

The background of the cover features a desolate, cracked, and dry landscape under a cloudy, overcast sky. On the left side, the Statue of Liberty stands on a small, raised platform, holding her torch aloft. The overall color palette is muted, consisting of greys, browns, and a pale yellowish-green from the statue.

ARENA

3

MORGAN RICE

BOOK #3 OF THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY

The Survival Trilogy

Морган Райс

Arena 3

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Райс М.

Arena 3 / М. Райс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
— (The Survival Trilogy)

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After nearly freezing to death on their trek north, Brooke and her small group wake to find themselves in civilization. They have found the utopian city, hidden deep in a remote stretch of Canada. They have heat, food, comfortable beds, clean clothes, and security. Finally, they have made it. As Brooke recovers, she meets the mysterious survivors who inhabit this city, and who vie for her love. She trains again, enhancing her fighting skills greatly under the wing of a new mentor, and matures into a woman. Brooke soon realizes, though, that being safe and secluded is not all there is to life. When she hears rumors of survivors underground, deep in America, fighting to restore order from the inside—her Dad possibly amongst them—Brooke finds herself facing the choice of a lifetime: to live in this perfect place, free and safe for the rest of her days, or to embark and fight for others' freedom. It would be a journey, she knows, back through post-apocalyptic America, this time traveling west, across its breadth, in search of the rumored survivors, of her father. She would have to fight her way through a land transformed by apocalypse, try to survive a never-ending stream of dangers, roving packs of violent gangs, with few resources and fewer supplies. It would be a two thousand mile trek to a certain suicide. And if she leaves this utopia, she knows, there is no coming back. Yet that is not the worst of it: something else lies in her way. Arena 3. The greatest arena left in what was once America, the most brutal and dangerous of them all, the one from which no one survives. The one, she knows, that would test the very limit of all that she is. Will she risk it all for others? An action-packed dystopian thriller featuring a tough female heroine whom readers worldwide have fallen in love with, ARENA THREE is the shocking conclusion to the bestselling Survival Trilogy, and one that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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Rice Morgan

Arena 3 (Book #3 in the Survival Trilogy)

Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); of the epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising six books; and of the new epic fantasy series OF CROWNS AND GLORY. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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"I will admit, before ARENA ONE, I had never read anything post-apocalyptic before. I never thought it would be something I would enjoy... Well, I was very pleasantly surprised at how addicting this book was. ARENA ONE was one of those books that you read late into the night until your eyes start to cross because you don't want to put it down... It is no secret that I love strong heroines in the books I read... Brooke was tough, strong, un-relentless, and while there is romance in the book, Brooke wasn't ruled by that... I would highly recommend ARENA ONE.”

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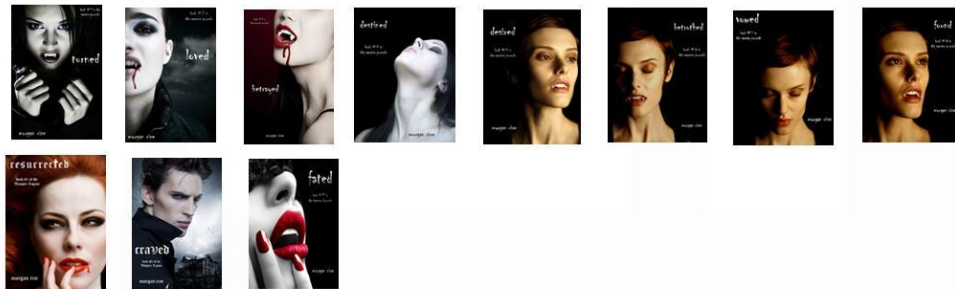
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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

I thrash against the struggling current, lungs bursting, desperate for air. I try to propel myself to the surface, kicking furiously, treading for sunlight. I don't know where I am or how I got here – but I know I can't breathe, and I can't last much longer.

With one last kick I finally manage to break the surface. I gasp, gulping the air, never having felt so dead – and so alive.

As I bob in a fast-moving river, I catch a glimpse of someone standing on the bank, looking down at me. Before a wave crashes over my head, I realize: my dad. He's alive.

And he's watching me.

His face is hard, though, too hard. No warmth is there – not that he was ever warm to begin with.

I push up to the surface again, fighting the power of the current.

“Dad!” I shout, fighting against the raging current. “Dad, help me!”

I'm overwhelmed with joy to see him, but there's no emotion on his face at all. Finally, he locks his jaw.

“You can do better than that, soldier,” he barks. “I want to see you fight!”

My heart constricts. I look around me, disoriented, and it's then that I see them: rows of spectators behind him. Biovictims with melted, tumorous faces. They are braying for blood.

I recoil in horror as the crowd begins to chant.

“Fight! Fight! Fight!”

I suddenly realize: I'm in another arena, its floor made up of water. It's as if I'm in a giant fish bowl, with all the spectators high up on bleachers, all chanting for my death.

My fighting instinct kicks in and I tread with all I have, trying to stay above the surface. I scream soundlessly, no noise coming from my mouth at all.

I suddenly feel an icy hand on my ankle beneath the surface, trying to drag me down.

I look down and am stunned to see, beneath the clear waters, a face I'd never thought I'd see again.

Logan.

He's alive. How can it be?

He holds onto my ankle with a viselike grip. His eyes are locked onto mine, boring into me as he pulls me deeper into the water, down into the depths.

“Fight!” my dad screams.

The crowd joins in, and as I am dragged down, I can hear their chants beneath the water, like a tribal drum pounding in my skull.

Panicking, I kick and writhe, trying to get away from the nightmare that is unfolding before my eyes. The water makes everything seem to move in slow motion, and I look down at Logan, his hand latched to my ankle and his sorrowful gaze still fixed on me. He looks at me forlornly, as though realizing that to hold onto me would be to kill me.

“I love you,” he says, his voice etched with pain.

Then he lets go, drifting away, and quickly disappears into the black depths.

I scream so loud it wakes me up. I sit bolt upright, my heart thudding so fast in my chest it feels like it could burst. I'm trembling all over. I touch my body all over as though checking that it's real. My skin is clammy to the touch, and I'm drenched in a cold sweat.

Reeling from the horror of the dream, I wait a long while for my heartbeat to slow. It's only then that I realize I have no idea where I am. I listen, immediately on guard, trying desperately to remember, and hear a soft beeping noise in the background. I smell the stench of antiseptic in the air.

I look around me and discover that I'm in some kind of hospital. Dawn is breaking, casting a pale red light on the clean walls, and as I look around I see I am lying in a bed, a blanket over me and a pillow beneath my head. I feel a tug on my arm and look down to see an IV, while a machine to my left beeps in time to my heartbeat.

The entire scene seems unbelievable, a place so quiet, so clean, so civilized. I feel as if I've gone back in time to the world before the war. I can't help but think I'm having another dream, and half expect it to turn into another soul-crushing nightmare.

Cautiously, I get out of bed, surprised to find my legs sturdy beneath me. I rub the puncture wound on my leg, from the snake bite I got in Arena 1, now mostly healed. So this is real.

The IV is attached to a metal stand with wheels. I hold on to it and pull it toward the window with me. I open the blinds, and as they inch up, I take in the sight and gasp.

There, sprawled out before me, lies a perfectly preserved town. It looks impossibly pristine, untouched by the war. All the buildings are intact, their clean windows shining. There are no bombed out buildings, no rusting, abandoned hulls of cars.

Then my heart quickens as I see that there are people milling about, leaving buildings that look like homes, heading down paved streets toward fields and farmyards. They look carefree, clean, well fed, well dressed. I even see one smile.

I blink several times, wondering if I am dreaming.

I am not.

A rush of hope hits me as I think of the rumored town in Canada, the one Charlie and Logan both believed existed. Have we made it here?

It's then that I think of the others. I realize I am completely alone in this hospital room. I spin around and of course see no sign of Charlie or Ben, no sign of Bree.

Fear takes hold of me. I rush to the door and find it locked. Panicking, I wonder if I'm a prisoner. Whoever put me here decided to lock me in, which doesn't bode well.

Just as I'm rattling the handle and pounding frantically against the door, it swings open, and I stagger back as a small group of people enter.

They wear strange uniforms, and there's something militaristic about the way they move as they swarm into my room with a brutal sort of efficiency.

"General Reece," a woman says, introducing herself as she raises her hand up in a salute. I notice her Canadian accent. "And you are?" she demands.

"Brooke," I say. "Brooke Moore ____." My voice sounds startled and breathless, weaker than I would have liked.

"Brooke," she repeats, nodding.

I stand there, stunned, not knowing what is going on.

"Where am I?" I say.

"Fort Noix," she replies. "Quebec."

I can hardly breathe. It's true. We really made it.

"How?" I stammer. "How do you exist?"

General Reece looks at me expressionlessly.

"We are defectors from the American and Canadian armies. We left before the war, because none of us wanted to be a part of it."

I can't help but think bitterly of my dad, of the way he volunteered to join the war before he was even called. Maybe if he'd been idealistic like General Reece and the other soldiers here we'd never have gone through everything we did. Maybe we'd all still be a family.

“We’ve created a safe society here,” she continued. “We have farms to grow food, reservoirs for water.”

I can’t believe it. I sit back on my bed, overwhelmed, feeling relief wash over me. I’d given up all hope of ever being safe, of ever living a life again where I wouldn’t need to fight.

But she isn’t about to give me time to bask in the moment.

“We have some questions for you, Brooke,” she says. “It’s important that we know where you heard about us and how you found us. Staying out of sight is paramount to our survival. Do you understand?”

I take a deep breath. Where do I even begin?

I recount my story for the General and her troops, beginning with the Catskills, the house Bree and I shared on the mountains, before going into the trauma of the slaverunners. I tell her about escaping Arena 1, about rescuing the girls who’d been taken to become sex slaves. She watches me with a grim expression as my story unfolds, our capture and ordeal in Arena 2. The only thing I leave out is Logan. It’s too painful to even say his name.

