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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

“Anthiom: A Christian YA Novel”

written by

Krystal Parker

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

Amy Sonheim, thesis director

Barbara Pemberton, second reader

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Dr. Barbara Pemberton, Honors Program director

April 18, 2018

Anthiom

Senior Thesis

A Christian YA novel by Krystal Parker

Chapter One

Kaelyn gripped tight at the silk sheets around her before her body settled into even breaths. *In. Out. In. out.* She could still see the shadowed faces in their dark hoods and the fires. There were always fires.

She opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling above her, counting the number of tiles from the edge of her bed to the mahogany dresser. *In. Out. One. In. Out. Two.*

You are back in your room, she reminded herself. It was just a dream.

“Kaelyn?” her door creaked open and she jumped. “Are you okay?”

She rolled over and saw the shadow of his large frame. Of course he would hear and come to check on her. If there was anyone she didn’t want in her room, it was him. “I’m fine Daemon. Just a bad dream.”

He nodded, his blonde locks moving as he did. “You’re probably just nervous. We have a big day tomorrow.”

There was an uneasiness in her stomach. Kaelyn couldn’t forget about the press conference, even if she wanted to. Usually, she just stood in the back as her father and Daemon

did all the talking, but every once in a while, a charismatic reporter would walk up to her and shove a microphone in her face.

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, it’s probably just nerves.”

He took two steps toward her, and Kaelyn mentally took a step back. “Do you want me to have Ellie get you something?”

And wake her up at this hour? She would kill me, thought Kaelyn. “No. Really Daemon. I’m fine. It’s just a dream.”

“Yeah, just a dream.” He started to go, but stopped. Crossing the room, he bent down and pressed his cold lips to her cheek. “Sweet dreams.”

Just a dream. It was just a dream, she tried reminding herself. But it’s the same one she had all the time. It was the same dream that turned into a nightmare.

Six hours later, Kaelyn heard the quiet patter of feet in the hallway outside of her room. She felt the gentle tug of her blankets. “Miss Avil, it’s time to get up,” came an annoyed, but gentle voice.

“But I don’t want to.” She yawned.

Ellie chuckled, continuing to tug at the blanket around her. “Kaelyn, your father and Daemon are already downstairs having breakfast. They are waiting for you.”

“Let them wait,” she whispered, too low for anyone not in close proximity to hear. If her maid heard her, she didn’t say anything. Kaelyn hadn’t gotten much sleep after Daemon left her

room. She was utterly exhausted, and the more she thought about going into the city today, the more comfortable the bed felt.

“You’re going into the Lower Sector,” Ellie said, a tease in her smile.

She peeked above her blankets and met Ellie’s gray eyes. “Really?” Kaelyn had moved around a lot in her short sixteen years. They never stayed at the same place for more than five years. Every time she began to make friends, real friends, her father would move the whole family to another part of the country, hoping to extinguish the uprising of street rebels. The savagery will not end unless we put an end to it ourselves, her father always told her.

No matter where her father forced them to move, there was always a Lower Sector. It was her favorite part of any city. Each one was better than the last. She would always visit with her mother when she was younger.

The thought of her mother caused her mind to wander. When Kaelyn was six, her mother died. She could remember mere glimpses of the past. The color of her blue eyes, her high pitched laugh, how her hair would lighten in the summer time. The memories were hazy, like looking through a foggy window in the middle of winter. But Kaelyn remembered the night of her mother’s death like it happened yesterday.

Absently, Kaelyn’s hand clutched the necklace that hung loosely around her neck. She never took it off, not even to shower. It was the only thing she had left, besides the memories, of her mother. The thin silver charm at the end of the chain lay softly near her heart. The necklace had been dented and scraped throughout the many years of wear. No other decorations adorned it, except a tiny black scruff etched in the center of the circle charm. It looked like a W with an extra line, or sometimes, Kaelyn thought it was two mountains.

“Miss Kaelyn?” Ellie’s voice pulled her away from her thoughts. The sympathetic look she gave her told Kaelyn that somehow, she knew exactly what she was thinking and where her mind had run off to. “Terrance asked Suzey to come along this morning.”

Kaelyn smiled. Suzey had a love for the Lower Sector similar to her own. In Kaelyn’s world, her half-sister was her constant. Kaelyn slowly moved her body out of the bed, placing her feet on the soft floor. Ellie handed her a blue dress from the closet. It was short with ruffled sleeves and a tight waist. Her father had had it designed for her and Ellie picked it up early this morning.

“Ellie, we need you,” interrupted a cold voice over the intercom.

She looked at Kaelyn, who shook her head. “Ellie, go. I’ll be down in a minute.”

Ellie nodded and left the room. After a quick shower, Kaelyn finished getting dressed and made her way downstairs. Everyone else was already eating the breakfast feast Ellie had made. Kaelyn grabbed a toaster cake and a slice of sausage and sat down next to Daemon, who didn’t look up from the news he was scrolling through on his netpad.

Her step mother, Cora, was the first person to speak. “Happy to see you have joined us, Kaelyn,” she commented over her morning cup of black coffee. She wrapped her long fingers around the dark porcelain mug. “We thought we were going to have to call in the Guard to get you out of bed.”

“She had trouble sleeping,” Daemon said before she had the chance to speak for herself. He looked up from his reading. “A bad dream. I told her to have Ellie get her something, but she wouldn’t listen.”

“I didn’t want to disturb her,” said Kaelyn.

Cora took another sip of coffee. “That’s what we pay her for.”

Not very much, she wanted to say, but held her tongue. She looked at her little sister sitting on the other end of the long dining table. Her dark hair was curled at the ends, making her look a lot older than her eight years. “How did you sleep, Suze?”

Suzy looked up and grinned. “Good. My bed is bigger than the one at the old house.”

Kaelyn wished that the comfortable bed would keep the nightmares away. “Ellie told me you get to come with us today to the Lower Sector. Are you excited?” Suzy nodded quickly, and Kaelyn laughed, taking that as a yes. “Maybe after the press conference is over, we can take a look around.”

“No,” Daemon said, his voice firm.

“And why not? We always look around the Lower Sector.”

“Not this one.” Daemon’s gaze met hers. “It’s dangerous, Kaelyn. More dangerous than the other cities we visited, according to Terrance. After the press conference today, I will be more than happy to show you and Suzy around, but don’t ever wander off by yourself. Promise me.”

Kaelyn nodded, but said no words. “When are we leaving?”

“As soon as Terrance’s call ends.”

“He’s on the phone with Adam Gregory,” Cora commented proudly. Kaelyn sighed, finishing her breakfast. Adam Gregory was the leader of the Union. She had been to his house too many times for dinners and banquets. He was vile and vicious in his pursuit for people that

went against the laws of the Union. He was also the type of person, that if Kaelyn saw him walking in the city, she would stay on the other side of the street.

Her father entered the room, ending his phone call. Terrance Avil was the youngest government official to ever hold a position in the Union of the Western Hemisphere. At eighteen, he became the Defense Attorney General of the Guard. Now twenty years later, he was serving as the Vice President of the free Union and the Governor of the province of Anthiom. Her father stood much taller than Kaelyn at six foot seven with slick black hair and small gray eyes. He had a strong frame and a very charismatic smile, especially in front of the public. Years ago, he would have been considered a heartthrob, but now wrinkles marked his eyes and dark spots speckled his cheeks. "President Gregory wanted to wish us the best today." He looked at Daemon. "He also wanted to speak with me about the latest. Have you heard?"

Daemon nodded, but didn't say anything. Kaelyn looked between the two of them. "What's going on?" They stayed muted. "Tell me. What happened?"

"There is no need for hostility," said Cora.

She ignored her, still staring at Daemon. He sighed, giving in. "There has been another rebel attack."

"Kaelyn," Cora snapped, "You know we don't speak of those things at the table."

"Where?" she asked Daemon.

"New Atlantic," answered Terrance. "They set the city on fire."

Kaelyn grabbed the netpad from Daemon, flipping quickly through the dozens of images on the screen. New Atlantic had been her home before Terrance moved them to Anthiom. She

stared at the pictures of little children clutching to their mother and father as they ran to escape the flames. They were people, just like her, but now, their life would forever be marked by destruction.

She forced herself to look away. "Have they caught the rebels who did this?"

"No," Daemon answered. He gently took the netpad from her. "But don't worry, they will."

She simply nodded as her father's words came to her mind like a light in the middle of the darkness. The savagery will not end unless we put an end to it ourselves.

Chapter Two

Kaelyn watched as the children from the Lower Sector played along the river bank. Their clothes were shades of brown and gray, tattered and patched with old pieces of cloth. A little girl with spiral curls reached out to one of the birds bathing in the reeds. The bird ate from her hand, its long neck dipping to eat from her small palm. She giggled just before it flapped its large wings and flew away. Kaelyn's eyes then grazed through the crowd in the Lower Sector. The parents watched and listened to her father's speech quietly. They were taller images of their children, wearing the same torn clothing and tired and dirty faces. The Northern Gate separated the Lower Sector from the Upper Sector. Like the other cities across the country, no one crossed over the wall, even if the Vice President was speaking. It didn't matter to the elite anyways. Those who lived in the Upper Sector could watch it on their netpad.

“Miss Kaelyn?”

“Huh?”

Daemon didn't break his smile as he lightly squeezed her elbow. “You were asked a question.”

Kaelyn turned her slim body towards the camera. The reporter had long blonde hair that didn't stay in the same place as she talked. “Miss Avil, what do you think of your move to the province of Anthiom?”

It looks the same as every other city, Kaelyn thought, but a hand snaked around her waist, and icy lips pressed against her cheek. Daemon grinned, his teeth two sparkling white rows. “We think Anthiom is great,” he answered for her, “We are so excited to have moved here.”

“What about the rebels?” a woman with bright red rouge questioned. “This morning there was another attack in New Atlantic There have been several reports of barbaric activity associated with these rebels here in Anthiom. What does the elected officials of The Union plan to do about the shootings and the bombings?”

Terrance flashed them his famous smile. “We are all devastated by these recent events. The Union was founded on the principle belief that peace should always be the top priority. Those against world peace are and will continue to be a detriment to society. These rebels can and will be stopped. I will be happy to answer any questions about new policies at the governor's meeting later this month.”

“What about you, Miss Avil?” the same reporter turned her attention to Kaelyn. “What do you think about all these protests going on around the country?”

“They are not protests,” said Daemon. “They are riots.”

“Miss Avil?”

Kaelyn smiled. “I have complete hope in our Union’s ability to arrest and bring to justice all those who go against the laws of society.”

Terrance stepped in front of her. “That is all we have time for today. Thank you all and the people of Anthiom for coming. I hope we will see each other again very soon.”

Suzey pulled at Kaelyn as soon as the reporters turned to leave. Many of the children continued to play in the bank of the river. “Can we go see the shops now?”

“Kaelyn, I don’t know—”

She could feel the anger bubbling to the surface. “But you promised—”

“Mr. Taylour, I hate to bother you,” one of the women reporters interrupted, “But my son loved you in the Champion Games and we were wondering if we could get a picture?” When Kaelyn first met Daemon, he was a fighter in the Champion Games, a monthly event across the country, held in honor of the President and hosted by the Governor of the city. He was undefeated until his opponent threw him into a wall, and Daemon was never able to fight again.

As he was taking the picture, Kaelyn knew it was her only chance. They had promised Suzey. She grabbed her sister’s hand. “Let’s go!”

Anthiom’s Lower Sector was smaller than the others they have visited. As Kaelyn stood by the Gate, she could see almost all of it. Considered the “old city”, the Lower Sector consisted of two cobblestone streets that connected to the entrance of the sector and tapered off at the river. Houses were one after another, almost as if they were on top of one another. Like their children,

everything seemed tattered and torn, but Kaelyn knew where to look. It was her favorite part of the Lower Sector. Her mother had trained her to look closely to what she called the heart of the city. Behind the gray and brown, the Lower Sector was filled with pops of bright purples and bursts of blue.

“Look, it’s a dog!” Suzey yelled and before Kaelyn could stop her, she was bolting.

Kaelyn looked at the man, who sat staring at Suzey with a smile. The old man twirled the long metal cane in his hand slowly. “I’m sorry. She just took off before--”

He chuckled. “It’s quite alright. Don’t worry. Felicity is a good pup.” He dug into his pocket. “Here, why don’t you give Felicity here a treat?” Suzey giggled as the puppy ate eagerly from her palm.

Daemon placed a hand on Kaelyn’s shoulder. “Alright, you have had your fun. We need to be going back to the Upper Sector.”

Suzey’s small upper lip quivered. This was the first time she has been able to leave the house in weeks. “But we haven’t seen all the shops.”

“It’s getting dark,” said Daemon.

Kaelyn grabbed his hand. “Maybe just one more shop? It won’t take long.” She smiled at Suzey as he nodded. “Just one more. What will it be?”

She looked around, considering. Kaelyn knew that this was important to her. She wanted to save the best for last. She turned and pointed, a grin forming on her small face. Kaelyn followed her to a small shop that looked exactly like the others.

A tiny bell jingled as they walked through the door. The construction shop was a small room with wooden furniture stacked on top of each other. Small trinkets lined the wall. In the corner, a dark-haired boy no older than herself worked intently on a chair, carefully smoothing the long rocking legs with sandpaper. Kaelyn tiptoed around sawdust, looking at everything. She had never seen anything more beautiful. She wanted to ask the boy about the furniture. As she got closer to front of the store, she didn't mean to overhear the conversation of two men next to the door. "I'm really sorry about this," one man, who Kaelyn assumed was the customer, "I really thought business would be better in the last months, and I would have enough." The man seemed desperate.

The owner had dark hair similar to the boy. He shook his head. "It's quite alright, Stephan. It really is."

"I could pay the rest whenever business picks back up," said Stephan.

"Don't worry about it." The owner smiled. "Consider it a discount for a very loyal customer and friend. See you tomorrow?"

Stephan nodded. "See you tomorrow."

"Miss, can I help you with something?"

