



## Silver Shadows: A Bloodlines Novel

By Richelle Mead

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In *The Fiery Heart*, Sydney risked everything to follow her gut, walking a dangerous line to keep her feelings hidden from the Alchemists.

Now in the aftermath of an event that ripped their world apart, Sydney and Adrian struggle to pick up the pieces and find their way back to each other. But first, they have to survive.

For Sydney, trapped and surrounded by adversaries, life becomes a daily struggle to hold on to her identity and the memories of those she loves. Meanwhile, Adrian clings to hope in the face of those who tell him Sydney is a lost cause, but the battle proves daunting as old demons and new temptations begin to seize hold of him. . . .

Their worst fears now a chilling reality, Sydney and Adrian face their darkest hour in this heart-pounding fifth installment in the *New York Times* bestselling Bloodlines series, where all bets are off.

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## Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Silver Shadows*

"...perfectly blends romance with paranormal adventure and drama..." -*Romantic Times Top Pick*

### About the Author

Richelle Mead is the author of the international #1 bestselling Vampire Academy series, its spinoff series, Bloodlines, and the Age of X series. A lifelong reader, Richelle has always had a particular fascination with mythology and folklore. When she can actually tear herself away from books (either reading or writing them), she enjoys bad reality TV, traveling, trying interesting cocktails, and shopping for dresses to wear on tour. She is a self-professed coffee addict, works in her pajamas, and has a passion for all things wacky and humorous. Originally from Michigan, Richelle now lives in Seattle, Washington, where she is hard at work on her next Bloodlines novel. Visit [www.RichelleMead.com](http://www.RichelleMead.com) to find out more.

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**SYDNEY**

I WOKE TO DARKNESS.

This was nothing new, as I'd been waking to darkness for the last . . . well, I didn't know how many days. It could've been weeks or even months. I'd lost track of time in this small, cold cell, with only a rough stone floor for a bed. My captors kept me awake or asleep, at their discretion, with the help of some drug that made it impossible to count the days. For a while, I'd been certain they were slipping it to me in my food or water, so I'd gone on a hunger strike. The only thing that had accomplished was a forced feeding—something I never, ever wanted to experience again—and no escape from the drug. I'd finally realized they were piping it in through the ventilation system, and unlike with food, I couldn't go on an air strike.

For a while, I'd had the fanciful idea that I'd track time with my menstrual cycle, the way that women in primitive societies synced themselves up to the moon. My captors, proponents of cleanliness and efficiency, had even provided feminine hygiene products for when the time came. That plan failed as well, though. Being abruptly cut off from birth control pills at the time of my capture reset all my hormones and spun my body into irregular cycles that made it impossible to measure anything, especially when combined with my wacky sleep schedule. The only thing I could be certain of was that I wasn't pregnant, which was a huge relief. If I'd had Adrian's child to worry about, the Alchemists would've had unlimited power over me. But it was just me in this body, and I could take whatever they threw at me. Hunger, cold. It didn't matter. I refused to let them break me.

"Have you thought about your sins, Sydney?"

The metallic, female voice reverberated around the small cell, seeming to come from every direction at once. I pulled myself up into a sitting position, tugging my rough shift down over my knees. It was more out of habit than anything else. The sleeveless garment was so paper thin that it offered no warmth whatsoever. The only thing it provided was a psychological sense of modesty. They'd given it to me partway through my captivity, claiming it was a token of goodwill. In reality, I think the Alchemists just couldn't handle keeping me there naked, especially when they saw it wasn't getting to me the way they'd hoped.

“I slept,” I said, stifling a yawn. “No time to think.” The drug in the air seemed to keep me perpetually sleepy, but they were also sending in some stimulant that made sure I stayed awake when they wanted, no matter how exhausted I might be. The result was that I never felt fully rested—as was their intent. Psychological warfare worked best when the mind was weary.

“Did you dream?” the voice asked. “Did you dream of redemption? Did you dream of what it might be like to see the light again?”

“You know I didn’t.” I was being uncharacteristically talkative today. They asked me these questions all the time, and sometimes I just stayed silent. “But if you want to stop feeding me that sedative for a while, maybe I’ll get some real sleep and have some dreams that we can chat about.”

More importantly, getting real sleep that was free of these drugs meant that Adrian would be able to locate me in my dreams and help me find a way out of this hellhole.

Adrian.

His name alone had gotten me through many long, dark hours. Thoughts of him, of our past and of our future, were what had helped me survive my present. I often lost myself in daydreams, thinking back to the handful of months we’d had together. Had it really been so short? Nothing else in my nineteen years seemed as vivid or meaningful as the time I’d spent with him. My days were consumed with thoughts of him. I would replay each precious memory, the joyous and the heartbreaking, and when I’d exhausted them, I’d fantasize about the future. I’d live out all the possible scenarios we’d imagined for ourselves, all our silly “escape plans.”

Adrian.

He was the reason I was able to survive in this prison.

And he was also the reason I was here in the first place.

“You don’t need your subconscious to tell you what your conscious already knows,” the voice told me. “You are tainted and impure. Your soul is shrouded in darkness, and you have sinned against your own kind.”

I sighed at this old rhetoric and shifted, trying to make myself more comfortable, though it was a losing battle. My muscles had been in a perpetual state of stiffness for ages now. There was no comfort to be found in these conditions.

“It must make you sad,” the voice continued, “to know that you’ve broken your father’s heart.”

That was a new approach, one that caught me off guard enough that I spoke without thinking: “My father doesn’t have a heart.”

“He does, Sydney. He does.” Unless I was mistaken, the voice sounded a bit pleased at having drawn me out. “He greatly regrets the fall you’ve taken. Especially when you showed such promise to us and our fight against evil.”

I scooted over so that I could lean against the rough-cut wall. “Well, he’s got another daughter who’s much more promising now, so I’m sure he’ll get over it.”

“You broke her heart too. Both of them are more grieved than you could ever know. Wouldn’t it be nice to reconcile with them?”

“Are you offering me that chance?” I asked cautiously.

“We’ve been offering you that chance from the beginning, Sydney. Just say the words, and we will gladly begin your path to redemption.”

“You’re saying this hasn’t been part of it?”

“This has been part of the effort to help you cleanse your soul.”

“Right,” I said. “Helping me through starvation and humiliation.”

“Do you want to see your family or not? Wouldn’t it be nice to sit down and talk to them?”