“Where are my friends?” I demand when I’m finished. “My sister? Are they okay?”

She nods.

“They’re all fine. All recovering. We had to speak to each of you in turn, separately. I hope you understand why.”

I nod. I do. They had to make sure our stories corroborated, that we’re genuine and not slaverunner spies. Suspicion is the only thing that keeps you alive.

“Can I see them?” I ask.

She puts her hands behind her back, a position I remember my dad adopting all the time. It was called “at ease” even though it doesn’t look remotely relaxed.

“You can,” she says in her clipped, emotionless voice. “But before I take you to them I need you to pledge to never speak about what you see here to anyone. Absolute secrecy is the only way Fort Noix can survive.”

I nod.

“I will,” I say.

“Good,” she replies. “I must say I admire your bravery. Everything you’ve been through. Your survival instinct.”

I can’t help but feel a swell of pride. Even though my dad will never be able to see me and tell me he is proud of my achievements, hearing this from the General feels almost as good.

“So I’m not a prisoner?” I say.

The General shakes her head and opens the door for me. “You’re free to go.”

In my thin hospital gown, I begin to take small steps down the corridor. General Reece and her soldiers escort me, one wheeling the IV on my behalf.

Just a few rooms down, the corridor opens up into a small dormitory. The first person I see is Charlie, cross-legged upon a bed reading a book. He looks up, and the second he realizes, his eyes fill with relief.

“Brooke,” he says, discarding his book, standing from the bed and coming toward me.

Movement from the other side of the dormitory catches my eye. Ben emerges into the brightening dawn light. Tears glitter in his eyes. Beside him, I see the small figure of Bree, with Penelope, her one-eyed Chihuahua, in her arms.

Bree begins sobbing with joy.

I can’t help myself. Tears spring into my eyes at the sight of them all.

The four of us fall into an embrace. We made it. We really made it. After everything we’ve been through, it’s finally all over.

As I cling to Charlie, Bree, and Ben, I let my tears consume me, shedding them cathartically, realizing this is the first time I've cried since the war began. We've all got a lot of healing to do. For the first time, I think we're going to get the chance to mourn.

Because we may have made it, but the others didn't. Rose. Flo. Logan. Our tears aren't just from relief, but grief. Grief and guilt.

I realize then that the horrible nightmare I had last night is just the beginning. All of us have tortured, traumatized minds; all of us have endured more than anyone should ever have to. In some ways, our journey hasn't ended.

It's only just begun.

CHAPTER TWO

Our embrace is interrupted by a gentle tap on my shoulder, and I pull back from the others and turn to look behind me. General Reece is standing there stiffly. Her expression reveals to me that our outpouring of emotion has made her feel awkward. My dad was the same – he was always teaching me not to cry, to hold everything in.

“Now you’re all back together,” she says, “I’ll need to escort you to the Commander. It’s up to him to make the final decision.”

“The final decision about what?” I ask, confused.

Emotionlessly, as though it’s the most obvious thing in the world, the General says: “To decide if you can stay.”

My stomach twists at her words, at the sudden realization that we might be forced back out. I’d been an idiot to assume our staying at Fort Noix was automatic. Of course we wouldn’t be accepted just like that.

Ben’s hand reaches for my arm and squeezes and I realize he must be thinking the same thing. Likewise, Bree grabs the fabric of my gown, twisting it anxiously into her fist, while Charlie stares at me with wide, terrified eyes. Penelope whines with anguish. None of us want to go back out there. None of us can leave this place now that we’ve seen it. Even the thought of it is too cruel.

A nurse, tending to someone on the far side of the dorm, looks over and scowls at General Reece.

“My patients are still weak,” she said, glancing at my IV line. “They need to be allowed to rest for a few days. Sending them back out there like this would be a death sentence.”

It would be a death sentence in any state, I think.

Almost as soon as she says it, I become immediately aware of all the aches and pains in my body. The adrenaline of finding myself alive and safe, of being reunited with my friends and sister, has been the only thing carrying me this far; being reminded of everything my body has gone through brings the pain flooding back.

“Then they will die,” General Reece replies firmly, matter-of-factly. “The decision lies with the Commander. I follow the Commander’s orders. You follow mine.”

The nurse looks away, immediately obedient, and the General, without another word, turns on her heel and marches out.

We all look at each other anxiously and then, prodded by the soldiers, we follow the General, flanked by her equally obedient soldiers.

It’s difficult to walk down the corridor. There are aches in muscles I never knew I had, and my bones seem to creak and grind as I walk. Sharp pains race through my neck and spine, making me wince. Moreover, I’m absolutely famished. Yet I don’t feel able to ask for food, worried that it may sway General Reece or the Commander, make them think that we’re demanding or spoiled. If we want to survive, we need to give off the best impression we possibly can.

Ben keeps glancing at me with a worried expression, and I can see his anxiety, his fear that we might be expelled from Fort Noix and left to fend for ourselves all over again. I share his fear. I’m not sure any of us would survive that again. It’s as if I’d been bracing myself all these years, steeling myself to survive this world, knowing that no other option existed. But now, seeing all this, seeing what is possible, the thought of going back to it is just too much.

We reach the end of the corridor, and as General Reece pushes open the two double doors, morning light floods in so bright I have to blink.

As my eyes adjust to the brightness, Fort Noix appears before me. It’s a fully functioning town, filled with people and buildings, military trucks, bustle, noise, and laughter. *Laughter*. I can’t even remember the last time I heard that. I can hardly believe my eyes.

It is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.
The General's voice breaks through my reverie.
"This way."

We're led along a sidewalk, past groups of kids around Charlie and Bree's age playing in the streets.

"We don't have many children at Fort Noix," the General tells us. "The ones that are here are educated until the age of fourteen. Then we sort them according to their abilities and assign them work."

Bree looks at the children with longing eyes: the prospect of four years of school is beyond tempting for her. Nestled in her arms, Penelope immediately reads the change in Bree's emotion and licks her face.

"What kind of work?" Charlie asks, curiously.

"All forms of labor are needed to keep this fort operational. We have farmers, fishermen, hunters, builders, tailors, and then we have more administrative duties, like assigning rations, taking registers, and the like. We have professionals, too: teachers, soldiers, doctors, and nurses."

As we're led through the town, I find myself more and more impressed by what I see. Fort Noix runs on solar power. All the buildings are only one story high, so as not to be visible from afar or attract any attention. Most of them have grass on their roofs – something the General explains is for both insulation and camouflage – and tree branches covering them.

As we stroll along, the sunlight grows warmer and brighter, and the General explains the history of the place. It seemed to come about through a combination of fate, chance, and a whole lot of luck. There were already a number of military bases peppered along the powerful Richelieu River. Due to its geographical location between New England and New France, the river had been a key pathway in the French and Iroquois Wars in the seventeenth century and, later, the French-English battles of the eighteenth century. Because of its rich military history, those who, like General Reece, opposed the brewing American civil war were drawn to it, and helped turn it into a safe zone for defectors.

The second bit of luck was that the river flowed from the distant Green Mountains bordering Vermont. When the war finally broke out in New York, the mountains sheltered the fort from the winds carrying nuclear radiation. While the rest of the population succumbed to the radiation and disease that resulted in the biovictims, the military personnel hiding out in Fort Noix were protected. At the same time, the good source of clean running water provided them with an abundance of fish, so that when supply routes were blockaded, bridges blown, and villages leveled, the people in the fort survived.

The wars that had raged around these parts had another unlikely outcome. Since most of the local towns were flattened, the surrounding forests had a chance to grow. Soon, a thick barrier of evergreens surrounded Fort Noix, reducing its chances of being found to virtually nil, while providing wood for fires and game for hunting.

Once the sound of bombs stopped and the fort's residents knew the war was over, they sent out scouts and quickly realized the human race had obliterated itself. After that, they cut themselves off completely and set to work expanding the fort into a town, and building civilization again from the ground up.

By the time General Reece has finished her story, I'm in awe of her. Her calm and military steeliness reminds me of my dad.

As we walk, I can't help but feel overwhelmed by every little detail. It's been so long since I've seen civilization. It's like stepping back in time. Better, even. It's like stepping into a dream come true. The people milling around me look healthy and well cared for. None of them have endured starvation. None of them have had to fight to the death. They're just normal people like the ones who used to populate the earth. The thought makes a lump form in my throat. Is it possible to start again?

I can tell the others are as overwhelmed as I am. Bree and Charlie stay close together, side by side, looking around with awe. They're both clearly excited and happy to be in Fort Noix, yet also anxious at the thought of it all potentially being taken away from us.

Ben, on the other hand, seems a little dazed. I can't blame him. To step out of our brutal world and into this one is beyond disorienting. He walks slowly, almost as though in a trance, and his eyes glance furtively from side to side, trying to take everything in. I realize as he walks that it's more than just being overwhelmed. It is like how my body could only reveal to me how exhausted it was once I was safe. Ben's mind, I'm sure, is revealing to him just how much he's been through: the death of his brother, fighting in the arena, every near-death experience. I can almost see that his mind is preoccupied with thoughts as he sifts through his memories. I have seen people suffer from post-traumatic stress, and his face bears the same look as they'd had. I can't help but hope that his appearance doesn't hamper our chances of being accepted here.

Soon, we're off the main street and walking down some smaller, winding roads that lead through the forests. This time, it's Charlie who starts hanging back, trudging a little way behind the rest of us. I drop my pace and draw up beside him.

"What's wrong?"

He looks at me with terrified eyes.

"What if this is a trap?" he says under his breath. "What if they're taking us to another arena?"

His question makes me wonder whether I'm being too trusting. I think back to the man who stole our supplies when we were on the run from the slaverunners. I'd trusted him and I'd been wrong. But this time it's different. There's no way Logan would have directed us toward danger.

I put my arm around Charlie's shoulder.

"We're safe now," I explain. "You don't have to be scared anymore."