Kaelyn jumped, knocking over a vase. It bounced and rolled on the ground. Kaelyn was thankful it didn't shatter. "I'm so sorry."

The girl chuckled, bending to the ground to pick it up. Her long brown hair fell nearly to her waist. "Don't worry. It didn't break." Her blue eyes met hers and they lit up. If she knew who she was, the girl didn't say. "Is there something specific you are looking for?"

“No,” said Kaelyn, “We’re just looking around.” Her gaze fell on a carved dove a few feet from where they were standing. It was small, but the details in the wings and face were breathtaking.

“They’re beautiful, are they not?” The girl smiled. “The doves. They’re my mother’s favorite. My brother carves them himself.” She picked it up and handed it to her. “They’re on sale.”

“We can get a much prettier dove than that shipped from anywhere in the world,” Daemon said from behind her. If he hurt the girl’s feelings, she didn’t show it. “Where’s Suzey? We need to be leaving.” He turned to find her, calling her name loudly.

Kaelyn met the girl’s gaze. “Thank you,” she said softly. “The dove is really beautiful.” As the girl stretched out her hand to take it back, something caught Kaelyn’s eye. Two dark mountains peeked just below her sleeve. Is that—thought Kaelyn—and she gasped. “Hey, what is that? That design?”

She frowned, an unknown expression on her face. “Design?” She shrugged. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“On your wrist.” Kaelyn grabbed her. Her fingers grazed over the deep carving. She traced it with the tip of her fingers. “The design...Does it mean something?” The girl remained silent. “Tell me!”

“I’m sorry Kaelyn, I don’t know what you are talking about.”

Why was she lying. “I have seen those symbols before. What are they?”

“Kaelyn, I don’t know what you are talking about...”

Kaelyn moved her necklace to lay on top of her collar, twisting the chain in her hand. “On my mother’s necklace--”

The girl’s eyes widened. “Where did you—” She looked as though she wanted to say more, but Daemon had found Suzey. He glanced between the two of them, and then his eyes landed on Kaelyn’s intensely. “Are you ready to leave?”

She slowly nodded. “Yeah. I’m ready. Let’s go home.”

There was a connection between the tattoo and the scratches on her necklace. Whatever the truth was, Kaelyn realized that the girl would not tell her with Daemon around. She might not even tell her at all, but Kaelyn knew that no matter what, she had to find out.

Chapter Three

Sirens squealed and pierced through the darkness. Kaelyn pulled the satin blankets to her chin watching the shadows jump on her bedroom wall. Everything will be okay, she thought to herself. She repeated it over and over again, only half believing it. Everything will be okay.

She tried to remember what her mother told her on the nights like this one. “Are they coming for me?” she would ask, frightened in place at the sound of the Guard. Looking back at the memory, she knew that the Guard was miles away in the Lower Sector, but in the moment, it felt like they were right outside her window.

Her mom would pull her closer, wrapping her warm arms around her tighter. Kaelyn felt safe, protected. Nothing could ever harm her. “No, they’re not coming for you.” She would place her head on her mother’s chest and listen to the slow steady beats of her heart. “Try to get some

sleep. They'll be gone soon." Her mother smoothed her hair back and kissed her softly on the cheek. "Be brave, little dove. Be brave."

Kaelyn's eyes snapped open, forcing her mind out of the dream. It was, of course, the same dream she always had. The worse part about her nightmares was that they were rooted in memories. Memories of her mother, particularly the night she died.

The thought of her mother caused her necklace to weigh heavy on her chest. She slipped the chain around her neck and unclasped it carefully. Soft sunlight streamed in from the window, and Kaelyn turned the necklace over in her palm, staring at the small design. She had always thought it was just a scratch. Maybe her mother had dropped it too many times or scraped it against something. Why was the same design on the girl from the Lower Sector's wrist? Could it mean something? The more she stared at it, the more confused she became.

She could hear a soft humming coming from downstairs followed by the smell of strong coffee brewing. It was early. No one else would be up at this hour, except for Ellie. Kaelyn quickly got out of bed. She wrapped herself in the robe lying on the floor next to her bed and slipped the necklace in the pocket. Ellie had been her mother's maid long before she married Terrance. She knew her mother better than anyone else.

Mornings were Ellie's favorite times of the day. When Kaelyn was younger and her mother was still alive, they would join her early in the morning. Some days they would help her cook breakfast, but most days, Kaelyn would sit and listen to her hum. It was the same tune every morning. It was a slow ballad that would build to a passionate ending until Ellie would start over.

Eleven years later, Ellie still hummed the same song. When Kaelyn entered the kitchen, she was bent over the stove, placing a tray of wheat biscuits in the oven. When Ellie turned around, her song ceased. “Kaelyn, it’s been a long time since I’ve seen you this early.”

“I couldn’t sleep,” said Kaelyn.

Ellie wiped her hands on a rag and sat down. “Same dream?”

Kaelyn nodded. “Same one.”

“Your mother’s death is not your fault, you know that right?” Ellie sighed at the silence. “Kaelyn, there is nothing you could have done.”

But I could have done something, thought Kaelyn. “I knew she was going to the Lower Sector. I could have told someone; I could have stopped her.” If she could have just stopped her, her mother would have never been in the Lower Sector. She would have never crossed paths with the rebels, and they would have never killed her.

Ellie’s green eyes softened. “You were six. You can’t carry that weight.”

Kaelyn pulled the necklace from her pocket and held it up for Ellie to see. “You gave me this the day of my mother’s funeral, remember?”

“Of course I remember. Lea never took it off.”

She turned it so she can see the design on the charm. “Ellie, do you know what this is? This design?”

“Design? I don’t see a design.”

“Look closer.”

Ellie unfolded her glasses and slipped them over her nose. She squinted at the necklace. “It looks like scruff marks to me.”

“That’s what I thought, too,” said Kaelyn, “But yesterday, while we were at the Lower Sector, a girl from a small construction shop had the same design as a tattoo on her wrist. It was small, but I’m positive it was the same one.” She clasped the necklace back in place around her neck. “I think it means something.”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know.”

“Are you sure? You knew my mother way better than I did. Was she keeping secrets? What could this mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“Think, Ellie. Did my mother ever say anything?”

“Kaelyn, I really don’t know.” Ellie turned away from her and focused on the stove. The pop and sizzle of the pork caused Kaelyn’s stomach to growl. “Maybe it’s all just a coincidence.”

“I don’t believe in coincidence. And neither did Mom.” Ellie remained silent, refusing to look at her. Did she know more than she was telling? “Ellie please. The girl at the shop seemed like she was going to tell me something, but Daemon showed up. I know it seems silly, but I think that it is all connected somehow.”

“Kaelyn--”

“You know something, don’t you?” She changed her voice to a whisper. “What do you know? What does this design mean?”

“Kaelyn, I think whatever you think you are going to do—don’t.” Her dark eyes were stern. “Don’t go looking for answers on this. It’s dangerous, you hear me? Dangerous.”

“But what does it have to do with my mother?”

“Kaelyn please. I can’t tell you that.”

“Can’t...or won’t?”

“Both. Kaelyn, that design, whatever it may or may not be, has nothing to do with you. Just leave it, okay?” She poured her a cold glass of water. “Just go back to bed, and let it go.”

Kaelyn took the glass and nodded. Ellie knew what it meant, or at the very least what the design was associated with, including why it was on her mother’s necklace. And it was dangerous. Ellie’s words didn’t completely scare her as the intention hoped, instead they intrigued her all the more. If the design was dangerous, why was it on her mother’s necklace? In every memory Kaelyn had of her mother, she couldn’t remember her ever being involved with something dangerous. Fear shot through her. She was only six when her mother died. Maybe she didn’t remember her as well as she always thought.

When Kaelyn got back to her room, she traded the glass of water for the netpad on the side table. The screen lit up at her touch. She quickly scanned a picture of the design and ran a search on the Union’s interface. Seconds later, the screen dinged.

Your image received (0) results.

She sighed and tried searching it again. The Union’s ancient library was filled with all the best knowledge across the country, and it was all at her fingertips, loaded onto her netpad. The screen dinged again.

Your image received (0) results.

Kaelyn growled and stopped short of tossing the electronic pad across the room. She deleted her search. Out of all the books and records on the interface, why wasn't there at least one that mentioned the design? If it didn't know, who would?

The image of the girl flashed in her mind. She had seemed like she knew. She would have told her, if it wasn't for Daemon. If she could just talk to her, explain about her mother's necklace, maybe, just maybe, the girl would tell her the truth.

She changed out of her nightgown and put on a jacket. She was half way out the door when she nearly ran into Daemon, who was trying to knock on her door. "Daemon, what are you doing up--"

"Terrance and I have an early meeting." His quick eyes looked her up and down. She squirmed under his stare. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Of course not." She shook her head. "I was just going downstairs for breakfast."

"You're up early," he noted.

She laughed, and hoped he couldn't hear how fake it was. "Yeah, I guess I am. I'll probably be taking a nap by noon." Her plan was ruined. "Was there something you wanted?"

He grinned, two rows of perfect white teeth. "I got you a present."

"Why?"

Hurt crossed over his handsome face, and for a moment, she felt bad for him. "Can I not get you a present?" He reached behind his back and pulled out a box. It was wrapped with bright green wrapping paper and a silver bow.

Kaelyn smiled politely and took the box from him. She opened it and sifted through the crinkly thin paper on the inside. Underneath it all, there was an orange bird with charcoal wings made of a soft plastic. If Kaelyn wanted to, she could squeeze it into a tight ball. “What--”

“It’s just like the one from the construction shop yesterday, isn’t it?” She turned it over in her hands. The glitter from the underside of the bird’s beak painted her fingers red. It was scary to look at.

“Thank you,” she managed to say.

Daemon hugged her. “I knew you would love it.” He pressed his lips to her cheek. “I’ll see you at breakfast.”

She smiled, and turned to go back into her room. She shoved the bird under her bed. Daemon had imported it from the other side of the country. Kaelyn knew she should be grateful and love the present, but she couldn’t stop thinking about the wooden birds inside the construction shop and the girl with the tattoo. The design had to mean something. There was no other explanation. She would have to sneak out to the Lower Sector at a time when no one else was up. She would have to go at night. She set the alarm on the netpad for later that night. This time, she would not be interrupted.

The netpad rattled her awake. Kaelyn got out of her bed, already dressed. She was determined for answers. She opened her window, and looked down. Her room was on the second floor of the biggest house on the street. The only way out was down a terrace a few feet away. And the only way to the terrace was to jump, and hope that the noise doesn’t wake up everyone.

Kaelyn let out a slow breath. Be brave, little dove, she could hear her mother say. Then, she jumped.

She landed with a soft thud, but checked the rooms above her for any movement or light. She waited. Nothing. No one had heard her. She kept walking, watching the windows. The terrace was beautiful. They had one just like it at their old villa when she was younger. She had pleasant memories of watching the sun rise with her mother. Kaelyn remembered how the deep indigo sky turned into the faintest shade of pink. She had never seen anything more beautiful, not even in paintings.

Kaelyn made it to the end of the terrace and forced herself over the edge. She hoisted her right leg over the side of the wooden railing, followed by her left leg, careful not to fall. She secured a tight grip on the railing and took another breath. Slowly, step by step, she scaled the building, cautiously looking for places to put her feet and hands. When her feet landed on the soft cool grass, she let out another breath.

“Halfway there,” she joked quietly.

A soft huzz caused her to stop in her tracks. She looked above at the strange camera pointed directly at her. She had forgotten about the motion sensors. Any type of motion or sound caused the cameras to record and call the Guard. She didn't have much time before they got here. To her right, a small black box peeked out from underneath a rose bush. Kaelyn smiled.

She bent down and opened it. Grinning, she turned the small knob and flicked on the switch. She didn't jump as the water began to douse down the area, including the camera and sensors. Tomorrow, when they checked to see what triggered the alarm, they will think it was the watering system.

Kaelyn made her way down the street, thankful she didn't run into any trouble. The next part was going to be the hardest. She followed the river bank to the edge of the Northern Gate. She was hoping to walk straight through, but two guards patrolled the area, never getting outside of two feet of the Gate. She stared at them from her spot behind a bush for what felt like hours, trying to figure out how she would possibly get past them. Could I talk my way in? she thought silently to herself, but quickly shook the ridiculous thought away. Her picture painted nearly every newscreen across the country. She couldn't get ten feet in front of the Guard. There was only one way in.

She stared at the twelve foot wall towering over her. Long vines tumbled down a thick concrete slab. It was nearly a century old, built just after the Great War and the Union was established. It was a symbol of pride and unity among the people, while also celebrating their differences. Kaelyn was thankful for the separation. She wrapped her hand around the closest vine and started to climb.

"What do you think you're doing?" Kaelyn halted at the sound of the Guard's voice. He looked to be at least thirty, attractive.

The young girl below pulled her jacket closer to her, motioning towards the Gate. "I need to get back home."

He cocked his head to the side. "Do you not realize what time it is? It's three hours past curfew."

The girl kept her head down. "I was coming back from a friend's house in the Upper Sector, and we lost track of time. I know my father is already angry enough."

“Friends with someone in the Upper Sector?” He laughed. “That I would like to see.” The guard stared her up and down. “Alright, I’ll let you go—with a warning. Next time, it will be a fine...or worse, you understand?”

The girl nodded as he unlocked the Gate. Kaelyn watched her walk through before she continued climbing, breathing a sigh of relief. When she reached the top of the wall, she quickly hoisted herself over. Suddenly, she lost her footing, her foot slipping. Kaelyn muffled a scream as she caught the vine and hit the wall. This was a horrible idea, she thought, continuing the descent down, her shoulder aching. When she neared the bottom, she jumped, landing with a soft thud on the mushy grass below.