I made no answer and instead tried to puzzle out what game was afoot. The voice had offered me many things in captivity, most of them creature comforts—warmth, a soft bed, real clothes. I’d been offered other rewards too, like the cross necklace Adrian had made for me and food far more substantial and appetizing than the gruel they currently kept me alive on. They’d even tried to tempt with that last one by piping in the aroma of coffee. Someone—possibly that family that cared so much about me—had tipped them off to my preferences.

But this . . . the chance to see and talk to people was a whole new thing altogether. Admittedly, Zoe and my dad weren’t exactly at the top of the list of whom I’d want to see right now, but it was the larger scope of what the Alchemists were offering that interested me: a life outside of this cell.

“What would I have to do?” I asked.

“What you’ve always known you had to do,” responded the voice. “Admit your guilt. Confess your sins, and say you’re ready to redeem yourself.”

I nearly said, I have nothing to confess. It was what I’d told them a hundred times before this. Maybe even a thousand times. But I was still intrigued. Meeting with other people meant that surely they’d have to turn off that poison in the air . . . right? And if I could escape that, I could dream. . . .

“I just say those words, and I get to see my family?”

The voice was irritatingly condescending. “Not right away, of course. It has to be earned. But you would be able to move on to the next stage of your healing.”

“Re-education,” I said.

“Your tone makes it sound like a bad thing,” said the voice. “We do it to help you.”

“No thanks,” I said. “I’m getting used to this place. Shame to leave it.”

That, and I knew re-education was where the real torture would begin. Sure, it might not be as physically challenging as this, but that was where they really honed in on the mind control. These harsh conditions were a setup, to make me feel weak and helpless so that I’d be susceptible to when they tried to alter my mind in re-education. So that I’d be grateful and thank them for it.

And yet, I couldn’t shake that thought again, that if I did leave here, I might be in a position to sleep and dream normally again. If I could make that contact with Adrian, everything might change. At the very least, I would know he was okay . . . if I survived re-education itself. I could make guesses at the kind of

psychological manipulation they'd try on me but didn't know for sure. Would I endure it? Could I keep my mind intact, or would they turn me against all my principles and loved ones? That was the risk of leaving this cell. I knew also that the Alchemists had drugs and tricks to make their commands "stick," so to speak, and although I was probably protected against them, thanks to regular magic use before I'd been imprisoned, the fear that I might still be vulnerable nagged at me. The only certain way I knew to protect against their compulsion was through a potion I'd once made and successfully used on a friend—but not on myself.

Further ruminations were put on hold as I felt fatigue wash over me. Apparently, this conversation was over. I knew enough now not to fight and stretched out on the floor, letting thick, dreamless sleep wash over me, burying thoughts of freedom. But before the drug took me down, I said his name in my mind, using it as a touchstone to keep me strong.

Adrian . . .

• • •

I woke at an unspecified time later and found food in my cell. It was the usual gruel, some kind of boxed hot cereal that was probably fortified with vitamins and minerals to keep my health up, such as it was. Calling it "hot cereal" might have been generous, however. "Lukewarm" was more adequate. They had to make it as unappetizing as possible. Tasteless or not, I ate automatically, knowing I needed to keep my strength up for when I got out of here.

If I get out of here.

The traitorous thought reared up before I could stop it. It was a longtime fear that had nagged at my edges, the terrifying possibility that they might keep me here forever, that I would never see any of the people I loved again—not Adrian, not Eddie, not Jill, not any of them. I would never practice magic again. I would never read a book again. That last thought hit me particularly hard today because as much as daydreaming about Adrian carried me through these dark hours, I would've killed to have something as mundane as a trashy novel to read. I would've settled for a magazine or pamphlet. Anything that wasn't darkness and that voice.

Be strong, I told myself. Be strong for yourself. Be strong for Adrian. Would he do any less for you?

No, he wouldn't. Wherever he was, whether he was still in Palm Springs or had moved on, I knew Adrian would never give up on me, and I had to match that. I had to be ready for when we were together. I had to be ready for when we were reunited.

Centrum permanebit. The Latin words played through my mind, strengthening me. Translated, they meant "The center will hold" and were a play off a poem Adrian and I had read. We are the center now, I thought. And he and I will hold, no matter what.

I finished my meager meal and then attempted a cursory washing at the small sink in the cell's corner, feeling my way in the dark to where it sat by a small toilet. A real bath or shower was out of the question (though they'd used that as bait before, too), and I had to clean myself daily (or what I thought was daily) with a rough washcloth and cold water that smelled of rust. It was humiliating, knowing they were watching with their night vision cameras, but it was still more dignified than staying dirty. I wouldn't give them that satisfaction. I would stay human, even if that was the very charge they were questioning me on.

When I was clean enough, I curled back up against the wall, my teeth chattering as my wet skin shivered in the cold air. Would I ever be warm again?

“We spoke to your father and sister, Sydney,” said the voice. “They were so sad to hear that you didn’t want to see them. Zoe cried.”

Internally, I winced, regretting that I played along last time. The voice now thought this family tactic had some leverage over me. How could they think I’d want to bond with the people who’d locked me up here? The only family I might have wanted to see—my mom and my older sister—probably weren’t on the visitor list, especially if my dad had gotten his way in their divorce proceedings. That outcome actually was something I would’ve liked to hear about, but no way would I let on to that.

“Don’t you regret the pain you’ve caused them?” asked the voice.

“I think Zoe and Dad should regret the pain they caused me,” I snapped back.

“They didn’t want to cause you pain.” The voice was trying to be soothing, but mostly I wanted to punch whoever was behind it—and I wasn’t the kind of person usually given to violence. “They did what they did to help you. That’s all we’re trying to do. They’d love the chance to talk to you and explain themselves.”

“I’m sure they would,” I muttered. “If you even talked to them.” I hated myself for engaging with my captors. This was the most I’d spoken to them in a while. They had to be loving it.

“Zoe asked us if it would be okay if she brought you a skinny vanilla latte when she visits. We told her it would. We’re all for a civilized visit, for you to sit down and truly talk, so that your family and especially your soul can heal.”

My heart beat rapidly, and it had nothing to do with the lure of coffee. The voice was confirming again what had been suggested before. A real visit, sitting down, drinking coffee . . . that had to take place out of this cell. If any of this fantasy were even true, there was no way they’d bring my dad and Zoe here—not that seeing them was my goal. Getting out of here was. I still maintained that I could stay here forever, that I could take whatever they threw at me. And I could. But what was I accomplishing? All I proved was my own toughness and defiance, and while I was proud of those things, they weren’t getting me any closer to Adrian. To get to Adrian, to get the rest of my friends . . . I needed to dream. To dream, I needed to get away from this drugged existence.