But as we go, the canopy thickens above us, blocking out the daylight and making dark shadows crowd in around us. Something about walking this long, dark path reminds me of the arenas, of walking those corridors knowing that a horrible, painful death was all that awaited me. I can feel my heart begin to hammer in my chest.

The sky gets darker and darker as we go. Bree must notice something is wrong, because she snuggles into me.

"You're sweating," she says.

"I am?"

I touch my brow and find that I've broken out in a cold sweat.

"Are you okay?" Bree adds.

But her voice sounds strange, distorted, like it's coming from far, far away.

Suddenly, there's a hand on my arm, and I scream as I see Rose's black, wizened hand latching onto my arm. I lash out, pushing her away, scratching at her hand with my fingernails.

Then all at once the panic is gone. I come back to the present and realize that it wasn't Rose's hand on me at all. It was Ben's. He's cradling it against his chest, and deep scratches run along it. He looks at me with an expression of pure anguish while Penelope yap-yap-yaps her distress. The soldiers around us politely avert their gazes.

I look down at Bree and Charlie, my heart hammering.

"I'm sorry," I stammer. "I thought... I just..."

But my words disappear.

"Maybe we should take you back to the hospital," Ben suggests in a soft, persuasive voice.

"I'm fine," I say, sternly, frowning at their worried expressions. "I thought I saw something is all. It's no big deal. Come on."

I stroll ahead, leading the pack, trying to gain back some sense of myself. I'm not the sort of person who crumbles in the face of adversity and I'm not about to become the sort who is haunted by the past.

Yet as I continue to walk, I'm not so sure I can leave the past behind.

We turn a bend, and I see it: the short, squat building that must contain the Commander's office.
I brace myself, heart pounding, as we walk.

The outcome of this meeting, I know, will determine if we live or die.

CHAPTER THREE

The Commander's building is buzzing with life. Military personnel march quickly by, while others sit around conference tables looking at blueprints, discussing in loud, confident voices the benefits of building a new granary store or extending the wing of the hospital. It feels like a real unit, a team with a purpose, and it feels good.

And it makes me all the more nervous that we won't be allowed to stay.

As we pass along the corridors, I see a sprawling gymnasium, people training with weapons, firing bows and arrows, sparring and wrestling. There are even little kids being trained how to fight. The people of Fort Noix are clearly preparing themselves for any kind of eventuality.

Finally, we're led into the Commander's office. A charismatic man in his forties, he stands and greets us each cordially by name, clearly already having been briefed. Unlike the General, he doesn't have a Canadian accent; in fact, he surprises me with a strong South Carolina twang, which tells me he's one of the defectors from the American side of the opposition.

He turns to me last.

"And you must be Brooke Moore." He cups his hand around mine and shakes, and the warmth from his skin seeps into mine. "I must say I'm impressed by your experiences. General Reece has filled me in on all you've endured. I know it's been hard on you. We don't know much about the outside world. We keep to ourselves here. Slaverunners, arenas – that's a whole different world to what we're used to. What I've been told about you is really truly incredible. I'm humbled to meet you all."

Finally, he drops my hand.

"I'm amazed by what you've done here," I say to the Commander. "I've dreamt of a place like this ever since the war. But I never dared dream it was true."

Ben nods in agreement, while Bree and Charlie seem completely entranced by the Commander, both gazing at him with wide eyes.

"I understand," he says. "On some days it's hard for me to take in, too."

He takes a deep breath. Unlike General Reece, who is a bit on the bristly side, the Commander is warm and pleasant, which keeps me hopeful.

But now that the formalities are over, his tone changes, darkens. He gestures for us all to sit. We sit in our chairs, stiff-backed like kids in a principal's office. He looks us over as he speaks. I can feel that he's judging each of us, summing us up.

"I have a very serious decision to make," he begins. "Regarding whether you can stay at Fort Noix."

I nod solemnly as my hands twist in my lap.

"We've taken in outsiders before," he continues, "particularly children, but we don't do so as a matter of course. We've been tricked in the past by kids your age."

"We're not working for anyone," I say, quickly. "We're not spies or anything like that."

He looks at me skeptically.

"Then tell me about the boat."

It takes me a moment to understand, and then I realize: when we'd been rescued, we'd been traveling in a stolen slaverunner vessel. I realize that they must think we're part of some kind of organization.

"We stole it," I reply. "We used it to escape from Arena Two."

The Commander regards me with suspicious eyes, like he doesn't believe that we could have escaped from an arena.

"Did anyone follow you?" he asks. "If you escaped an arena and stole a boat from slaverunners, surely they'd be pursuing you?"

I think back to the time on the island in the Hudson, of the relentless game of cat and mouse we played with the slaverunners. But we'd managed to get away.

"There aren't," I say, confidently. "You have my word."

He frowns.

"I need more than your word, Brooke," the Commander contests. "The entire town would be in danger if someone had followed you."

"The only proof I have is that I've been lying asleep in a hospital bed for days and no one's come yet."

The Commander narrows his eyes, but my words seem to sink in. He folds his hands on top of the table.

"I'd like to know, in that case, why we should take you in. Why should we house you? Feed you?"

"Because it's the right thing to do," I say. "How else will we rebuild our civilization? At some point we need to start taking care of each other again."

My words seem to anger him.

"This is not a hotel," he snaps. "There are no free meals here. Everyone chips in. If we let you stay you'll be expected to work. Fort Noix is only for people who can contribute. Only for the tough. There is a graveyard out there filled with those who couldn't hack it here. No one here rests on their laurels. Fort Noix is not just about surviving – we are training an army of survivors."

I can feel my fighting instinct kick in. I pull my hands into fists and thump them on the table. "We *can* contribute. We're not just weak children looking for someone to take care of them. We've fought in arenas. We've killed men, animals, and monsters. We have rescued people, kids. We are good people. Strong people."

"People who are used to doing things their own way," he contests. "How can I expect you to alter to a life under military command? Rules keep us alive. Order is the only thing stopping us from perishing like the others. We have a hierarchy. A system. How will you hack being told what to do after so many years running wild?"

I take a deep breath.

"Our father was in the military," I say. "Bree and I know exactly what it's like."

He pauses, then eyes me with dark, beady eyes.

"Your father was in the military?"

"Yes," I reply sternly, a little out of breath from my outpouring of anger.

The Commander frowns, then shuffles some papers on his desk as though looking for something. I see that it's a list of our names. He taps mine over and over with his fingertip then looks up and frowns.

"Moore," he says, saying my surname. Then he lights up.

"He's not Laurence Moore?"

At the sound of my father's name, my heart seems to stop beating entirely.

"Yes," Bree and I cry at the same time.

"Do you know him?" I add, my voice sounding desperate and frantic.

He leans back and now looks at us with a whole new respect, as if meeting us for the first time.

"I know of him," he says, nodding with clear surprise.

Hearing his tone of respect as he talks about my father makes me feel a surge of pride. It's no surprise to me that people looked up to him.

I realize then that the Commander's mood is shifting. Coming face to face with the orphaned children of an old acquaintance must have stirred some kind of sympathy inside of him.

"You can all stay," he says.

I clasp Bree's hand with relief and let out the breath I'd been holding. Ben and Charlie audibly sigh their relief. But before we even have a chance to smile at one another, the Commander says something else, something that makes my heart clench.

"But the dog has to go."

Bree gasps.

"No!" she cries.

She wraps her arms more tightly around Penelope. Sensing she's become the subject of attention, the little Chihuahua wriggles in Bree's arms.

"No one stays at Fort Noix who cannot contribute," the Commander says. "That goes for animals as well. We have guard dogs, sheep dogs, and horses on the farms, but your little pet is useless to us. She absolutely cannot stay."

Bree dissolves into tears.

"Penelope isn't just a pet. She's the smartest animal in the world. She saved our life!"

I put my arm around Bree and pull her close into my side.

"Please," I say to the Commander, impassioned. "We're so grateful to you for letting us stay, but don't make us give up Penelope. We've already lost so much. Our home. Our parents. Our friends. Please don't make us give up our dog too."

Charlie looks at the Commander with concern in his eyes. He's trying to read the situation, to work out whether this is going to escalate into a fight like it always did back in the holding cells of Arena 2.

Finally, the Commander sighs.

"It can stay," he relents. "For now."

Bree turns her tear-stained eyes up to him. "She can?"

The Commander nods stiffly.

"Thank you," she whispers, gratefully.

Though the Commander's face remains emotionless, I can tell he's moved by our plight.

"Now," he says quickly, standing, "General Reece will assign you quarters and take you to them."

We all stand too. The Commander clamps a hand down on Bree's shoulder and begins steering her to the door. Then all at once we're shoved out into the corridor.

We stand there, shell-shocked, hardly comprehending what just happened.

"We got in," I state, blinking.

Ben nods, looking equally taken aback. "Yes. We did."

"This is home now?" Bree asks.

I squeeze her close into me. "It's home."

*

We follow General Reece outside past rows of small brick buildings, one story high, covered in branches to camouflage them.

"Males and females are separated," the General explains. "Ben, Charlie, you'll be staying here." She points at one of the brick buildings covered in thick ivy. "Brooke, Bree, you'll be across the street."

Ben frowns. "Don't people live with their families?"

The General stiffens a little. "None of us have families," she says, a hint of emotion in her voice for the first time. "When you desert the military, you don't get a chance to bring your husband, kids, or parents with you."

I feel a pang of sympathy in my gut. My dad wasn't the only person who deserted his family for a cause he believed in. And I wasn't the only person to abandon their mother.

“But hasn’t anyone formed a family since?” Ben asks, pressing her further, as though oblivious to her emotional pain. “I thought you said you began repopulating.”

“There are no families at the moment. Not yet, anyway. The community has to be controlled and stabilized to ensure we have enough food, space, and resources. We can’t have people breeding whenever they want to. It must be regulated.”

“*Breeding?*” Ben says under his breath. “That’s a funny way of putting it.”

The General purses her lips. “I understand that you have questions about how things work here, and I appreciate it may seem unusual to you from the outside. But Fort Noix has survived because of the rules we’ve put in place, because of our order. Our citizens understand and respect that.”

