind howled around me, carrying the scent of blood and fire.

Erya—no, the thing they had turned her into—met me head-on, her massive form barreling toward me like a beast of war. Her claws gleamed, stained with my blood, and her twisted, monstrous frame moved unnaturally fast.

I barely had time to react.

She swiped at me, her claws ripping through the air, and I ducked just in time. The wind from the strike nearly knocked me off balance, the raw power behind it enough to crush bone.

I rolled, my body screaming in protest, and came up swinging.

"I'm sorry."

I drove the blade into her chest.

Deep.

Right through the scarred, pulsing core of her mutated body.

Her scream pierced the air, her entire frame seizing as if an electric shock had ripped through her.

Kieran fell from her grasp, hitting the sand with a grunt.

Erya staggered.

Her breath hitched.

And for the first time—her eyes cleared.

They met mine.

And I saw her.

My mother.

Her lips parted, and for the briefest moment, I thought she might speak.

Might tell me that she was sorry.

That she was proud.

That she loved me.

But nothing came.

She fell.

Hard.

The ground trembled beneath her weight as she collapsed, her massive form slumping into the sand.

I stumbled, the sword still buried in her chest, hands shaking violently.

She gasped, her monstrous body shuddering, and then—

Her breath stilled.

The battlefield went silent.

The fighting raged in the distance, but for this moment, everything else faded.

I dropped to my knees beside her, my heart hammering in my chest.

"Mother?"

She didn't move.

Didn't speak.

I sucked in a ragged breath, my vision blurring.

She was gone.

A choked sound left my throat.

I had lost her.

Not to time.

Not to fate.

But to Tiber.

To the monsters that had twisted her into something unrecognizable.

A shadow loomed over me.

I looked up.

Kieran stood there, his expression unreadable, his breathing ragged.

He didn't say anything.

But in his eyes, I saw the same rage, the same loss, the same pain
burning inside me.

Then, finally—

He reached down, gripping my arm, pulling me to my feet.

I clenched my fists, the grief twisting inside me, fueling me.

Tiber thought he had broken me.

That taking my father, my mother, Daris, and everything I had left
would end me.

But he had made a mistake.

He let me escape Solaris Prime.

I turned, looking back toward the battlefield, toward the man
standing on the ridge, still watching, smirking, believing he had al-
ready won.

He hadn't.

Not yet.

I wiped the blood from my blade.

And I started walking.

Straight toward Tiber.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

BENEATH THE BURNING VEIL

The battle was over, but the scars it left would never fade.

The air was thick with smoke, the scent of blood, fire, and decay hanging over the battlefield like a shroud. The once-proud walls of Solaris Prime stood tall behind us, untouched by war, but outside its gates... the world had changed.

Bodies littered the sands. Veiled warriors, Exiles, Hollow survivors, Khari riders, Raiders, and Syndicate enforcers alike lay among the wreckage, their lifeless forms a grim reminder of the cost we had paid. The once-glorious Sand Wraiths, creatures of legend, were now reduced to broken corpses, their massive bodies twisted and unmoving.

And yet, we had won.

The Syndicate forces broke. The survivors turned and ran, their once-unshakable order crumbling into chaos. They had fought for power, for control, for dominion over Inferna.

We had fought for something greater.

For freedom.

For life.

For the future.

I stood there, gripping my sword, my arms shaking from exhaustion. Every muscle in my body screamed in protest, my wounds burning, my mind fogged with fatigue. I had no idea how I was still standing.

But I kept moving.

One step after another.

Ahead of me, Tiber stumbled through the retreating soldiers, his once-proud form now bloodied and limping. His cloak was torn, his face twisted in pain. He turned to flee—

An arrow flew through the air, striking him in the leg.

Tiber let out a choked cry, falling to one knee.

I glanced back. Aria stood behind me, her bow still raised, her eyes burning with vengeance. Her breath was ragged, her body battered and bruised, but her aim was true.

Nearby, Varik attempted to retreat, clutching at the tubes connected to his life support, his chest rising and falling in labored, wheezing breaths.

He turned his cold, calculating eyes, locking onto me.

Then—

A knife spun through the air, embedding itself deep into his breathing tubes.

Varik staggered, clawing at the ruined device. His eyes bulged, his body convulsing as he gasped for air that would never come.

I saw Nia standing behind me, her arm still extended from the throw.

She watched Varik collapse, his body twitching violently before going still, his eyes frozen in shock.

"That was for Garren," she muttered, turning back toward me.

My breath hitched.

Slowly, we moved forward together—Jax, Nia, Sienna, Aria, Corvin, Ronan, Rahim, and Kieran—all of us bloodied and wounded, but none stopped.

The battle may have been over, but one last fight remained.

Tiber knelt before us, gasping through the pain, clutching his wounded leg.

He looked up as I approached, his face contorted in agony—but still filled with hatred.

I gripped my sword tightly.

Every memory flashed before me—

The night they took my father from me.

The moment I was thrown into exile.