And not just that. If I were somewhere that wasn’t a small, dark cell, I might be able to work magic again. I might have a clue about where in the world they’d taken me. I might be able to free myself.

But first I had to leave this cell. I’d thought I was brave staying here, but suddenly, I wondered if getting out was what would truly test my courage.

“Would you like that, Sydney?” Unless I was mistaken, there was an edge of excitement in the voice—almost an eagerness—that contrasted with the lofty and imperious tone I’d grown used to. They’d never sparked this much interest from me. “Would you like to begin the first steps toward purging your soul—and seeing your family?”

How long had I languished in this cell, moving in and out of agitated consciousness? When I felt my torso and arms, I could tell I’d lost a considerable amount of weight, the kind of weight loss that took weeks. Weeks, months . . . I had no idea. And while I was here, the world was going on without me—a world full of people who needed me.

“Sydney?”

Not wanting to sound too eager, I tried to stall. “How do I know I can trust you? That you’ll let me see my family if I . . . begin this journey?”

“Evil and deception are not our ways,” the voice said. “We relish in light and honesty.”

Liars, liars, I thought. They’d lied to me for years, telling me good people were monsters and trying to dictate the way I lived my life. But it didn’t matter. They could keep their word or not about my family.

“Will I have . . . a real bed?” I managed to make my voice choke a little. The Alchemists had taught me to be an excellent actress, and now they’d see their training put to work.

“Yes, Sydney. A real bed, real clothes, real food. And people to talk to—people who’ll help you if you’ll only listen.”

That last part sealed the deal. If I were going to be put regularly around others, surely they couldn’t keep drugging the air. As it was, I could feel myself being especially alert and agitated now. They were piping in that stimulant, something that would make me anxious and want to act rashly. It was a good trick on a worn and frazzled mind, and it was working—just not how they’d expected.

Out of old habit, I put my hand on my collarbone, touching a cross that was no longer there. Don’t let them change me, I prayed silently. Let me keep my mind. Let me endure whatever there is to come.

“Sydney?”

“What do I have to do?” I asked.

“You know what you have to do,” the voice said. “You know what you have to say.”

I moved my hands to my heart, and my next internal words weren’t a prayer, but a silent message to Adrian: Wait for me. Be strong, and I’ll be strong too. I’ll fight my way out of whatever they’ve got in store. I won’t forget you. I won’t ever turn my back on you, no matter what lies I have to tell them. Our center will hold.

“You know what you have to say,” the voice repeated. It was practically salivating.

I cleared my throat. “I have sinned against my own kind and let my soul become corrupted. I am ready to have the darkness purged.”

“And what are your sins?” the voice demanded. “Confess what you’ve done.”

That was harder, but I still managed the words. If it got me closer to Adrian and freedom, I could say anything.

I took a deep breath and said: “I fell in love with a vampire.”

And like that, I was blinded by light.

## **ADRIAN**

“DON’T TAKE THIS THE WRONG WAY, but you look like crap.”

I lifted my head from the table and squinted one eye open. Even with sunglasses on—indoors—the light was still almost too much for the pounding in my head. “Really?” I said. “There’s a right way to take that?”



Rowena Clark fixed me with an imperious look that was so like something Sydney might have done. It caused a lurch in my chest. “You can take it constructively.” Rowena’s nose wrinkled. “This is a hangover, right? Because, I mean, that implies you were sober at one point. And from the gin factory I can smell, I’m not so sure.”

“I’m sober. Mostly.” I dared to take off the sunglasses to get a better look at her. “Your hair’s blue.”

“Teal,” she corrected, touching it self-consciously. “And you saw it two days ago.”

“Did I?” Two days ago would’ve been our last mixed media class here at Carlton College. I could barely remember two hours ago. “Well. It’s possible I actually wasn’t so sober then. But it looks nice,” I added, hoping that would spare me some disapproval. It didn’t.

In truth, my sober days at school were about fifty-fifty lately. Considering I was making it to class at all, though, I thought I deserved some credit. When Sydney had left—no, been taken—I hadn’t wanted to come here. I hadn’t wanted to go anywhere or do anything that wasn’t finding her. I’d curled up in my bed for days, waiting and reaching out to her through the world of dreams with spirit. Only I hadn’t connected. No matter what time of day I tried, I never seemed to find her asleep. It made no sense. No one could stay awake that long. Drunk people were hard to connect to since alcohol dampened spirit’s effects and blocked the mind, but somehow I doubted she and her Alchemist captors were having nonstop cocktail parties.

I might have doubted myself and my own abilities, especially after I’d used medication to turn spirit off for a while. But my magic had eventually come back in full force, and I’d had no difficulties reaching out to others in their dreams. Maybe I was inept at a lot of other things in life, but I was still hands down the most skilled dream-walking spirit user I knew. The problem was, I only knew a few other spirit users, period, so there wasn’t a lot of advice I could get on why I wasn’t reaching Sydney. All Moroi vampires use some sort of elemental magic. Most specialize in one of the four physical elements: earth, air, water, or fire. Only a handful of us use spirit, and there’s no well-documented history of it like there is of the other elements. There were a lot of theories, but no one knew for sure why I wasn’t reaching Sydney.

My professor’s assistant dropped a stack of stapled papers in front of me and an identical one in front of Rowena, jarring me out of my thoughts. “What’s this?”

“Um, your final exam,” said Rowena, rolling her eyes. “Let me guess. You don’t remember this either? Or me offering to study with you?”

“Must have been an off day for me,” I muttered, flipping uneasily through the pages.

Rowena’s chastising expression turned to one of compassion, but whatever else she might have said was swallowed by our professor’s orders to be quiet and get to work. I stared at the exam and wondered if I could fake my way through it. Part of what had dragged me out of bed and back to college was knowing how much education meant to Sydney. She’d always been envious of the opportunity I had, an opportunity her controlling asshole dad had denied her. When I’d realized that I couldn’t find her right away—and believe me, I’d tried plenty of mundane ways, along with the magical ones—I’d resolved to myself that I’d carry on and do what she would have wanted: finish this semester at college.

Admittedly, I hadn’t been the most dedicated of students. Since most of my classes were introductory art ones, my professors were usually good about giving credit as long as you turned something in. That was lucky for me because “something” was probably the nicest description for some of the crap pieces I’d created recently. I’d maintained a passing grade—barely—but this exam might do me in. These questions were all or nothing, right or wrong. I couldn’t just half-ass a drawing or painting and count on points for effort.

