

The Village

Today is a day I have lived dozens of times. Waking up to hear the foghorns that signal the Soldiers' return is comforting to me. It means routine. It means specific, meticulous details, a role I have to play. I am better at playing roles than playing myself, and rightfully so because I've been playing roles my entire life. Today is no different.

And yet, it is all coming to an end soon. My Superior promised me this would be my last assignment before becoming a Superior myself, before the memory erasure technology was ready to use on the Soldiers. At 22, I will be the youngest Superior in the history of the Village. I should clarify: my Superior is also my mother, but it feels weird to call her "mother," so I don't. Our relationship has been strictly professional since the day I was born on the floor of her office. I have never known a life outside this place she created.

I peer out my window at the grayness of the morning, my head pounding like usual. The Guards begin their methodical walk on the flat roofs of the village's buildings. Watching. I've never been afraid of them. They're not there for me. Well, I suppose they could be, but I'd never do anything stupid enough to get their attention, not when I can hear their footsteps above me.

I sigh and pull my thick curtains closed so I can get ready in privacy and in the dark. It's easy getting around my apartment in the dark, one because it's so small and two because it's so clean. Clean and simple. It's how I prefer everything.

"One more, Helena," I mutter to myself, pulling on a black turtleneck from my closet. "One more."

I stare at the ten pairs of black skinny jeans I have and grab the one on the top, hopping up and down a few times to pull them up my waist. As I wander into the bathroom to do my hair, finally turning on a light, I think about my assignment and what my job is today.

When Simon first stepped off the bus four years ago, his eyes were wide and doe-like. I almost felt bad for him, for what we were going to turn him into. Most guys who come to the village are aggressive and violent already, so turning them into Soldiers is no problem. Simon is... well, Simon is different. He's the first assignment I actually see as another human being. I wasn't surprised when my Superior assigned me to him a year ago. No other Aid has been able to get through to him.

I can't wait to be rid of him.

I can't wait to rid him of his memories so that he can finally blend in with all the other Soldiers and I can forget about him and he can forget about me.

But for today, I will pretend to be in love with him. One last time. I ignore the sick feeling in my stomach at the thought.

After my hair is in a tight French braid cascading halfway down my back, I smooth my turtleneck out and give my rested-looking reflection a slight nod. The hundreds of freckles on my face look darker than usual today, but I've never made an effort to cover them up before. They

match the brownness of my hair, and I kind of like them. It's the one part of myself that doesn't remind me of my Superior, so I wear them with pride.

Walking out of my apartment, boots crunching on the gravel road, I see the army from a distance. The Village can hold no more than three hundred Soldiers, but from my estimation, nearly half of them did not make the return trip. Now we have more room, at least.

As an Aid, my tasks today are to comfort Simon and make sure his transition back into everyday life goes smoothly. I will also need to buy into his ridiculous notions that the Village is corrupt so that he can vent to someone. Simon has been difficult ever since he arrived here, never wanting to cooperate and infecting other Soldiers' minds with crazed theories.

I wait for Simon at the edge of the Village, gravel turning into dead grass, world's end. Well, my world's end. I have no idea if anything else exists beyond here besides death and war.

Eventually, I spot Simon among the Soldiers, and my heart unexpectedly drops at the sight of him. Slumped and slouching, his usually wild, unkempt dark hair is matted to his forehead. His green eyes are dark and dead, devastated. His sword drags on the ground behind him, and he is caked in so much blood and dirt that I'm not sure where the remnants of other people end and he begins.

I see him, and the line between who I'm supposed to be and who I am blurs.

Bathed in weapons and war, I stand in front of her for the first time in a year. I force myself to memorize her features before they are taken away from me again. This is not a tiresome task; I could look only her for the rest of my life and never run out of wonderment. From her deep brown eyes to every little freckle on her cheeks, she has captured me.

My armor sits so heavily on my broken body that I could melt into the earth and never return. I want nothing more than to fall into her arms and weep until my eyes run dry. When I look at her, I see a force. All fire and strength and serenity, she is mother nature.