“And so do we,” I add, quickly. I turn and put an arm around my sister. “Come on, Bree, let’s get inside. I’m looking forward to meeting our new housemates.”

The General nods. “They’ll show you the ropes from here on out. Follow them to lunch when it’s time.”

She gives us a salute, then walks away, taking her soldiers with her.

*

A cheerful American woman named Neena shows us around our new home. She’s the “mother” of the house, which consists, she tells us, of a group of teenage girls and young women. She explains that the rest of our housemates are out working and that we’ll meet them in the evening.

“Give you time to settle in,” she says, smiling kindly. “A house full of twenty women can get a little much at times.”

She shows us into a small, simple room with bunk beds.

“You two will need to share a room,” she says. “It’s not exactly a five-star resort.”

I smile.

“It’s perfect,” I say, walking into the room.

Once again, I’m overwhelmed by the sensation of peace and safety. I can’t remember the last time I stood in a room that smelled clean, that had been dusted and polished and vacuumed. Light streams through the window, making the room look even more welcoming.

For the first time in a long time, I feel safe.

Penelope likes it, too. She runs around happily in circles, jumping on the beds, wagging her tail and barking.

“I must say it’s so exciting to have a dog in the house,” Neena says. “The other girls are just going to love her.”

Bree grins from ear to ear, every inch the proud owner.

“She’s so smart for a dog,” she says. “She saved our life once, when – ”

I grab Bree’s arm and squeeze it to quiet her. For some reason, I don’t want what we’ve been through spoken about within our new home. I want it to be a new beginning for us, one free from the past. More than anything, I don’t want anyone to know about the arenas if they don’t have to. I’ve killed people. It will change the way they look at me, make them more cautious, and I don’t know if I can cope with that right now.

Bree seems to understand what I’m trying to silently communicate. She lets her story disappear into the ether, and Neena doesn’t seem to notice.

“There are things for you on the bed,” she says. “Not much, just a few bits to tide you over.”

On each of our beds are neatly folded clothes. They’re made from the same dark material that General Reece and her army were wearing. The fabric is rough; I figure it must be home-grown cotton, colored by naturally made dyes and stitched into a uniform by the tailors she’d told us about.

“Do you girls want to wash before lunch?” Neena asks.

I nod and Neena takes me to the small bathroom that serves all twenty of the house's residents, before leaving me be. It's basic and the water is cold, but it feels amazing to be clean again.

When Bree comes back into our room after her own shower, she starts laughing.

"You look funny," she says to me.

I've changed into the stiff uniform that was left for me. Tendrils of hair hang over my shoulders, making wet patches in the fabric.

"It's itchy," I say, wriggling uncomfortably.

"Clean, though," Bree replies, running her fingertips against the fabric of her own uniform.

"And *new*."

I know what she means. It's been years since we had anything that was *ours*, that wasn't stolen or found or recycled. These are our clothes, never before worn. For the first time in a long time, we have possessions.

Along with the new clothes, we are also given towels, shoes, nightwear, a pencil, a pad of paper, a watch, a flashlight, a whistle, and a penknife. It's like a little welcome package. From what I've learned about the place so far, the contents seem very Fort Noix.

Neena leads us out of the house and along the street, and after a short stroll we come to a larger building. I look up. It has the air of a town hall, yet simple, anonymous.

We go inside and immediately the smell of food hits me. I start to salivate, while Bree's eyes widen. The room is filled with tables, most taken up by farm workers, recognizable from their muddy clothes and sun-blushed skin.

"There's Ben and Charlie," Bree says, pointing to a table.

I notice that both of them have plates piled high with food, and both are gorging themselves.

Neena must notice the look of want on my face because she smiles and says, "Go sit with them. I'll bring you over some food."

We thank her and go to sit with Charlie and Ben on a bench filled with farm workers. Everyone nods politely to us as we take seats. For a community that doesn't usually take in outsiders, they seem pretty accepting about the sudden appearance of four bedraggled, half-starved kids and a one-eyed Chihuahua.

"Someone's feeling more at home," I say to Ben as he rams another mouthful of food into his mouth.

But that same haunted look has returned to his eyes. He may be clean on the outside, but his mind appears to be polluted by the things he's been through. And though he's eating, he's doing so mechanically. Not in the same way Charlie does, as though he's relishing every single bite. Ben eats as though he can't even taste the food. What's more, he doesn't say a word as we take our places beside him, almost as though he hasn't noticed we're there. I can't help but worry for him. I've heard about people going through terrible ordeals only to then fall apart as soon as they reach safety. I pray that Ben won't be one of them.

I'm distracted when Neena returns with two plates of food, one for Bree and one for me, heaped with garlic-buttered chicken with roast potatoes and some kind of spicy zucchini and tomato side dish. I can't remember the last time I saw food that looked like this. It looks like something you could order in a restaurant.

I can't hold myself back. I begin wolfing it down, making my taste buds come to life. It's absolutely delicious. For so many years I subsisted on the plainest of foods, the tiniest of portions, and trained myself not to want more. Now, finally, I can let myself go.

Bree is a little more restrained. She gives a generous portion of chicken to Penelope before seeing to herself. I feel a little embarrassed by the way I devour my food as if my life depends on it, but table manners aren't exactly my priority right now.

Down the table, across from us, I can't help noticing a boy who looks a little older than me, feeding strips of meat to a pit bull terrier. The boy looks exactly like the type who'd own a pit bull. His head is shaved, and he has dark eyebrows, brooding eyes, and a cocky smile.

"Who's this?" he asks Bree, nodding at the Chihuahua.

"Penelope," she says. "And yours?"

"Jack," the boy says, rubbing the dog's neck playfully.

"I thought animals weren't allowed here," I say.

His eyes meet mine, smoldering, intense.

"He's a guard dog," he replies. Then he looks at Bree. "Do you reckon Penelope and Jack might want to be friends?"

Bree laughs. "Maybe."

They both set their dogs down on the ground. Straightaway the two begin to play, chasing each other and gently pawing at each other's face.

Then, to my surprise, Jack bounds right over to me, leaps into my lap, and plants a big, sloppy, hot lick across my face.

The others laugh, while I can't help laughing myself.

"I think he likes Brooke more than Penelope," Bree says with a grin.

"I think you might be right," the boy replies, fixing his gaze on me.

I finally manage to shove Jack off me, and as I wipe his drool from my cheek with my sleeve, the boy watches on, seemingly amused. He breaks apart a piece of bread with his strong fingers, and taps one edge into the juices on his plate.

"So," he says before taking a bite, "I'm guessing Brooke is your sister."

"Yes," Bree says. "And I'm Bree."

Even though his mouth is full, he says, "Ryan," and slides down the bench and stretches his hand out and shakes Bree's.

Then he offers it to me. I look up. His dark eyes bore into me, making a pit swirl in my stomach. The sensation reminds me of the first time I saw Logan: not the warm, slow-building feeling I got with Ben, but an instant, heart-stopping attraction. I don't want to touch him, worried that I'll somehow betray my attraction.

Immediately, I feel guilty for having any kind of attraction to him at all. It's only been a couple of hours since my dream about Logan. I still miss him.

I look at Ryan's outstretched hand suspiciously. I have no choice. He's not going to just put it down. I grasp it, hoping I can get the shaking over quickly. I turn my gaze back down to my meal, hoping he doesn't notice the blush in my cheeks.

Ryan's gaze stays on me as I eat. I can just about see his crooked smile from the corner of my eye. He's looking at me so intensely my heart begins to flutter.

"Your sister has a healthy appetite," he says, speaking to Bree but looking at me the whole time. "And butter on her chin."

Bree laughs but I feel self-conscious, my blush deepening.

"I was just joking," Ryan says. "No need to look so angry."

"I'm not angry," I reply sharply. "Just trying to eat in peace."

Ryan tips his head back and laughs; I'd been trying to get him off my back, but it seems as though my words have only encouraged him. His dark eyes twinkle.

"So *you're* the one from the arena," he says.

I swallow hard. "Who told you?"

Then I notice Charlie looking guilty beside me. He must have already spilled the beans about our ordeal. So much for a fresh start.

I don't say anything.

"I'm not judging you," Ryan says. "Actually, I'm impressed."

At these words, Ben looks over. He'd been in his own world this whole time, seemingly lost in his own thoughts, but now he's suddenly alert, a flash of jealousy in his eyes as he looks over at us.

"Have you just come back from the fields like the others?" I ask Ryan, trying to steer the conversation toward safe territory.

Ryan smiles to himself, as though pleased to finally have my attention. "Actually, I've been on guard duty this morning."

"Really?" I ask, genuinely interested. "How does that work?"

Ryan stretches out in his chair, making himself comfortable, as he begins his explanation.

"A group patrols the outer borders at all times, while a second group patrols inside, making sure everyone's keeping to the rules. And to make sure no one gets too power crazy, we take it in turns, in a rotation. Everyone has to do it, even the kids. I mean, you won't have to do it for a while since you're recuperating, but –"

"I want to," I say suddenly, interrupting him.

The idea of sitting around doing nothing fills me with horror. If I sit around idle, my mind might start playing tricks on me again. I'll see Rose and Flo. I'll see Logan. I don't know if my heavy heart could cope with seeing him again.

"Well, you will eventually –" Ryan begins.

"Now," I say, firmly. "Can I come on your shift with you?"

Ryan gives me a curious look, and I can see his eyes are filled with intrigue and respect.

"I'll see if General Reece is okay with me having a tagalong."

"Make that two," Ben says suddenly.

I look over at Ben, and for the first time since we got here, he seems to be fully lucid.

"You sure you're up for it?" I ask.

He nods, sternly. "If you think you're well enough to patrol, then I definitely am."

Ryan nods, looking equally as impressed by Ben as he did by me. But I'm not entirely convinced Ben is well enough to come. He looks haggard, his eyes rimmed with dark shadows, and I can't help but suspect that he only wants to come along because he doesn't want to leave me alone with Ryan.