As I began making my best attempts at answering questions on contour drawing and deconstructed landscapes, I felt the dark edges of depression pulling me down. And it wasn't just because I was likely going to fail the class. I was also going to fail Sydney and her high expectations of me. But really, what was one class when I'd already failed her in so many other ways? If our roles had been reversed, she probably would've found me by now. She was smarter and more resourceful. She could've done the extraordinary. I couldn't even handle the ordinary.

I turned in the exam an hour later and hoped I hadn't just wasted an entire semester in the process. Rowena had finished early and was waiting for me outside the classroom. "You want to get something to eat?" she asked. "My treat."

"No thanks. I've got to go meet my cousin."

Rowena regarded me warily. "You aren't driving yourself, are you?"

"I'm sober now, thank you very much," I told her. "But if it makes you feel better, no, I'm taking the bus."

"Then I guess this is it, huh? Last day of class."

I supposed it was, I realized with a start. I had a couple other classes, but this was my only one with her. "I'm sure we'll see each other again," I said valiantly.

"I hope so," she said, eyes filled with concern. "You've got my number. Or at least you used to. I'll be around this summer. Give me and Cassie a call if you want to hang out . . . or if there's anything you want to talk about. . . . I know you've had some rough things to deal with lately. . . ."

"I've dealt with rougher," I lied. She didn't know the half of it, and there was no way she could, not as an ordinary human. I knew she thought Sydney had broken up with me, and it killed me to see Rowena's pity. I could hardly correct her, though. "And I'll definitely get in touch, so you'd better sit by your phone. See you around, Ro."

She gave me a half-hearted wave as I walked off toward the nearest campus bus stop. It wasn't that far away, but I found myself sweating by the time I reached it. It was May in Palm Springs, and our fleeting spring was being trampled into the ground by summer's hot and sweltering approach. I popped the sunglasses back on as I waited and tried to ignore the hipster couple smoking beside me. Cigarettes, at least, were one vice I hadn't returned to since Sydney went away, but it was hard sometimes. Very hard.

To distract myself, I opened up my bag and peered inside at a small statue of a golden dragon. I rested my hand on his back, feeling his tiny scales. No artist could've created such a perfect work of art because he wasn't actually a sculpture. He was a real dragon—well, a callistana, to be precise, which was a type of benign demon—that Sydney had summoned. He'd bonded to her and to me, but only she had the ability to transform him between living and frozen forms. Unfortunately for Hopper here, he'd been trapped in this state when she was abducted, meaning he was stuck in it. According to Sydney's magical mentor, Jackie Terwilliger, Hopper was technically still alive but living a pretty miserable existence without food and activity. I took him everywhere I went and didn't know if contact with me meant anything to him. What he really needed was Sydney, and I couldn't blame him. I needed her too.

I'd been telling Rowena the truth: I was sober now. And that was by design. The long bus ride ahead gave me the perfect opportunity to seek Sydney. Even though I no longer tried to reach out to her in dreams as voraciously as I once had, I still made a point to sober up a few times a day and search. As soon as the bus was moving and I was settled into my seat, I drew upon the spirit magic within me, exalting briefly in the

glorious way it made me feel. It was a double-edged joy, though, one that was tempered by the knowledge that spirit was slowly driving me insane.

Insane is such an ugly word, a voice in my head said. Think of it as obtaining a new look at reality.

I winced. The voice in my head wasn't my conscience or anything like that. It was my dead Aunt Tatiana, former queen of the Moroi. Or, well, it was spirit making me hallucinate her voice. I used to hear her when my mood dropped to particularly low places. Now, ever since Sydney had left, this phantom Aunt Tatiana had become a recurring companion. The bright side—if you could even look at it that way—was that some of the bipolar side effects of spirit had become less frequent. It was as though spirit's madness had shifted form. Was it better to have mental conversations with an imagined deceased relative than to be subject to wildly dramatic mood swings? I honestly wasn't sure.

Go away, I told her. You aren't real. Besides, it's time to look for Sydney.

Once I'd connected with the magic, I stretched my senses out, searching for Sydney—the person I knew better than anyone else on this earth. Finding someone asleep whom I knew only a little would've been easy. Finding her—if she were asleep—would've been effortless. But I made no contact and eventually let go of the magic. She either wasn't asleep or was still blocked from me. Defeated once again, I found a flask of vodka in my bag and settled in on it as I waited out the ride to Vista Azul.

I was pleasantly buzzed, cut off from my magic but not from my heartache, when I arrived at Amberwood Preparatory School. Classes had just finished for the afternoon, and students in stylish uniforms were moving back and forth between the buildings, off to study or make out or whatever it was high school kids did near the end of term. I walked to the girls' dorm and then waited outside for Jill Mastrano Dragomir to find me.

Whereas Rowena had only guessed at what was troubling me, Jill knew exactly what my problems were. This was because fifteen-year-old Jill had the “benefit” of being able to see into my mind. Last year, she'd been targeted by assassins wanting to dethrone her sister, who happened to be queen of the Moroi and a good friend of mine. Technically, those assassins had succeeded, but I'd brought Jill back through more of spirit's extraordinary abilities. That feat of healing had taken a huge toll on me and also forged a psychic bond that let Jill know my thoughts and feelings. I knew my recent bout of depression and binge drinking had been hard on her—though at least the drinking numbed out the bond some days. If Sydney had been around, she would've scolded me for being selfish and not thinking of Jill's feelings. But Sydney wasn't around. The weight of responsibility rested on me alone, and I wasn't strong enough to shoulder it, it seemed.

Three campus shuttle buses came and went, and Jill wasn't on any of them. This was our usual day of the week to get together, and I'd made sure to keep up with that, even if I couldn't keep up with anything else. I took out my phone and texted her: Hey, I'm here. Everything okay?

No answer came, and a prickle of worry started to go through me. After the assassination attempt, Jill had been sent here to hide among humans in Palm Springs because a desert was no place that either our kind or the Strigoi—evil, undead vampires—wanted to be. The Alchemists—a secret society of humans hell-bent on keeping humans and vampires away from each other—had sent Sydney as a liaison to make sure things went smoothly. The Alchemists had wanted to make sure the Moroi didn't plunge into civil war, and Sydney had done a good job of helping Jill through all sorts of ups and downs. Where Sydney had failed, however, was in getting romantically involved with a vampire. That kind of went against the Alchemists' operating procedure of humans and vampires keeping apart from each other, and the Alchemists had responded brutally and efficiently.

Even after Sydney had left and her stiff-faced replacement, Maura, had come, things had remained relatively

calm for Jill. There'd been no sign of danger from any source, and we even had indications that she could return to mainstream Moroi society once her school year finished next month. This kind of disappearance was out of character, and when I didn't get a text response from her, I sent one to Eddie Castile.