The dead grass crunches beneath my feet as I step closer to Helena. I can't help but glance up at the Guards walking on the village's flat rooftops, monitoring us. Always watching. The ashen fog almost makes it look like they're walking on air, and the brick buildings below them stand stoically.

The reunions around us do not faze me. Over half of the Soldiers don't have anyone to come home to, but I have Helena, will always have Helena. I'm lucky. Covered in sweat and death, I'm lucky.

Helena places a hand on my cheek; it's a gentleness I have not felt for far too long. I have been ripped raw by others and have ripped others raw, and yet, she still touches me. I have never known a face as kind as hers. She is never false, a breath of fresh air after being lied to for the last year. I sigh and lean into her hand while her thumb runs along a tear-stained path on my face.

"Simon, who do you weep for?" she asks.

My eyes close, and bloody memories stab their way to the surface. Blood and blood and blood. For one year, it was never-ending. I have become grossly accustomed to the sound a blade makes when it enters a human body and exits out the other side.

When I first came to the Village at 19, I was blinded by hatred toward my parents for shipping me to this unimaginable place. I didn't do anything wrong. I didn't deserve to be here; I wasn't a killer. On the outside, I wanted to be an artist. What's threatening about an artist that makes his parents send him to a military camp?

I guess it's the most threatening thing in the world when I'm supposed to take over my father's company but would rather hold a paint brush than a test tube. They thought they'd scare me straight, mold me into something I'm not, but it's not working.

Now, instead of painting canvases with blues, purples, and pinks, I solely paint the ground in shades of red.

And I have no idea why. I don't know why we're fighting or who we're fighting, and no one has ever given me any answers. When placed in battle, facing the other end of a sword, what else could I do but fight back?

But after four years of training and killing to survive, maybe I do deserve to be here.

"For the hundreds who ran through this sword," I say.

Helena places her hand around my clenched fist that grips my sword, prying it away from me. It's like my hands don't know what to do when they aren't tightened around it, ready to kill.

What have I become? This awful fucking place is tearing me away from myself.

"This isn't something you have to do alone anymore."

Her words are sincere and comforting, but I'm beyond needing sincerity and comfort. I need peace. Freedom.

"He who fights by the sword, dies by the sword, right?" I say cynically.

It's the Village's motto, a place that only knows of warfare and death. Even when the army is victorious in battle, our bodies are caked in defeat anyway.

"Simon," she says, sounding disappointed, "Forgiving is easier than fighting. Pride is easier to swallow than murder. You know this. Don't let them groom you into believing their nonsensical ideals."

I want to scream.

War is all I know now. Everything else has been wiped out. How can I possibly believe in forgiveness when I am part of the system that believes the exact opposite? Never mind the fact that I would face my own death if I refused to fight. I am still complicit. Still weak and cowardly. Yet, I never refuse. I murder for them, stay alive for them.

Space exists between the two of us. Infinite potential for a life outside of this. But I want it now. I want to close the distance and be there already; I've waited too long.

I have to get out of here, and I need Helena to come with me.

I touched him. I'm so fucked.

The moment the Guard walked up to me after I left Simon at his apartment and told me my Superior wanted to see me, I knew what it was about. Initiating physical contact with our assignments is strictly forbidden. Our job is to help them readjust to life outside of warfare and get back into daily training schedules. That's it. The three main rules are: we don't meet them without the presence of a Guard, we don't divulge personal information about ourselves, and we definitely don't touch them.

They are killers, after all.

What does it mean that I made the biggest mistake of my career and didn't even realize it?

After swiping my key card, I enter The Hub, located in the center of the Village. Even though my Superior works here, even though she's my mom, I avoid this place as much as possible.

The Hub, my Superior's pride and joy, is a giant, modern building that looks completely out of place from the rest of the old brick buildings in the Village. It is used for training new Aids and for screening new Soldiers. The best word I can use to describe it is empty. I mean, there are people working inside, and there's always training going on, but it feels hollow. It feels like the black hole at the center of the galaxy. It takes and takes and takes.

