

## Branded

### by Kelley Armstrong

**THERE'S NOTHING AS** boring as civics class, and in the fortress, that's really saying something. Still, monotony can be good, if the alternative is fighting for survival every second of every day until you die a horrible, violent death, your bones gnawed and sucked clean by scavengers, not all of them animal. That's the message of civics class, and students get it every six months to remind us how good we have it in the fortress. After seventeen years, I could recite it in my sleep.

As the minister droned on, Priscilla elbowed my ribs. "Braeden keeps looking at you, Rayne."

I glanced over. Braeden smiled. He mouthed something, but I didn't catch it—I was too busy looking at that sad twist of a smile. Maybe there was still time. Maybe I could—

Learning reading speed

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one.

Every kid surrounding Braeden stumbled over himself getting away—chairs toppling, desks scraping the wooden floor—until Braeden was alone. He rose slowly, hands instinctively going to the pockets of his grease-and-soot-streaked trousers, then thinking better of it and lifting them.

"Is this about the Fourth's horse?" he asked. "He says my father didn't shoe it properly but—"

"Braeden Smith." The regulator with the cudgel walked toward Braeden. "You are hereby charged with breaking the First Law of the fortress." The whispers and gasps of the students almost drowned out his next words. "You have been accused of having supernatural blood. Werewolf blood. You will be taken to the stocks and watched for signs—"

"What? No! I'm not a—"

The regulator grabbed Braeden by the arm and twisted it, but Braeden broke free. He looked around, as if lost, then his gaze fell on me. He let out a snarl and flew at me. I stood my ground as Priscilla and the other girls ran, shrieking.

"You did this!" Braeden said as he charged. "You treacherous bitch!"

I made a move to dive for safety, but he grabbed me in a headlock, still ranting as I struggled. The

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But I couldn't. It was done.

The minister had now begun the history lesson, just in case we'd somehow forgotten how we all got here.

"The end began when the world discovered the existence of supernatural beings. Witches, sorcerers, vampires, werewolves, and others, all living among us. When they were revealed, the natural order was destroyed forever, and the very earth revolted. Famines, earthquakes, tsunamis . . .

"Then those supernatural beings decided that infiltrating our world was not enough. They needed to infiltrate our very selves. They convinced scientists to modify ordinary humans with supernatural DNA, promising superior soldiers for our wars against those who sought to take our food supplies and our habitable land.

"And so we took refuge in our fortresses, where we continued to live as civilized beings, protected from the Outside. Yet even here, we are constantly under siege from another threat, equally dangerous. Overpopulation. That is why—"

The classroom door flew open. Two regulators burst in, one armed with a cudgel; the other, a syringe.

"Braeden Smith," barked the cudgel-wielding

regulator with the syringe crept up behind Braeden. As he injected him, Braeden stiffened. His hand dropped to mine. A quick squeeze. Then he hit the floor, unconscious.

**A day later**, they had their proof. Braeden had transformed into a wolf. We'd known he would. Braeden had grown up on the Outside and knew the gene ran in his family. As with most supernatural powers, it left whole generations untouched. We had hoped it would pass Braeden. It didn't.

On the day of his branding, nearly everyone in the fortress crowded into the square. I read once about hangings in the Old World, how people would watch with great delight and baskets of food. There was no joy here, certainly no feasting. We came because if we did not, then someone—a regulator, a minister, a prefect—might notice our absence and decide we were not as committed to the laws as we should be. Or, worse, that we had cause to fear the same fate for ourselves.

They'd given me a place of honor, on the raised platform with the First's and Second's families. As Priscilla clutched my hand, I noticed her mother frown, but Priscilla's chin shot up in a rare show of defiance, and she held my hand tighter. Her father

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noticed and nodded, first at me, then at her. She glowed at his approval.

Priscilla and I had always been schoolmates, but now that she believed I'd informed on a werewolf, I had risen to the status of friend. Friends with the Second's daughter. How my mother would laugh if she were here to see it. No, she wouldn't laugh. She'd rub her hands and plot how to use it to her advantage. That's what it was all about in the fortress—getting ahead, surviving and thriving.

For my mother, surviving had meant accepting life as a whore. It's a real job in the fortress, just like a blacksmith or a doctor or a farmer, and it's considered just as necessary for the stability of the community. She accepted it. I wouldn't. There were other ways to survive, if you were willing to take chances, including the chance that you wouldn't survive.

They led Braeden out. He'd been stripped to the waist, his feet bare, his trousers even filthier than they had been when the regulators had taken him in. His face was unshaven, dark shadow on his cheeks; his hair unwashed, falling over his face. Making him look like an animal. *See? This is what we saved you from.*

I looked at his chest—the lean muscles, the old

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dangerous. But I hadn't seen anger—I'd seen terror.

I remembered him again, at twelve. A prefect's son and his friend had cornered me behind the schoolhouse and decided that since I was going to be a whore someday, I should be willing to take off my shirt for a credit, and if I wasn't, then they'd take it off without paying the credit. Braeden came around the corner and sent them scattering with an ease that made my weak kicks and punches look like the struggles of an infant. I'd asked him for lessons in fighting and said I'd pay. He'd said he didn't need that kind of pay, and I'd lost my temper, snarling that I wasn't a whore and when I said pay, I meant credits. He'd been amused, I think. But he agreed. Only he wouldn't trade for credits—he wanted me to teach him something: how to read and write.

When they lifted the brand, I was thinking of Braeden again, at fourteen, the first time he kissed me. I tried to focus on the memory, but I could smell the fire and see the glowing metal.

"The brand is nothing," he'd said. "I've had worse burns. You know that."

I'd seen those burns. Some accidental. Some not. Mr. Smith might call Braeden his son, but he slept in the barn and worked from sunrise to sunset, and if he didn't do a good enough job, he'd be beaten,

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scars, the healed burns—and remembered all the nights lying in our cubbyhole, touching him, whispering with him. There were new marks now, lash welts crisscrossing every inch of bare skin.

"They'll beat me, Rayne," he'd warned. "You need to be ready for that."

"I know."

I tried not to see the welts, but of course I did, and the rage built inside me until Priscilla's hand twisted in mine. I realized I was clutching too tight and loosened my grip.

Taking deep breaths, I forced myself to look at the figure on the stage and see another Braeden. To see the boy who'd been bought from the Outsiders to replace the blacksmith's dead son.

In the fortress, couples are allowed only one child. If that child dies, they can have another baby, but that isn't a solution for someone like the blacksmith, who needed a replacement for the strong, healthy ten-year-old son who'd been his apprentice.

The day that Braeden was brought in, everyone had again found an excuse to be in the square. They'd ogled the boy, who'd looked much as he did now—barefoot and filthy. They'd whispered about his eyes, how savage he looked, how angry, how

sometimes burned.

Yet this was different. I saw that glowing metal coming toward Braeden's back, and I had to drop Priscilla's hand before I squeezed hard enough to break bones. I gripped my legs instead, my fingers digging in.

The brand sizzled as the metal touched his back. His body convulsed. I swore I smelled the stink of burning flesh. He didn't cry out, though. They always cried out, even the grown men, sometimes dropping to their knees, howling and weeping. But after that first flinch, Braeden stood firm, gaze straight ahead, biting his lip until blood trickled down his chin.

Next the regulator pressed soot into the wound. That's when Braeden almost lost it. His eyes bulged with agony, and tears streamed down his cheeks. His gaze rolled my way. His eyes met mine and he mouthed, "Just a burn," before looking away again.

"He saw you," Priscilla whispered. "He said something."

"Cursing me to a thousand hells, I'm sure," I said, my voice thick.