The streets of the Lower Sector were completely vacant. The only Guards were the ones keeping watch at the Northern Gate. Kaelyn turned down a street and stopped at a fork in her path, staring at the faded street signs. Which way was it? she thought, cursing herself for not being able to remember. To the right, there was a skinny road made of gravel and dust. She couldn’t see where it led because the distance was covered in a curtain of darkness. Polar, the split street sign read. Bale Street to the left was long and cobbled stoned. She could see patches of houses in the distance. Neither way looked all that much familiar.

Left it is, she thought, hoping it was, in some way, the right way to go. She kept walking, drawing her jacket closer around her. The farther down the road she got, the darker it became. How much different the Lower Sector was than the Upper Sector. If she were walking outside in the Upper Sector, she would see many people, coming from the taverns and local club houses. Nightlife was an essential part of the Upper Sector’s social life. That and the Games.

Her eyes began to adjust to the distance, and she smiled when she saw the dog in its pin. “Hello there, Felicity.” She scooped up a handful of food from the wooden basket hanging next to the pin and allowed her to eat them from her hand. Felicity was happy to oblige, and the sensation of the thin whiskers on her hand made her giggle. “Your owner was right. You are a good pup.” She gave the dog a few pats on the head before retracting her hand from the cage.

Kaelyn froze when she heard voices. The guards were farther from her, and unless there was some type of trouble, the voices didn’t belong to them. She kept her head down, hoping whoever they were, they would leave her alone, and allow her to move along. She needed to get to the construction shop.

“Why are you running from us?” a voice called out. “We won’t bite.”

She stopped but didn’t turn around. Even with her jacket wrapped tight, she felt colder. “I’m just trying to get back home.”

He laughed, a deep burly laugh. “You don’t expect us to believe the lie you told that guard, do you?” She finally looked at them. He was around the same height and build as Daemon, but he had auburn hair with a fiery beard. She couldn’t get a good look at the guys behind him, but if their leader was any indication, she was afraid of them too. “We know outsiders when we see them, especially The Union brats.” She let out a harsh breath, and the man smiled. “That’s right. We know who you are, Kaelyn Avil.”

I need to move, she thought, but she froze. She couldn’t move, couldn’t scream. They didn’t have to say it, but Kaelyn knew who they were. “Please--”

Their leader smiled. “We’re going to have fun with you, Kaelyn.”

Only one word was on her mind before her world went dark. *Rebels.*

Chapter Four

Something was burning. That was the first thing Kaelyn noticed when she came to. Where am I? She wondered. She could smell sulfur. The air was dry, and she struggled to breathe. She peeked her eyes open. She was in a small room lit with candles. The walls were lined with brick and to the left, there was a long table. She didn't see any windows, and she still hadn't found the door. She remembered the rebel and his last words:

"We're going to have fun with you, Kaelyn."

She shuddered at the thought. What did he mean? What were they planning on doing to her? She looked around for a door, a window, some way to escape, and couldn't find one. She reached into her pocket for her port device and swore when the pocket was empty. This was a mistake, Kaelyn thought. A terrible mistake. She shouldn't have come. There was no way out. Her curiosity was going to get her killed.

She heard voices, and snapped her eyes shut. The sound of feet and then the sound of a door creaking open. She couldn't tell how many people there were, but she guessed at least three. They stopped just inches away, hovering over her. She squeezed her eyes tight and listened. Maybe if she didn't see them, they would leave her alone.

"Simon, is that who I think it is?" a male voice asked. His voice was rough, but quiet, unlike any voice she had heard.

“Kaelyn Avil?” another male voice said. Kaelyn recognized him as the leader of the rebels. “I found her wandering the streets, so I thought I would have some fun with her.”

“Have some fun with her?” This voice belonged to a girl. Familiar. “What is that supposed to mean?”

She heard Simon chuckle. “I’m going to pay her back for all the pain she caused my family.”

“But it wasn’t her that--”

The quiet voice: “This isn’t how we do things, Simon, and you know that.”

“Maybe it should be,” said Simon. Kaelyn wanted to speak up. Beg him to let her go. She would leave and never come back. Would he believe her? What about the others? Could she reason with them? Would they let her go? “My father died because of her. He was just a hardworking mechanic trying to provide for his family. He didn’t do anything wrong, and she killed them. Didn’t think twice, or wonder if it was right or wrong. They just shot him in the head, and in front of his family. I still have the nightmares. It’s all her fault.”

Lies. All of it was lies. She had never met the man until he cornered her, Kaelyn thought. She never murdered anyone.

“This isn’t what we stand for,” the quiet male voice interrupted her thoughts.

“By whose standards, Daniel?” snapped Simon. She could hear him pacing in front of her, his large feet pounding the ground. “Your dad’s? Who is he to decide how we live our lives? Who is to delegate morality?”

“He isn’t the one who decides that,” the quiet voice, Daniel, said. “But you also know that.”

“Simon, please.” This time it was the girl. “You don’t want to do whatever you think you want to do. You can’t come back from it.”

“And your father wouldn’t want it,” added Daniel.

There was a moment of silence in the conversation. Kaelyn was afraid of what would happen next. Simon stopped pacing.

“What would *you* do with her?”

“I don’t know,” the girl said, “But we’ll make sure she gets back to the Upper Sector safely.”

“And she won’t know who I am? She won’t send for her Daddy and her boyfriend and come take me to jail?”

“We promise,” Daniel vowed.

Simon paused. Kaelyn could hear the hesitation in his voice. “Okay. Do with her as you want.” Kaelyn heard the door open and close, and she knew that Simon left. Could she trust them? Was she safe now?

“So, what should we do with her?” came a masculine voice. This voice was new.

“We could just leave her,” said Daniel. Leave her? Kaelyn shuddered at the thought of Simon changing his mind and coming back. “We could leave her to walk back to the Upper Sector by herself. End of story.”

“And have more rebels try to kill her?” the girl reasoned.

“She will be fine, Kloe.” Daniel said. “We leave her to walk back to the Upper Sector by herself and she never comes back. We’ll never have to see her again.”

Kloe hesitated. “Actually--”

“What do you mean ‘actually’?” Kaelyn took this moment to slowly open her eyes. There were three of them, completely lost in conversation. No one noticed she had opened her eyes. She could see the door off her right. If she could get up, she could give one big push to her captors and make a break for the door. She could escape easily. Move, she willed herself. But she didn’t move.

“She was asking about the symbol,” Kloe explained.

The new voice, “What symbol?”

Kloe sighed. “What symbol do you think, Tomas?”

“Why would she be asking about the symbol?”

“It’s on my mother’s necklace,” Kaelyn tried to tell them. Her voice was hoarse at first. She cleared her throat, and when she did, all three of them turned to look at her.

The girl’s blue eyes met hers. She was the same girl from the shop. She was tall, the tallest one in the room. The Network she looked at her reminded Kaelyn of the Network someone would care for a hurt pet. She spoke softly. “Kaelyn, are you alright?”

Kaelyn nodded. “Yeah I just...headache.”

Kloe smiled and took a step towards her. She was about to say something, but one of the boys pulled her back. He was not much taller than Kaelyn herself, and had strong arms. His tan face was topped with tousled brown hair. He knelt in front of her, and Kaelyn noticed his eyes were a calm green. They reminded her of the forest of trees she visited a few years ago near the ocean with her family. She also noticed a thin pink scar above his right eyebrow. She wondered how he got it. “Why did you come?” His voice harsh.

“Daniel, there is no need to be rude.” Kloe knelt beside him. Her eyes focused on Kaelyn’s. “Why did you come Kaelyn?”

“I need answers,” she whispered. She cleared her throat again, and this time, her voice was stronger. “Your tattoo... the design—the one on your wrist—it’s on my mother’s necklace. And I want to know what it is.”

Daniel looked away from her. “We don’t know what it means. It’s just a design.”

“Daniel--”

“Kloe, I know what you’re thinking, and don’t. Not with this one.”

“But Daniel--”

“She’s Terrance Avil’s daughter—the Vice President of The Union,” Daniel reminded her.

Kaelyn used her elbows to shift her body to a better upright position. She didn’t know how long she was sitting in the dark room, but her legs had begun to cramp. “My father doesn’t know I’m here. No one does.”

Daniel shook his head. “It’s dangerous.”

Kloe turned and considered the other boy in the room. “What do you think, Tomas?”

He ran a hand quickly through his dark mop of hair. “It is dangerous, Klo.”

Kloe touched his arm, and even Kaelyn could tell the effect it had on him. “She deserves to know the truth about the symbol.”

“Please,” Kaelyn pleaded. She was too close to knowing the truth, and she refused to walk away from the answers. “I won’t tell anyone.”

Tomas looked up to Daniel. “It’s your call, friend.”

Daniel’s eyes grazed Kaelyn’s as he considered. She could see the thoughts swirling in his head as he decided what to do. Kaelyn knew how she must have looked showing up, demanding answers about the design. There was a reason they were fearful. It was the same reason Kaelyn wouldn’t tell her father or Daemon about the necklace. She knew it was dangerous, but no matter what, she wanted, needed, to find out.

Daniel finally spoke. “Alright, we’ll take you to the shop. Our mother and father will answer any questions you have about the symbol. Then, you will go back to the Upper Sector and never come back, got it?”

Kaelyn nodded. “Okay.”

Tomas and Kloe moved to help her up. They grabbed each of her arms and gently helped her to her feet. “Our shop is just a few blocks from here,” Kloe explained. “We can help you if you don’t feel up to it.”

“No, I can manage.” Kaelyn pulled away from them. She didn’t need their help.

They made their way to the door and out onto the empty streets. Light broke through the darkness and reflected on their faces and the building behind them. She looked up and saw the moon peeking out from behind a mass of clouds.

“I’m Kloe, by the way,” Kloe said as her and Tomas kept pace beside her. “This is Tomas.” Tomas grinned a crooked smile. Kloe gestured to the dark haired boy leading them in the front. “And that is my older brother, Daniel. He might seem mean, but he’s just protective.” Kaelyn glanced at Daniel, studying his movements. His steps were fast, but he made sure not to set a pace that was too fast for the rest of them. She noticed that he would turn his head, like he was checking to make sure that they were still there.

“Contrary to what Daniel might say, we are really happy you are asking questions about the symbol,” said Kloe.

“Happy?” Kaelyn’s legs ached. She hoped they were nearly there.

She laughed. “Don’t worry, my Mom and Dad will tell you everything.” She looked up and a grin spread across her face. “We’re almost there now!”

Sure enough, they were on the same street she had explored days earlier with Suzey and Daemon. They passed the dog pin. She was just feet away from her destination whenever Simon stopped her. She tried not to focus on that as they walked up to the door. They stopped, and Daniel looked at Kaelyn and sighed before knocking, four short raps.

The door flew open and a short woman gathered him in her arms. Despite his best efforts, Daniel was pressed up against her, no doubt getting a mouthful of strawberry blonde hair. The woman kissed him twice on both cheeks and then moved to hugging Kloe. “I was worried sick about you! When you didn’t come home, your father and I feared the worse!” Tomas chuckled,

and the woman released them. “You too Tomas! Your grandmother would kill us if anything ever happened to you!”

“Honey, I think they brought a guest,” a low voice said. Kaelyn’s eyes met his. He was tall, an older version of Daniel with brown hair that was slightly speckled with gray. Dark hair covered his tanned chin. “Miss Avil, it’s nice of you to join us.”

“She was asking about the symbol,” said Daniel flatly.

Kloe ignored the anger in his voice. “She said that the symbol was on her mother’s necklace. She wanted answers, and I thought we could give her the answer she was looking for.”

“Of course.” Daniel’s mother let her into the shop. The smell of sawdust tickled Kaelyn’s nose, but she didn’t mind. She liked the smell of it. It gave her a feeling of peace.

Daniel and Tomas helped his father move some chairs for them to sit in. When Daniel placed the wooden chair in front of her, she marveled at how beautiful it was. The long legs were smoothed to perfection, and small roses were carved down the back. She was scared to break it. “Don’t worry, you won’t get a splinter,” Daniel said. She sat down, and his mother and father sat down across from her.

Daniel’s father took the lead. “Kaelyn, Kloe told us you have some questions.”

Her mouth was suddenly dry. What if the answers were too much? What if she couldn’t handle her mother’s secrets? She swallowed. She had come too far now. “I was wondering about the design, Kloe’s tattoo. It’s on my mother’s necklace. I wanted to know what it means.” She unclasped her necklace and handed it to them.

They examined the necklace as Kaelyn sat quietly. Daniel's father asked, "Kaelyn, what is it that you want us to tell you?"

What did she want? She wanted to know what the design meant. She wanted to know why it was on her mother's necklace. She wanted to know why Ellie tried to turn her away from finding out. She wanted to know why it was dangerous. "I want to know the truth."

Daniel's parents looked at each other. "Are we sure we want to do this?" Daniel's father asked his wife. When she nodded, he took a deep breath. "Kaelyn, the symbol on your mother's necklace and on Kloe's wrist is the symbol of The Network. "

Kaelyn was confused. "The what?"

Daniel's father's eyes were soft. "Are you familiar with the Union's history?"

She nodded. "There were two factions of people who hated each other, and they went to war. The Great War lasted for over a half a century and the country was devastated when the Union took control. They saved us."

Daniel rolled his eyes. "Of course you would say that."

Kaelyn's heart beat faster. "You're radicals."

Daniel's father shook his head. "No Kaelyn, we're not rebels. Not all that follow the Network are rebels. We are believers in an ancient religion from before the War. A religion that became illegal when the Union was established."

She took a step back. This was a mistake. They were crazy. Radical. Or worse, a cult. "Why haven't I heard about The Network?"

Daniel's mother explained, "When The Union took over the broken existing government long ago, they got rid of anything they saw as radical and a threat to peace."

Kaelyn was raised to be a person of logic. She was raised looking at science, reason. Everything they were telling her now was complete nonsense. "Where is your proof of all this? Shouldn't it be written down somewhere? In a record or something—where is your proof?"

"When The Union took office, they got rid of all the literature that went against their teachings. They burned them."

How convenient, thought Kaelyn. How convenient that there wouldn't be actual evidence to their claims. "And you just believe this without any actual proof?"