Whereas Jill and I were Moroi, he was a dhampir—a race born of mixed human and vampire blood. His kind trained to be our defenders, and he was one of the best. Unfortunately, his formidable battle skills hadn't been enough when Sydney had tricked him into splitting up from her when the Alchemists had come after her. She'd done it to save him, sacrificing herself, and he couldn't get over that. That humiliation had killed the kindling romance between him and Jill because he no longer felt he was worthy of a Moroi princess. He still dutifully served as her bodyguard, however, and I knew that if anything had happened to her, he'd be the first to know.

But Eddie didn't answer my text either, and neither did the other two dhampirs serving undercover as her protectors. That was weird, but I tried to reassure myself that radio silence from all of them probably meant they'd gotten distracted together and were fine. Jill would show up soon.

The sun was bothering me again, so I walked around the building and found another bench that was out of the way and shaded by palm trees. I made myself comfortable on it and soon fell asleep, helped by both staying out late at the bar last night and by finishing off my vodka flask. A murmur of voices woke me later, and I saw that the sun had moved considerably in the sky above me. Also above me were Jill and Eddie's faces, along with our friends Angeline, Trey, and Neil.

"Hey," I croaked, managing to sit up. "Where were you?"

"Where were you?" Eddie asked pointedly.

Jill's green eyes softened as she looked at me. "It's okay. He's been here the whole time. He forgot. Understandable since . . . well, he's going through a tough time."

"Forgot what?" I asked, looking uneasily from face to face.

"It doesn't matter," said Jill evasively.

"What did I forget?" I exclaimed.

Angeline Dawes, one of Jill's dhampir protectors, proved as usual to be the voice of bluntness. "Jill's end-of-term expo."

I stared blankly, and then it all came back to me. One of Jill's extracurricular activities was a fashion design and sewing club. She'd started off modeling, but when that proved too public and dangerous in her position, she'd recently tried her hand at designing behind the scenes—and had found she was pretty good at it. She'd been talking for the last month about a big show and exhibit her club was doing as their end-of-term project, and it had been good to see her so excited about something again. I knew she was hurt over Sydney too, and with my transferred depression and her botched romance with Eddie, she'd lived under a cloud nearly as dark as my own. This show and the chance to display her work had been one bright spot for her—small in the grand scheme of things but monumentally important in the life of a teenage girl who needed some normality.

And I'd blown it off.

Bits of conversation came back to me now, her telling me the day and time, and me promising I'd come and

support her. She'd even made a point to remind me the last time I'd seen her this week. I'd noted what she said and then went out to celebrate Tequila Tuesday at a bar near my apartment. Saying her show had slipped my mind was an understatement.

"Crap, I'm sorry, Jailbait. I tried texting. . . ." I lifted up my phone to show them, except it was the vodka flask I picked up instead. I hastily shoved it back in the bag.

"We had to turn our phones off during the show," explained Neil. He was the third dhampir in the group, a recent addition to Palm Springs. He'd grown on me over time, maybe because he was suffering from his own heartache. He was head over heels for a dhampir girl who'd dropped off the face of the earth, though unlike Sydney, Olive Sinclair's silence was most likely from personal baggage and not Alchemist abduction.

"Well . . . how it'd go then?" I attempted. "I bet your stuff was awesome, right?"

I felt so incredibly stupid, I could hardly stand it. Maybe I couldn't fight against what the Alchemists had done to Sydney. Maybe I couldn't prepare for an exam. But for God's sake, I should've at least been able to make it to one girl's fashion show! All I had to do was show up, sit there, and applaud. I'd failed at even that, and the weight of it was suddenly crushing. A black haze filled my mind, weighing me down, making me hate everything and everyone—myself most of all. It was no wonder I couldn't save Sydney. I couldn't even take care of myself.

You don't need to, Aunt Tatiana whispered in my mind. I'll take care of you.

A spark of compassion showed in Jill's eyes as she sensed the dark mood coming on. "It was great. Don't worry—we'll show you pictures. They had a professional photographer doing everything, and it'll go online."

I tried to swallow back that darkness and managed a tense smile. "Glad to hear it. Well, how about we all go out and celebrate then? Dinner's on me."

Jill's face fell. "Angeline and I are eating with a study group. I mean, maybe I could cancel. Exams are still a month away, so I could always—"

"Forget it," I said, getting to my feet. "Someone in this bond needs to be ready for exams. Go have fun. I'll catch you later."

No one tried to stop me, but Trey Juarez soon fell in step with me. He was perhaps the oddest member of our circle: a human who'd once been part of a group of vampire hunters. He'd broken ties with them, both because they were psycho and because he'd fallen—against all reason—for Angeline. Those two were the only ones in our little group with any semblance of a happy love life, and I knew they tried to downplay it for the rest of us miserable souls.

"And how exactly are you going to get home?" asked Trey.

"Who says I'm going home?" I retorted.

"Me. You have no business going out and partying. You look like crap."

"You're the second person to tell me that today."

"Well, then, maybe you'll start listening," he said, steering me toward the student parking lot. "Come on, I'll drive."

It was an easy offer for him to make because he was my roommate.

Things hadn't started out that way. He'd been a boarder at Amberwood, living at school with the others. His former group, the Warriors of Light, had the same hang-ups the Alchemists had about humans and vampires interacting. Whereas the Alchemists dealt with this by covering up the existence of vampires from ordinary humans, the Warriors took a much more savage approach and hunted vampires. They claimed they only went after Strigoi, but they were no friends to Moroi or dhampirs either.

When Trey's father had found out about Angeline, he'd taken a different approach than Sydney's father. Rather than kidnapping his son and making him disappear without a trace, Mr. Juarez had simply disowned Trey and cut off all his funding. Lucky for Trey, tuition had already been paid for through the end of the school year. Room and board had not, and so the Amberwood dorm had turned Trey out a few months ago. He'd shown up on my doorstep, offering to pay me rent with his meager coffee shop earnings so that he could finish high school at Amberwood. I'd welcomed him in and refused the money, knowing it was what Sydney would've wanted. My only condition had been that I had better never, ever come home and find him making out with Angeline on my couch.

"I suck," I said, after several minutes of uncomfortable silence into our drive.

"Is that some kind of vampire joke?" Trey asked.

I shot him a look. "You know what I mean. I screwed up. No one asks that much of me. Not anymore. All I had to do was remember to go to her fashion show, and I blew it."

"You've had a lot of crap going on," he said diplomatically.