She put a thin arm around my shoulders. "You did the right thing. Can you imagine if no one had discovered him? A werewolf?" She shuddered. "The

last werewolf in the fortress ate three children before he was caught.”

I doubted it. I'd been with Braeden when he changed to a wolf, and he'd never even nipped at me. Priscilla's story was an old one, passed down as an example of how horrible supernaturals could be and why they must be rooted out at all costs. There probably had been a werewolf. And children might have died in the years leading up to his discovery, but that was hardly unheard of in the fortress. Disease and death stalked the young and old here. It grew worse with every passing year, as supplies and food sources dwindled.

There were no words after the branding. The charges and the sentence had been read beforehand. Now all that remained was the final part of that sentence. The casting out.

A horse-drawn cart waited beside the stage. The regulators prodded Braeden toward it. When he gazed about, as if blinded and befuddled by pain, they gave him a tremendous shove off the stage, and he hit the cart with a thud, crumpling at the bottom. A regulator jumped in after him and forced him to stand. It took a moment for Braeden to get himself steady—there was a post in the cart, where they often had to tie the convicted to keep him upright—

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hybrids and the tribes, all to bring back wood to repair the wall. Sixteen feet up there was a platform that stretched around the perimeter. Guards patrolled it at all times. One was permanently stationed at the gates, bearing one of the few guns we still had from the Old World.

As the gates began to open, Priscilla gripped my arm, her hands trembling.

“Don't be afraid,” she whispered. “We're safe here.”

That was the point. That was what this drama was all about. As those gates swung open, there was a collective gasp. A few women who'd fought to the front now shrieked and pressed back into the crowd. Men snorted at their cowardice, but even they shrank as the gates swung open to reveal . . .

Nothing.

That's what you saw at first. That's what was so terrifying. The gates opened, and you looked out to see miles of barren, rock-strewn dirt, stretching in every direction.

The sun beat down, baking and cracking the earth. It was so bright that it took a moment for your eyes to adjust. Then you noticed the plain was not empty. Far to the left, there was a mountain, dark with trees and capped with snow. To the right

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but Braeden managed it and stood there as he had on the stage, gaze forward, expression blank.

The crowd followed in a procession behind the cart. Now there was a little spring in their steps. This was the part they looked forward to, as they jostled and jockeyed for a spot near the front. Not to watch a convict cast out. Again, that struck a little too close to everyone's gravest fear. But they were about to see a sight they'd talk about for days. The Outside.

The cart rolled along the dusty streets, past the wooden buildings. Children too young to watch the branding leaned out the open windows. Mothers tugged at the children, but only halfheartedly. It wasn't a sight for a child, but fortress life would be better and easier if they understood the alternative.

The cart stopped at the gates, and the regulator took longer than necessary fussing with the locks, making people stamp and twitch and whisper with excitement. I pulled my gaze from Braeden's whip-striped back and looked up at the structure that kept us safe.

The walls of the fortress stretched twenty feet in the air. Our buildings might rot and list, but no expense would be spared for this wall. Voyager parties traveled for days and lost members to the

rose a thin ribbon of smoke. You didn't need to wonder what was at the base. Not a bonfire—no Outsider would be so foolish as to announce his presence with that much smoke. It was a camp, now burning. Torched.

Braeden told me once about coming across a burned camp, back when he was with the tribe. They'd seen the smoke and gone to it, holding back and sending scouts until they were sure the raiding party had left. Then they'd swooped in for the scraps the raiders hadn't wanted, bits of fur or wood left unscorched. They'd ransacked the bodies, too, taking whatever they could from the corpses of those too proud or too foolish to flee when the raiders sounded their horn.

“We didn't take the bodies,” Braeden had said. “Sometimes the elders argued about that. Other tribes took them. For meat.”

I remembered how disgusted I'd been. I remembered how angry Braeden got.

“You don't understand what it's like out there, Rayne. You do what you have to. I really don't want to eat another person, but if it was that or starve . . .”

He was right, of course. Later I found out that, sometimes, in the long winter, when someone died

in the fortress, their body wasn't taken out to be burned. People did what they had to, and it was no different in here than it was out there.

There were piles of bones on the landscape, too. We sent out voyagers to scavenge those when one of the craftsmen needed material, but we didn't bother storing any. The piles weren't going anywhere, and space inside was already at a premium.

Off to the far left there was a body not yet reduced to bones. Carrion eaters attempted to remedy that, silently ripping flesh from the corpse. From the looks of the body, it had been a hybrid, I could no longer tell what kind. Maybe part bull or part bear or part cat. Those were common ones.

The hybrids were the end result of the overreaching ambition that began with the supernaturals. The minister taught us that supernaturals had convinced us to use their DNA, but Braeden's family told him it had been the humans' idea. They'd rounded up the supernaturals and taken that DNA. The scientists had started with careful, controlled studies, but then the wars for food and land broke out, and there wasn't time for caution.

Eventually they decided there was no need to limit themselves to creating ultrapowerful werewolf

soldiers or spell-casting assassins. If they could use the DNA of supernaturals, could they use animals, too? That was near the end of the Old World, when the situation was so dire that no one cared about limits. So they created hybrids. Then the Great Storms came and the Final War came, and when it ended, the hybrids and modified supernaturals broke out of captivity and fought back. It took only a few years for the first fortress to rise, shielding a small group of uninfected humans against that endless wasteland overrun with hybrids and roving bands of survivalists.

That's where Braeden was born. Out there. When he was five, his parents had been killed by hybrids. He'd survived and been found by a tribe of wanderers. They'd taken him in—as a slave whose job was to roam from camp and attract any nearby hybrids so that his tribe could kill them for meat.

So Braeden knew the hybrids better than any fortress dweller. We were told they were just animals with humanoid features, but he said they could be as cunning as humans, setting traps and raiding camps. Some even had language. The point of the lie was to convince us they weren't human so that we wouldn't feel guilty when we slaughtered and ate them.

The hybrid rotting outside our gates hadn't accidentally perished there. I'd heard the shot two days ago. It had ventured too close to the fortress, and a guard had killed it. The carcass would warn others away. To me, that proved the hybrids had some human intelligence.

When the gates opened, the regulators drove the cart through, then stopped just past the walls. By now, Braeden had recovered enough to walk on his own. Once he was out of the cart, the driver led the horses to the side, and two regulators flanked Braeden as the First stepped from the edge of the crowd and solemnly walked toward him. A young prefect followed.

The elderly First stopped in front of Braeden.

"Braeden Smith," he said in his reedy voice. "You have been found to possess werewolf blood, which has been proven to manifest itself in the form of a physical transformation. For this, you must be cast from the fortress. However, in recognition of the fact that you have been an otherwise loyal and productive member of the community—and that this curse comes through no fault of your own—this is not a sentence of execution. We hope that you will find your place in the Outside. To that end, we will provide you with the tools necessary to do so."

He motioned to the young prefect, who stepped forward and handed him a dagger, the metal flashing in the sunlight.

"A weapon for defense."

He dropped it at Braeden's feet. A small bow followed.

"A weapon for hunting."

A filled skin and a bound package.

"Water and food."

Another parcel.

"Clothing and shoes."

Finally, a bag.

"And a pack with which to carry it. You are young and strong, Braeden Smith, and I trust that you will not perish in this harsh land. Go forth with our gifts. And do not return."

Everyone waited for the inevitable final outcry from the convicted. Some attacked the First, and their exile turned into a speedy execution. Some raged and had to be forcibly dragged into the Outside. Most dropped to the First's feet, wailing and begging, promising anything, should they be permitted to stay.

Braeden bent and picked up the shoes first. He put them on. Then he stuffed the food, the waterskin, and the rest of the clothing into the pack.