The lies, the betrayals, the endless blood spilled in his name.

Everything had led me here.

I stood over him, staring into the eyes of the man who had taken everything from me.

"Why did you kill my father?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Tiber gritted his teeth, his bloodied fingers tightening around his wound.

"He was weak," he spat, his voice raw. "Too weak to do what needed to be done. The Haven Network needed to expand and evolve. He wanted to slow things down, to limit progress. He clung to foolish ideals—just like you."

I clenched my jaw.

"Did he tell you?" I asked.

Tiber's brows furrowed. "Know what?"

"About the Sunscorched prophecy."

Tiber blinked. Then, for the first time, he hesitated.

"No."

The others looked at me in confusion.

None of them had heard of it—not Jax, Nia, or even Aria. Only Rahim remained still, his expression grim.

"Kael," Kieran's voice broke through the silence, his fists trembling at his sides. "He killed Daris. Finish him."

Jax stepped forward, his knuckles bloodied. "End this, Kael."

Ronan, his breathing labored, nodded. "No second chances. Not for him."

Aria's green eyes burned with fury, her body tense with rage. "He murdered my father. He destroyed my home. Kill him."

Nia swallowed hard, her voice cold. "He turned your mother into a monster. He doesn't deserve mercy."

The voices swirled around me.

The rage, the pain, the vengeance that demanded justice.

And yet...

I stared at Tiber, the man who had spent his life crushing others under his heel, believing himself untouchable, unbreakable.

He looked so small now.

So fragile.

So... weak.

I took a step back.

"Death is too easy for you," I said.

The others froze.

Kieran's head snapped toward me, disbelief flashing in his eyes.

"What?"

I turned to face them, my voice steady.

"We will save Inferna," I said. "And he is going to watch."

Tiber's expression darkened, realization sinking in.

I continued, "He will watch from a cell while the world changes around him. He will watch the Syndicate crumble, watch Inferna heal, and rot knowing he failed."

Jax scoffed. "Kael, he doesn't deserve to live."

I met his gaze.

"I know," I said. "But I won't let him escape into death. Not after everything he's done."

Nia's jaw tightened.

Kieran's fists trembled at his sides, but he said nothing.

Aria's lips parted as if to argue, but then... she saw it.

The certainty in my eyes.

The absolute resolve.

She swallowed, then slowly lowered her bow.

One by one, the others followed.

I turned back to Tiber.

He glared at me, hatred burning in his eyes—but beneath it, I saw it.

Fear.

"Take him," I commanded.

Rahim and Kieran grabbed him, dragging him to his feet.

Tiber thrashed, but he was powerless now.

I stepped closer, leaning in, my voice low enough for only him to hear.

"You lose."

Tiber let out a choked, bitter laugh, but nothing was victorious.

"They'll come for you," he rasped. "Do you really think the Syndicate are the only ones out there? He continued to laugh uncontrollably as they carried him away.

The battle was over.

We had won.



The battlefield had fallen silent.

The last of the Syndicate forces knelt before me, their weapons discarded, their heads bowed in surrender. The golden emblem of the Haven Network, once worn with pride on their armor, was now stained with blood and defeat.

Kieran, his face still streaked with sweat and dirt, stepped forward. He looked across the scattered remains of what was once Inferna's most powerful army and then turned his gaze to the towering Dome of Solaris Prime, untouched by the war that had raged at its gates.

With a booming voice, he declared, "People of Solaris Prime! Your false king is defeated!"

A hush spread through the crowd of onlookers, the citizens of Solaris Prime who had watched the battle unfold from behind their pristine walls. They had remained silent, hidden, waiting to see who would be left standing.

Kieran turned to me, his voice carrying the weight of history. "The rightful heir to the throne stands before you. Kael Solaryn—son of Alric Solaryn—is your true king."

A murmur ran through the crowd. The people hesitated. Some of them, I knew, had been loyal to the Syndicate for years, bound to its power. But others... others had suffered under its rule. Others had lost everything.

Slowly—one by one—the civilians of Solaris Prime began to kneel.

I swallowed, feeling the weight of their trust settle on my shoulders. I hadn't fought for a throne. I hadn't fought for a crown. But they weren't kneeling for a ruler. They were kneeling for hope.

Jax clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Damn. Would you look at that? King Kael."

I shook my head. "Not a king."

Nia smirked. "Then what are you?"

I didn't answer because I wasn't sure yet.

We spread out, searching for survivors, killing any remaining Feralkind that still roamed through the wreckage, and cleaning up the devastation of the battle.

That's when I saw her.

A figure in dark robes, slipping through the chaos, head down, trying to disappear into the shifting crowd.

But I knew that posture. That walk. That deception.

My heart slammed against my ribs.

Queen Lyra.

She was escaping, along with her two sons, Tarin and Edric.

I stepped forward, my voice carrying across the broken streets. "Stop them."

Guards rushed forward, weapons drawn, cutting off their path. The queen froze, her head snapping up, eyes wide with fury.