I shiver as I step up to the receptionist desk. The old man seated behind it doesn't even look up as he mumbles, "Name?"

His glasses are nearly falling off of his face, back hunched over as he messily scribbles something on a piece of paper.

"Helena Winks," I say, mentally trying to figure out what I have to do to not end up like this man. "Here to see my Superior."

His eyes flick up to me at my last name, and he immediately sits up straight and gives me his full attention. I fight the urge to roll my eyes.

"Oh, right. Um. Head on back. She's waiting for you."

I take a deep breath, crack my knuckles, and walk down the long hallway to get to my Superior's office, mind running rampant. My steps get slower and shorter the closer I get to her office.

"Don't dawdle out there, Helena," I hear her call, annoyance seeping through her voice. "I'm very busy today."

“Yes, ma’am,” I instinctively answer, hurrying now to enter her office.

Much like the rest of the Hub, my Superior’s office is empty. It looks more like a prison cell than an office. There are no pictures of me or my dad hanging up on the walls or on her desk, items that usually clutter up other Superiors’ offices. I suppose she probably burned all the pictures of my dad after he left. The only decorative piece she has is her name plate that reads “Lorraine Winks.”

My Superior looks as she always does, her brown hair tied up in a tight top knot with no hair out of place, her all-black uniform perfectly pressed and polished.

“Sit,” she says, pointing to an uncomfortable looking chair in front of her desk. “I received a worrying report about you today.”

I sit in the chair which is just as uncomfortable as it looks, sitting as perfectly straight as I possibly can. My Superior will call me out if I don’t.

“You initiated physical contact with your assignment,” my Superior continues. She holds a piece of paper in front of her face. “‘A prolonged hand caressing his face,’ is what the Guard writes.”

She places the paper back on her desk and looks at me expectantly.

I shrug. “Okay, so I touched him. I’m supposed to be in love with him, right? Doesn’t that mean touching him every once in a while?”

“Supposed to be or are?”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Are you in love with Simon, Helena?”

The question comes out of nowhere, and I’m genuinely taken aback. Yet, I sit in silence, unable to answer for a moment.

I hope she doesn’t sense my hesitation, hesitation that even takes me by surprise, but I quickly recover. “Absolutely not. I find it insulting that you even have to ask that question of me.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Right. You’re insulted. Forgive me. I have no qualms about keeping you as an Aid after this assignment is over. You do know that, yes?”

She only reminds me every time I see her. Instead of “I’m your mother. I brought you into this world, and I can take you out of it,” it’s “I’m your Superior. I can make promises, and I can break them just as quick.”

“I’ll do better,” I promise. “How’s the memory tech progressing?”

She sighs. “Slowly. We’re still monitoring our test subject to make sure there aren’t any long-term effects, but the tech itself is ready to go.”

“It’s been over three years. You still can’t tell me who this test subject is?”

“That information is confidential. How are your headaches?”

This is how conversations usually go between us, both changing topics when we get too uncomfortable with the current one.

“Better,” I lie. I don’t want to be here anymore.

She nods approvingly. “Any weird dreams or instances of déjà vu?”

That’s a new one. “No, why?”

“I just want to make sure you’re healthy.”

Right, because she’s always been so concerned about my health. Besides asking about my headaches and general well-being every once in a while, my Superior couldn’t give a shit.

“I’m healthy.”

“Ma’am?” I hear someone call from behind me. “Oh, sorry, I didn’t realize you had someone in here. There’s an emergency with one of the returning Soldiers. You’re needed in the med wing.”

My Superior nods and stands up. “It’s alright, Tevin. I’ll be right out.” She starts walking toward the door, but stops right next to me. “Remember what I said. Don’t make any more mistakes.”

I don’t respond as she walks out of her office. I’m not sure what possesses me to stay in here longer than absolutely necessary, but I find myself becoming more and more curious as I glance at the folders on my Superior’s desk.