"So has everyone else. Hell, look at you. Your whole family denies your existence and did their best to get you kicked out of school. You found a workaround, kept up your grades and sports, and managed to nab some scholarships in the process," I sighed. "Meanwhile, I may have failed an introductory art class. A few of them, actually, if I've got more exams coming this week—which seems likely. I don't even know."

"Yeah, but I've still got Angeline. And that makes it worth putting up with all the other crap. Whereas you . . ." Trey couldn't finish, and I saw pain flash over his tanned features.

My friends here in Palm Springs knew about Sydney and me. They were the only ones in the Moroi world (or the human world that shadowed the Moroi) who knew about our relationship. They felt bad for what had happened for my sake and also for hers. They'd loved Sydney too. Not like I did, of course, but she was the kind of person who was fiercely loyal and inspired deep bonds in her friends.

"I miss her too," Trey said softly.

"I should've done more," I said, slouching into my seat.

"You did plenty. More than I would've thought to do. And not just the dream walking. I mean, you harassed her dad, pressured the Moroi, made life a living hell for that Maura girl . . . you exhausted everything."

"I am good at being annoying," I admitted.

"You've just run into a wall, that's all. They're just too good at keeping her prison a secret. But they'll crack, and you'll be there to find that crack. And I'll be right by your side. So will the rest of us."

The pep talk was unusual for him but didn't cheer me up any. "I don't know how I'm going to find that

crack.”

Trey’s eyes went wide. “Marcus.”

I shook my head. “He’s exhausted his leads too. Haven’t seen him in a month.”

“No.” Trey pointed as he pulled the car up to my apartment building. “There. Marcus.”

Sure enough. There, sitting on the building’s front step, was Marcus Finch, the rebel ex-Alchemist who’d encouraged Sydney to think for herself and who had been trying—futilely—to locate her for me. I had the door open before Trey even brought the car to a stop.

“He wouldn’t be here in person if he didn’t have news,” I said excitedly. I jumped out of the car and sprinted across the grass, my earlier lethargy replaced with a new sense of purpose. This was it. Marcus had come through. Marcus had found answers.

“What is it?” I demanded. “Have you found her?”

“Not exactly.” Marcus got to his feet and smoothed back his blond hair. “Let’s go in and talk.”

Trey was nearly as eager as me when we ushered Marcus inside to the living room. We faced him down with mirrored stances, arms crossed over our chests. “Well?” I asked.

“I got a list of locations that may have possibly been used as Alchemist re-education holding facilities,” Marcus began, not looking nearly as enthusiastic as he should have for news like that. I clutched his arm.

“That’s incredible! We’ll start checking them out and—”

“There are thirty of them,” he interrupted bluntly.

I dropped my hand. “Thirty?”

“Thirty,” he repeated. “And we don’t exactly know where they are.”

“But you just said—”

Marcus held up a hand. “Let me explain it all first. Then you can talk. This list my sources got is from cities in the United States that the Alchemists were scouting for re-education and a few other operations centers. It’s several years old, and while my sources confirm that they did build their current re-education facility in a city on the list, we don’t know for sure which one they ended up picking—or even where in that location they chose. Are there ways of finding out? Sure, and I know people who can start digging around. But we’ll have to do it on a city-by-city basis, and each one is going to take a while.”

All the hope and enthusiasm I’d felt upon seeing Marcus shattered and blew away. “And let me guess: ‘A while’ is a few days?”

He grimaced. “It’ll be a case-by-case basis, depending on the difficulties of researching each city. Might take a couple days to knock one off the list. Might take a few weeks.”

I hadn’t thought I could feel worse than I had over the exam and Jill, but apparently I was wrong. I threw myself down on the couch, defeated. “A few weeks times thirty. That could be over a year.”

“Unless we get lucky and she’s in one of the first cities we search.” I could tell even he didn’t think that was likely, though.

“Yeah, well, ‘lucky’ hasn’t really been the way I’d describe how things have been going for us,” I remarked. “Don’t see why that should change now.”

“It’s better than nothing,” said Trey. “It’s the first real lead we’ve got.”

“I need to find her dad,” I muttered. “I need to find him and compel the hell out of him so that he tells me where she’s at.” All attempts at locating Jared Sage had proven unsuccessful. I had managed a phone call and been promptly hung up on. Compulsion didn’t work so well over the phone.

“Even if you did, he probably wouldn’t know,” said Marcus. “They keep secrets from each other, for the very purpose of protecting against forced confessions.”

“And so there we are.” I stood up and headed for the kitchen, off to make a drink. “Stuck just like we were before. Come get me in a year when you’re able to verify your list was a dead end.”

“Adrian—” began Marcus, looking more at a loss than I’d ever seen him. He was usually the poster boy for cocky confidence.

Trey’s response was more pragmatic. “No more drinks. You’ve had too much today, man.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” I snapped. Rather than actually making a drink, I ended up just grabbing two liquor bottles at random. No one tried to stop me as I went to my room and slammed the door.

Before I began my one-man party, I made another attempt to reach out to Sydney. It wasn’t easy since some of this afternoon’s vodka was still hanging around, but I managed a tentative grasp of spirit. As usual, there was nothing, but Marcus’s certainty that she was in the United States had made me want to try. It was early evening on the East Coast, and I’d had to check, just in case she was calling it an early night. Apparently not.

I soon lost myself in the bottles, desperately needing to wipe away everything. School. Jill. Sydney. I hadn’t thought it was possible to feel this low, to have my emotions so black and so deep that there was no way to raise them into any sort of constructive feeling. When things had ended with Rose, I thought no loss could be more terrible. I’d been wrong. She and I had never really had anything substantial. What I’d lost with her was possibility.

But with Sydney . . . with Sydney, I’d had it all—and lost it all. Love, understanding, respect. The sense that we’d both become better people because of each other and could take on anything so long as we were together. Only we weren’t together anymore. They’d ripped us apart, and I didn’t know what was going to happen now.

The center will hold. That was the line Sydney had coined from “The Second Coming,” a poem by William Butler Yeats, for us. Sometimes, in my darkest moments, I worried the poem’s original wording was more fitting: Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.

I drank myself into oblivion, only to wake up in the middle of the night with a raging headache. I felt nauseous too, but when I staggered to the bathroom, nothing came up. I just felt miserable. Maybe that was because Sydney’s hairbrush was still in there, reminding me of her. Or maybe it was because I’d skipped dinner and couldn’t remember the last time I’d had blood either. No wonder I was in such bad shape. My alcohol tolerance had built up so much over the years that I rarely felt ill from it, so I must’ve really screwed



myself up this time. The smart thing would've been to start hydrating and drinking gallons of water, but instead, I welcomed the self-destructive behavior. I returned to my room for another drink and succeeded only in making myself feel worse.