He slung the bow over his shoulder. When he reached for the knife, the First tensed, but he could not recoil, could not show fear. Braeden picked up the knife, thrust it into the discarded sheath, fastened it to his belt, and hefted the pack. Then, without a glance at the First or the fortress, he began to walk into the Outside, bloody soot falling from his branded back in a trail behind him.

The gates closed as soon as the cart was brought back in. I left then, mumbling apologies to Priscilla as she told me again how brave, how terribly brave, I'd been. Before I could escape, her father clamped a hand on my shoulder and said I must come to dinner, soon, that the fortress needed more young women like me.

If only he knew.

I got away, then raced to the smithy. Braeden's "father" wasn't there. He hadn't gone to the ceremony, more out of shame than because he couldn't bear to watch his boy branded and cast out. I made my way through the stables, past the horses that were the fortress's most valuable commodity. That's what Mr. Smith had used to buy Braeden—a horse. The tribe wanted it because horses were the only way to cross the barren lands one step ahead of the predators, human and otherwise. As Braeden

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peephole. He'd covered it with a nailed piece of old leather, in case light from inside the fortress revealed the hole at night. I pulled the leather off and peered through. Braeden was a distant dot on the horizon now. It was still daylight, and the hybrids rarely came out then, but I knew they were there, hiding in the outcroppings of rock or the rare stand of scrubby bush. Braeden knew too, and steered clear of all obstacles.

"I know how to survive out there, Rayne," he said when he came up with the plan.

"You were ten."

"But I survived. And I've been out with the voyagers. I'll be fine." He'd paused then, peering at me through the dim light in the cubby. "It's you I'm worried about."

"You've taught me well."

"I hope so," he'd whispered, and kissed me, a long, hungry kiss as we stretched out on the rags and told ourselves everything would be all right.

I stared out at his distant figure.

"Everything will be all right," I whispered. But I didn't quite believe it. I don't think either of us did.

I fell asleep in the cubby that night. I knew I shouldn't—it was risky. But I had to trust that

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said, though, he doubted their foresight had lasted past the first harsh winter, when they'd have looked at five hundred pounds of meat and decided having a horse really wasn't that important after all.

When I ducked out the stable's back door, the smell hit me, like it always did. The dung heap. Almost as valuable as the horses themselves—or it would be, once it rotted into fertilizer for the fortress garden's near-barren soil. Given the stench, this was one treasure everyone steered clear of. It was Braeden's domain, one he never argued about, because that dung heap kept everyone from discovering his cubby.

The "wall" was actually two layers with empty space between. In other parts, the space was used for storage. Here, because of the dung heap, it was left empty. Years ago Braeden had cut through a board behind the heap and made a narrow door. I had to twist out a nail to get the board free. Then I swung it aside and squeezed in.

There used to be straw here, covering the ground and masking some of the smell, but a drought two years ago meant Braeden couldn't afford to steal enough from the barn to replace it, so I'd brought rags instead. As for the smell, you got used to it.

On the other wall Braeden had carved out a

everyone in the whores' dormitory would think I was just too upset to come back. Why did I stay? I don't know. I guess it made me feel like, if things went wrong, and Braeden came back, I'd know and I could save him from the guard's bullets. I couldn't, of course. If he returned, even pursued by a pack of hybrids, he'd be shot.

When I woke to the sound of voices, I bolted up so fast I hit the wall and froze. Then I heard another whisper—a male voice, from outside—and I scrambled over to the peephole. I couldn't see anything. It was night and pitch-black. Then, slowly, I made out figures moving along the wall. More than one. Not Braeden. I started to exhale, then stopped.

There were figures. Outside the wall. That was not a cause for relief.

I crept toward the door, to race out and warn the guards that we were under attack. Then I heard a child's voice.

"Are we going to live in there, Momma?"

"Shh!"

"But—"

A man's voice. "We will . . . if you can be quiet, child. Just for a while longer." A pause as they continued creeping along the wall, then he said, "Do

you remember what we told you, child? What you need to say? It is very important."

"Yes," the girl lisped. "I am to say that I am hungry and cold, that I do not eat very much, but I am a good worker, like my mother and my father. Then I am to cry. If I do not, you will pinch me."

"Only to make you cry, child. It is very important that you cry. They will not listen otherwise."

I cursed under my breath. Outsiders, coming to try to persuade the Six to let them into the fortress. It happened nearly every moon cycle. They came and they begged and they pleaded, and their cries fell on deaf ears.

It had been a generation since our fortress accepted refu-gees. Yet the desperate still came, only to be refused and sometimes . . .

I shook off the thought and reached for the cubby door. It was not my business. It could not be my business.

And yet . . .

Any other time, even the child's voice wouldn't have moved me. You learn not to be swayed by useless emotions like mercy and pity. But tonight, listening to the child, I thought of Braeden, alone out there, and I thought of the branding, and I thought of what would happen if these Outsiders

33 mins left in chapter

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"It is you who lies, girl. We know what you fear. That we will take some of your precious milk and your honey and your fresh water. You want it all for yourself."

Milk? They'd killed the cows decades ago, when they realized the milk was no longer worth the cost of supporting them. We had goats now, but their milk was reserved for children and, on special occasions, made into cheese. As for honey, the bees had started dying almost from the start, and the few that remained were coddled like princesses, because if they perished, the crops would no longer be pollinated. We would never risk disturbing them by removing honey from their hives.

Water was another matter. We did have it. Every fortress was built around a spring, encompassing just enough land to grow crops and keep livestock and support the community forever. A noble dream. After generations, though, the water didn't flow as freely as it once did. And the land? There must have been no farmers among those early settlers, or they would have warned that you could not keep using the same land year after year and expect bountiful crops.

"We have nothing to spare," I said. "We have too many to support as it is."

32 mins left in chapter

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approached the gate and refused to leave.

I returned to the peephole and pulled back the leather.

"You there!" I whispered.

It took a moment for me to get their attention, but when I did, they came over and gaped around, as if the very wall had spoken.

"You need to leave," I whispered. "Now."

"What?" the girl said. "We have walked—"

The woman reached out, scowling, and pulled her daughter closer. "Ignore her, child. It is only a fortress girl, not wanting to dirty her pretty town with the likes of us."

The man stepped forward. "There is no need to fear us, girl. We are hard workers, and your town needs hard workers, so you do not need to dirty and callous your pretty hands."

I looked at my already dirty and calloused hands and bit back a bitter laugh. What did they imagine when they pictured life in the fortress?

"I don't fear you," I said. "I'm trying to warn you. Whoever told you this town takes refugees has lied. It hasn't taken one in my lifetime, and it does not take kindly to those who ask."

The girl whimpered. Her mother pulled her closer, scowl deepening.

*We're dying. Don't you get it? We're all dying. Out there. In here. It makes no difference.*

I didn't say that—I didn't want to scare the little girl—but she started to cry anyway.

"They won't take us, Momma. You promised they would—"

"They will," the woman said. "Do not listen to that foolish girl. She is greedy and wants it all to herself. Come. We will speak to the guard."

"If you try, then you are the fool," I whispered, my voice harsh, anger rising. "I only hope you are not fool enough to persist when the guard tells you to begone, or you will see your daughter's blood stain the—"

"Enough!" the man roared, and he leaped forward, challenging the very wall itself. Behind him, the little one began to sob. "You are a wicked girl, and you had best hope I do not find you when I am in there, or I shall teach you a lesson."

"Come," his wife whispered. "While the child cries. It will soften their hearts."