And it's then that I wonder: what have I just gotten myself into?

CHAPTER FOUR

Ryan leads Ben and me across the length of Fort Noix, heading for the arsenal, and as we go, I feel satiated for the first time in months. My stomach is almost uncomfortably heavy. It feels good. It also feels good to be heading to guard duty, to have a mission, a purpose, and something to take my mind off everything. Without it, I think I might go crazy.

We pass plenty of people, all as clean and well fed as Ryan is; none have radiation scars or melted flesh from nuclear fallout. None are missing limbs or teeth or dragging a deformed leg behind them as they walk. I haven't seen so many healthy-looking humans in one place since before the war. It's almost disconcerting.

Ryan walks beside me but Ben lingers a few steps behind. There's an undeniably tense atmosphere, one I attempt to ignore by focusing all my attention on Jack the pit bull, who has been tagging closely at my heels as if I'm his master rather than Ryan.

"He's taken a shine to you," Ryan says with a chuckle.

Ben's head immediately snaps up. He frowns. I can't help but wonder why Ben insisted on coming with us. I don't want him lingering around me like a dark storm cloud, casting suspicious glances in my direction. We're on the same team, we always have been, and I don't like seeing him like this. It reminds me too much of the way he acted with Logan; jealous, wanting more from me than I am able to give.

At least Ryan doesn't seem to pick up on the tension. He strolls confidently across the compound, like someone who has never seen real death or destruction. Not like Ben and me, whose very steps seem to reveal our past torments.

"Here we go," Ryan says with an air of pride as he hauls open a huge steel door.

A cloud of dust swirls into the air, obscuring my vision. As it settles, I get my first glimpse of the treasures inside the arsenal. My mouth drops open as I step inside and take in the sight of pistols and sniper rifles, automatic crossbows and AK47s. I feel like a kid in a candy shop.

As I scan the walls, something catches my eye. A shotgun. It reminds me of the antique one Dad used to have displayed behind glass at home. I go over to it and pick it up.

"Are you sure you want to take that thing?" Ryan asks, as I test the weight of it in my hands. "Something smaller would be better for your stature."

In a matter of seconds, I lock and load the shotgun, before hitching it on my shoulder in firing position. I go through the motions expertly; thanks to Dad, I'm at ease with a shotgun.

"I think this one will suit me just fine," I say.

Ryan's eyes widen with surprise. He seems impressed by my knowledge of the weapons and I can't help but feel a surge of pride.

Ben narrows his eyes and grabs his own weapon, a rifle.

"So you guys have used guns before?" Ryan asks.

"Of course," Ben replies, a little too harshly.

I think back to the first time I met Ben, when we were speeding through the frozen wastelands chasing after the slaverunners who had kidnapped our siblings. He'd been useless with the gun, and had even dropped it at one point.

"Ben's more of a bow and arrow kind of guy," I say, gently mocking him, trying to coax him into the conversation.

Ben frowns, clearly not taking the joke well. Ben's always been sensitive, but he's clearly feeling more sensitive than usual. I remind myself to be more careful with him. I don't want him to think I'm making a joke at his expense or that I'm letting Ryan's jovial attitude rub off on me.

"No problem," Ryan says. "We have plenty of bows and arrows if you'd prefer."

"I'm fine with this," Ben answers tersely.

Ryan shrugs, once again seemingly oblivious to the building tension in the air.

I then notice a wall display of knives. I go over and see the same kind of knife my dad had when I was a kid, with a military insignia brandished into the handle. A wave of nostalgia washes over me.

I touch my fingertips to the cool metal blade. “Can I take this too?”

“Of course,” Ryan replies, suddenly coming up very closely behind me. “Take what you want.”

I can feel the warmth radiating from his body as I snatch up the knife, holding the weight of it in my hand. It feels like mine, like it was always supposed to be in my grasp. Then I dart out of Ryan’s shadow, stashing the knife at my hip as I go. I load up with the gun on one shoulder, and a bow and arrow slung across my back.

Ryan whistles as he takes in the sight of me.

“Ready for duty,” he says, giving me a light-hearted salute.

I can’t help but smile to myself. I feel every inch a guard and I’m practically itching to get out there, to learn the ropes and prove to the Commander that I deserve my place here.

Ben, on the other hand, is fumbling around and getting frustrated with a twisted strap. Ryan goes over to help him. As he tightens his straps, I can’t help but think that Ben looks like a lost, vulnerable child being dressed by his parent on their first day at school.

We head out of the arsenal and my stomach swirls with anticipation as I catch sight of the group of ten other guards up ahead that we’ll be patrolling with. They’ve congregated by one of the huge iron barbed-wire-topped gates. A few dogs mill around, pawing tufts of grass at the base of the fence, sniffing the air, cocking their heads at every noise. It occurs to me that they’ve all been trained to help with patrolling and to offer protection against attacks. The Commander was right when he said everyone at Fort Noix has a job to do – even the animals. I’m grateful again that he conceded to keep Penelope, and I hope she gets a chance to prove that despite being the size of a cat and having only one eye, she’s the smartest dog he’ll ever meet.

Jack breaks away from us and rushes up to the other dogs, barking excitedly. His presence alerts the group to our approach. Heads begin to turn in our direction, taking in the sight of Ryan leading two strangers toward them. I can’t help but feel like I’m being scrutinized, sized up, and I try to calm my racing heart. After all, this is nothing compared to the leering eyes of the biovictim spectators in the arenas.

Ben doesn’t seem to be faring as well as me, though. As we get closer to the group, I can see his face becoming paler. He’s not ready for this at all. Being with strangers, packing weaponry – it’s all too much for him, like being back in an arena. I don’t get a chance to tell him to turn around and go home, though, because we’re suddenly at the entrance. Ryan’s clapping people on the back, reeling out names that fly in one ear and out the other. The only one that sticks is Molly, because the girl it belongs to has shockingly ginger hair.

She looks over at me.

“You’re living with Neena, right?” she asks with a friendly grin. She looks about my age, with bright green eyes and freckles across her nose.

I nod, a little overwhelmed by all the names and faces.

“Me too,” she replies. “I guess that makes us roomies.”

Roomies. The word seems alien to me, like it’s a term that belonged to an old, ancient world that I thought had ceased to exist. Not for the first time since arriving here, a wave of happiness washes over me. I have a feeling she might become a friend. *Friend*. A word I had never thought to use again.

The group begins to move and we follow, sticking close to Ryan and Molly. We pass through several layers of fencing, guards stationed at the gates of each one. The amount of security they have here is crazy, but I understand their need to be so heavy-handed. The only way to keep the people inside Fort Noix safe is by making it impenetrable to all the monsters lurking outside.

Between one row of fencing and the next, nestled in the trees, I see a row of wooden cabins.

“Do you guys stay in those overnight?” I ask Molly.

She shakes her head. “No, people live in them.”

“Really?”

Before Molly has a chance to reply, Ryan speaks up, practically salivating at the opportunity to impart his wisdom.

“We call them the Forest Dwellers,” he says. “They’re sort of a part of Fort Noix but not at the same time.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Well, not everyone wants to live by military command. They want to structure their lives differently. They want to have families, homes, pets, that sort of thing. You know, the whole men and women being separated thing isn’t so great for that.” He smiles and wiggles a knowing eyebrow. I blush and avert my gaze as he continues. “Anyway, they’ve all taken the pledge to keep the fort secret, so they’re pretty much a part of us really, especially as they are within our perimeter. They’re just not on the same job rotation system – and they don’t get rations.”

Just then I notice a barefoot young girl sitting on the wooden doorstep of one of the cabins. In her lap sits a huge rabbit with light brown fluffy fur, which she strokes gently. As we pass, she looks up and waves. I wave back. She must take it as an invitation to come over, because she places the rabbit on the ground, leaps to her feet, and bounds over. Her patchwork dress swishes as she skips toward us, and her blond ponytail bobs.

“Oh, here we go,” Molly says under her breath while rolling her eyes, giving me the distinct impression that she’s not much of a maternal type.

“Trixie,” Ryan says in a gentle warning tone as she draws up beside him. “You know you can’t come on patrols with us. It’s far too dangerous.”

“I just wanted to say hello to the new people,” the little girl says breezily.

She’s absolutely adorable. I can hardly believe that such a smiley, carefree child can exist in our brutal world.

“I’m Brooke,” I say to Trixie. “And this is Ben.”

I look around for my companion, realizing he’d been so quiet I’d completely forgotten about him. The whole time that I’ve been chatting with Molly and Ryan he’s been silent, just taking it all in. As I look at him now, I can see how distracted he seems, looking over his shoulder, flinching at every noise. My worry for him magnifies.

“Do you want to come to my house to play?” Trixie says to me, breaking through my thoughts.

Her sweetness and innocence warms my heart. She can’t have seen any of the atrocities of the war, or have the constant terror of being kidnapped by slaverunners at the back of her mind. She’s carefree, just as a child ought to be.

“I’d love to,” I say, “but I’m on guard duty. It’s my job to protect you.”

Trixie beams up at me. “Well then maybe another day,” she says. “My mom will make you soup if you like. Dad made a Scrabble board out of wood. Do you like Scrabble? My sister’s better than me at it but it’s still my favorite game.”

The thought of hanging out with a family playing games and eating soup seems like a dream come true.

“That sounds like a lot of fun,” I reply, feeling a strange pang in my stomach as I realize that I haven’t played a game since before the war, that my childhood, and the lives of many, many others, was cut short by all the fighting. “Maybe I’ll be able to come back and see you,” I finish.

This seems to placate Trixie. She trots off back to her home, although not before stroking each one of the guard dogs.

“She’s so cute,” I say to Ryan as I watch her skip away. “I can’t believe she lives out here with her family. She seems so carefree.”

“She is,” Ryan replies. “That’s part of our job. We’re not just protecting the fort, we’re protecting everyone we can.”

A strong wave of happiness washes through me, telling me I'm exactly where I need to be.