My head and stomach calmed around dawn, and I managed some kind of fitful sleep back in my own bed. That was interrupted a few hours later by a knock at the door. I think it was actually pretty soft, but with the lingering remnants of my headache, it sounded like a sledgehammer.

"Go away," I said, peering bleary-eyed at the door.

Trey stuck his head in. "Adrian, there's someone here you need to talk to."

"I've already heard what Merry Marcus has to say," I shot back. "I'm done with him."

The door opened farther, and someone stepped past Trey. Even though the motion made my world spin, I was able to sit up and get a better look. I felt my jaw drop and wondered if I was hallucinating. It wouldn't have been the first time. Usually, I only imagined Aunt Tatiana, but this person was very much alive, beautiful as the morning sunlight illuminated her chiseled cheekbones and blond hair. But there was no way she could be here.

"Mom?" I croaked out.

"Adrian." She glided in and sat down beside me on the bed, gently touching my face. Her hand felt cool against my fevered skin. "Adrian, it's time to go home."

## **SYDNEY**

I COULD FORGIVE THE ALCHEMISTS their light-show shock tactics because once I was able to see reasonably well again, they offered me a shower.

The wall in my cell opened up, and I was greeted by a young woman who was maybe five years older than I was. She was dressed in the kind of smart suit that Alchemists love, with her black hair pulled back tightly in an elegant French twist. Her makeup was flawless, and she smelled like lavender. The golden lily on her cheek shone. My vision still wasn't at full capacity, but standing beside her, I became acutely aware of my current state, that I hadn't truly washed in ages and that my shift was little more than a rag you might use to scrub the floors.

"My name is Sheridan," she said coolly, not elaborating on whether that was her first or last name. I wondered if she might be one of the people behind the voice in my cell. I was pretty sure they'd worked in shifts, using some sort of computer program to synthesize it so it always sounded the same. "I'm the current director around here. Follow me, please."

She turned down the hall in her black leather heels, and I followed wordlessly, not trusting myself to say anything yet. Although I'd had some freedom of movement in my cell, I'd also had limitations and hadn't done a lot of walking. My stiff muscles protested against the changes, and I moved slowly behind her, one agonizing barefoot step at a time. We passed a number of unmarked doors along the way, and I wondered what they held. More dark cells and tinny voices? Nothing seemed to be marked as an exit, which was my immediate concern. There were also no windows or any other indication of how to get out of this place.

Sheridan made it to the elevator long before I did and waited patiently for me. When we were both in, we went up one floor and emerged into a similarly barren hall. One doorway led to what looked like a gym

bathroom, with tiled floors and communal showers. Sheridan pointed to a stall that had been supplied with soap and shampoo.

“The water will last for five minutes once you turn it on,” she warned. “So use it wisely. There’ll be clothes waiting for you when you’re done. I’ll be in the hall.”

She stepped outside the locker room, in a seeming show of offering privacy, but I knew without a doubt I was still being watched. I’d lost all illusions of modesty the moment I got here. I started to strip off the shift when I noticed a mirror on the wall to my side, and more importantly, who was looking back from it.

I’d known I was in bad shape, but seeing the reality of that face-to-face was an altogether different experience. The first thing that struck me was how much weight I’d lost—ironic considering my lifelong obsession with staying thin. I’d certainly met that goal, met and blown past it. I’d crossed from thin to malnourished, and it showed not just in the way the shift hung on my thin frame but also in the gauntness of my face. That hollow look was intensified by dark shadows under my eyes and a paleness in the rest of me from lack of sun. I looked like I’d just recovered from some life-threatening disease.

My hair was in bad shape too. Whatever decent job I thought I’d been doing at washing it in the dark was now proven a joke. The strands were limp and oily, hanging in sad, messy clumps. There was no doubt I was still a blonde, but the color was dull, made much darker now by the dirt and sweat that scrubbing with a washcloth just couldn’t get off. Adrian had always said my hair was like gold and had teased me about having a halo. What would he say now?

Adrian doesn’t love me for my hair, I thought, meeting my eyes. They were steady and brown. Still the same. This is all exterior. My soul, my aura, my character . . . those are unchanged.

Resolved, I started to turn from that reflection when I noticed something else. My hair was longer than the last time I’d seen it, a little over an inch longer. Although I’d been well aware my legs needed a good shaving, I’d had no sense in the cell of what the hair on my head was doing. Now, I tried to remember how fast hair grew. About a half inch a month? That suggested at least two months, maybe three if I took the poor diet into account. The shock of that was more horrifying than my appearance.

Three months! Three months they’ve taken from me, drugging me in the dark.

What had happened to Adrian? To Jill? To Eddie? A lifetime could’ve passed for them in three months. Were they safe and well? Were they still in Palm Springs? New panic rose in me, and I staunchly tried to push it down. Yes, a lot of time had passed, but I couldn’t let the reality of that affect me. The Alchemists were already playing enough mind games with me without my helping them.

But still . . . three months.

I stripped off my poor excuses for clothes and stepped into the stall, pulling the curtain closed behind me. When I turned the water on and it came out hot, it was all I could do not to sink to the floor in ecstasy. I’d been so cold for the last three months, and now here it was, all the warmth I could want. Well, not all the warmth. As I turned the temperature up full blast, I secretly wished I had a bathtub and could just sink into this heat. Still, this shower alone was glorious, and I closed my eyes, sighing with the first contentment I’d experienced in a very long time.

Then, remembering Sheridan’s warning, I opened my eyes and found the shampoo. I applied it to and rinsed my hair three times, hoping it was enough to get out the worst of the grime. It’d probably take a few more showers to ever be fully clean again. After that, I scrubbed my body with the soap until I was raw and pink

and smelled vaguely antiseptic, then just gloried in standing under the steaming water until it turned off.

When I stepped outside, I found clothes folded neatly on a bench. They were basic scrubs, loose pants and a shirt like you'd find hospital workers or—more fittingly—prisoners wearing. Tan, of course, since the Alchemists still had taste levels to maintain. They'd also given me socks and a pair of brown shoes, kind of a cross between loafers and slippers, and I wasn't surprised to find they were exactly my size. A comb completed the gift set, nothing fancy, but enough to attempt some semblance of neatness. The reflection that peered back at me now still didn't look good, exactly, but it certainly looked improved.

"Feeling better?" asked Sheridan, with a smile that didn't meet her eyes. Whatever strides I'd made in appearance felt lame beside her stylish grooming, but I consoled myself with the thought that I still had my self-respect and ability to think for myself.

