

“Take me with you,” I blurted out.

“Katja, please!” Mom protested.

Dalton had a conflicted expression. “You don’t want this life,” he said.

“I don’t want the life I’m living now, either,” I asserted. “And I don’t want to lose you again.”

“I don’t know if I can keep you safe.”

“Dalton, I’ve made up my mind, okay? This is what I want.”

“You will not leave with him!” Mom demanded.

Dalton’s head snapped to the side, listening for something neither my mom or I could hear, but I could tell by his urgent expression that whatever he heard meant trouble. With inhuman speed, Dalton crossed the room, scooped me up as if I were a small child, and vaulted up the stairs in a single bound.

“Katja Whitaker, get back here this instant!”

The house became a blur around me as Dalton charged through my room and smashed through the window. He landed on the neighbor’s roof and continued on, leaping to the next house without stopping. We were moving faster than I had run the first time I tried out my augmentation, faster than any player I’d seen in Major League, or even the members of the Justice Patrol Mom would watch on HeroTV. Each leap knocked the wind out of me before I had recovered from the last. Eventually I settled for wrapping my arms around Dalton and trusting that he wouldn’t drop me.

I looked behind us over Dalton’s shoulder. Flashlights beamed down on us, shaking wildly from the pursuit of the dark figures holding them. Gunshots rang out around us. I buried my face in Dalton’s chest just as he leapt down to ground level. My teeth rattled in my skull. He weaved over and around obstacles, vaulting fences, darting around trees, at some points leaping back onto a roof, only to plummet back to the ground an instant later.

My eyes were closed, but eventually I noticed the gunshots coming from farther and farther away, until they stopped entirely. Dalton had also stopped weaving back and forth, though he actually ran faster now that he was moving in a straight line.

“Where are we going?” I asked once I was finally able to catch my breath.

“Anywhere we can hide,” he replied.

I looked around. Somehow Dalton had carried me all the way to the bell tower, which he had just ducked behind. He motioned for me to climb onto his back, and in three big jumps he'd hoisted us up to the top, where he finally collapsed against a support beam and caught his breath.

I flopped down beside him and looked up at the massive bell hanging overhead. Dalton had been carrying me so long that it was nice to be able to look at something that wasn't just a blur.

Dalton shifted beside me. I looked over and saw him peeking around the pillar, scanning for something. I started to ask what it was, but he shushed me.

“I heard something. It sounded like yelling.”

I crawled over and the two of us looked down and across the street to see a father playing with his child. The man carried his son above his head, his arms stretched out in front of him as though he were flying through the air.

The man threw the child twenty feet in the air, then jumped what must have been at least ten feet to catch him.

“Higher, Dad!!” the boy shrieked with excitement.

My brother watched with an unreadable expression on his face. “That might be the only memory that kid has of his father. He'll be dead long before his son gets married, or has kids of his own.”

I had just been thinking about how cute they were together, but Dalton had a point. It seemed innocent enough watching them, but the underlying implication was heartbreaking.

“I know why you left,” I said. “I mean, I knew before, but I think I'm starting to really understand.”

Dalton shrugged. “It's not like you were a huge fan of the State to begin with.”

“I know, but I was a coward. It was too easy to say, 'The system sucks, but what are you going to do about it?' and that whole time you were dying, and then I got augmented and I was

dying, and everyone's just wasting away because they feel like there's no other option. And I knew that then but I just forced myself to not think about it."

"Katja, it's okay. Really."

"But it's not! It's not fair that I spent so long doing nothing, it's not fair that you made the biggest sacrifice out of everyone and you've had to fight this all on your own."

"I didn't have to fight alone," Dalton said quietly. "Not until the Justice Patrol slaughtered everyone. And besides, you're here now, aren't you?"

The reality of my decision finally sank in.

"Does that make me a member of the Liberation Front?" I asked.

"At this point, I would hesitate to say the LF even exists anymore. They'll still call you a villainess, though," he smirked.

"Everyone else is dead?"

"Almost," Dalton said. "I saw Sholto escape during the raid. We should meet up with him and figure out some kind of a plan."

I was pretty sure I'd heard Sholto's name on the news. Not that they would have had anything to say about him except that he was dangerous and unhinged.

"Do you know where he is?"

"He has some friends out on a farm in Little Creek. If he's still alive he'll probably head there."

"Why didn't you go straight to the farm?"

"Little Creek is like 50 miles away. I can't run that far with these injuries."

My eyes widen with realization. "Oh, shit! Are you okay after carrying me so far?"

Dalton rubbed his side and winced. "Kinda. It's not awful, but I do need rest."

"You and me both."

"Speaking of which..."

Dalton pulled his shirt off, rolled it into a ball, and laid back on it like a pillow. I was suddenly aware of how tired I was, too. I curled up beside him and laid my head on his chest. I could feel his heart hammering away, 600 beats per minute. It didn't resemble any sound that should have come from a human.

"I missed you a lot, sis."

"I missed you too."