*Nothing will soften their hearts, I wanted to rage. You don't get it. You really don't get it. We have nothing to share. We are dying. Every third moon, the Six meet to assess the food supply and discuss new ways to decrease the population. They*

*don't just cast out the supernaturals anymore. The smallest crime is weighed against your contribution to the community, and if the balance is not in your favor, you are exiled.*

Nothing I could say would stop them. They were determined to make a better life for their child, which only made me all the more angry, because it made me feel pity. That love of parent for child was nothing I'd ever known. My mother had cared for me, in her way, but thought more of what I could do for her, the credits I could bring if my looks blossomed while hers faded.

When she'd died three years ago, she'd been pregnant. For that, she was executed. Those in the fortress were allowed only one child, and in trying to secretly have a second, she'd committed high treason. She'd begged for mercy, pleaded and wept that she had been blinded by maternal instinct, which would have been much more touching if I hadn't known the truth—she'd promised the child to the doctor for an outrageous sum. His wife was barren, and the new population rules did not allow adoption. They'd conspired to pretend the doctor's wife was pregnant, while hiding my mother's condition. It failed. She died. A community that would kill one of its own for the crime of attempting

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We need no extra mouths to feed. Now, begone!"

He cocked his gun, the metal clank ringing out in the silence. The woman started to wail as her husband begged the guard to take their daughter. Another guard joined the first and ordered them to leave.

"Yes, all right," the man said. "We are going, but we will leave the child."

"You will not—"

"Stay there, child," he said. "Just stay there." To his wife: "Come. We will leave. They will take her."

"No, we will not," the guard said, his voice growing louder as the parents' footsteps trampled over the hard earth. "Come back and get the child or you are leaving her for the hybrids."

The girl wailed. I heard her try to run, but her father caught her and forced her back, whispering, loud enough for the guards to hear, "You will be fine. No one would be so cruel." His voice rose another octave. "No one would be so cruel."

His footsteps retreated.

"Come back for the girl!" the guard shouted.

"You would not—"

"If I open this gate to your child, my own life is forfeit. If you do not take her, there is only one way for me to show mercy: kill her before the hybrids

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to bear a second child was not about to admit three strangers.

**I stayed where** I was and strained to listen. They hadn't even reached the gate before a patrolling guard tramped over, platform boards shuddering.

"Who goes there?" the guard called.

I could hear the parents prompting the child to speak, but she was too distraught, crying loudly now.

"I asked who goes there!"

"We . . . we are refugees," the woman said. "Our tribe was raided by the Branded. We are the only survivors. We throw ourselves on your mercy and—"

The child cut in, finding her voice. "I am hungry and cold, sir. I do not eat very much, but I am a good worker, like my mother and my father." She snuffled loudly.

"There is no room for refugees here," the guard said. "Begone."

"Where?" the woman said. "There is no place for us to go."

"Find a place. Now leave."

"We'll leave," the woman said. "Just take our child. She's strong and she's healthy and she'll be no bother at all. She'll prove her worth. Just take—"

do."

"You would not—"

"I would! Now get back here and take your child and begone before—"

"You will not. I know you will not."

"I must! Are you a fool? A monster who would sacrifice his own child?"

The guard continued to rant, his voice growing louder, his partner joining in, entreating the parents to come back, do not do this, come back. Inside the fortress, people began to stir, doors opening, then closing quickly as they realized what was happening. Stopping up their ears because they knew what was coming. What had to come.

A shot.

A single shot, barely audible over the guard's voice, choked with rage and grief as he cursed the parents to deaths in a thousand hells. The father shrieked and raged, and his wife wailed, and they raced back to their dead child, and the guards told them no, they must go, leave her, she was gone, and the scent of the blood . . .

The parents didn't listen. I could hear them still sobbing and cursing as they carried their child's body into the wasteland.

Then, reverberating through the night air, a

growl. Joined by a second. I opened the peephole to see eyes reflecting in the darkness.

"Drop the child!" the one guard shouted, his voice raw. "Drop her and run!"

The guard continued to shout as his partner tried to quiet him, to tell him it did no good. The growls continued, seeming to come from every direction. And then, as if answering some unknown signal, feet and paws thundered across the baked earth, coming from the left, from the right, too many to count.

The woman screamed. She didn't scream for long.

Growls. Snarls. Roars. The wet sound of ripping flesh.

I stumbled from the peephole, fumbled open the door, and raced back to my quarters.

**For two nights**, I scarcely slept, racked by nightmares of the child at the gate, the creatures beyond, those eyes, those snarls, that horrible ripping sound. I thought of that, and I thought of Braeden. Out there. Alone.

"It's the smell of blood that draws them out, Rayne," he'd said.

"But the branding. There will be blood—"

27 mins left in chapter

17%

bartered for everything from shoes to rations. These days, for most people, credits went to rations, which only drove the price higher, until it was a rare night you went to bed with a full stomach.

Priscilla had asked me to lunch in the dining hall of the Six, and I'd come away sated for the first time in memory. There'd been extra tasks I'd planned to do that afternoon, but she had wanted to spend the time with me, and I knew that was more valuable than any paper token in my pocket.

In another life, would Priscilla and I have become friends? Probably not. She was sweet and kind, but too timid by far. As hard as I struggled to remind myself that she had not chosen her place in the world, I couldn't help but feel guilty niggles of contempt when she twittered about the refugees at the gate, telling me they had escaped into the night, as her father told her. There was no reason to correct her. It would only turn her against me.

For the next three days, I accepted all her invitations, both to meals and quiet times together. Did she see me as a friend? Perhaps. But I think, in truth, I was more of a pet. An exotic pet in a world where children made cages for mice because anything larger was a source of food, not companionship.

26 mins left in chapter

17%

"The soot does more than mark the brand. It covers the blood. As long as I take shelter at night, the only hybrids who will attack are the ones who are starving. Easily fended off with a blade."

He was right. The hybrids hadn't attacked until the child was killed. They must have heard and smelled the three refugees, but they were still human enough to have learned lessons about attacking healthy targets.

At least ones who were in groups.

Braeden was alone.

*He'll be fine. He'll be fine. He'll be fine.*

And if he wasn't? This fate had been chasing him from the day he began his first transformation. He couldn't have hidden that forever. Either way, he would have been cast out, and all we could do was take control of the situation. Make plans.

Plans.

The morning after Braeden was cast out, Priscilla had come to the livestock barns, where I was tending to the chickens. Except for civics class, most children stopped school as soon as they were old enough to work. My true "job" might be six months away, but that didn't mean I could laze around until then. I had chores that paid for my room and board, and I worked extra tasks for credits that could be

On the third evening, when I was supposed to meet her in the square to watch a rare dramatic performance, I did not show up. She found me in tears behind my quarters. Hearing her, I leaped up and wiped my cheeks.

"Wh-who's there?" I squinted into the twilight. "Oh, Priscilla. What are you doing—?" My eyes widened, mouth dropping open. "Oh! I was supposed to—" I looked up at the stars. "The performance. I missed it." I hurried over to her, tripping as I did. "I'm so sorry."

"What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" Another wipe of my eyes as I cleared my throat. "Nothing. I was just"—I pointed up—"admiring the night sky."

"You've been crying."

I denied it. She pushed. I continued to deny. This went on for a few minutes before I blurted, "I heard a rumor."

Thus far in our relationship, while Priscilla was the Second's daughter, she'd treated me as an equal, more recently as someone she looked up to. I was a year older. I was more mature. I was certainly more worldly. And then, of course, there was the matter of my recent estimable "bravery." When I said this, though, she pulled herself up tall and smiled,



shaking her head as a mother might with her child.

"There are always rumors, Rayne. You can't pay them any mind."

"But this—this was about Braeden."