If she won’t tell me who this test subject is, then I’ll just find out for myself.

I quickly stand up and walk around to the other side of her desk, noticing the colors of the folders. My Superior has a very intricate color-coding system for organizing these, a system I was forced to learn from a very young age. Green folders are Soldier intake folders, red folders are Aid folders, blue folders are Superior folders, and black folders are Guard folders. My eyes immediately land on a folder that is clearly out of place, the neon yellow color making a stark difference against the others.

I pry the yellow folder out from the stack and nearly drop it when I see my name written across the top. What the hell is this? I’ve seen my Aid folder before and know for a fact that it’s red. This is definitely not that.

Cautiously opening the folder, I scan the documents inside, and all of a sudden, the folder gets ten pounds heavier. I read the words “memory extraction,” “Subject 1,” and “headaches” over and over again.

It’s me. I’m the test subject. My memories were wiped.

In my still half-asleep state, I trip over the lamp cord and nearly fall on my face trying to answer my door. The pounding in my head matches the pounding on the door, images of dead bodies still filling my mind from my dreams.

When I open the door to see Helena standing there, I once again have to tell myself that this is reality. She's real, but at a closer look, she looks distressed, to put it lightly. She's breathing heavily like she sprinted here, and her usually calm eyes are wide and frantic.

"What's going on?" I ask.

She just stares at me, like she has no idea how to make words come out of her mouth. I can almost feel the fear radiating off of her.

"I..." she trails off. "It's me."

I furrow my eyebrows. "Yes, Helena, I know it's you." When she doesn't say anything else, I open my door wider. "Here, come inside."

At my words, Helena takes a step back, shaking her head. "I can't. I'm sorry, I don't even know why I came here. Um, I need to go."

Something is incredibly wrong.

I'm losing control.

This is not simple and clean. This is not routine.

I am all too aware that Simon now has the advantage over me. He has his memories; he knows how he got into the Village, so he knows how to get out. He knows what lies beyond. The one person I wanted to be rid of most is now the one person I need more than anyone, and I'm about to run away from him.

My hands are curled into fists at my side to keep my hands from shaking, and I can't imagine what I look like to Simon right now. Probably like some sort of deranged animal because that's what I certainly feel like.

My skin is crawling, and my head... it feels like someone is using it as batting practice. Before I can get away from Simon's apartment, I have to bring my fists up to my head to stop the pounding.

I feel a hand grip my wrist. "Come on, you're starting to scare me," Simon says quietly, leading me into his apartment.

I'm starting to scare me.

I ignore the fact that this, being in a Soldier's apartment, is very against the rules and instead focus on the blooming paranoia in my chest.

Am I being watched right now? Has someone been constantly watching me, observing my condition, since my memories have been taken? Does my Superior already know that I know? How could she do this to me? I'm her daughter.

No, I remind myself, I'm her Aid. The only reason she asks about my headaches are because she wants to make sure the Soldiers don't have the same kind of after effects of memory extraction. I'm nothing to her, just an experiment.

The next time I come back to myself, I'm sitting on Simon's couch. He's crouched down in front of me, holding out a glass of water. I shake my head; I'm too nauseous for that. I'm afraid of what will come out of my mouth if I open it.

"Helena," he starts. "I need you to tell me what's going on."

Her red-rimmed eyes stare straight into my soul, and I want nothing more than to ease her of whatever kind of pain this is.

She seems reluctant to talk, seems sick, but then she says, "I don't know where to even begin. You're probably not going to believe me, but I need your help."

"I'll believe you," I respond without hesitation, setting the glass of water on the floor next to the couch.

I sit cross-legged on the floor in front of Helena. I want to be close to her, to help her. She is the only person I can trust here, and I want her to feel like she can trust me, too.

Helena clears her throat. "Okay, um. My last name is Winks; my mom is the person who created the Village. I work here."

Blow number one.

Bang.