"We trust the Network," said Daniel.

Kaelyn had a hard time believing that people would believe something without any actual proof. What they did or did not believe in was no matter to her. It isn't why she came. "What does all of this have to do with my mother?"

The parents exchanged another look. A silence fell on the room. Kaelyn could feel each breath she took. What were they hiding from her? "Kaelyn," Daniel's dad said calmly. "Your mother was a follower of The Network."

Chapter Five

Kaelyn's heart thumped loudly in her chest, color rushing from her cheeks. She searched her brain for memories of her mother. She never said anything about the Network. She never did anything suspicious. She had no tattoos. How could there be this whole other side of the most important person of her life and she not know anything about it? Kaelyn opened her mouth to

she speak, but no words came. She gulped then tried again. “What do you mean my mom believed this?” She paused, staring at a yellow stain in the carpet. She felt dirty. What would people think of her? “My mother supported The Union. My mother and father were the power couple of the Union, and you tell me that she’s been hiding the fact that she was a rebel?”

“Two different things,” corrected Kloe quietly.

“What?”

She sighed. “The rebels and the Network are not the same thing. Some rebels claim to be part of the Network, but it doesn’t make what they do right.”

“Why would she keep this from my father?” From me? Kaelyn thought, but she didn’t say it aloud. “It’s complete nonsense.”

David’s mom leaned forward. “Why else would she have that symbol on her necklace?”

Kaelyn stood up. “How dare you talk about my mother as if you knew her. My mom was a good person. She would never have believed in all this. She wasn’t a traitor.”

She turned and broke towards the door. Kloe followed. “Kaelyn wait!” Kaelyn stopped and turned to look at her, fists clenched. “Are you sure you want to leave? There’s a lot more to tell you.”

She shook her head. She could not stand listening to the nonsense. Why would her mother believe this? It didn’t make sense, and even if it did, she refused to believe it. Her mother wasn’t a radical, a traitor. “I don’t want to hear it. You people can believe in all this craziness if you want, but I’m going back to the real world, the one without magic or secret designs.”

“Well, if you have questions, you know where--”

Kaelyn didn't let her finish before slamming the door in her face. Those people were crazy, and she wanted no part of what they were saying. She stopped and pulled off the necklace, examining it under the moon's light. She could see the design clearer than ever.

What if what they were saying is true? A small voice whispered inside her.

She quickly shook the thought away, clearing it from her mind. No, there was no way her mother would go against The Union—against her father, against her. They didn't know what they were talking about.

Kaelyn hurried back through the streets of the Lower Sector. The guards were nowhere to be seen. The journey back to her home was much easier since some of the servants had woken to start their chores. She walked through the giant front door, careful not to be too loud. Daemon and her father would still be asleep, and the last thing she wanted to do was wake them.

"I see you found them," a voice said. She turned to see Ellie sitting at the foot of the stairs. Shadows crossed her face. She looked as if she had been waiting for her for a long time. "And now you know what the symbol means," she whispered.

"Why didn't you just tell me?" Kaelyn nearly shouted a little too loudly. She lowered her voice. "You could've told me and saved me from going to the Lower Sector."

Ellie sighed. "I guess I hoped you would be a little less curious than your mom was."

"So, she believed in it, didn't she?" asked Kaelyn, hoping that what they said about her mother was all lies. But she couldn't shake away the voice that said otherwise. "My mother was a part of the Network?" A traitor?

She nodded. "Yeah, it's true."

Why would her mother keep secrets? Kaelyn felt like there was a whole other side to her mother she didn't know. A different side that was lost forever; one she would never be able to experience. "Why didn't she tell anyone? Why didn't she tell Dad? Or me?"

"Kaelyn, don't you understand?" Ellie grabbed her hands. "There's a reason the symbol is on the inside of the necklace. There's a reason for the symbols and secrets. The Network goes against everything the Union stands for." She gripped her hands harder and they began to turn a bright red from the pressure. Kaelyn pulled them quickly away and rubbed until the color disappeared. "It's dangerous."

"How could it be true?" She could feel the tears forming in her eyes. Every memory she had of her mother was hazier than ever. How could she not know her mother was a traitor? How could she keep this from her? Did her father know? Thoughts swarmed in Kaelyn's head, and she struggled to keep up. What did this say about her? What would people think of the Avils if they found out?

She couldn't quit shaking. She felt disgusted. Tears rolled down Kaelyn's face, splattering on her shoes. If she didn't know this about her mother, what else didn't she know? She had very few memories and now they were tainted. She could barely remember anything at all and now, she questioned everything.

She unclasped the necklace, grasping it in her palm so tightly it started to leave an indentation of the mountains. She closed her eyes and threw it. The necklace hit the wall before falling to the ground. Did her mother love her?

Ellie walked over to the rejected necklace and scooped it up carefully. She handed it back to Kaelyn, her eyes soft.

“So, is it true?” Kaelyn whispered, “Is it true what those people—my mother—believe?”

Ellie stood to get back to her chores. In a few hours, the whole Avil family would be awake, and breakfast would be expected. Her green eyes met hers, and for a second, she didn't say anything. Kaelyn thought about repeating the question, but Ellie spoke. “That's for you to decide yourself.”

Chapter Six

Daniel slipped out the window and closed it quietly behind him. The moonlight sparkled on the clear river. It was the middle of the night, and Daniel prayed that his family would not wake up before he got back. He couldn't tell them where he was going. It made what he needed to do so much harder. He started making his way to the meeting place, following the path and staying in the shadows.

“Where are you going?”

Daniel turned around. His seven-year-old little brother had climbed out the house from behind him without his noticing. He was still in his night shorts and shirt, carrying a small blanket. His big blue eyes stared up at him with earnest. “James, you can't come with me.”

“Why not?”

All Daniel could do was sigh. James was just as stubborn as he was, probably more so. “Mom and Dad will miss you if something happens.”

“They'll miss you too,” his brother whispered.

Daniel sighed. “James, go back and go to bed. There’s something I need to do. You can’t come.”

“If it’s so important, then why are you being so sneaky?” James inquired.

“Because it needs to be done.” Daniel pointed to the house. “Now go back to bed.”

James nodded and turned to go back in the house. Daniel opened the window he had just slipped out of. “Don’t go,” James whispered before Daniel closed it behind him.

After James was safely out of sight, Daniel started jogging. He was going to be late. Simon wouldn’t like that. None of them would. When he arrived at the abandoned building, he knocked twice on the old steel door. It opened quickly.

“You’re late,” said Simon.

Breathing hard, Daniel joined the group as they sat gathered around a small fire looking over the plans Simon had written out. “I know. But I’m here now.”

“We thought you wouldn’t show,” a girl teased beside him. He didn’t know her name.

Simon went over the plan with them, his eyes full of passion and fire. He knew what he was doing was right. Daniel prayed that the feeling of dread and uncertainty deep within himself would fade away when the time came. Simon smiled at the end of his speech. “You ready?”

The United Embassy was surrounded by a black spiked fence, just north of the Gate in the Upper Sector. It was the tallest building in Anthiom, hovering over the wall and the people below it. When they visited, Adam Gregory and his family usually stayed in the penthouse on the top floor that looked out toward the river. The Embassy had a private underground garage.

The plan was simple. It was fool proof. At exactly midnight, the guards at the Gate would take their break. Daniel and his friends were to climb the Gate and sneak into the garage of the Embassy. It was the easiest access point and had the least security. The first explosion would take care of the security in the garage. Then, they were to burn it all down. There were to be no survivors.

When they got there, Simon quickly began his task of setting up the explosives in the garage that would bring the building down. They only had ten minutes before the Guard would arrive and ruin their plans. "Daniel, go!" Simon yelled. "Remember your job!" Daniel nodded, rushing up the stairs. There was a loud scream when the first explosion went off.

"Hurry!" He could hear Simon yelling. "We must hurry! Get out!"

Daniel gripped the match of dynamite in his jacket, counting the numbers on the wall as he ran. Four. Five. Six. He stopped and knelt, grabbing the matches from his pocket. The match caught fire as soon as he struck it, but the flame fizzled out. He cursed, throwing the blackened match and striking another one. After a few seconds, he pressed the match to the stick of dynamite and dropped it. The fire quickly spread as he dove into the stairwell. People rushed past him as the dynamite exploded. He hurried back down the stairs. The fire spread, and the flames raced up the building. He heard the Guard's siren. "Daniel, we have to go!" a voice yelled behind him.

"Where?" asked Daniel over the sirens.

"Out the wash room near the elevators," answered Simon. "It's the quickest way. Hurry!"

Daniel nodded and ran towards the elevator. There were so many people. He found the washroom and climbed out the window quickly. Another explosion. This one shook the building.

He felt like he was going to be sick. He bent to put his head between his knees. The flames were so hot they felt as though they were singeing the dark hairs on his arms.

“Daniel!” The scream was coming from inside the building. He lifted his head and saw a little boy’s hand reaching from the broken window in the inferno. Daniel saw his blue eyes and dark hair and his stomach dropped. “Daniel!”

No, it couldn't be. “James!” Daniel yelled, rushing towards the flames.

A hand grabbed him, but Daniel shook Simon off. “James!” He could see him more clearly. James held out his hand, his small palm outstretched and waiting. Daniel was so close.

He didn’t hear the explosion, but he felt it. He flew back, and crashed to the downy ground, his ears pounding. *James.* He stood clumsily and took off for the rubble. A hand grabbed him and pulled him just as the door frame collapsed, the window nowhere in sight. “We have to go!” Simon yelled, “the Guard is here.”

“But James!” His eyes flashed back to the Embassy. The flames from the building had spread to the houses around it. “We have to save him!”

“He’s gone!” Simon yelled, still pulling at him. “He’s gone! We need to go! Now!” Daniel remained frozen. “Daniel! Daniel! We have to go! Daniel!”

“Daniel!” a female voice yelled. “¿*Qué pasa?*”

Daniel blinked a few times as his world came into focus. His sister’s face was just inches from his, and she waved her hands back and forth in front of his face. He was in the store. His hands were covered in sawdust as he worked on a bench seat that someone ordered weeks ago.

Kloe sat back on the chair next to him. “You were doing it again,” she whispered. “Blank stare, frozen, clammy hands. You’re thinking about it again, aren’t you?”

He couldn’t respond. He could still feel the heat radiating from the building. He could still hear James yelling for him to help him, his small hand outstretched, begging to be saved.

“What happened to James--”

“Isn’t my fault?” He threw a rag into the wash bucket located beside the back door. The rag landed with a thud and sloshed water onto the floor. It bobbed up and down a few times before slipping to the bottom. “Then whose fault is it? If it wasn’t for me, he would have never been there. I should have known better.” He grabbed the sander from his work table and began sanding away at the legs of the bench. “I should have never joined the rebels.”

Kloe’s eyes met his. They were full of compassion. Kloe was always like that. She cared about people, even when they had a hard time caring for themselves. She was like their mother in that way. “You were young. You can’t blame yourself for that.”

“And the second time?” Daniel had walked away from the rebels before. Right after he was initiated into the group, Daniel quit, but as he got older, he was angry with the government. He wanted revenge on everything they had done to his family and his friends, so he joined them again. And it was a decision that cost him his little brother.

“I know it hurts, Daniel, but you are not alone.” said Kloe. She brushed her slender fingers over her tattoo. “Remember to trust the Network.”

Daniel nodded, allowing the subject to drop. He had been raised his whole life learning about the power of forgiveness, but what happened to James was no one’s fault but his own, no

matter what Kloe or the rest of his family told him. The only person whose forgiveness really mattered to him was James's, and he wasn't here to say the words.

"So, do you think Kaelyn will be back?" Kloe questioned. She picked at the dead ends of her brown hair. She needed a haircut, but Daniel knew his mother had been so busy with helping around the shop lately. They have received so many orders, and no one had much time for anything else. He made a plan to tell his dad to mention something to her about it. "I can't believe she left without hearing everything. We had so much to tell her, and she didn't even stay for all of it. I just don't understand how you can hear, and still refuse to believe."

"She wasn't raised the same way we were," said Daniel. "This is the first time she has heard the truth."

"Do you think she will be back? Do you think what we told her was enough?"

He shrugged, wiping the sweat that had accumulated on his brow before continuing his work. "Maybe."

The bell above the front door to the shop dinged and both Kloe and Daniel looked up just as a small woman entered. She looked like she had been up all night crying. Her hair was matted around her face, and red rimmed her dark eyes. "That's Stephen's wife," Daniel whispered to Kloe. Stephen was a loyal customer and fellow believer. "Something has happened."

His mother hugged Stephen's wife, and their father escorted her to the back room just as the bell above the front door rang again. Tomas entered and hurried to them. "Did you hear?" He looked between the two of them. "Did you hear about Stephen?"

"His wife just came in," said Kloe. "Dad just took her to the back. She looked upset"

“What happened?” asked Daniel.

“Stephen has been arrested!” A few customers turned to look at his outburst, but Tomas paid no attention to them.

“On what grounds?”

Tomas shrugged. “The Guard said something about his being a rebel, but we all know he would never join them, despite Simon’s constant urging.” His voice lowered. “They arrested him early this morning in front of his wife and family.”

Kloe put a hand over her heart. “Those poor children.” Stephen and his wife had two small children. One child was still in diapers. Daniel tried not to think about the pain they were going through. “What’s going to happen to him?” Daniel tried not to think about that either.

The Network was dangerous. Members of the Network were arrested and thrown into jail daily, and if they were lucky, they would go before a trial of government officials. Most who were arrested were not so lucky. Most were convicted of high treason and punished with the highest penalty—death. Daniel tried not to think about the fate that Stephen now faced, and he prayed that God would give him strength to endure whatever would come his way.

“His wife wants to get him out of jail, but the money is too much,” Tomas continued, “And they already owe the government so much. The Guard is now threatening to take their house.”

“That’s horrible!” Kloe exclaimed. A few customers gave them pointed looks. Kloe lowered her voice. “What about their kids? Surely they wouldn’t throw those children out on the street!”