"Oh." She paused, as if uncertain how to react, then reached to grip my hands. "I know you must feel some guilt, but you shouldn't. You really and truly shouldn't. You did the right thing, and I'm sure he's fine. He grew up Outside, remember?"

"It—it's not that."

"I know it is." She enunciated each word carefully, as if I truly were a child. "You did the right thing."

"I didn't do any—" I sucked in breath. "It doesn't matter. What I heard was about the interrogation. When they forced him to transform." I paused. "Who witnesses that?"

She frowned. "Hmm?"

"When an alleged supernatural is forced to reveal his or her powers, who is there to witness it? Is one of the Six present?"

"Oh, no."

"So it's . . . just a prefect."

"And a regulator, of course," she said.

"But no one else?"

"No. Why?"

24 mins left in chapter

18%

with a wry smile. "It's twenty feet, Priss. At most, I'd twist my ankle. I wasn't going to jump." I took another step from the wall to reassure her. "I was just . . ." I looked out at the setting sun. "Thinking, I guess. Of him. Of what I did."

I stared out until she got a little closer, then wheeled and blurted, "I didn't turn him in. Not on purpose." I took a deep breath. "Braeden and I. He was . . ."

"Your boyfriend."

I nodded. "One night, we were out together, and he told me that there were werewolves in his family. I—I went a little crazy. We'd been together for years and he'd never said a word, and now he tells me he could turn into a wolf? That we could be alone together, and he could suddenly transform? Kill me? Eat me? He insisted it was no big deal—it might never happen. Might? Might?"

I stopped and gulped breath.

Priscilla came over and patted my back. "That must have been terrible."

I nodded. "It was. We fought. Really fought. I yelled at him and I think—" Another gulp of air. "I think someone heard. Someone told the regulators."

"But not you."

I shook my head. "No. But when they came, I

22 mins left in chapter

18%

"I heard—" I stopped myself. "Nothing. I heard nothing. I'm sorry."

I broke from her grip and fled into my quarters.

**I avoided Priscilla** for the next two days. It wasn't easy, but I stuck with others or in places where I knew she wouldn't follow, like the whores' quarters. Then on the second evening, I was playing ball with a group of young people in the square. Priscilla was there, watching us. Partway through the game, I started hesitating, as if overcome by my thoughts. Finally, I made my excuses and fled. She followed.

I raced behind the dining hall to a stairway that led to the wall platform. This section was blocked off—it had been unstable for years, and we couldn't yet retrieve enough material to fix it. I climbed over the barrier and ran up the stairs. At the top, I grabbed the wall and stood there, leaning out.

"No!" Priscilla shrieked.

Her dainty boots tapped across the platform as she ran.

I turned and waved her back frantically. "It's not safe!"

She kept coming. "Whatever you're thinking of, Rayne, don't do it. Please don't do it."

"Don't . . . ?" I looked down and stepped back

didn't . . . I didn't stand up for him. I didn't defend him. I knew it was right—that he needed to be taken. To be tested."

Lies. All of it. I'd known about the werewolf blood since Braeden and I became more than friends. I had been the one who'd informed on him—as part of the plan, our plan.

"I thought—I thought he'd be fine. I told myself that he needed to know for sure. Then . . . when they said it was true—he did transform—I knew there was nothing I could do, nothing I should do. He had to leave. For the sake of everyone, he had to leave."

"Of course. A werewolf cannot be allowed—"

"But he's not a—" I clamped my hand over my mouth, eyes going wide. "I-I'm sorry. I shouldn't say anything. Just . . . just leave me, Priss. I know you mean well, but I can't involve you in this."

"What did you hear?"

"Hear?" More feigned terror and horror. "I didn't hear anything."

Once again, I let her press, and I pretended to resist until I finally blurted, "They say he didn't transform. That the prefect lied. I overheard the regulator—the one who was with Braeden—and he said that after the last two accusations, when they didn't find anything, some of the Six were angry

with the prefect. They thought he wasn't doing his job right. So he . . . he lied."

"But if Braeden didn't transform, he would have said something."

"Accuse a prefect of lying? What good would that do? Every accused denies they manifested powers. They're beaten for the lie, then cast out." I looked beyond the wall. "I need to get to him."

"What?"

I turned back to her. "I need to get Braeden and bring him back. I could tell what I heard, but they wouldn't believe me. I need proof. I need Braeden."

"You—you—" She sputtered for a minute, unable to find words, then took my arms again. "You'd never find him out there, Rayne."

"No, I can. I know where he'd go. We talked about that, in case something ever happened to either of us. Where we'd go. What we'd do. How we'd survive. We had a plan. It made us feel safer."

She looked confused.

"Everyone has a plan, Priss. Everyone who isn't the Second's daughter. What they'd do if they were accused of having supernatural blood. If they were accused of a crime. If they were cast out. How they'd kill themselves quickly or how they'd survive. Braeden used to live out there, and he traveled with

shouldn't be, because this part was true, but to pour my heart out in such melodrama felt like a mockery of the truth. I loved Braeden. I wanted to spend my life—any life—with him. But, to me, love isn't mooning and moaning—it's taking action to protect the one you love. Deed, not word. Priscilla needed words. She was still very much a child, a princess locked in a tower, dreaming of her prince. She actually did have one—she'd been betrothed to the Third's son for a decade. But he was still a gangly, pimple-faced youth of thirteen, and she was a pretty young woman noticing all the handsome young men around her, and knowing she couldn't so much as share a lingering glance with one.

She might never have read a romantic story, but she yearned for what I had. Or a prettied-up, fantasy version of what I had, in which the young couple wouldn't set off to a harsh life together in the bleak wasteland, but would ride home, victorious and vindicated, living happily ever after within the safe bosom of the fortress.

So she promised to do whatever was in her power to make this dream come true. I argued, of course, but the more I fought, the more resolved she became. She would aid in the cause of truth and true love, whatever the cost. She would be brave,

the voyagers, so he had a good plan. He told me about a spring where I could camp and wait for a tribe to come by, then join them. That's where he'll be—until a tribe comes. Which is why I have to go now."

"Go?" Again she sputtered. "Go how? You can't go out there. You'd never survive."

"Not alone."

Her eyes shot wide. "You—you want me—"

"No, of course not. I'd never ask anyone to do that. I meant a horse. I could do it with a horse. I just need help—"

I stopped, and now it was my eyes widening in horror. "I don't mean—I shouldn't ask—I'm sorry. I just . . ."

I turned back to the wall and looked out, pouring every ounce of despair into my expression, imagining Braeden out there, alone, waiting for me, and I never came. That must have done the trick because Priscilla reached for me. I sidestepped, then feigned a stumble and let myself collapse in a heap on the platform, tears starting to stream.

"I just—I love him so much. He's the only boy I've ever loved. The only one I will ever love."

I continued in that vein for a while. It was, in some ways, more of a struggle than the lies. It

too.

Finally I agreed, on one condition.

"You must tell them I tricked you," I said.

"Tricked me?"

I nodded. "I set you up. I used you. You considered me a friend, and I abused your trust and tricked you into helping me escape with a horse. Then they cannot punish you."

"But then I won't seem brave; I'll seem a fool."

I took her hands. "Don't think of that. Remember that this might not work. I might be killed. Braeden might have already been killed. Even if we return, they might not permit him to stay."

"They will. I know they will. I heard Father telling the First how sorry he was to lose Braeden. He was strong and healthy and already a skilled blacksmith, and now another will need to be trained, and the smith is an old man. That prefect is old, too, and it is not the first time he has given my father reason to doubt his loyalty. They will exile the prefect and welcome Braeden back, and hail you as a hero." Her eyes clouded. "But I will be seen as a fool."