Blows two and three come quick and harsh. It's like a cork has been released; the words flow out of Helena, words that I don't want to hear, many words that I ignore.

"You're what we call an assignment."

An assignment, not a person.

Bang.

"My job was to play a part, to help you get reacclimated after battle."

My mind shuts down.

Bang.

This has all been a lie. Helena doesn't love me, doesn't care about me. She doesn't say it in these exact words, but they're right under the surface.

You fool.

This woman who I thought could never lie is made of them. This woman who has been the only good part about being here is now becoming the worst.

I stand up, backing away. “Get out,” I say, cutting her off from spewing out anything more.

I can’t get far enough away from her.

“Simon.”

“Get the fuck out.”

He’s not listening to me. I need him to listen to me.

Before he can throw me out of his apartment, I blurt out, “They’re going to take your memories. Okay? About three months before you got here, they took mine. My Superior, my mother, worked with a bunch of scientists to develop this tech so that anyone who comes here would become obedient, pliant, and cooperative. Imagine how much time they could save by not having to deal with forcing all of you into submission themselves, right? Only, they needed a test subject, and for some reason, they chose me. My own mother chose me. Took my memories. And she’ll take yours, too.”

I watch this information sink in and can see how conflicted he looks as he starts pacing back and forth. He could either throw me out, knowing his memories will be taken eventually, or help me, someone who he now knows has lied to him since he got here.

I have put him in an awful position. I have let him love me and believe that I love him when I don’t. I could, but I don’t. Not yet. Maybe not ever now.

“You’re more of a Soldier than I will ever be,” Simon mutters in disbelief, rubbing a hand over his face. “You- this is unbelievable, really. Why do you need my help?”

His face tells me he hates me, but his words tell me he can be convinced.

“You know what’s out there,” I explain. “No world exists for me outside of here, not one that I can remember.”

“But surely, you’ve been outside the Village, right?”

I just stare blankly back at him.

I make my decision then and there. The idea of losing any more of myself, of ending up like Helena, is too terrifying. I will put her words behind me for now because we need each other to get out of here. The one thing I’ve wanted more than anything since arriving at the Village is getting out of the Village. I have my chance now, and even though I feel nauseous looking at Helena, someone I can’t help but love, I know I can’t say no.

“I can’t forgive you for this,” I say firmly. Helena’s face visibly drops at this, and I can’t fight the urge to ask why. “What, you thought after everything you just told me that I’d just frolic off into the night with you?”

“No, I-,”

“You don’t have to pretend to care about me anymore, Helena.”

Her silence tells me more than I want to know right now. For a moment, I allow myself to believe that Helena might actually care about me, or hell, even love me. But that’s worse. It makes everything worse.

Helena takes a deep breath. “My Superior is conveniently distracted right now, but as soon as she finds out what I know, this place will be turned upside down. I need to know if you’re going to help me.”

I nod my head once before I can change my mind. “Give me a minute to pack some things.”

Am I surprised that Simon decides to help me? No.

I know he wants to hate me, to yell at me. I can see it in his face, in the way his eyebrows scrunch up and in the tension in his shoulders. He’s holding back. But I also know that he loves me too much to not help me and to not save himself in the process.

I wait nervously on the couch while Simon goes to pack a few things in his room. We don’t have much time. I’m more precious to my Superior now than I’ve ever been, and she might not even realize it yet. My only hope is that she’s too caught up with the emergency with the Soldier.

This place. I don’t want to believe I ever believed in it. Did I really think that what my Superior was doing was right? Was I that naïve? I mean, military camp is one thing, but taking memories?

As I think on it, maybe I never did believe that what she was doing was right. Maybe that’s why she took my memories. It wouldn’t make much sense to take someone’s memories who is already cooperative.

What was my life like before this, before my memories were taken? Who was I, and who am I now?

My leg bounces up and down, and I feel like I’m going to be sick until Simon comes back with a bag over his shoulder.

“Ready?”