“The government doesn’t care about that,” whispered Tomas. Taxes increased in the Lower Sector to provide services for the wealthy, and more and more people were being arrested on false allegations. Tomas searched Daniel’s face. “What do you think they will do to him?”

As a member of the Network, Stephen now sat in jail. He would be sentenced to government services because of his actions, but not before the Guard interrogated him about the others. If he would compromise and give the names of others, he would be counted as a hero, but if he didn’t, there was only one way out, and that would most surely end in death: The Reality Games.

Chapter Seven

How could they take this seriously?

Kaelyn scrolled down the blank search screen on her netpad. She had been at it since she woke up that morning, and she hadn’t had any luck. The online library database had zero results. There wasn’t any piece of evidence—no document, no paper, no book—that mentioned the Network or this weird stuff Daniel’s family had mentioned. How could they believe in this?

She turned the screen off and placed it beside her on the night stand. As the daughter of the Vice President of The Union, she had the best tutors. She studied everything they gave her, and she was a good student. She read books on history, culture, science, and philosophy, but nowhere in any of that did she learn about The Network.

It's dangerous. Ellie's words burned in her memory. *People die for it.* How could people die for something she couldn't find on the Union's interface? How could her mother get involved with it?

She needed to speak with Ellie again. She needed to ask her about The Network and her mother's connection with Daniel's parents. How could they know her mother was interested? Did they know her mother? There were so many questions left unanswered.

There was a loud knock on her door, and she looked up just as Daemon entered. He crossed her room with three easy strides and sat down at the edge of her bed. He didn't say anything at first, just stared at her, twirling the shaggy edges of her navy bedspread in his thick fingers. He then placed a yellow box in her small hand. "I got you a present."

"Another one?" This was the second in less than a week. Her birthday was several months off, and the romantic holidays had already passed.

He laughed, his whole body violently shaking. "Just open it, Kaelyn. I think you will like it."

She removed the lid. The necklace was pretty with silver chains linked in a loop and a large diamond arranged in a perfect circle on the pendant. She took it out of the box, and held it while the diamond reflected the overhead light and cast a prism of bright colors on her wall. She undid the clasp, and then secured it around her neck. The necklace weighed heavy on her chest. In comparison, her mother's necklace looked dull.

"The jeweler gave it to me as a gift," Daemon explained. He reached out and touched it, his fingertips grazing the smooth cut of the diamond. "I thought you would find more use to it than I would. Every girl of the country will want one just like it."

“The jeweler will have to make a mass order,” she said dryly. “Thank you, Daemon. It really is a beautiful piece of jewelry.”

He smiled. “There is something else I wanted to ask you. Terrance thought it would be a good idea if we attend the Games next week.”

She hated the Reality Games. She didn’t go unless she was dragged. “Daemon, I--”

“Look Kaelyn, I know how much you hate the Games, but Terrance thought it would make a good impression on the people of Anthiom. They are really counting on us making an appearance.”

She sighed. “I don’t really have a choice, do I?”

His brow furrowed. “Kaelyn, you always have a choice.”

She knew that if she would refuse him, Terrance would lecture her about the importance of staying in good spirits with the community. ‘They believe we are like gods,’ he once told her, ‘and the moment they quit, the country has been given over to anarchy.’ She had spent her life in front of cameras and going to banquet after banquet, event after event. Her father taught her the priority of not only being an example to others of the law, but also a beacon to enforce it.

“I’ll go,” she said. “But only this time.”

He nodded. “Good. Terrance will be happy to hear that.”

Kaelyn slid out of the bed. It was nearly noon. If she wanted to talk with Ellie, she needed to leave now or she would have to wait until after lunch. She took the stairs two at a time, Daemon on her trail. “Where are you going?” he questioned after her.

She went inside the kitchen. No sign of her. She left the kitchen and entered the dining room. The lunchtime meal was already prepared and laid out in a feast before them, but there was still no sign of her. “Did Ellie start her chores early? I need to speak to her about something.”

Daemon grabbed her wrist. “Kaelyn--”

“Is she in the garage?” She started to turn towards that part of the house. “I know she likes to eat with the chauffeur.”

“Kaelyn, Ellie left early this morning,” Daemon told her softly.

The pit of her stomach tightened. She already knew the answer, but she asked it anyway. “Where did she go?”

“We don’t know.” He shook his head. “She abandoned us, Kaelyn.”

Kaelyn stumbled backwards into the wall behind her, her mouth suddenly dry. Daemon was saying something, but she couldn’t hear him. She abandoned me, Kaelyn thought. Just when she was starting to gather the right information about the necklace and her mother, one of her primary sources abandons her. How could she just leave?

Kaelyn raced back up the stairs, forgetting about lunch and Daemon. Ellie was one of the only people who made living in the house tolerable. Without her, Kaelyn didn’t know how she was going to survive Terrance, the press, Daemon, and Cora. Ellie was one of the only real connections she had to her mother. Terrance never talked about her, despite Kaelyn’s various attempts when she was younger.

She threw the full weight of her body on her bed and buried her head in her pillow. Ellie abandoned her. Hot tears fell down her cheeks and soaked the pillow. She left without a trace, without saying goodbye. Now, she had practically no one.

Daniel and Kloe's family flashed before her mind. They were different. They were different than anyone she had ever met, and yet, she felt like she knew them. They were strangely familiar, and Kaelyn couldn't place her finger on it. She needed to talk with them again. She still had questions that needed answers.

Kaelyn slipped her shoes on her feet, eager to get out of the house. She needed the fresh air, and the farther she got away from the Avil estate, the better. She made her way down the stairs, walking towards the door and not paying any attention to Daemon or anyone who might be calling her name or trying to stop her.

She was halfway through the door when she heard it. It was the only voice that would cause her to turn around. "Sissy, where are you going?" Suzey's eyes searched her up and down. "Lunch is almost ready."

Kaelyn stopped. "I'm going to the Lower Sector again," she whispered. "There are some more questions I need answered."

"Let me come with you," Suzey said.

Kaelyn remembered the incident with Simon, and she shook her head. "I can't, Suze. It's too dangerous for you or I would."

"Please?" Kaelyn could see the longing in her eyes.

No matter how hard she tried to convince Suzey to stay put, she knew that there was no use. She was coming whether Kaelyn said she could or not. "Okay but promise me you'll stay right by my side and will do exactly what I tell you to."

Suzey grinned, practically jumping in excitement. "I promise." She followed her in silence out of the door and towards the Gate. They received some looks and glances from the servants, but they paid no mind to it. When they were almost to the Gate, Suzey finally spoke quickly. "So, where are we going in the Lower Sector? I really hope we visit Felicity again...or that wood shop. That was a lot of fun. Momma got mad when I told Ariel about it."

"She did?" Kaelyn looked sideways at her and she saw Suzey's face fall at the memory. "What did she say?"

"She said not to talk about what the gutter rats do," she said softly and slowed her pace. "Dad agreed with her."

Of course he did. Kaelyn grabbed her small hand, wrapping it in hers and leaving it there. "Don't listen to them. I'm sure Ariel loved your stories."

Suzey giggled. "She did, especially the one about Felicity!"

They continued walking until they arrived at the Gate. Unlike nights before, Kaelyn had no problem getting through with it being the middle of the day. The young guard, the very same one from nights before, gave her a small wave as they passed through. "What brings you to the Lower Sector today, Miss Avil?"

“We’re just doing a little shopping.” Kaelyn felt guilty about lying so easily. “We’ll be back before curfew.”

He grinned. “Let me know if you need anything. Anything at all.” She nodded, and slipped by him, still clutching to Suzey.

“That guy gives me the creeps,” Suzey whispered when they were out of his sight. She laughed along with her.

Thankful to be out of the Upper Sector, Kaelyn let out a long slow breath. Sunlight shone on the buildings and reflected off the concrete. People in pale brown and gray clothes moved about on the streets. The early morning didn’t interfere with their chores. Kids ran around their parents playing. Kaelyn could hear the sounds of knocking and drilling. “We need to hurry if we want to get out of here before curfew.” Simon filled her mind, and she tried not to think too hard on it. The last thing she wanted to do was run into him or his band of rebels. She saw the curvy road that led to the carpenter’s shop. She motioned for Suzey to follow. “This way.”

They didn’t go far until they were stopped by a large crowd of people. She peered around them, seeing if there was any way at all to get past them. There were too many people. Suzey pulled on her hand. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know.” She looked up again and saw two officers of the Guard. A young woman was in front of them on her knees, her long arms flailing about as she tried to hold onto them, to make them stay.

“Please,” the woman begged, but the officers seemed to not be paying too much attention to her. Another one came out of the house manhandling a small child. The child could not have been more than three years old, still in a diaper, and the Network the officer was holding him,

Kaelyn was surprised his arm wasn't broken. "Not my house," she whimpered, "Please don't take my home! Where will we go?" The officer threw the young boy at his mother's feet.

"Not our problem," Kaelyn heard one of the Guards say.

The boy began to cry, and the mother tried to shush him. Another child, an older boy, probably about seven, stood behind his mother. "What about my children? You really want to throw us out on the street like animals?"

"You and your husband should have thought about that before you defaulted on your taxes," the Guard replied, barely looking at her. Kaelyn could hear the desperation in her voice and her heart tugged with it. "Or before your husband committed treason. You're lucky your punishment isn't much worse." He smiled. "It's nothing compared to what waits for your husband."

"Please."

Something small pulled at Kaelyn's hand, and she looked down to see Suzey glancing up at her. "Are they really going to throw her out on the street?" She whispered. There was no way that Suzey could have seen what was going on, but she heard all of it. "That's not right."

They're criminals, a voice said inside her. It belonged to Terrance. Daemon. Adam. Every voice she had ever heard or been taught to listen to. But this time, as Kaelyn looked at the hurt in this woman's eyes, even she had a hard time believing it. Taxes or not, was it really right for the Guard to throw a woman and her young children onto the streets? The crowd had begun to disperse, and Kaelyn could see the construction shop. "Let's go. We're almost there."

Chapter Eight

The block of wood was putty in his hands. Daniel gently moved the dull blade along the grain of the brasswood. Stroke after stroke the soft wood peeled off, revealing the deep grooves of a dove's wing. Screams penetrated the open window his father looked out. If Daniel could just ignore it—pretend he didn't hear Stephen's wife and children being thrown out onto the streets—maybe he could resist the urge to go outside and do something that would disappoint his mother.

His sister trudged past, her face buried under a stack of wool blankets. Kloe reached for the door knob. "And where do you think you're going?" his father asked, closing the dark curtain he was peeking out of.

"It's supposed to be chilly tonight." Kloe shifted the blankets in her hand. "They're going to need something to keep them warm."

"The guards are still out there," Daniel said, not looking up from his work.

Kloe raised her chin. "And?"

"And the guards will arrest you if you try to help her."

Their father peeked through the curtain again. "Daniel's right, Kloe. If you go out there now, you will only make things worse. Wait until tonight."

There was a knock on the door, and this time, Daniel's head shot up at the noise. Who would be knocking on their door now? Especially with all of the commotion going on outside? His father went to answer it and his heart beat faster with each moment he didn't come back.

When he did, he returned with the last person he expected to see. Her hair was pulled back this time, a few curls refusing to stay with the others blew in the draft from the door, and

she wore a coral colored sweater that fit casually at her hips. Her right hand was linked to her sister's.

“Kaelyn!” his sister screamed before he had the chance to say anything. Kloe gathered her in a hug. “It’s so good to see you again!”

Daniel picked up his tools and his bucket of scraps. “What are you doing here?”

“I have a few more questions I was hoping you could answer.” She said.

“Of course.” His mother stood in the doorway to the kitchen. Her face was matted with sweat from standing over the hot stove. “We were just about to have lunch. You and your sister are welcomed to join us.”

“Thank you, we would like that very much.” She pulled at her sister’s hand, but her sister paid no attention. Her eyes darted around the room, frightened like a deer. Daniel had seen her sister on TV before. She looked more like Terrance Avil than Kaelyn did. She had dark hair and even darker eyes. It was a stark contrast to Kaelyn’s chestnut hair and amber eyes that caught every light in the room. The little girl looked back up at her and Kaelyn smiled. “This is my sister, Suzey. She refused to let me come without her. Suzey, these are the people I was telling you about—Daniel, Kloe, and—” She paused, looking between his parents. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think I ever caught your names.”

His mom glanced at his father. “I’m Emelle. This is my husband, Joseph. We are happy to finally meet you.”

“Me? Why?”

“Your mother would be so proud of you.”

“So you knew her?”

His mother smiled. “Your mom was an important part of my life. If it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t have joined the Network or met Joe. Lea and I were best friends.”

Kaelyn stared down at the plate Emelle had offered her. It looked like a sandwich, something Ellie ate frequently, but it was much flatter with cheese gooing out the edges. “Relax Kaelyn,” Kloe said beside her, “We promise we’re not trying to poison you.”

“Yeah, because that’s supposed to make me feel better.”

Kloe laughed softly. She grabbed the sandwich with two hands and took a big bite. “It’s just melted cheese with peppers. You’ll like it.”

Kaelyn looked at Suzey, who was eating eagerly in her seat down the table. Kaelyn ripped off a small piece of the bread and popped it into her mouth. The sandwich was salty and warm with a little spice. She took another bite as Kloe broke out in laughter beside her. “I told you it was good.”

Kaelyn looked at Emelle. “You said you and my mom were best friends. That she introduced you to the Network?”

Emelle nodded. “I grew up similar to yourself—fancy houses, servants, the best of everything. My dad was an officer in the Guard. When I was fourteen, we moved. Your mother lived right next door. Everyone loved Lea. She was funny, outgoing, and one of the most sincere people you could ever meet. We became friends, and the closer we got, the more I realized that she wasn’t who everyone thought she was.”

“What do you mean?”