Finally we pass through the perimeter fence and head farther into the woods. It's colder out in the open and the ground beneath my boots is frozen, crunching underfoot. The new boots Neena gave me prevent any of the cold seeping in like my old, worn leather ones used to. The strange uniform is pretty good at keeping out the cold too.

"So, where is it that you guys are from?" Molly asks Ben and me, sounding genuinely interested.

She has a soft Canadian accent, which invites me in and tells me I can trust her. But I'm reticent to tell her about the arenas and everything we've been through. The thought of making a friend, a real friend, is so tempting. I don't want to scare her off by revealing my gladiatorial past. No one wants to make friends with a killer.

"The Catskills," I reply. "New York."

Her eyebrows rise with interest. "New York? How did you end up in Quebec?"

Logan. That's the real answer. He always believed in this place and urged us to come here. But I can't tell Molly that. I can't even let his name pass my lips.

"There was a rumor about Fort Noix, about survivors," I say. "We thought we'd risk it."

Ben looks at me inquisitively, silently noting my inability to utter the name of our dead companion.

This time, Molly's eyes widen. "You'd better not tell the Commander that there are rumors about this place. He's terrified about anyone finding out about us. I mean you guys are the first outsiders we've welcomed in a long, long time. He seems to think the whole fort will implode if anyone finds out about our existence."

"He's right to think that," Ben says, a little too abruptly. "You'd all be in danger if the slaverunners found out about this place."

Molly gives him a curious look, one that seems to suggest that she's seen through him, into his soul, and has glimpsed the darkness inside. But she doesn't challenge him, and I'm grateful.

The outpost is a little ways away from Trixie's cabin. It's a tall metal structure that stretches far up into the canopy. The climb is at least thirty feet. Molly enthusiastically begins to scale the ladder, showing off her strength. But I falter. Because as I stand at the base of it, I get a sudden flash of memory of the horrible sand dune we had to climb in Arena 2.

"You need help climbing up?" Ryan asks.

I shake my head, dislodging the memory, then grip the rungs. I'm determined not to be weak, not to let the things I've been through in the past affect me now. I take a breath to steel myself and begin to climb, Ryan following right behind. My muscles protest but I push through my pain, and after a few moments I'm at the top.

The effort was worth it. Up here at the top, there's an amazing view all around. The mountains look beautiful, with their snow-capped peaks glittering in the midday sunlight. I let the air stir the hair at the base of my neck, cooling the sweat from the effort of climbing. I completely tune out the sound of the rest of the guards clambering into the outpost, and revel in the tranquility of the moment.

Far in the distance, I can see huge craters in the earth where the bombs hit. It makes me so sad to think of all of the needless destruction, all the death and pain, and I wonder if our world really ever can recover. But then I realize that the craters are overgrown with vegetation, as though nature is trying to eradicate the disastrous effects our war has had, trying to heal the scars and gashes our bombs created. The sight gives me hope for a better future. All at once, a smile bursts across my face.

From the corner of my eye, I can see Ryan watching me intently. I squirm under his scrutiny and let my smile fade. For some reason, I don't want him encroaching on my private moment. When he approaches I don't look at him, keeping my gaze steadily ahead.

"I don't think your friend is enjoying the view as much as you are," his voice quips into my ear.

I look behind and see Ben, his gun huddled in his arms, looking overwhelmed.

“It’s the height,” I say, knowing exactly why Ben is freaking out, knowing he must have had the same horrible flash of memory as I had. “We had to climb up a mountain in one of the arenas. It was full of spikes that bludgeoned kids to death.”

I shut my mouth immediately. I don’t know what came over me, what made me blab about such a painful secret from my past to Ryan like that.

“Oh,” he says, his mocking smile immediately disappearing. He looks suddenly serious for the first time since I’ve met him. “Sorry, I didn’t realize.”

A feeling of intense awkwardness overcomes me.

“You couldn’t have known,” I reply quickly, trying to end the conversation.

On the other side of the post, Molly takes a seat beside another guard and pulls out a pack of cards. I’m shocked and a little taken aback to see her, and the other guards around her, looking so lax. No one seems to be alert at all. The Commander made it seem as though everyone at Fort Noix was as serious and militaristic as he is, but here are his guards lazing around.

“Don’t worry,” Ryan says, clocking my expression. “Nothing ever happens on guard duty. There were attacks at the beginning but these days it’s calmed down a lot.”

But it’s not enough to placate me. Everyone back at the fort is relying on these guys to do their job and here they all are sitting around like it’s a big game. Even the guard dogs are slacking off, play fighting with one another rather than looking out for intruders. So much for everyone has a job to do! Only Ben and I seem to be alert to the possibility of lurking danger.

Just as those thoughts are crossing my mind, I notice movement coming from the distance. In the area pocked with bomb craters there’s a patch of trees and shrubbery, and it seems to be rustling.

“Do people live over there?” I say, nudging Ryan.

He peers out where I’m pointing.

“In the bomb craters?” he says. “No way. The radiation levels are too high.”

Every muscle in my body tenses. “There’s someone there,” I say.

I bring up my shotgun. The motion alerts Ben. He comes to my side, poised with his rifle.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Ryan cries. “You guys are getting a bit trigger happy. I’m sure you’re seeing things. It’s probably just a deer.”

Molly notices the commotion and comes to my side.

“What’s going on, Brooke?” she asks, her expression serious and intent.

“There are people in the trees,” I say, not looking at her, my body still positioned to fire, my eyes still locked on the foliage, seeking out possible danger.

Unlike Ryan, Molly doesn’t contest me. She seems to have understood me straightaway. She raises her own gun, taking position beside me.

The trees continue to rustle. Then all at once, something huge and black billows from the foliage. I let off a shot, the noise splintering the air. It’s only after I’ve fired that I realize my evil predator was a flock of innocent birds.

The tenseness leaves my body in one go, replaced by embarrassment. Molly gives me a sheepish look, as if she’s embarrassed on my behalf by my overreaction. Ryan just grins, amused by the whole thing.

“Told you there was nothing to worry about,” he says, arrogantly.

But no sooner are the words out of his mouth, than the sounds of screaming and frantic barking come from behind.

I spin and my heart drops as I see that, just on the other side of the outpost, near the ladder leading up, a group of crazies are thundering out of the vegetation. They’re heading right for us.

Ryan’s slow to react. “Breach!” he finally shouts.

Immediately, I fire my gun at them, but my angle is off and I miss my target. The guards seem stunned, like they were never expecting such a thing to happen. They take far too long to react. By the time they join me, I’ve finally managed to hit one of the crazies, and he goes down like a dead weight.

At last, guns begin firing off all over the place. The noise is so loud I wince. The air becomes thick with smoke from the shots we're firing and the smell of sulfur.

The crazies start to drop, but some are getting dangerously close to our outpost. I adjust my position and begin firing as they ascend. Ben stands beside me but I realize he isn't firing his gun at all. His hands are trembling and sweat is pouring down his face. He's as white as a ghost.

"Ben!" I cry. "Help me!"

But he's completely frozen. It's Ryan who sidles up to me and helps me take down the group, one by one, while Molly flanks my other side, firing expertly, too.

Suddenly, I hear a shrill scream from behind and swirl on the spot. One of the crazies must have taken a different route than the others and has gotten up the outpost without anyone noticing. It dawns on me that not a single one of the guards thought to cover us from behind, leaving us completely exposed.

The crazy's arm is locked around Molly's throat and he's dragging her back toward the ladder. I watch, horrified, as Jack bounds forward and locks his jaws around the crazy's leg. The man roars in pain and loosens his grip on Molly, leaving just enough for her to run away. But now Jack's the source of his hatred. He grabs the pit bull and yanks him off, bringing him over his head, ready to hurl him off the outpost. The whole world seems to slow down as I notice the terrified dog's expression as he hangs helplessly over the edge of the outpost. The thirty-foot drop will certainly kill him.

Without even thinking, I pull my knife from its sheath and race across the length of the outpost. With every ounce of strength in my body, I stab the crazy straight in the heart.

The crazy's eyes roll back in his head and he falls backward. I manage to wrench Jack from his grasp before the crazy plummets over the side of the outpost and hits the ground with a sickening squelch.

My blood-soaked knife clatters to the floor, and then, all at once, quiet descends. I stand there panting, Jack whimpering in my arms, the warm blood of the crazy dripping down my face. Slowly, I turn back to face the other guards.

They're all looking at me in disbelief, as though they can hardly comprehend what I just did. I can't tell if they're scared of me or in awe of me, but the main thing is that my secret life as a killer can no longer be hidden.

I cradle Jack in my arms then slowly approach Ryan. I place the dog in his arms. His cocky expression has completely gone. His arrogance seems to have faded, too, leaving behind a stunned and slightly alarmed expression.

"Thank you," he says, quietly. But I think what he really means is, "I get it now." For the first time he understands what sort of world we really live in, and what sort of person it has made me.

Everyone else seems too stunned to move. I feel I have no choice but to take control of the situation.

"We should report back to the Commander," I say, trying to hide the tremor in my voice. "That attack wasn't accidental. It was planned. That means there might be more to come."

CHAPTER FIVE

Twilight is breaking by the time we make it back to the fort. Up ahead I see a group of guards who must have returned from guard duty before us sitting around a bonfire, chatting away without a care in the world. They begin whispering when they notice us trudging wearily toward them.

A tall, lanky man with a goatee comes up to us.

“What happened to you lot?” he says, smirking.

“A breach,” Molly explains.

Immediately, the man’s expression changes. “What do you mean?”

“We were attacked,” Ryan adds. “By a group of crazies.”

The rest of the group begins to take notice of the conversation. They stand up from their positions around the bonfire and come over, listening intently, looks of concern on their faces.

“Did anyone get hurt?” the man with the goatee asks.

Ryan shakes his head. “Thankfully not. But if it hadn’t been for Brooke, there might have been fatalities.”