Her sons tried to fight back—Tarin reached for a blade—but Roman struck him across the face with the hilt of his sword, sending him sprawling into the dirt.

Lyra lifted her chin, her eyes locking onto me with pure venom. "You've already won, Kael. Must you humiliate us further?"

I stepped closer, my voice cold. "Did you think I would just let you walk away?"

"You think you're better than me?" Lyra hissed. "Than us?"

I shook my head. "No. I think I still have work to do."

I looked to the remaining Veiled warriors. "Throw them in the cells next to Tiber."

Lyra scoffed but said nothing as her arms were bound in chains, her sons dragged alongside her.

They would watch, just as Tiber would.

They would see Inferna change—and know that they had failed to stop it.

As the dust began to settle, I felt eyes on me.

I turned.

Ashari stood a few feet away, her blue and gold robes shifting in the wind, her dark eyes unreadable.

She walked toward me, slow and purposeful.

"History has a way of repeating itself."

"Thank you for helping us."

"Of course," she said. "Perhaps one-day Inferna will call on its Sunscorched once more."

"The prophecy isn't fulfilled?"

I turned to ask her more—

But she was already gone.

The Khari warriors had disappeared, their Wraiths already sinking into the endless dunes, returning to the sands that had birthed them.

“What was that about?” Aria asked, approaching.

“I don’t know yet.”

Without warning, she grabbed me and kissed me for what felt like an eternity.

“We did it,” she said, letting go of my lips.

I smiled for the first time in so long.

“Get a room, you two,” Jax said.

“I’m so happy for us,” Nia added.

“We did it,” I agreed.



The Barrens stretched out before us, endless and scorched, yet quieter than they had ever been. No more war drums. No more screams. No more machines drilling into the heart of Inferna. Just wind, shifting sand, and the first hints of peace.

Two weeks had passed since the battle since we had done the impossible.

I sat on a boulder just outside of Solaris Prime, the once-pristine walls of the capital now smeared with smoke and ash from a war that had rewritten the future. The city, untouched during the battle, was no longer the same. The people inside had been forced to see the truth.

Aria, Jax, and Nia sat beside me, all staring at the horizon where the sun dipped low, bleeding its golden light across the dunes.

The weight of everything we had endured still clung to us. The scars, the memories, the losses. But for the first time, we weren't running.

We weren't surviving.

We were simply... here.

Jax exhaled slowly, running a hand through his dirty, sweat-matted hair. "So, this is what winning feels like?" he muttered. "Kinda thought there'd be more booze involved."

Nia rolled her eyes, stretching her leg carefully. She was still recovering from her wounds, but she wouldn't admit how much it hurt. "You had plenty of booze, Jax. I saw you nearly fall off a rooftop three nights ago."

Jax grinned. "Oh, right. That was fun."

Aria sat quietly, her arms wrapped around her knees, staring at the desert like she was waiting for it to shift, change, and reveal something she hadn't seen yet.

"Everything's different now," she murmured.

She wasn't wrong.

Solaris Prime had changed. The drilling had stopped. The experiments were over. Walls no longer separated the exiles and the civilians, and they were no longer fighting over scraps.

But it wasn't just the city that had changed. It was all of Inferna.

The Veiled, the Exiles, the Red Hollow rebels, and even the Raiders—those who remained—had banded together, knowing that for the first time, they had a real chance at something better.

I had made my choice.

I had declined the throne.

Instead, I had formed a council—leaders from every faction, including Kieran, Corvin, and a few remaining members of the old council who could be trusted. No single ruler would ever hold the fate of Inferna in their hands again.

Power was no longer a weapon. It was a responsibility.

We had done what we set out to do.

“So, what now?” Aria asked.

“No more adventures, please,” Jax begged.

“I don’t think I can take being shot at anymore,” Nia pleaded.

“We wait,” I said. “Until Inferna needs its band of misfits to save it again.”

I turned my gaze back to the Barrens, watching the horizon glow beneath the setting sun.

The desert stretched on forever.

I used to think it was empty.

I used to think I was alone.

But now, I knew better.

For the first time in my life, I had truly discovered where I belonged and what was *beneath the burning veil*.

About the Author

Brandon Rohrbaugh is a lifelong storyteller with a passion for creating vivid worlds, memorable characters, and heart-driven adventures. He has written and published dozens of books across genres, from imaginative children's stories to gripping young adult fantasy. His goal with every book is to spark wonder, stir emotion, and leave readers with characters they'll never forget.

When he's not writing, Brandon enjoys spending time with his wife and kids, exploring nature, sipping good coffee, and finding inspiration in everyday moments. He believes in the power of stories to change lives—and hopes his books do just that.

Thank you so much for reading! If you enjoyed this story, Brandon kindly asks that you consider leaving a review on the book's product page—it truly helps more than you know.

To learn more about Brandon's upcoming books, blog, and behind-the-scenes updates, visit **www.brandonrohrbaugh.com**.

Your support means the world. Thank you for being part of the journey.