Emelle smiled, her whole face gleaming at the memory. “Lea was radical. When we were fifteen, she snuck into my bedroom and woke me up. She said she wanted to show me something—something in the Lower Sector.” Joseph reached out and grabbed her hand gently. Kaelyn could see the tattoos on their wrists. “That was the day I met Joe. And the day I joined the Network.”

. How could they know so much about her mother when it appears she knew so little? Heat built up in Kaelyn’s chest. “And my mother believed in this, did she?”

Emelle looked at her husband, then back at her, nodding slowly. “Kaelyn, Lea was a leader of the Network. She was passionate about the Network.”

“My mother was crazy.”

“No, not crazy. Radical, maybe, but never crazy.”

Never ending questions danced in Kaelyn’s head. The more answers she was given, the more questions she had. “If my mom believed in this stuff, what about Dad? Why did she marry him?”

“Lea’s parents were huge supporters of the Union. Her father was in all the political circles. We met Terrance at a banquet.” Emelle picked at the slightly burnt edges of her bread. “He fell in love with Lea the moment he saw her. When her father found out, he was overjoyed. Their courtship was short, and they were married just as Terrance took office. They had you two years later.”

“Did she love him?”

“Love is a hard concept for people to understand, but not for your mother. The marriage was hard on her; I’m not going to lie. After Joe and I got married, she would sneak out frequently and she spent so many nights on our couch. But she would always go back. She was patient with him, kind with him when he wasn’t kind to her, and she put his needs before her own. Lea loved him in the purest sense of the word.”

“What happened to her? Emelle, how did my mother die?”

Emelle paused before she spoke. When she did, it was barely above a whisper. “We were living in another city. Lea had stepped down from being the leader there because Terrance started questioning where she was going at night. We were worried, but she didn’t seem to be. It was late at night. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. The rebels killed her before she even made it home. We think someone from the Network tipped them off. ”

“The Network betrayed her?”

“No, not the Network. A person. The Network never left her. People aren’t perfect, Kaelyn. They make mistakes.”

“Who betrayed her? Who was it!?”

“We don’t know.”

Kaelyn sat back in the seat of her chair. She remembered every detail of the night her mother died. It replayed every night in her dreams. She remembered the coolness of the wind drafting in from the window that left the tiny hairs on her arm standing up. She remembered being tired, but also wide awake. Her mother had tucked her in and Kaelyn waited for what, in

her little mind, though only minutes, seemed like hours, for her mother to come back in the room. She watched as Lea paced back and forth outside her door, speaking softly on the phone.

“Tonight?” Her mother seemed worried, “Are you sure? Calm down, friend. I’m sure everything will be okay.” There was a long pause and her mother sighed. “I’ll be there... Yes, but don’t worry about that. I’ll leave early.” She hung up the phone and walked into Kaelyn’s room, a bright smile on her face. “Are you ready for bed? What story do you want to hear tonight?”

Kaelyn remembered her mother climbing in next to her and how warm she felt. Lea smoothed the ruffles of her evening dress as Kaelyn said, “Mommy, tell me the story of the man and the boat!”

“You want to hear that one?” She poked her playfully and Kaelyn giggled. “Okay, then.” Kaelyn loved her mom’s stories. She was so smart and creative. She told each story as if it were her favorite.

“There once was a man, and he was a very good man. He was unlike anyone else. Everyone else around him did very very bad things. They were mean and did horrible things to one another. These people were so bad that they were destroying the world. But this man was good, and someone, someone very special, loved this man a lot. And this person didn’t want the man to suffer with everyone else, so this special person told the man to build a big boat. A big boat that would hold him, his family, and two of every kind of animal—”

“Two kitties...two puppy dogs.. two hippopotamuses...”

Lea laughed softly. “And then it started to rain. It rained so much that it covered all the world, and the man and his family were saved because of someone’s love for them! After the

rain ended, the man and his family got out of the boat and there was a rainbow so big that it could be seen for miles.”

“Red, yellow, green...”

She smiled. “It was a promise that the man was loved and cared for and that someone would always be there for him. And with that, I hope you have sweet dreams tonight.”

“Tell me another one!” Kaelyn cried. “Tell me the one about the special baby!”

“Two stories in one night?” she teased. “It’s already past your bedtime.” Lea got out of the bed and kissed her on the forehead.

Kaelyn grabbed her. “Mommy, please don’t go.”

“Oh sweetie, you really should get to bed, little dove. You’re going to need your sleep for all the things that are going to happen tomorrow.”

“What things, Mommy?”

“That’s why you have to go to sleep.” Her calm eyes held hers for a moment. Looking back at the memory, Kaelyn wished she would have said something else. That she wouldn’t have let her leave her room so easily. That she would have stopped her.

But instead, Kaelyn simply closed her eyes. She couldn’t remember what her mother looked like the last moment she saw her. But she remembered her voice. It was a still whisper in the darkness. “Goodnight, little dove.”

Several hours later, Kaelyn awoke to the sound of the Guard’s sirens. Someone barged into her room and started shouting. A light blinded her. “Kaelyn!” She sat up slowly. Even then,

some part of her knew. She didn't know how, but she remembered the look in her father's eyes and the feeling of the warmth leaving her body.

"Your mother is dead, Kaelyn. The rebels killed her."

"Kaelyn, are you okay?" someone whispered.

She looked up and saw Kloe, Daniel, and their parents staring at her. Emelle reached over and grabbed her hand gently. "We know it's a lot to take in, but we're here for you."

"It's getting late," Daniel said softly.

Kloe jumped out of her seat. "Oh no, we forgot about Lydia!" She left the table, nearly knocking off her glass as she went. Kaelyn looked at Daniel and Joseph for some idea of what the commotion was about, but only found confusion on their faces. When Kloe returned, she carried a big stack of thick flannel blankets in her hands. "The guards are long gone by now, and they will get cold tonight."

"What's going on?" asked Kaelyn.

There was a pause. Each of them glanced at each other, not sure of what to do. Kloe spoke first. "Lydia Stavos, a family friend, was kicked out of her home today. Her husband, Stephen, is in jail."

"Kloe!" Daniel exclaimed. He looked around the room. "She's still Kaelyn Avil, or have we forgotten that?"

"Daniel, Kaelyn is a guest and our friend," said Joseph. "And we look out for our friends."

“That’s right,” said Kloe with a grin on her face. She handed him the stack of blankets.
“And so is Lydia. And she needs us right now.”

“Why can’t you just let her stay here?” asked Kaelyn, looking around the room.

“We can’t,” Joseph explained. “It’s illegal to interfere with the Guard.”

“Even if what they are doing is unjust?”

He nodded. “Even then.”

She looked at Suzey sitting across the table. Suzey had grown quiet and was fighting hard to stay awake. Kaelyn wanted to stay and ask more questions about the Network and her mother, but she knew that the longer they stayed, the more dangerous their walk back became. “Suzey and I should be leaving.”

“Daniel will walk you back,” said Joseph.

Daniel glared at his father. “What?”

“It’s dark, and with everything that happened with Stephen and Lydia today, it’s going to be dangerous on the streets tonight. Kaelyn and Suzey will need help getting out of here,” he explained.

“And you could take Lydia the blankets,” said Khloe.

“Dad, I—”

“Suzey and I can manage just fine,” Kaelyn said. They had managed to find their way here before, they could find their way back. “We’ll be okay.”

“Daniel—”

“Fine, I’ll go,” he huffed.

Chapter Nine

They walked in silence. Daniel led the way, his feet pounding against the worn asphalt. He didn’t look back at them, and Kaelyn feared that he would get far ahead of them as Suzey loitered at her side. “Could you slow down a little?”

He kept moving. “The faster I walk, the sooner we get to the Gate. Unless you plan on spending the entire night in the Lower Sector.”

She pulled Suzey so that she was walking in front of her. It was like she was a shield between the two of them. “You don’t like me very much, do you?”

His jaw clenched. “I don’t trust you.”

“I’m just trying to find out more information about my mother.”

“At what cost?” He stopped and turned. “My family’s life?”

“You’re not as welcoming as your sister.”

“She hasn’t seen what I’ve seen. Surely you have figured it out by now—why the Guard and people like your father hate people like me and my family. My family walks on eggshells every day, hoping that the next door the Guards bang on isn’t ours. And all we want to do is live in peace.”

“I just want know more about my mother. I have a right, don’t I?”

“And what happens when you figure it all out?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yeah, and that’s what scares me the most.”

The continued walking. The moonlight danced in shadows along the path. The night was quiet. The only sound that could be heard was the sound of the light wind rustling through the trees. Daniel turned the corner onto another vacant street. Kaelyn didn’t remember the Gate being this far away.

Oh no. She groaned inwardly, thinking that she shouldn’t have asked Kloe for that second glass of milk. She called Suzey closer to herself. “Do you have to go to the bathroom?” she whispered, looking to make sure Daniel didn’t see. He didn’t. Suzey shook her head.

Daniel peered behind his shoulder. “Is everything okay?”

“Suzey needs to stop,” said Kaelyn.

“I do not—”

Daniel stopped. “What is it?”

This could not be happening. “It’s nothing. We’re fine.”

“Kaelyn, what is it?”

Kaelyn groaned. This could not be happening. “Um...well...it’s nothing really. I just need to...um...” She took a deep breath. “Use the facilities...”

His cheeks turned a deep crimson and he averted his eyes from hers. “Really? Right now?”

“I would wait if I could!”

He also took a deep breath. “Okay, there’s a rest house next to the Gate if you think you could um...wait...for another block...”

She nodded, letting out a slow sigh. “Thank you.”

They continued walking, passing house after house. Each house was the same. The curtains were pulled tightly closed and every light was extinguished. “The Lower Sector completely shuts down right before curfew,” said Daniel, as if answering the question she had not yet formed in her mind. “Especially when the Guard raids. No one wants to get caught interfering or become the next Stephen or Lydia.”

“What did Stephen do?”

“We told you. He was arrested because—”

“No, what did he do professionally?”

“He was a mechanic. He would fix things that were broken.”

“And does that fare well in the Lower Sector? Does he make good business?”

His brow furrowed. “I don’t know—”

“And what about construction? It’s a family business like many of the ones in the Lower Sector, isn’t it?” asked Kaelyn. “How long has your family been in the business?”

He slowed his pace so that he walked beside her. “It was my great grandfather’s shop. He built it with his own hands. Laid the foundation and everything. Dad told me that he always said, ‘Just because we’re poorer than dirt doesn’t mean we can’t make beautiful buildings, even in the Lower Sector.’”

“Your store is filled with furniture. Does your dad build furniture as well?”

“A little. It’s mostly me.” He looked away from her. “Another source of income is good when taxes constantly increase.”

“And do you enjoy it?” Kaelyn asked. “I’ve seen some of your bird carvings, and they are quite beautiful.” She smiled. “Daemon tried to buy me one just like it. The thing was hideous.”

Daniel chuckled, and it was the first time Kaelyn saw him smile. It was a nice look on him. He stopped at a small building with two steel doors. “Hurry up. We don’t have all night.”

Kaelyn rinsed her hands in the sink, letting the water droplets sit on her fingers for a moment before drying them off on a towel. She stared at her reflection in the mirror. She looked a mess. Her curls had begun to fall from their tie behind her head, and tiny hairs stuck to her forehead. Her body ached, wishing she was back in the comforts of her bed.

That’s when she smelled it. Something was burning. Her nose burned and though she couldn’t see it, Kaelyn knew that whatever was on fire was close.

“Daniel, what is—”

“Kaelyn, stay in there,” Daniel whispered, entering quickly and closing the door behind him. Kaelyn’s face grew warm.

“Daniel, what are you—”

He shushed her. He crouched below the door and motioned for her to do the same. “What is going on?” she whispered, pulling Suzey to herself. She waited for the answer. The smell of smoke was stronger now. Suzey coughed.

There was shouting. Several voices. Kaelyn couldn't tell what they were doing, but it wasn't good. "Daniel—"

"Hurry!" one of the voices yelled. There was a loud explosion and Kaelyn's ears tingled from the blast. One of them laughed wickedly. "We need to hurry!"

The voices disappeared, but the smell of smoke didn't. Suzey coughed again. "Daniel—" She started to stand, but stumbled. Daniel caught her and helped her balance. Loud sirens broke the silent night. Kaelyn had to yell over them to be heard. "What is going on?"

"It's the rebels," he explained.

The flames were mesmerizing. It reminded her of the reports she saw on the news. The fire had taken over the whole building and the grass around it. Windows busted and fell to the ground. In a matter of minutes, there would be nothing left of the building.

Something warm touched her forearm and she jumped. Daniel removed his hand. "We need to go. The guards will be here soon."

She nodded, following him away from the building. She glanced down at Suzey. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," she whispered softly, then paused. "Why would someone do something like that?"

Daniel's eyes hardened. "Why does anyone do anything? In their minds, they think they're doing the right thing."

"And are they?" whispered Kaelyn.

His eyes met hers and he shook his head. "No. No they are not."

Chapter Ten

“Kaelyn!” Someone was calling her name, but the sound was muffled. It was dark. She could barely see her hands that she waved frantically in front of her face. Why was it so warm? She could feel the drops of sweat slide slowly down her face. She licked her lips and tasted their saltiness. Someone was screaming.

What was going on? She pulled herself off the cold ground and rubbed her aching head. Had someone hit her?

The building in front of her was on fire. Huge flames of yellow and red wrapped the sides of the building. Debris fell and ignited grass beside her.

“Kaelyn!” the voice yelled again. It was coming from a broken window. She recognized the voice.

“Suzey?” She saw a glimpse of dark hair in the window.

“Save me sissy!”

“Suzey!” She rushed towards the building. The flames soared.

“Kaelyn,” Daniel appeared beside Suzey, followed by Kloe and her family. “Kaelyn, we can’t get down!”

She couldn’t breathe. Her lungs were caving in on her and she couldn’t breathe. She didn’t know what to do. She started towards the building again, but the flames were higher.

“Kaelyn!” It was a different voice. Another familiar one.

“Kaelyn, we have to go!” Daemon pulled on her arm.