And what am I supposed to say? Yes? No? Neither of those answers would be the truth, so I don’t say either.

“I don’t have much of a plan,” I say.

“Well, lucky for you, I’ve been planning for this since I’ve gotten here. Follow me.”

He leads me to the back of his apartment, and among the nerves and the fear and all the shit, I feel little blossoms of hope in the pit of my stomach. Maybe this will work.

This isn't going to work.

I know from the moment we step outside. Even though I told Helena I had a plan, I have no plan. None of the situations I've ever imagined are like this one.

This is crazy.

I'm with this woman who isn't who I thought she was, and I want to hate her, but I still love her, and we're doing the unimaginable. We exit out the back of my apartment, and cautiously step out. I immediately grab her hand to start running, but she stops me.

"What do you think you're doing?" she hisses, eyes frantically looking around. "As of right now, nothing is out of the ordinary. Unless we want to get caught, we can't just start running like bats out of hell."

"Okay, fine, you take charge then," I say somewhat sarcastically.

But can I really be surprised when Helena actually takes charge?

"Stay close to me, but don't touch me," she starts. We begin walking down the cobblestone road. "As long as we don't look suspicious, the Guards won't pay attention to us. Just, pretend you don't hate me for a second and act like we're having a happy conversation while getting us the hell out of here. Calmly."

Right. No big deal. Easy.

The sun beats down on my face, and I'm now hypersensitive to how I'm walking. How does someone walk suspiciously, anyway? And am I walking suspiciously? Can the Guards on the roofs smell my fear from blocks away?

"You're telling me that your mom created this place but never gave you a way out of here?" Simon asks.

I resist the urge to glance up at the rooftops again. "Well, I don't know if she did or if she didn't. All I know is that I don't know how to get past the front gate. You do?"

"I nabbed a Guard's keycard the night before we went off to battle."

Does the gate keep our enemies out, or does it just keep us in? What else is out there?

Simon doesn't give any more details, but I could care less about those details because there's only one question on my mind.

"Why didn't you use it?"

We pass by three Guards walking our way, and I hold my breath, giving them a slight nod. When all we get is the same nod back, those hope blossoms get a little bigger in my stomach.

Once we're a safe enough distance away, Simon says, "I wanted to wait for you. I was going to go find you in the morning, but before the sun even rose, the foghorn went off without warning. I wanted to leave, yes, but more than anything, I wanted to leave with you."

My steps falter, and I nearly trip over my own shock and guilt.

I don't know how to respond to that, so I don't, not until Simon fills the silence again.

"I truly loved you, you know."

The way he speaks of loving me in the past tense hurts more than I'd like to admit.

"I know."

"You're a good actress, I'll give you that. Had me fooled."

But that's the thing. With Simon, none of it has ever felt like acting. It's real. He's real. The thought of not being loved by him anymore makes me want to rip out my heart and hand it to him, show him what's truly there. I can lie, but my heart can't.

"Simon," I start.

"Shit," he mutters, before I can get any further. "I think we've caught the Guards' attention."

They're watching us.

What did we think was going to happen as we walked closer and closer to the front gate? That we'd just be able to get right on through?

I know the Guards are watching us because they've stopped moving, and they never stop walking around the rooftops unless there's a problem.

"We don't know that they know," Helena reasons.

To prove my point, I glance up at the roof of the building in front of us and make direct eye contact with a Guard.

"Helena, they're looking right at us."

Panic rises in my stomach, and I start to get antsy. We can't just keep pretending that everything is okay, that the Guards aren't silently waiting for us to make a mistake.

"Okay, well, don't do anything stupid," she says. "We're nearly at the edge of the Village."

"And do you think they're going to let us get much further?"

"Whatever you're thinking of doing right now, don't do it," Helena warns.

The next time I look up at the Guards, one of them is talking into a walkie talkie, hand gripping a huge gun. It never made sense to me why the men they sent into battle were only given

swords but the Guards had guns. My skin is itchy, and I grip my bag tighter around my shoulder. If we want to get out of here, we have to move.