I told her we'd work that out, that I'd be sure to give her credit when I returned—if I returned. She wasn't happy, but she saw my point, and turned

instead to excitedly planning my trip, as if I were heading off on some grand adventure.

I was leaving that night. When I told Priscilla, I panicked her a little, and I began to think I'd miscalculated, but when I said I had my bag ready, she agreed tonight was best. And it was—not giving her time to rethink everything I'd said and realize that, as stories went, it was rather ludicrous: "I think my boyfriend was wrongly accused, so I'm going to ride to near-certain death to bring him back, and hope the Six will believe a blacksmith and a whore over a prefect and a regulator." But it was heroic and it was romantic, and that was all that mattered, so long as I didn't give her too much time to ponder it.

Getting the horses was easy. They weren't guarded—the penalty for disturbing one was exile, and you couldn't exactly ride through the fortress without anyone noticing. Or you couldn't unless you were the Second's daughter, in which case they'd notice but wouldn't dare stop you. The Six and their families were allowed to exercise the horses between their rare forays into the Outside. So too were the blacksmiths, which was how I'd learned to ride.

18 mins left in chapter

20%

"It's the regulator who guarded Braeden Smith," Priscilla said. "The werewolf bit him and he didn't tell anyone and now he's transforming and Father needs help—"

The regulator started down the steps again, faster now, then stopped. "The gate—"

"Father is sending someone. He says not to wait."

As the regulator raced down, I stopped working on the locks and moved the horse in front of them. He cast a quick glance my way, but didn't pause when he saw me. Everyone in the fortress knew I was the new pet of the Second's daughter. He didn't question Priscilla's words. Why would anyone lure him from his post? No one ever left the fortress. No one ever tried to sneak someone in—the fortress was not large enough to hide a stranger. So he saw me, gave a curt nod, and hurried off.

"Quickly!" Priscilla said as soon as he was gone. "The patrol will come soon."

I'd timed the patrols of the night guard and knew we had only a few moments before one reached the gate.

I was on the last lock when I heard the thump of boots.

"Hurry!" Priscilla breathed.

I resisted the urge to glower at her and tugged at

16 mins left in chapter

20%

When Priscilla arrived at the stables, I was filling the saddlebags with goods Braeden and I had been saving for weeks. She'd brought more—as much as I had two times over, all gathered easily in the space of an hour or two.

We each selected a mount. If anyone challenged us, she would say she was treating her friend to a midnight ride, as was her prerogative.

We headed along the lane of shuttered homes to the gates. The main gates were enclosed in a courtyard, for added security from the Outside. The gates into the courtyard were simply latched. Not much need for added security from our side—no one in their right mind would sneak through.

I unlatched the gate, and Priscilla rode through first. I followed and closed it behind us. The gate guard noticed, of course, and started down from his post. Priscilla swung off her mount and raced up the stairs to meet him, breathless, as if she'd run the whole way. I moved my horse into position alongside the main gate, where I could reach the locks.

"Father needs you," Priscilla panted. "He needs every regulator he can find. It's—it's—"

The guard made her slow down. As he focused on her, I began undoing the locks.

the lock. It was sticking. It'd been the first I'd tried to undo, but when it didn't come easily, I'd moved on and now I was back to it, and it hadn't magically popped open in the interim.

I yanked at it as Priscilla urged me to hurry and the guard's boots came ever closer until—

It came free. By the time it did, my hands were shaking so badly, I could barely grab the rope to pull the door open. I fumbled, then caught it and yanked. It barely budged. Priscilla rode over and took the end from me, and I held the middle and we pulled.

The gate swung open.

"Go!" Priscilla whispered.

I wasted only a moment to whisper back a thank-you. Then I rode, heels knocking my horse's flanks to spur her ever faster. I listened for the shouts of the guard or a shot from the gun, but none came. He'd still been too far away. I kept straining, but all I could hear was the thunder of hooves. Then, as I passed the first outcropping of rock, a dark shape leaped out. I passed it easily, but as I did, I heard a shriek from behind me, and turned to see Priscilla on her horse, fifty feet back.

I spurred my horse around. Another dark shape raced on all fours across the baked earth. I caught a

glimpse of fur and fangs as my horse passed it, and I circled back to Priscilla.

"Ride!" I shouted. "Just ride!"

The first hybrid snarled up at me, and I could see it now, a hairless, naked bearlike thing with tiny eyes and claws as long as my fingers.

I pulled something from my pocket. A hunk of dried meat, put there for just such a purpose, as Braeden had advised. I held it out. The hybrid lunged for it. I spurred my horse, meat still held out, leading the beast away from Priscilla. Then I threw the meat and jammed my heels into the horse's sides. She didn't need the encouragement—the moment I gave her rein, she was off, following Priscilla's horse across the wasteland.

I **didn't stop** riding until I reached the first waypoint. When Braeden and I had planned our escape, he'd mapped out every step of it for me. The first waypoint was a large outcropping of rock five miles from the fortress.

"Don't stop until you reach it," he'd said. "If you do, the hybrids will come out."

So I couldn't pause long enough to say anything to Priscilla, let alone try to send her back. We rode until I saw the outcropping, then veered toward it,

15 mins left in chapter

20%

"Because, really, this wasn't going to be difficult enough for me. Now I have the Second's daughter to look after. What did you think you were doing?"

"Helping. You can't do this alone. Even you said —"

"If you're saying I asked—or even hinted—"

"No, you didn't, but it was the right thing to do." Her chin shot up. "I wasn't going to stay behind and pretend you tricked me. I'm tired of being treated like a fool. I can be brave, too. I just never get the chance. This is my chance."

I argued, but there was little to be done. She couldn't go back now.

"Have a drink," I said. "We can't stay here long. Now that I have the Second's daughter with me plus two horses, they'll have a search team out already."

"I . . . I didn't think about that."

I grumbled and scowled. Yes, they'd come looking, but the ground was baked hard, no tracks left behind, and it was hours until daylight. The fortress had no experience tracking people in the Outside. For a horse, they'd come. For two horses and the Second's daughter, they'd definitely come. But they'd be ill-equipped for the task. As long as we kept moving, we'd be fine. As for the part where Priscilla thought we were "rescuing" Braeden and

13 mins left in chapter

21%

my horse breathing hard now, sweat rippling down her neck.

"Leave the horse outside," Braeden had said. "She's been trained to defend herself. The hybrids will eventually work themselves up to attacking, but you'll both have time to rest."

I did as he'd instructed. Priscilla stayed mounted, waiting for me to speak. I ignored her, filled the horse's water bag, and headed into the cave-like outcropping. It was dark, but I could see a pile of brush at the mouth. Dried brush. Left for me. When I saw that, I let out a sigh of relief so hard it was more of a sob. I quickly lit the fire, then hurried into the cave. There, on the wall, he'd written with a flint rock: "Be safe." I smiled, struggling not to choke again, then quickly wiped the note off as Priscilla approached the fire at the cave's mouth.

"Rayne?" she said, her voice nearly a whisper.

"Get in here," I said. "Past the fire. Before you attract a hybrid."

"I—"

"Did you water your horse? Did you even bring water?"

"I—I did."

"Had it all planned then, did you?" I glowered at her as she carefully stepped around the tiny blaze.

bringing him home? That could be dealt with later.

**We stopped at two more posts that night.** As long as it was dark, we had to keep the horses moving fast, which meant they needed regular breaks with water. Braeden had planned for that. I found his messages at the next two posts, telling me he'd gotten at least that far. As for the rest . . . ?

At dawn I let the horses slow. Daylight would not keep all hybrids away, but now I could see them coming and kick the horses to a gallop.