“No!” she broke free of his grip. “Suzey’s inside! We need to save her!” But she didn’t know how. The flames made a wall, encircling the building. The inferno was getting closer to Suzey. “Help me save her!”

“We have to go, Kaelyn.” Daemon grabbed her arm again and pulled hard. “Terrance is waiting.”

“Daemon, we have to help them!” She wished she didn’t sound like a whiny kid. She wished her voice was stronger, more demanding. Her mind flooded with options on how to get into the building, but she knew that none of them would work. It was all too much. “No, no, no!”

He kept pulling her away from Suzey, the burning building, and Daniel’s family. “We can’t save them, Kaelyn. There is no saving them.”

That’s when she realized that the screaming voice was hers.

“Kaelyn, Kaelyn...” Someone whispered her name in her ear. She felt someone nudge her. “Kaelyn, wake up.”

She opened her eyes to see Daemon’s face inches away from her own. He pulled away and sat down on top of the covers next to her. “You were screaming. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” She sat up. “Just a bad dream.”

“The same one?”

She shook her head. “No, it was...” She sighed. How could she possibly explain the building? And why wouldn’t dream Daemon help her save Suzey? “Never mind.”

He folded his large hands. “Cora wanted me to come get you for breakfast. Terrance said we will be leaving for the Games soon.”

Kaelyn nodded. “Okay. I’ll be down in a moment.”

Daemon then stood up to leave, but stopped. “Kaelyn...” he hesitated, “Kaelyn, where were you last night?”

She played with the fringe on her blanket. “What do you mean?”

“You left at noon and didn’t get back until after two in the morning.” Daemon hovered over her. “Where did you go?”

Kaelyn shrugged. “Just around. Suzey and I went for a walk and we were having so much fun we lost track of time.”

“Until two in the morning?” he questioned.

“Yeah.” She stood. “You know Suzey, she has to look at everything.” Kaelyn kissed him on the cheek quickly and headed for the door. “I need to take a shower before we leave.”

When she shut the heavy bathroom door behind her, she let out a long slow breath. She was fine. Suzey was fine. Everyone was okay. Daniel had led her and Suzey to the Gate and they said goodbye. They snuck into the house early in the morning. The only burning building was the one from the night before and Suzey was not in it. Everyone was okay.

Kaelyn turned on the faucet and let the warm droplets slide down her arm. She thought about the day before and the conversation she had with Emelle. Emelle knew her mother better than she did. She tried not to let that bother her, but she couldn’t stop the sting she felt in the pit of her stomach. Did she know her mother at all?

She thought about the burning building and the rebels. Daniel's words entered her mind. 'They think what they are doing is right.' How can the rebels think their attack was the right thing to do? They hurt people. They destroyed people's lives. Nothing they did was right.

Kaelyn was so scared it was Simon the night before. She was frightened he would march into the rest house, rip her out of the stall, and kill her on the spot. She remembered the seriousness in Daniel's eyes as he led her and Suzey quickly to the Gate.

His hands were a lot rougher than Daemon's. It was quick as if it didn't happen, but she could still feel Daniel's calloused fingertips as they grazed her arm. His hand was warm. She shook the thought from her head. The boy hates your guts, she thought to herself. The only reason he was walking you to the Gate was because Joseph forced him. He despises you.

She finished her shower and got dressed before making her way downstairs. She grabbed a bagel from the middle of the table and sat down next to Suzey. "Good morning, Suzey."

She grinned. "Good morning, sissy!"

"Did you have fun yesterday?"

Suzey bobbed her head up and down. "Can we go again?"

"Go where?" asked Cora, peeping up from her port screen.

Kaelyn took a bite of her bagel. She wondered how it would taste with melted cheese.

"Oh, around."

Cora looked at Suzey. "Really?"

Suzey looked at Kaelyn, then back at her mom. She nodded her head. "Yeah, around."

Kaelyn hid her smile as their father walked into the room. Daemon sat down and began filling his plate. Terrance looked at her briefly. “Good. You’re awake. We’ve been waiting for you.”

She took a sip of water. “I’m sorry. I’ve been really tired.”

“Coming in at two in the morning will do that to you,” said Cora, setting down her coffee mug. “You still haven’t told us where you went, and why you were out so late.”

“We went to the Lower Sector,” chimed Suzey.

Kaelyn gulped, nearly choking on the water. Daemon glanced at her, then looked at Cora. “Kaelyn told me this morning they went for a walk. They lost track of time.”

“In the Lower Sector?” Cora scoffed. “There’s hardly anything to do down there. What could possibly have taken so long?”

“It was nothing,” whispered Kaelyn. She wouldn’t understand.

A chill slithered down her back and Kaelyn wrapped her jacket tight around her. They had the best seat, the highest box in the arena. From their spot, she could see the entire arena. Dry, brown sand and brick pillars. Steel beams arched above her and created a dome reaching for the sky. A massive steel fence, similar to the Wall, separated them from those who were entertaining. A large TV in the corner of their box played the credits on the athletes who would be competing.

“Vice President Avil, any comments on the latest rebel attack?” a reporter asked. He pushed a microphone to Terrance’s mouth, anticipating an answer.

Kaelyn's heart tightened at the thought. She could still see the flames in her mind. Her father finished sipping his glass of wine and smiled. "We have the rebels in custody and they will be quickly taken care of. The law does not tolerate rebel activity."

"And any comments on the increase of taxes due to your arrival in Antiom?" the reporter questioned.

Kaelyn looked at Daemon. "What is he talking about?" she whispered.

He grabbed a slice of cheese off a platter and gestured for the server to leave. "We needed more Guard patrols for the rebel attacks, so we increased taxes in the Lower Sector."

"By how much?"

"Not by much. It's nothing those people couldn't afford for the price of everyone's safety."

Music began to play, and Kaelyn had a hard time talking over speakers. "You didn't answer my question."

He shushed her. "It's starting!"

"Miss." A server offered a plate of appetizers to her. "Would you like anything?"

She waved him off. "Daemon, answer me."

"It's just politics, Kaelyn." He smiled, glancing down at girls dancing in the arena. Their long legs swung in slow movements and Daemon couldn't keep his eyes off them. There were many things about the Games Kaelyn hated, but the dancers were her least favorite.

"You haven't answered my question, Daemon."

He sighed. "You ask too many questions."

She crossed her arms. "Actually, I'm only asking one question and you still haven't answered it. How much was the tax increase?"

"You're not going to give this up, are you?"

Kaelyn shook her head. "No."

Daemon exhaled. "It went from two to four."

She paused. "You increased their taxes by half of what they already pay?"

He shrugged. "It's just politics, Kaelyn."

It's cheating people. She thought of Stephen and Lydia and Daniel and his family. No wonder Stephen's family couldn't pay their taxes. It was so much more than what they owed.

The scene from below shifted as a tall man carrying a long microphone took to the makeshift stage in the middle of the arena. He smiled wide for everyone to see. Loud cheers erupted from the crowd as he spoke. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is truly a thrill to see you all here tonight. I do hope you are enjoying the show." More cheers and applause. His grin widened. "Well, my friends let's continue the fun. Don't forget to wager on the closing event. We have a very special treat for you tonight. Enjoy the rest of the night!" The man bowed and walked through a small tunnel in the corner of the arena.

The next event was the boxers. Two large men with long braided hair met in the middle of the arena, their wrists bandaged from the last fight. They looked like mountains. One of them was a hometown favorite, receiving the love and applause from the crowd: "Stacee! Stacee!" people yelled beside Kaelyn.

Stacee punched his opponent in the stomach and he fell to the dirt, but Stacee didn't stop. Even as blood dripped from the other athlete's nose, Stacee kicked his opponent until he quit moving.

Daemon clapped his hands together with the rest of the audience. "Stacee had just finished induction when I got hurt. Look how far he's come. Rumor is that he will get to avenge next year."

Kaelyn looked away from the screen. She would give anything to be anywhere but at the Games. Dameon's large hands grasped hers. "I was hoping we could talk."

"About?"

He crossed his hands. "I have been asked to transfer to the Union's base in Pierre City. We haven't made the announcement yet, but I will be leaving at the end of summer."

That was less than six months away. "Leaving?"

"Terrance thought it was a good idea. He thought it would give me experience."

She bit back a smile. "We will miss you terribly."

Daemon squeezed her hands. "I wanted to ask you to come with me."

All the thoughts flowing through her mind turned on her. "Come with you? To Pierre City?" It was over six hours away from Anthiom. Away from her father. Away from Suzey and Cora. Away from Emelle. And Kloe. And Daniel. And—

"Kaelyn, are you all right?"

"You want me to move with you to Peirre City?"

He nodded. “They have some great universities there. You could study anything you want. And my salary would pay for all of it, and—”

“And my father—Terrance—thought all of this was a good idea?”

“It *was* his idea.”

She bolted to her feet. “I think I need some air.”

Music from the arena began to blare from the speakers overhead and the people again cheered as the guy with the microphone entered the arena again. Daemon pulled Kaelyn to her seat. “Ladies and gentlemen, it is now the moment you all have been waiting for. Your main event!” More screams. “Please welcome Sergeant Xander Marquett of our very own Union Guard.”

Sergeant Xander Marquett was short, shorter than Kaelyn even, but the way he walked towards the center of the arena reminded her of a way a lion circles his prey before pouncing. A stony expression painted his face. He stood in the middle of the arena in front of three bodies on their knees, their heads covered in dark sacks. “Anna Isaacs, age 25. Accused and convicted of treason.”

He removed the first dark cloth, revealing a young woman with curly red hair. Her mouth was moving, but Kaelyn couldn’t hear what the woman was saying. The people erupted in cheers. The pit of Kaelyn’s stomach tightened. “I don’t want to be here.”

Daemon glanced at her from the corner of his eye, then returned his attention to the arena. “It’s almost over.”

Sergeant Marquett removed the second sack from a criminal's face, his voice a whisper. "Galley Chou, age 50. Convicted of treason." The man was short and pale. She wondered if he had family watching. "Daemon, I—"

Marquett removed the final sack. The dark cloth fell to the ground slowly. "Stephen Stavos, age 32. Accused and convicted of association with rebel activity and treason to the Union."

Stephen Stavos was nothing like she imagined. She leaned in closer to the TV. Kaelyn could see the yellow and purple bruises that marked his face. His eyes were frantic and scared. She could still remember the look on the face of Stephen's wife and the sound of her pleading voice to the Guards. Cheers erupted. Kaelyn's stomach clenched and twisted tighter and tighter in knots. She couldn't breathe. She felt as though someone were punching her in the gut.

This is wrong. She grasped Daemon's arm. "Daemon—"

"People of Anthiom, you have wagered and now the time has come!" The man spoke to the three on the ground. "You know the rules. Anyone who can beat our avengers takes their place in the arena. Please welcome tonight's finest avengers!" Five men roughly the size of Daemon came rushing out, each carrying a weapon of his choice. If five to three weren't fair enough, battling clubs and arrows with bare hands was. Stephen tried to fight, but a guard held him back.

Kaelyn couldn't hear the bell go off and the people in the arena ran. Anna Isaacs was the first one eliminated, a countdown chiming off in celebration of her death. The people cheered.

Galley Choo was next. A bearded avenger shot him with an arrow, and he fell down dead. The people roared. The same avenger smiled as he cornered Stephen on the right side of the arena, a brick pillar pressed hard against his back. “With the sword!” Cora yelled, her eyes glistening with excitement. The avenger grabbed the discarded machete with a red handle and pointed it at Stephen.

Kaelyn looked at everyone around her. Daemon. Her father. Cora. The crowd. All of them were on the edge of their seats. Some had their hands raised in the air, ready for the final blow. Others looked like they would jump in applause.

She looked at Stephen again. He fell to his knees, his eyes closed. His head was tilted back almost as if he were pointing at the sky. He had a smile on his face. This is wrong.

Kaelyn’s nails dug deep into Daemon’s arm. “Kaelyn, what are you—”

“This is wrong,” she whispered. Stephen didn’t deserve this. This was wrong and it needed to be stopped.

Just as the long sword with the bright red handle came down in one full swing, Kaelyn’s body lurched forward. “STOP!”

Chapter Eleven

People roared as the rest of Stephen’s body hit the dirt. “NO!” Kaelyn bolted to her feet. “NO!” She fell forward and caught herself on the steel railing. She began to scream. All of this was wrong. He didn’t deserve it. And his poor family.

Some of the audience quit cheering and looked up to see what the commotion was about. Hot tears rolled down Kaelyn's face as the guards carried Stephen out of the arena in pieces. A camera panned to her, but Daemon bolted in front of her. "Kaelyn, what do you think you are doing?" He said, clenching his perfect teeth.

"It's wrong!" she cried, hot tears streaming down her face. "What they did to Stephen and that poor woman and that man-- And all we're doing is sitting around cheering! As if this is some game!"

Terrance stood, his eyes hard. "Daemon, take Kaelyn away. It seems like she needs some air."

"This is all wrong! Why am I the only one to think so?"

Daemon yanked Kaelyn's arm harshly. "Let's go, Kaelyn." His hand was tight around her arm. He kept walking, outside their box, outside the arena. They were so far away, the lights of the arena dimmed in the distance. No one could hear them.

"What do you think you're doing?" Daemon's eyes burned. "Standing up there making a fool of yourself? Have you gone insane?"

Kaelyn ripped her arm away from him. "It's wrong." She was still shaking from the image of Stephen's head being separated from the rest of his body, and Galley Choo's and Anna Isaacs's deaths. The sound of the people cheering played over and over again in her mind. It was as if his life meant nothing to them. His life was nothing more than a spectacle, a game for pleasure. "What if he's got a family? What if they all do?" She could still see Lydia Stavos and her two boys, their faces hopeless. "And now, they're left with no one, thrown out onto the streets."

“Not my problem.”

“But isn’t it? The Union just doomed him to die, leaving them fatherless.”

“He’s a criminal, Kaelyn. Associated with the rebel attacks. Or have you forgotten?” He took two steps forward until he was looming over her. “He’s a criminal.”