As I grab Helena's hand and start to run, I am all action and no thought. The gate is in our sight, and I don't care how many Guards get in our way, we're getting out of here.

All of a sudden, my arm is being jerked out of its socket and Simon is pulling me down the street. I really have no other choice but to run after him, mentally cursing him as I hear commotion above me.

"This is definitely 'something stupid!'" I say, catching up to Simon.

We run through the streets, and I don't know if I hear pounding footsteps behind us or if it's just my heartbeat. There's this rush, this hope that this could actually work.

And it is working. We near the front gate of the Village, and it's working.

And then.

Guards everywhere in front of us. Thirty at least.

Coming out from the shadows, uprooting the hope from my stomach.

And my Superior in front of them all.

Simon and I stop in our tracks, his hand leaving mine. I could die, right here. I'd rather that happen than get rebooted again. The Guards stand with their guns aimed at us, undoubtedly waiting for my Superior to give them permission to pump us full of bullets, make an example of us.

I can't gauge the look on my Superior's face. Is it disappointment? Resentment? Disinterest?

I glance over at Simon when his hand slips back into mine, pressing something made of plastic against my palm.

"Cut around the back of the outdoor training area and up to the front. I'll try and distract them," he says quietly.

My eyes widen as I realize what he's given me: Not just the key card to the gate, but a chance.

I wanted to leave, yes, but more than anything, I wanted to leave with you.

My feet stay glued to the ground.

"Helena," my Superior says. "What is this?" she sounds tired. When I don't answer, she nods to Simon. "Grab him."

Two Guards surge forward and grab Simon by the arms, hauling him forward. I just manage to hang onto the key card as his hand is ripped from mine. Fear runs through me, my brain finally catching up to my body.

What have we done? How could we be so stupid to think we could get out of here?

“I am aware of what you know,” my Superior stars. “You need to come with me.”

I take a step back, fists clenched at my side. “I can’t. You- you can’t do this to me. Please.”

I’m too desperate to feel embarrassed about pleading to my Superior.

“I can and I will. It’s perfect; Simon will be our second subject.”

I feel small, like a child. I want to curl in on myself and make this whole world go away. My chest hurts when I look at Simon with such a pained expression on his face as he struggles against the Guards’ grip.

“Please,” I beg. “Don’t hurt him.”

“If you care about Simon, you’ll come with me,” my Superior warns.

I watch Simon struggle even more, his eyes shooting daggers at my Superior. I run my thumb over the key card, the key to my freedom.

Today is a day I have lived dozens of times. And I’m going to have to live it at least once more.

Bright, blinding lights.

It’s like I’m staring up into the sun.

I’m faintly aware of a pounding in my head, and I don’t know where I am or what’s going on. I just know I’m laying down on an incredibly comfortable bed that I could sink into and never come back out of.

Before I can call back asleep, I look to my left and I see the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on. She’s asleep, her face a galaxy of freckles, but she looks distressed. I want to know everything about her.

I feel peaceful.

I jolt awake, not knowing who I am. The room I’m in is tiny, just big enough to fit two beds. It’s white, antiseptic. The man lying in the other bed is asleep; I have no idea who he is. He looks innocent, like he’s never experienced life.

A woman walks into the room, and I’m scared of her. I don’t know why because I’ve never seen her before in my life, but I’m scared of her. Her hair is in a tight top knot, and it looks like she’s never smiled a day in her life.

“Helena,” she starts, “how are you feeling?”

Helena. That's my name. I know it's my name, but nothing comes to mind when I hear it. No memories, no emotion, nothing.

"Uh, I'm okay. Where am I?"

"You're in the Village, specifically a building called the Hub. My name is Lorraine. I'm happy to report that the procedure went smoothly."

"What procedure? I don't remember."

The first semblance of a smile crosses Lorraine's face as she glances down at the man next to me. When her eyes find mine again, she says, "No, I suppose you wouldn't."