Soon we came into a field of rock and upturned earth, the scars left by earthquakes a century ago. It went for miles in each direction, and we had to pick our way through it.

"This will be the most difficult part," Braeden had said. "You'll feel more secure, because you aren't on the plains, but if you feel sheltered, so does everything else. Get through it as fast as you can and back out to the plains where you can see again."

I looked around. Twisted earth and upheaved rocks turned the land here into something almost beautiful. Hills and fissures, overhanging rocks, even patches of green where the upheaval had brought underground springs closer to the surface.

It smelled of water, too, a rich scent, like lush crops in the rare year when the baking sun didn't stunt their growth.

Behind me, Priscilla was lagging, and I had to keep waving for her to catch up. She was sulking because when she'd seen the greenery, with its promise of fresh water, she'd wanted to stop. I'd explained why we couldn't, but it didn't matter. She was tired and aching and wanted rest, and I wasn't giving it to her.

When I looked back again, I caught a flicker to the east, where the sun was, already so bright it hurt. I squinted and shielded my eyes. The landscape was empty. I'd seen something, though. A dark shape against the gray-and-beige rock.

As I motioned Priscilla forward, I caught another movement, almost directly to my left. A figure perched on a furrow of upturned earth. A human figure. When I turned, it dived for cover.

I frantically waved for Priscilla. She pretended not to notice me. Another figure climbed over a rock to my left. My horse whinnied and sidestepped. I jabbed my finger at the figures, but when Priscilla looked, they were gone, and she just kept trudging along.

I measured the distance between us. Too far for

her mount, but one foot fell from the stirrups and she clung there, leaning over the beast, reins wrapped around her hands, eyes wide. Another rock struck near the horse's rear hooves. Then another hit his flank, so hard that I heard the impact. The horse bucked. Priscilla flew off. The Outsiders charged, seeming to rise from behind every outcropping of rock, swarming toward us.

My horse tried to twist and run. I held the reins tight and spurred her on. I reached Priscilla before the Outsiders did. I grabbed her outstretched arms and heaved her up, nearly unseating myself. I managed to haul her on just as an Outsider leaped. He caught her foot. The horse's back hoof kicked him in the stomach, and he sailed through the air, spitting blood.

I righted myself in the saddle. We were surrounded. Eight Outsiders. All men. They were filthier than the refugees who'd come to the fortress, some wearing ragged clothing, some wearing only a loincloth, one wearing nothing but a bluish paint streaked across his body. Their hair was as long and matted as their beards. Savages, ultimately not much more civilized than the hybrids. But they were human enough to keep their gazes half fixed on the riderless horse, now snorting and pawing the

me to whisper a warning without the watching figures knowing they'd been spotted.

"Outsiders won't attack like hybrids," Braeden had said. "The horse is too valuable to risk killing. They'll follow you and wait until you dismount, but if they know they've been seen, they'll swoop in."

I'd stopped looking around now, but could catch glimpses of movement in every direction as our pursuers crossed the rough landscape, drawing closer. I tried to turn my horse around and go back to Priscilla, but we'd been traveling down a narrow path between a fissure and a line of rock, and while there was room to turn, my horse disagreed, whinnying and balking, hooves stamping the hard earth.

I waved for Priscilla. She pulled her horse up short and sat there, scowling.

"I can't go any faster," she called, ignoring my frantic gestures for silence. "My horse is tired and the rocks hurt his hooves and I don't understand why we can't just—"

A stone hit the ground, right at her mount's front hooves. He reared up.

"Priscilla!"

I yanked the reins, hard enough that my horse finally started to turn. Priscilla managed to stay on

ground.

I looked for an escape route. There wasn't one, and even if they were watching the horse, making sure they didn't lose it, the other half of their attention was on us and the second horse. I pulled my dagger from my boot. One saw it and snarled. He charged, but I was already in motion, spurring my horse toward her stablemate.

"What are you—?" Priscilla began.

As we closed in on the horse, I raised my knife.

"No!" she shrieked, both hands clutching me, fingers digging into my sides.

I slashed the knife and caught the other horse in the flank. He let out a scream. Then he bolted. Seeing their prize escaping, six of the Outsiders tore after it. The oldest one shouted and snarled and waved, as if trying to call some back, but none listened.

I gave my horse full rein then, and she galloped back the way we'd come. An arrow whizzed past. A second caught the folds of my shirt. But they didn't dare risk hurting the horse—or wasting arrows—so after two shots, they settled for chasing us, howling and raging as they fell ever farther behind. Twice, the horse stumbled on the rocky ground. Once, I thought she was going down, but I managed to rein



her in, slowing her enough to get her footing and keep it, and we continued on through the rocky divide.

**When we reached** the other side, I took us a little distance out onto the plain, then stopped my horse and slid off.

"You don't need to do that," Priscilla said. "We can both ride."

I certainly was not walking so that she could ride. I resisted the urge to snap that and said, "You need to get off, too, before the horse keels over from exhaustion."

"O-out here?" She looked around. "It's not safe."

"That looks like a sheltered spot over there," I said, pointing to a pile of stone, oddly out of place in the empty plain.

It was the next stop on the mental map Braeden had given me. He'd called it something I hadn't quite understood—an Outsider term. As I drew closer, I realized it was a pile of ruins. The remains of a building from the Old World. There weren't many of them left—they'd been scavenged decades ago. But this one was a twisted mass of man-made rock and metal rods that looked as if it had been fused together in a giant oven.

8 mins left in chapter

22%

back to Priscilla, but the rational part of my brain said it was only the wind whistling past. A real growl meant hybrids, and if one got anywhere near the ruins, the horse would have let us know. But when the growl came again, closely followed by Priscilla's shriek, I stumbled back to her so fast I reached the main room only to trip on the rubble and fall face-first, barely catching myself as I hit the ground.

As I lifted my head, Priscilla raced over to help me.

"It's okay," she whispered. "I think it's Braeden."

I looked up to see a massive black wolf in the doorway. Saliva dripped from its open mouth. Blue eyes held mine. Human blue eyes, one of them filmed over, as if blind.

"It's a werewolf," I whispered. "But it isn't Braeden."

"How would you know?"

I didn't answer. I'd seen Braeden in wolf form. His dark eyes stayed the same and his fur matched his hair—medium brown. This wolf was almost black, with grizzled gray around his mouth. Older. Bigger, too. A lot bigger.

"Don't break eye contact," I whispered. "We're going to back up—"

7 mins left in chapter

23%

"Wh-what is it?" Priscilla asked as we drew closer.

"A building from the Old World," I said. "Destroyed by some kind of bomb, I think."

"Bomb?" She said the unfamiliar word like I must have repeated Braeden's Outsider term. If you hadn't read every book in the fortress's collection a few times, there were a lot of words you wouldn't know—ones that had dropped from our vocabulary because we had no use for them. Even I wasn't sure exactly what a bomb was or whether one had done this.

I crawled through what must have been a doorway. Inside, it was hushed and cool. I picked my way through the rubble until I saw Braeden's message: "Soon." I wiped it away quickly, but there was no rush—Priscilla was still outside.

"Get in here," I said. "We need to rest, and this is safer than any pile of rock. We can stay here for a while."

She finally came in. She didn't look around, just walked straight into the main room, stretched out gingerly on the ground, and laid her head on her arm. As she rested, I continued poking about.

When I first heard the growl, I was near the back wall, in a separate room. I wheeled, ready to race

"To where?" Panic edged into her voice.

I reached out and gripped her arm, my gaze still holding the wolf's. "We'll find another way out."

There wasn't one. Not that I had seen. But she nodded and rose to her feet.

"Don't break eye—" I started.