“You don’t know that.”

“And you do?” He sighed. “Kaelyn, what has gotten into you? An outburst like that, not to mention sneaking in at two this morning. Do you want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Daemon, what if we’re wrong?”

“What in all the Western Hemisphere are you talking about?”

She turned away from him, thinking through every phrase before she said it. “Our whole lives...we have been taught to trust the Union...That we should listen and obey them. They want us to have peace. They have the heart of the people... They know what is best...and we shouldn’t question it, right?” She let out a deep breath. “But what if we’re wrong?... Daemon, what if the Union is wrong?”

He grabbed her hand in his large one. “Kaelyn, you’re scaring me. Are you sure you’re okay?”

She sighed. It was no use. “I’m fine.”

“Good.” He smiled. “You never gave me an answer to my question earlier.”

“What question?” Her head was fuzzy.

“About moving with me to Pierre City?” His eyes met hers. “Kaelyn, I know it’s miles away from your family, but it will be good for you.”

With him? To Pierre City? “Daemon, I...I don’t know how to answer. It’s a lot to think about.”

His face fell. He dropped his hands from hers. “Maybe you should go for a walk. Clear your head.”

“I’m fine, Daemon.”

“It wasn’t a request. Go home. Take a walk. Do something with Suzey. Get your mind off the Games. Think about your answer.”

She nodded and began to walk away, but he called her back. “And Kaelyn, the Union was founded on peace, justice, and truth. If we can’t trust that, what can we trust?”

Chapter Twelve

“Did you hear?” Tomas rushed into the dim room, knocking several long candles off the wood tables as he entered. The sun had begun to set and casted an orange glow through the small basement window.

“Tomas!” Kloe bent to pick the candles up. “We were almost done!”

“Sorry,” he said softly as he got down to help her. When they were done and each candle was back on the right table, they stood next to each other, Kloe being at least four inches taller than Tomas, but neither seemed to notice. “Did you hear about Kaelyn Avil?”

“Hear what?” asked Kloe.

“She made a scene at the Games. It’s all everyone was talking about.”

“A scene?”

“Yeah. During Stephen’s—” he hesitated.

She sighed, her eyes falling to the ground. “I already know.”

“During the Games, when the Avenger was going to murder Stephen, Kaelyn yelled for them to stop.”

Kloe looked back at him. “She did?”

He nodded, then ran a hand through his curly locks. “Apparently her father wasn’t too happy about it. The camera only caught a second of it before it turned away.”

She smiled. “Maybe Kaelyn is starting to see the truth.”

Tomas’s grin widened. “Maybe.” He remained looking at her, a silence landing on their conversation. Neither of them knew what to say next. “Kloe, um... there was something I wanted to talk to you about...to ask you.”

“Yeah?” She smiled.

He paused, lightly tapping his fingers on his jeans. “Do you want to—”

“Want to what?”

“Do you maybe want to sometime go...”

Someone cleared their throat and they both jumped. Daniel stood in the doorway, his arms crossed, watching them. He looked between the two and then his eyes landed on his sister.

“Kloe, Mom said she wanted your help with something before it all starts.”

“Can’t it wait?”

Daniel smirked. “If it could, I wouldn’t’ve been told to come get you, would I?”

“Fine.” She sighed, then glanced back at Tomas. “But we’ll continue this conversation later?”

He nodded. “Later.”

Tomas and Daniel watched her leave. “Do you want to tell me what that was about?”

Tomas shrugged. “What do you mean?”

Daniel crossed the room and moved the empty box of candles so that they were out of the way. “What do the two of you have to talk about?”

“Nothing.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Really? Nothing at all?”

Tomas shook his head and Daniel let the subject drop. “Did you hear about Kaelyn?”

“Hear what?” asked Daniel. He grabbed the arm of a couch and Tomas grabbed the other.

They walked to the other side of the room and set it down. Tomas wiped his hands on his jeans. “She screamed for the Games to stop right as the avenger was going to murder Stephen.”

He hesitated. “Do you think she’s starting to see—”

Daniel shook his head, moving a kitchen chair beside the couch. “She’s Kaelyn Avil.”

“Yeah, but you know that doesn’t matter. Her mother—”

“Kaelyn is not her mother.”

Tomas turned from him, walking over to the coffee table in the corner of the room.

“Yeah, but she trusted the Network. Kaelyn can too.”

He shrugged. “She was probably just sympathetic.” He moved one of his wooden doves from the table and held it in his hand.

“Or—”

Daniel slammed the bird on the counter. “Drop it, Tomas.”

Tomas glanced down, pausing, then looked back at his best friend, a smile tugging at his lips. “She is pretty, don’t you think?” When Daniel looked away, Tomas laughed. “Oh come on, Dan, don’t pretend you haven’t noticed.”

Daniel sighed. Kaelyn was the sweetheart of the entire country on TV with her wavy chestnut hair and her amber eyes, but when he saw her sitting across from Simon, and she first looked up at him, her features were softer somehow. She was no longer on the TV screen, smiling brightly in front of the cameras. She was a real person that had thoughts and feelings. And she was someone who desperately needed to know the answers his family could provide, but at what cost? “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Daniel answered.

Tomas rolled his eyes. “Denial.”

“I hope they’re having those cheese sandwiches again,” said Suzey as Kaelyn knocked softly on the door. She chuckled to herself. The door opened, revealing an overly excited Kloe. “I hope we’re not intruding,” Kaelyn said.

Kloe squealed, gathering her into a tight hug. “Intruding? Of course not!”

She released her and Kaelyn let out a deep breath. “Good. We went for a walk and ended up here.”

Kloe smiled, pulling her in the room. “We’re happy you’re here. We’re actually about to start soon.”

“Start?”

She nodded. “You’ll see soon enough.”

Kaelyn followed her into the kitchen where Emelle was laying out bread and water on the counter. Emelle’s lips grew to a smile when she saw them. “Oh, Kaelyn and Suzey, it’s nice of you to join us.”

“Deny, all you want Dan, but we all know the truth!” Tomas yelled as came up the stairs from the basement, followed by Daniel.

“Mom, we’re almost out of—” His dark eyes landed on Kaelyn. “Hey,” he whispered. Before Kaelyn could say anything, he looked at Emelle. “Do you think her being here is a good idea?”

Kloe exhaled. “Not this again. I thought we were over this.”

“She’s still Kaelyn Avil.” Daniel said. He glanced in Kaelyn’s direction before his eyes landed on his mother. “If the others see her, they’re going to think she’s here to arrest them or worse.”

“She’s Lea’s daughter,” Emelle said. “They’ll understand.”

“And if they don’t?”

Kloe rolled her eyes. “Come on, Kaelyn. We have better things to do than listen to his nonsense.” She grabbed a few of the trays and left the room. Kaelyn and Suzey followed her down the stairs to the basement. Kloe laid the trays down on the coffee table and began lighting candles.

Kaelyn rummaged in a cardboard box to help. Finding a pale lighter, she lit the candle on the center of the coffee table. “Is he always like that?”

Kloe didn’t have to guess who he was. “Like what?”

She went to light another one, but the flame went out. She tried the lighter again, but the orange flame flickered for a moment before dissolving into nothing. Kaelyn sat back against the sofa. “Dark and brooding. Doesn’t trust anyone, despite them never doing anything to make him question them. And he’s mean.”

Kloe chuckled softly. “He didn’t used to be like that. He’s just being protective. He’s been like that since James died.”

“James?”

She stopped. “Our little brother.”

Kaelyn looked down. “I’m so sorry. How did he die?”

Kloe finished lighting the last candle. “That story is for another day.” She helped Kaelyn to her feet. “I think it’s just a mask. One day, it will go away.”

There was a pause “Tomas is friendly,” said Kaelyn. She had noticed the way he made Kloe smile. “How long have you known him?”

“Tomas and his grandmother moved to Anthiom about five years ago.” Kloe looked down and then back at Kaelyn, another smile playing on her lips. “He’s really nice.”

“Nice looking too,” teased Kaelyn.

Her mouth dropped, and she laughed. “What about Daemon?”

“What about him?” Kaelyn looked away from her.

“The two of you seem inseparable. I never really see him without you, and you have been together for so long!”

She sighed. The last person she wanted to be talking about was Daemon. Something deep in her stomach turned at the conversation they had at the Games. I want you to come with me, he had said. And it was her dad’s idea? “Daemon is being transferred.”

“Really?” Kloe’s smile faded. “I’m so sorry, Kaelyn.”

“And...he wants me to go with him.”

“Move?” Kaelyn simply nodded, and Kloe asked, “What are you going to do?”

She was still trying to figure that out. If she went with him, she would leave everything behind. “I don’t know.”

“Do you want to go with him?” asked Kloe softly.

Did she want to go with him? She had known Daemon for nearly her whole life. He was always there for her, but to move away from her father and Suzey, away from Anthiom and the Lower Sector? “I don’t know,” she whispered.

Kloe turned swiftly. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

“What is she doing here?” an unfamiliar gruff voice asked, causing the both of them to turn. A short older man with dark features crossed his arms, his black eyes never leaving Kaelyn. A woman joined him, also staring at Kaelyn fiercely.

“Mr. and Mrs. Netley, I can explain—” tried Kloe.

The woman’s head snapped in her direction. “Are you crazy? I knew this family was slightly insane, but this?” She scoffed. “Kaelyn Avil and her little sister? We’re all doomed now.”

“[...uh—”

“The Network welcomes everyone,” Kloe said, taking a step closer to Kaelyn.

“She’s one of them,” Mr. Netley whispered. His voice got louder. “They increase our taxes, arrest us on false allegations, and kill us in the Games. Now she invades the only space we feel safe.”

“Mr. Netley,” Joseph walked in behind them. He smiled. “I assure you, there is no harm with Miss Avil being here.” He looked between them. “Now come, it’s time for us to start.”

Kaelyn stood in the back between Daniel and Kloe. Joseph sat in a chair in the front of the small crowd gathered around him. Everyone had their heads down and Daniel was whispering something. He used words Kaelyn didn’t recognize, and after a few minutes, everyone lifted their eyes to Joseph. He began speaking.

It was unlike anything Kaelyn had ever seen before. Joseph's voice was barely a whisper. The more he spoke, the louder his voice became. He held eye contact with everyone in the room, including Kaelyn. When his green eyes landed on hers, she looked away.

"What is he doing?" she whispered to Kloe.

She smiled. "He's telling our story."

"Story?"

Kloe nodded. "The story of the Network. The greater story each of us is a part of."

Joseph's voice was soft again. "He was perfect. He didn't make the same mistakes we did. On the night of his death, he begged his close friends to stay awake with him, but they couldn't." Kaelyn's head hurt. Her forehead tightened, and her stomach twisted in knots. "He knew what he came to do, but when he drew away, he broke down. The hero was scared to die. He begged to let what was coming to pass happen some other way. Any other way. He was so distressed, so anxious, his sweat was as blood." *As Blood*. Her head pounded. She winced from the pain. "But the mission couldn't be taken away from him. He knew it was the only way. He would die. And on that night, one of his closest friends, betrayed him with a kiss."

Kaelyn gasped and Daniel and Kloe glanced at her. Daniel raised an eyebrow. *The special baby*. Joseph was telling the story of the special baby who would grow up to save everyone. Her mother would tell her the same story nearly every night before she went to bed. Her mother's stories were slightly different, especially in the way she told them, but they were the same nonetheless.

Kaelyn shook her head, slowly backing out of the room as Joseph continued the story of how the man would die and then be brought back to life. The door shut softly behind her just as the first tears filled her eyes. What was happening to her? “Mom,” she cried aloud, gathering her arms around herself. It was the first time she said it since she was six. “Mom, I miss you.”

The door slammed shut again, this time a little louder. She quickly turned around wiping her eyes. “What do you want?”

“I came to see if you were okay,” Daniel whispered. He handed her a small rag and waited as Kaelyn wiped her face and blew her nose. She tried not to think about the spots of dirt on the rag. Or the fact that Daniel was staring at her with tears streaming down her face.

She sniffled and handed it back to him. “Thank you.”

He tossed the rag back towards the house, then looked at her. He put his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Kaelyn wiped away another tear. “Let me guess: Kloe sent you out here.”

“Kaelyn—”

“Why are you even pretending to be nice to me?”

His eyebrow arched. “Pretending?”

She sighed angrily. “Daniel, you and I both know you hate me.”

“Hate?”

“Don’t even try to deny it. You don’t trust me. You have the same hateful expression on your face every time I’m around. You don’t understand why your family is being so kind to me.”

She took a step back, her hand in front of her as if she was defending herself from Daniel.

“Please, spare me. I want to be alone.”

He turned and headed back towards the house, but paused. “Kaelyn, I don’t hate you.” He turned back towards her. “And my sister didn’t tell me to come check on you. Now, tell me what’s wrong.”

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong?” Kaelyn’s voice was loud. “Everything! A mere weeks ago, I didn’t know any of this. The design on my mother’s necklace was a scratch. A coincidence. And now, my mother is a follower of some secret underground group, Ellie is gone, Daemon is leaving and asking me to move with him. I’m questioning everything I’ve ever been told and doing things I’ve never done before like standing up for a criminal in the middle of the Games.” She gripped her hair. “What is happening to me? Why am I even here?”

“Why are you here?”

“Excuse me? What do you mean?”

His voice was soft. “Kaelyn, why are you here? You could’ve left weeks ago and never returned, but yet you still keep coming back. Why? Why are you here?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“I think you do.” He pressed.

“Daniel, if I knew, I wouldn’t be yelling about it.”

“Kaelyn, I think you do.” His deep green eyes met hers and stayed there. “You can feel it, can’t you? I think you’ve felt it since you came to the Lower Sector weeks ago. Something that

is different and scary, but you return because the closer you get to it, the more like yourself you feel.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Kaelyn started back towards the house. “I’ve told you. I’m here for one reason and one reason only. I can care less about the Network. I’m here for my mother.”