"Yes," I said. "Thank you."

"You'll want this too," she said, handing me a small plastic card. It had my name, a bar code, and a picture from much better days on it. A little plastic clip on its back allowed it to attach to my collar.

She led me back to the elevator. "We're so happy you've chosen the path to redemption. Truly. I look forward to helping you on your journey back to the light."

The elevator took us to another floor and a new room, this one with a tattooist and a table. Whatever comfort I'd taken from a hot shower and real clothes vanished. They were going to re-ink me? But of course they were. Why rely on physical and psychological torture alone when you could have the added element of magical control?

"We just want to do a little touchup," Sheridan explained cheerily. "Since it's been a while."

It had been less than a year, actually, but I knew what she and the others really wanted to do. The Alchemist tattoos contained ink with charmed vampire blood woven with compulsion spells to reinforce loyalty. Obviously, mine hadn't worked. Magical or not, compulsion was basically just a strong suggestion, one that could be overridden if the will was fierce enough. They were probably going to double their usual dose in the hopes of making me more compliant so that I'd accept whatever rhetoric they were now going to subject me to.

What they didn't know was that I'd taken steps to protect against this very thing. Before being taken, I'd created an ink of my own—one made with human magic, something equally appalling to the Alchemists. From all the data I'd gathered, that magic negated whatever compulsion was in this vampire-derived ink. The downside was, I hadn't had a chance to inject that ink into my tattoo and provide that extra layer of protection. What I was counting on was the claim from a witch I knew that the very act of practicing magic would protect me. According to her, wielding human magic infused my blood, and that would counteract the vampire blood in the Alchemist tattoo. Of course, I hadn't really had a chance to practice many spells in solitary confinement and could only hope what I'd done in the past had left its mark permanently on me.

"Become one of us again," said Sheridan, as the tattooist's needle pricked the side of my face. "Renounce your sins and seek atonement. Join us in our battle to keep humans free of the taint of vampires and dhampirs. They are dark creatures and have no part of the natural order."

I tensed, and it had nothing to do with the needle piercing my skin. What if what I'd been told was wrong? What if magic use wouldn't protect me? What if, even now, that ink was working its way through my body, using its insidious power to alter my thoughts? It was one of my greatest fears, having my mind tampered

with. I suddenly had trouble breathing as that idea crippled me with terror, causing the tattooist to pause and ask if I was in pain. Swallowing, I shook my head and let him continue, trying to hide my panic.

When he finished, I didn't think I felt different. I still loved Adrian and my Moroi and dhampir friends. Was that enough? Or would the ink take time to work? And if my magic use hadn't protected me, would my own strength of will be enough to save me? Obviously, I'd overcome the previous round of re-inking. Could I do it again?

Sheridan escorted me out when the tattooist released me, chatting away as though I'd just been to a spa and not subjected to an attempt at mind control. "I always feel so refreshed after that, don't you?"

It was kind of unbelievable to me that she could act so casually, like we were friends out for a walk, when she and the others had left me starving and half-naked in a dark cell for months. Did she expect me to be so grateful for the shower and warm clothes that I could forgive everything else? Yes, I realized moments later, she likely did. There were probably plenty of people who emerged from that darkness and were willing to do anything and everything for a return to ordinary comforts.

As we journeyed up another floor, I noticed that my head felt clearer and my senses seemed sharper than they had in months. Probably with good reason. They wouldn't be subjecting me to that gas, not with Sheridan around, so this was likely the first pure air I'd breathed in a long time. Until now, I hadn't realized what a shocking difference there was. Adrian could probably reach me in dreams now, but that would have to wait. At the very least, I could practice my magic again, now that my system was no longer polluted, and hopefully fight off any of the tattoo's effects. Finding an unwatched moment to do that might be easier said than done, though.

The next corridor we entered had a series of identical rooms, doors open, revealing narrow beds inside. I continued keeping track of everything we passed, each floor and room, still searching for a way out that didn't seem to exist. Sheridan led me inside a bedroom with the number eight written outside.

"I've always thought eight was a lucky number," she told me. "Rhymes with 'great.'" She nodded toward one of the two beds in the room. "That's yours."

For a moment, I was too taken aback by the idea of a bed to recognize the larger implications. Not that it was very comfortable-looking—but still. It was leagues away from my cell floor, even with its hard mattress and thin sheets made of a material similar to my old shift. I could sleep in this bed, no question. I could sleep and dream of Adrian. . . .

"Do I have a roommate?" I asked, finally taking note of the other bed. It was hard to say if the room was occupied since there were no other signs of personal belongings.

"Yes. Her name is Emma. You could learn a lot from her. We're very proud of her progress." Sheridan stepped out of the room, so apparently we weren't lingering. "Come on—you can meet her now. And the others."

A hallway branching off of this one took us past what looked like empty classrooms. As we headed toward the corridor's end, I became aware of something my dulled senses hadn't experienced in a while: the scent of food. Real food. Sheridan was taking us to a cafeteria. Hunger I hadn't even known I possessed reared up in my stomach with an almost painful lurch. I'd adapted to my meager prison diet so much that I'd taken my body's deprived state as normal. Only now did I realize how much I craved something that wasn't lukewarm cereal.

The cafeteria, such as it was, was only a fraction of the size of Amberwood's. It had five tables, three of which were occupied with people in tan scrubs identical to mine. These, it seemed, were my fellow prisoners, all with golden lilies. There were twelve of them, which I supposed made me lucky thirteen. I wondered what Sheridan would think of that. The other detainees were of mixed age, gender, and race, though I was willing to bet all were American. In some prisons, making you feel like an outsider was part of the process. Since this one's goal was to bring us back to the fold, they would most likely put us with those of shared culture and language—those we could aspire to be like if we only tried hard enough. Watching them, I wondered what their stories were, if any of them might be allies.

"That's Baxter," said Sheridan, nodding toward a stern-faced man in white. He stood in a window that overlooked the dining area and was presumably where the food came from. "His food is delicious. I know you're going to love it. And that's Addison. She oversees lunchtime and your art class."

It would not have been clear to me that Addison was a "she," if not for that introduction. She was in her late forties or early fifties, wearing a suit just as prim if less stylish than Sheridan's, and was stationed against the side wall with sharp eyes. She kept her hair shaved close to her head and had a hard-angled face that seemed at odds with the fact that she was chewing gum. The golden lily was her only ornamentation. She was pretty much the last person I would've expected for an art teacher, which in turn led to another realization.

"I have an art class?"

"Yes, of course," said Sheridan. "Creativity is very therapeutic for healing the soul."

## **Users Review**

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