The wolf growled, the sound reverberating through the hushed room, and Priscilla leaped up to run. The wolf lunged. I dived out of the way. Priscilla flew into the wall, as if the wolf had hit her, but he was still running. I looked up to see a man in the doorway, his hands lifted, fingers sparking.

A woman appeared behind the man, pushing past as the wolf brought Priscilla down. I started to run to Priscilla, but the first man hit me with magic, knocking me off my feet. I saw Priscilla twisting under the wolf as she tried to fight it off. The woman said something—words I didn't understand—and Priscilla stopped. Just froze.

Something hit my side. I caught a flash of fur, felt claws scrape my leg. I tried to rise, tried to drag myself away, but a second wolf had me. Still I fought. Then fangs clamped down on the back of my neck, pinning me to the ground, and I stopped struggling.

**“The Branded,”** Priscilla whispered. “We’re dead now. Worse than dead.”

She moaned and huddled on the dirt floor of the hut. Our attackers had brought us there, thrown us in, and left us. It felt like half a day had passed, just sitting there in the dark, waiting, listening to Priscilla.

When the door flap opened, the sudden blast of sunlight was so strong it blinded me. I felt fingers grip my forearms. Someone yanked me to my feet. Priscilla screamed at them to leave us alone, that she was a Second’s daughter, and her father would hunt them to the ends of the earth if she was harmed.

The man who held me only laughed and kicked at her when she tried to attack. Then he dragged me out, stumbling, into the bright midday sun. As he led me, I blinked hard and looked around. I’d been blindfolded when they brought us in. Now I saw that we were in a camp filled with leather tents. People milled about, mostly men, a few women, no children or elders. A raiding party. Some looked over at me as I passed. Most continued with their tasks—sharpening weapons, cooking food, tending to the small herd of horses tied nearby, my own mount now among them.

5 mins left in chapter

23%

then I wasn’t sure you did.”

“I knew,” I said. “I’m just a good performer.” Another gulp of water. “So it worked? The Branded took you in?”

“I had to fight a few rounds to prove my worth, but they can always use werewolves, and young and healthy is even better. It doesn’t hurt that they lost their blacksmith in a raid last year.”

“Good. So now . . .”

I took a deep breath. My heart hammered so hard my hands shook. Braeden squeezed them.

“It’ll work. The hard part is over. Now we just need to—”

The tent flap opened, and in walked a massive man with grizzled black hair and blue eyes, one cloudy and sightless.

“So, girl,” the man said. “What are we going to do with you?”

**The Branded.** That’s what those in the fortress called them, in hushed tones with averted gazes. They might fear the hybrids and the tribes, but it was the Branded they invoked to frighten children. The greatest danger in the Outside, one the fortresses themselves created by casting out those with supernatural powers and branding them. Did

4 mins left in chapter

23%

My captor said nothing, just led me along, one hand on my arm. When we reached another tent, he opened the flap and prodded me inside.

Again, I was blinded, this time by the sudden dark, and I stumbled. Fingers gripped my arms and steadied me. They pulled me inside, and the door flap closed. Then arms went around me, lips coming to mine in a deep kiss.

“You did it,” Braeden whispered when he pulled back.

I blinked. There was a small lantern blazing, and after a moment, I could see him in the dim light. His cheek was cut, healing now, along with a blackened eye. I hugged him, tight and fierce, and when he stiffened a little, I remembered his back, whipped and branded. I tried to pull away, whispering an apology, but he hugged me again.

“You really did it,” he whispered.

I looked up at him. “We did it.”

A smile. A kiss. Then he led me to a blanket, where dried meat and water waited. I took the water first, gulping it.

“You weren’t hurt?” he said.

I shook my head.

“You knew it was me, didn’t you?” he said. “The wolf that took you down? I thought you would, but

they not realize that those branded outcasts would find each other? That they’d create their own tribes, more organized, more powerful, and more dangerous than anything in this barren world?”

This was why I had informed on Braeden, rather than just helped him sneak over the wall. He needed that brand. While not every branded Outcast was accepted—those rejected were killed on the spot—we knew he’d be a prize recruit. As long as he bore the mark.

A mark I did not bear.

“The boy tells me you have no powers,” the grizzled man said. “You’re certain of that?”

“As far as I know.” If I had, this would have been much simpler. I didn’t say that, of course, only dropping my gaze respectfully.

“That’s a shame. You would have made a good addition to our tribe.”

Beside me, Braeden stiffened. “She brought you —”

I quieted him with a hand on his arm. I tried to be discreet, but the man noticed and laughed.

“He said you were a smart one,” he said. “I see he’s right. I’m well aware of what she brought, boy. Reminding me is not appreciated.”

“I’m young and strong and healthy,” I said. “I can

read and write. I can cook. I can sew. I can farm. I can tend livestock. I can fight, too. With weapons or without. I can ride. I can hunt. I can slaughter and skin. I can do anything the tribe requires of me."

"Almost anything," Braeden said, his voice a growl as he gripped my hand.

"Put your back down, boy," the man said. "You've made the situation clear, and I don't need that reminder either."

The man circled me, his gaze critical, assessing my health, my strength.

"Anything I don't know, I can learn," I said.

"I'm sure of that. Braeden tells me this plot was your idea?"

Not entirely true, but it did me no good to be modest, so I nodded.

"I don't know what you're expecting, girl, but life here isn't going to be as easy as it was in the fortress."

"No life is easy," I said. "It's just a different kind of hard."

"True." He looked toward the door. "It's a good horse. We were hoping for two, but we can raid those that stole the other one. About the girl, though . . . You're sure her father wants her back? She's not a son."

2 mins left in chapter

24%

**I stood by the fire.** There was no crowd here. No onlookers at all. Only those who needed to attend. Everyone else continued with their work.

It was Braeden who held the brand in the fire. The camp had been using the stable master as a smith, and the grizzled man—the camp leader—offered to let him do it, but Braeden said no. The leader seemed surprised, but I understood. Braeden didn't trust anyone else to do it right.

Braeden gave me a piece of leather to bite down on. I didn't refuse it. I couldn't start my life here screaming in agony.

"If you have to cry out, they'll understand," he whispered as he took out the brand.

"I won't." I smiled back at him. "It's only a burn."

"I wish I didn't have to—"

"I trust you."

"I mean I wish it wasn't necessary."

"It is."

He moved me into position, lying flat on my stomach, which he said would be easier. I lifted my head and looked at Priscilla's tent. If I strained, I could hear her crying. Did I feel guilty for what I'd done? Yes. Did I wish I hadn't? No. I knew what I had to do, and I did it. Sometimes, that's the only choice you have.

Learning reading speed

24%

"Yes," I said, "but without a son, she's the only way he can hold on to power and pass it along to his kin. The First is old. He will die before next winter ends. Everyone is certain of it. He has no living child. Both the Second and Third will want the position, and they know that an alliance is the best way to solve the problem. If Priscilla marries the Third's son, both can rest assured of their legacy. They will each move up one post with the promise that the son will become First after Priscilla's father."

The grizzled man shook his head. "It's all too complicated for me. But that's the fortress way, and if you're as smart as you seem, you'd know that your gift is useless if they don't want her back."

"They will."

"You took a big risk, expecting her to follow you. Would have been easier just to take her."

"I knew she'd come, and it worked better if she thought it was her idea. Also, this way, the fortress will never know I betrayed her, so they won't have the excuse to exile my friends."

The man smiled. "Good. Loyalty is important here. All right then. We accept your gifts. Welcome to the Branded, girl. There's just one more thing we need to do. . . ."

Braeden lowered himself to one knee beside me, and I could feel the heat of the brand over my shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"I'm not," I said, and closed my eyes as the metal seared into my flesh.