I shift uncomfortably as everyone’s attention turns to me, the stranger, taking in the sight of my blood-splattered uniform. But rather than looking scared of me like the others who’d seen me kill the crazy at the outpost, they look at me with respect. People start congratulating me, clapping me on the shoulder. Zeke, the man with the goatee, salutes me.

I can’t believe it. I’d been so worried about people finding out about me being a killer and judging me for it, it’s quite a relief for it all to be out in the open. I can’t remember the last time I felt accepted like this.

“Someone get this girl a drink!” Zeke says, before adding, “We don’t have liquor, I’m afraid, so I hope you like mint tea.”

“That sounds great,” I say, but I’m still in fight-or-flight mode. “But we should report to the Commander.”

Zeke shakes his head and rests a hand on my arm. “Don’t. It will just make him more paranoid.”

“But...” I begin, but he interrupts me.

“Honestly,” he says, passing me a mint tea. “The Commander is becoming more and more isolated. We take in fewer survivors every year. To be honest, I’m surprised he even let you guys stay. We’ve kicked kids out younger than you before. If he knows the attack came so soon after you arrived, he’ll probably blame it on you, saying you led them here. So if I were you, I wouldn’t give him more reasons to turn people away.”

The heat from the tea seeps into my skin as his words seep into my mind. It hadn’t occurred to me that not everyone within Fort Noix would be on board with the way the Commander chooses to run things. But, like the Forest Dwellers I saw earlier, it seems as though not everyone is happy with how things work here, with the Commander’s stance on not taking in outsiders. My gut instinct back when I’d met him in his office earlier this morning had been revulsion – to not take in outsiders is the equivalent of sentencing them to death. But then I’d gotten so caught up in it all, in being a guard, in protecting this precious place, that I’d let myself forget how cruel that policy really is.

Just then, I hear a voice calling me from far away.

“Brooke!”

It’s Bree. I turn and see her running along the path toward me, Charlie just a few steps behind. Neena walks a little way behind them both with Penelope on a lead. Some of the girls and women from our house are walking beside her, and the boys from Ben’s house are also coming toward the bonfire.

Bree reaches me, flies into my arms, and hugs me tightly. I hold her close.

“What happened?” she cries, moving out of the embrace. “You were gone for hours. I was worried.”

I smile at her reassuringly. “I’m OK.”

“Is Jack okay?” Bree asks, bending down to stroke the pit bull at Ryan’s feet.

“He’s fine,” Ryan says to Bree, but his eyes are locked on me. “Thanks to Brooke.”

Over Bree’s crouched figure, Ryan’s smoldering eyes burn into me. Before, I wasn’t sure what he thought about me, but now I do. He admires me. My stomach flutters at the thought.

“Where’s Ben?” Charlie asks.

Immediately, I feel guilty for letting myself feel anything toward Ryan at all. I glance around, searching for Ben. I see him sitting on a bench, alone, beside the fire. He looks just as lost back at the fort as he did out in the forest.

“There he is,” I say to Charlie. “Why don’t you go and get him some tea?”

“I’ll get it,” Ryan says, his intense gaze still fixed on me.

I falter. “Okay... thanks.”

I watch, my stomach roiling, as he disappears into the crowd.

Bree grabs my hand and drags me toward the bonfire. Charlie follows, and the three of us sit down beside Ben. Despite the danger we’ve just been in, we’re all still overjoyed to be at Fort Noix. To be warm, clothed, and cared for. To be amongst allies. But Zeke has planted a seed of doubt in my mind. Is it enough for just *us* to be warm, clothed, and cared for? Is it okay to sit on our laurels when others like us die out in the wilderness at the hands of slaverunners, biovictims, and crazies?

Ryan comes back with more mint tea and some chicken soup for us all.

“Do you want to join us?” I ask him.

I want to speak to him about the Commander’s isolationist position, about his hard-line policy on not letting in survivors. But Ryan casts his eyes over at Ben, and I look over to see that Ben’s watching us, his expression a mixture of anger and sadness.

“Not tonight,” Ryan says. “You guys should probably spend some time together.”

So Ryan’s starting to figure it out, to understand that there’s something between Ben and me, or at least, that Ben feels something for me. He’s not prepared to tread on Ben’s toes when he’s in such a fragile state, and I’m grateful for his thoughtfulness. It seems there’s more to Ryan than meets the eye.

I nod and watch him take the bench opposite with Molly, whose ginger hair matches the color of the flames.

The soup tastes absolutely delicious. The heat from the bowl and the fire, along with the fresh, healthy food, rejuvenates me. I feel like I’m coming back from the dead, not just physically but psychologically too. For years I’ve been in battle mode. For years I’ve felt completely alone. But now I have people around me, people who will fight beside me. And it’s the greatest feeling in the world.

I look over at Bree and Charlie laughing happily, as carefree as Trixie had been when I met her earlier. Finally they’re getting to be children. But Ben is a different matter altogether. He seems even more withdrawn.

“Ben,” I say cautiously. “Is everything okay?”

He looks at me slowly, a little dazed. “It’s just being around all these people,” he says. “It’s a bit overwhelming.”

I know it’s more than that, but I don’t want to push him to speak when he doesn’t want to.

Everyone finishes their soup.

“I think you kids should be heading home now,” I say to Bree and Charlie. They both look exhausted, like they’re fighting to stay awake so they can be part of the festivities.

Bree pouts. “Can’t we stay up a little longer?”

I shake my head. “It’s been a long day. Ben will take you home.”

Ben looks over at me and frowns, like he thinks I’m trying to get rid of him, when really I just want him to get a good night’s sleep and rejuvenate. But he doesn’t argue; he just stands, as though hypnotized, and leads Charlie and Bree back home.

I watch them go. But as soon as I'm alone, I feel suddenly out of place surrounded by the other guards, all laughing and joking easily. For me, smiles come rarely. The past constantly lingers in my mind like a storm cloud, only parting occasionally to let in a ray of sunshine. None of these people have the same darkness inside of them. I should be feeling peaceful and happy right now, but I can't. I can't just see the crazy attack as a one-off to be forgotten, because for me it was just the latest battle in my long, never-ending fight against the world we live in. And while we won that particular fight, somewhere in the world, another group of children loses.

Ryan must notice my change in mood, because he comes over and extends his hand to me.

"Come on," he says.

"Where are we going?" I reply, looking at his outstretched hand.

"For a walk." He beckons, urging me on. "Come on," he presses.

I don't feel like I have much choice but to take his hand and let him guide me to my feet.

We walk. It's pitch black and the stars are twinkling above us as we stroll away from the light of the fire and out into the compound.

"Brooke, I know that you think the way the fort works isn't fair," he begins.

"What makes you say that?" I reply. "I understand why it has to work this way. I just don't think that it's enough for me."

"What do you mean?" he asks.

I pause, trying to gather my thoughts in such a way that I can articulate them. "I mean I have to do more," I begin, carefully. "I can't live with myself knowing others are out there dying. I need to do something. I can't be part of a place that doesn't do more to help people. It would make me a hypocrite."

"Does that mean you want to leave?" he asks, frowning.

I turn my face, unsure myself what I really want. It's true that I've started to question whether I've made the right call by coming here. Can I really sit back, after everything I've witnessed, and live out my life in peace, knowing that there's a thousand more Roses out there who need saving, a hundred more Flos trapped in the arenas, a dozen more Logans who have been forced into policing a city they loathe? But at the same time, how could I force my friends and my sister back out into that world? I couldn't. If I left, I would have to go alone. And that would mean leaving them behind.

Ryan gently touches my arm. Warmth radiates from the place where his fingertips touch me. "I don't want you to leave, Brooke," he says. "Will you stay? For me?"

I move my arm away, a little startled by the contact, by the intensity of what he's asking me.

"I can't promise that," I say, not meeting his eye. But I know it's not enough, that I owe him more of an explanation. I take a breath then turn to meet his gaze. "Bree and I survived in the mountains for years. So did Ben and his brother. There are thousands more kids out there who don't have anyone to help them. There are so many more survivors."

"And you think it's our responsibility to be out there looking for them?" he challenges me.

"Don't you?" I say, my tone becoming more heated. "Don't you think we ought to help the innocent survivors of the war?"

I sigh, frustrated by the fact that Ryan and the rest of the people at Fort Noix have no idea at all what the real world is like now. It's not their fault that they've been completely protected from it all, but I can't help but feel the sting of injustice. That one random crazy attack can shake them to the core when for me, it's an everyday occurrence.

Ryan gives me a steely look. "I understand why you're angry. And trust me, you're not the only one who thinks that way. It's a controversial topic around here. But the Commander is an isolationist. It's what he fundamentally believes. It's kept us all alive so far, so why would he ever change it?"

He sighs when he sees that I'm still frowning.

"We do what we can, Brooke. We found you, didn't we? We took you in."

“That’s not enough,” I contest. “Four kids and a dog, when there’s thousands out there. There are girls being kidnapped for the sex trade. There are kids fighting to the death for the entertainment of others. You’re an army, trained fighters. You could make a difference.”

His mouth twists to the side in consternation. I can tell that my words are getting to him. But at the same time, I know he’s not going to change his mind. And why would he? Fort Noix is paradise for all who live within it. No one wants to rock the boat, or risk losing it all. Fighting off a bunch of crazies is one thing – willingly seeking them out is quite another.

Ryan lowers his voice and looks around cautiously, as if debating whether to tell me something.

“There are people who want to help others outside Fort Noix,” he says. “There’s actually a group who meet to discuss it.”

“There is?” I say, relieved to hear that.

He nods.

“Zeke and Molly are among them. But you have to keep it quiet. The only way the Commander can keep the peace is by maintaining everything exactly as it is.”

I understand the need for secrecy, but I’m intrigued and want to know more.

“So what’s their plan?” I ask. “What do they propose to do? Bring survivors back to Fort Noix?”

Ryan shrugs.

“I don’t know. They’re not rebelling or anything like that. They’re just trying to build their numbers in order to persuade the Commander that it’s what people want. If there’s enough, he might listen.”

“Do you think that will work?” I add. “Is he the sort of man who can be persuaded?”

He shrugs.

“It hasn’t worked so far,” Ryan replies.

I think about my meeting with the Commander earlier in the day. He’d been hard-line about us not joining Fort Noix, but I’d managed to convince him to change his mind. About Penelope too. There’s leeway in him, definitely.

“I’d like to meet them,” I say, “the others who want to search for survivors.”

Ryan nods. “I’ll take you to a meeting,” he says. “If it’s a way to get you to stay.” He suddenly shoves his hands into his pockets and looks shy.

“Thanks,” I reply, grateful for the darkness that is hiding my blush.

“Brooke,” he says hurriedly, “I know it’s early but... I wanted to ask you if maybe one day you’d want to go on a date with me? I mean, I know ‘date’ isn’t really the right word for it anymore, but I just mean, well... you know what I mean.”

His voice drops as he speaks and his gaze falls to my lips. I realize he’s thinking about kissing me.

I want to say yes to a date, want to consent to a kiss, but something inside is holding me back. It’s the shadow of Logan in my mind. It’s the echo of Ben’s kiss on my lips. And it’s the horror of everything I’ve been through.

Ryan must sense my hesitation because he starts to rub his neck awkwardly. “Sorry, bad timing on my part, right? I mean we almost all died today and here I am asking you on a date.”

“I’d love to,” I interrupt him with a hurried whisper. “But I can’t. Not now. Not yet.”

“Because of what you went through in the arenas?” he asks.

I glance away, feeling suddenly uncomfortable and embarrassed.

“I have to figure out how to live in this new world first,” I say. “I’ve spent so long fighting, I don’t know who I am anymore. Do you understand?”

He looks a little hurt, but nods all the same.

Just then, I feel something cold land on my nose. It feels like rain, but softer. I look up and see that it’s starting to snow.

“Winter comes early in Quebec,” Ryan explains.

I keep gazing up, watching the snowflakes fall. I feel happy and content, grateful to be alive and well fed. But I also feel like staying at Fort Noix forever just won't be possible.

Out of the corner of my eye I can see Ryan watching me, studying me, trying to work me out.

"Will you at least stay for the winter?" Ryan says. "After everything you've been through, you deserve that much, don't you? It's not selfish to want to recuperate and rest. And you can help far more people in the spring. You don't know what our winters are like here."

I don't answer, but keep looking up at the falling snow, reflecting the twinkling starlight. I don't want to promise Ryan anything I won't be able to give.

"If you won't stay for me," he adds, quietly, "stay for Ben."

Finally, my head snaps over to look at Ryan. "What do you mean?" I challenge him.

"I've seen guys like that before," Ryan says. "I'm worried he might have PTSD."

I nod. I'd been thinking the same thing.

"You know everyone has to work here, right?" he adds. "The Commander isn't particularly kind when it comes to things like that."

"What do you mean?" I whisper.

"I mean the Commander wouldn't keep a useless soldier around. He doesn't have the resources or the motivation to rehabilitate damaged people."

My insides turn to ice at the thought of Ben being turfed out of Fort Noix and left to fend for himself when at his most vulnerable. If I'd had any concerns about leaving my friends and sister before, they're now magnified by ten times. If the Commander finds out about Ben's PTSD, he'll be kicked out for sure.

Which means for now, I have no choice but to stay and look after him.

I'll stay, I realize.

At least for now, I'll stay.

SIX MONTHS LATER

CHAPTER SIX

“Brooke! Brooke! Brooke!”

The crowd is cheering my name. My heartbeat races. My palms are sweaty. I start to tremble as I raise my bow. I poise, holding my stance, whispering a silent prayer under my breath. Then I let my arrow fly.

Bull’s-eye.

I hit my target dead center. Flooded with relief, I turn to face the audience and squint against the spring sunshine. As my eyes orient to my surroundings, I remember where I am. Not in an arena, but on the firing range in Fort Noix: a big grassy field, beautiful and tranquil, peppered with the first flowering buds of spring. I’m not fighting to the death, but taking part in Fort Noix’s annual shooting competition.

Beside me, Molly takes her own shot, hitting the bull’s-eye too.

“Molly, Molly, Molly!” the crowd chants.

My competitiveness is set alight. Molly and I are the last two left in the knock-out competition. Now we have to go head to head, taking on an assault course, shooting moving targets that pop up as we go. It’s made up of cars, tires, ropes, and climbing nets and has become my favorite thing to do in training. In fact, I’ve done it so many times now, I know how to jump and weave like a ninja.

A horn blares and we’re off. I leap from one car hood onto a net, swiveling around to fire a shot at the target that’s just popped up behind me. I get it right between the eyes and it pops back down again.

I quickly climb up the rope and heave myself onto a platform. Immediately another target pops up down below me. I crouch down and fire. I hit my target and it pops down again. The crowd starts cheering.

I shimmy down the netting on the other side and race past the tire stack. A target appears the other side. I can just about see it through a gap in the tires. I shoot through the hole and it disappears. Straightaway, another appears at the end of the stack, just by the finish line. I race toward it and shoot it out of my way, not even slowing down in the process. The crowd screams and cheers as I pass over the finishing line.

I’ve won.

“Brooke! Brooke! Brooke!”

Panting, I bend forward, exhausted from my run, and let the sound of the cheering crowd filter into my mind, reminding myself that it is not the braying cry of biovictims but the cheer and support of my friends and allies. I catch sight of my instructor, General Reece, standing in her typical arms folded pose. There’s a sliver of a smile on her lips, one that tells me she’s pleased with my performance.

“The winner of our annual shooting competition,” she announces, “is Brooke Moore!”

In the audience I see Bree and Charlie going wild and feel a swell of pride. Over the last six months that we’ve been in Fort Noix, they’ve both grown. Bree celebrated her eleventh birthday and is looking more like a teenager every day. It’s amazing what a healthy diet of vegetables and meat can do to a girl.

Neena’s also in the audience, looking on proudly like the surrogate mother she has become to me. Neena’s one of the kindest women I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing. She takes good care of all the girls in the house, making sure our bedding is clean and our clothes are mended, and though she can be fierce, life is harmonious.

But then I catch sight of Ben. He’s clapping in the muted, emotionless way I’ve come to now expect from him. I feel a knot form in my stomach. I’m surprised that he even came to watch me compete since he’s been doing everything he can to keep his distance from me.

Molly and Ryan come over to congratulate me on my win, quickly distracting me from my thoughts.

“And this is the girl who said she wasn’t going to compete,” Ryan says, kissing me on the cheek cordially.

It’s true. It took General Reece more than a bit of encouragement to get me to compete. I was terrified about standing in front of an audience again after everything I’ve been through in the arenas, worried it would cause another flashback. But having people cheer me for my skill rather than bray for my blood is beyond healing. My only wish is that she could have convinced Ben to take part as well, but he hasn’t touched a weapon since that first night at the outpost.

“Typical,” Molly says, rolling her eyes playfully. “Even when Brooke doesn’t want to do something she’s still better than the rest of us!”

I can’t help but smile. Their support means the world to me. Since Ben seems to be drifting further and further away from me, sometimes I think their friendship is the only thing that’s keeping me going.

“So,” I say, “do I get a medal or anything?”

Molly laughs. “It’s not quite that easy to become a decorated soldier at Fort Noix,” she tells me, knowingly. “Your reward is just to bask in your own triumph.”

“That’s good enough for me,” I reply, jovially.

It’s not just my mind that’s been rejuvenated by the last six months living and working in Fort Noix. It’s my body. I’ve put on weight, my muscles are stronger, and all my wounds are healed. The snake bite is now nothing more than a cool silvery scar on my calf.

Bree and Charlie run over to me, Penelope yapping at their heels. When they reach me, they throw their arms around me and Penelope licks my hand. Watching them flourish is the best reward of all.

“Want to come to Trixie’s?” Bree asks me once she releases me from her bear hug. “Charlie and me are going to play Jenga.”

Charlie and Bree have been spending all their free time with the Forest Dwellers, particularly Trixie and her family, learning how to forage and playing games. Trixie’s dad carved a Jenga set, which has been well played ever since.

“I’d love to,” I say. “But I have plans.”

I glance up at Ryan shyly. He smirks. Bree looks from me to Ryan then nods knowingly at Charlie. They think something romantic is happening between us, but really it’s not. At least, I don’t think it is. It’s just that we’ve been spending a lot of time together out in the forest, hunting and fishing together, as well as discussing our positions at Fort Noix, and the Commander’s isolationism. Because while I love seeing the kids thrive, I also know in my heart that I can’t stay here forever. I need to go out looking for survivors. I have a moral duty. Ben’s been safe under the radar for six months. I can’t put my life on hold for someone who doesn’t seem to want to know me anymore.

“Shall we?” Ryan says, gesturing toward the path that will lead us into the forest.

I can practically feel Ben’s glare from here. I don’t like hurting him, but I can’t just stay on pause forever. He’s the one pulling away from me, not the other way round.

I nod, and leave with Ryan.

*

The woods have become my favorite place. As much as I love Fort Noix and how well it runs, like a well-oiled machine, nothing can beat the peace and tranquility of the forest. If there’s any good to have come out of the war, it’s that nature is getting the chance to reclaim the earth. My only wish is that if civilization ever recovers, we don’t destroy the environment again.

Ryan and I go straight to the river to check on the poles. Eating the food supplied by Fort Noix is one thing, but catching our own fresh food and cooking it on the bonfire is quite another.

We find that we've both had catches. I tug on my line and pull out a trout, its scales glistening in the spring daylight.

"Nice catch," Ryan says when he sees it.

He's smiling, but I don't feel like returning the gesture.

"What's wrong?" he asks, when he notices my lackluster expression. "Anyone would think you'd just lost the shooting competition!"

I take a deep breath. "Spring is here," I say. "And I think it's time to leave."

Ryan's expression falls. He always knew this day would come, but I think he's been hoping that I'd change my mind.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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