I thought it would be hard to sleep, but my body had other plans. I couldn't remember a single thought that ran through my head before I was out cold.

"Katja, get up," an urgent voice whispered.

I felt my body being jostled.

"What's going on?" I asked, rolling onto my stomach and picking myself up. Dalton stopped me.

"Stay down!" he hissed. "The Justice Patrol is here. We need to move."

I peeked down at the street cautiously. They were everywhere, flashlights shining in all directions. Some went door to door, interrogating neighbors. I couldn't hear if they were downstairs searching the bell tower, but my brother's expression said enough.

Dalton opened the trapdoor and began descending the tower. I followed his lead as quietly as I could, straining to see through the darkness of the stairwell. It was only a few seconds before he stopped.

"Go back," he whispered. "They're coming up the stairs."

My heart pounded as we made our way back up through the trapdoor.

"Can we just climb down?" I asked.

"They'd shoot us to pieces," Dalton said grimly. "Our only option is to jump."

"Are you serious!? We're over a hundred feet up! There's no way I can survive that."

"I can, and I'll be carrying you."

I was trying to think of some other way down when I heard footsteps down below and I knew we were out of time.

“No time. Don’t scream.”

Before I had a chance to react, Dalton had scooped me up, and the next thing I knew we were hurtling through the air. What sounded like yelling from below was drowned out by the wind rushing past us as we plummeted from the tower.

The force of the landing jolted through my entire body, and if it hadn’t been for Dalton supporting my neck and cushioning the fall, I had no doubt that it would have killed me. I was still recovering from the impact when Dalton barked at me.

“On your feet!”

I had barely picked myself up when the crack of gunshots spurred me into action. I tore down the street and made my way between two houses, hoping they might shield me for a few seconds. The houses gave way to a backyard, but I kept running, vaulting over fences and dashing around corners.

At some point the panic began to fade, and I realized something was wrong. After ducking into an alley behind an apartment building, I peeked around the corner and saw Dalton had fallen behind. I waited a few seconds for him to catch up, but instead of charging ahead, he collapsed in a heap beside me.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I sprained both ankles on the landing. The best I can do is hide, but you need to keep running.”

“I’ve barely managed to survive even with your help. What chance do I have alone?” I didn’t tell him how scared I was for him, too.

Dalton fished out an augmentation vial from his pocket and pressed into my hand. “Do what you have to do.”

“Are you going to be okay?” I asked. I knew the answer but I couldn’t bring myself to admit it.

“It doesn’t matter, because we’re out of options,” Dalton said.

As if to illustrate this point, rapid footsteps began approaching us.

“Take the main road into Little Creek, then the third right onto Oak Ridge Drive. Look for the first farmhouse right after you pass the pond. I love you, Katja. Good luck.”

Before I had a chance to respond, Dalton grabbed my arm and hurled me forty feet into the air. I screamed in terror, looking down as the world retreated from me. It was a good throw; I only fell five or six feet from the highest point before landing on the roof of the apartment.

I didn't see what happened next, but I heard it. The standoffs on HeroTV were always edited to look like long, epic fights, but whatever happened in that alley couldn't have taken longer than six seconds. There was a scream, then a dull impact, more screaming, a hail of gunfire, and then silence. Finally, a voice spoke.

“Target neutralized. Everyone, to my position!”

I got to my feet and put my shaking hands on the edge of the roof. I didn't want to see my brother like this. But I had to know. I held my breath and leaned over.

The flashlights from the four Justice Patrol officers illuminated the mess that was Dalton's body. Beside him was a fallen member of the Justice Patrol, who looked as though his head had been smashed against the brick wall. My brother laid at an odd angle, bloodied and unmoving. He was dead, and he had died saving me. If he hadn't been carrying me, he could have rolled the landing from the tower and been fine.

“I thought I saw someone jump onto that roof.”

“Check it.”

I pulled away from the edge just as I saw all four flashlights beaming up in my direction. I looked around the roof. Only one door led down below, and jumping from this height would end the same for me as it had for Dalton. Which meant I only had one option.

I stared at the vial in my hand. Inside was a glob of mud, while a needle and strike anywhere match were lashed to the outside. It was such a simple little potion: Earth, water, fire, and a blood sacrifice.

I struck the match and held it over the vial, tapping it on the edge when enough of it was curled and brittle. Next, I pricked my finger with the needle and counted the potency of the augmentation aloud, starting from the degree I'd augmented back when I first started working at the quarry.

“Three, three and a half, four, four and a half...”

I tried not to think about how many years of my life were draining away, but I already knew. Going up to ten gave me about four years left to live. Not that I'd actually live that long. Most members of the Liberation Front were killed in less than a year.

I swizzled the contents of the vial with the needle, then raised it to my lips with a trembling hand and swallowed the concoction in a single gulp. No going back now. I counted to fifty before the pain in my legs began to ebb to a shadow of its former self, and I could feel my senses sharpen.

Three floors down, I heard the marching footsteps of the Justice Patrol ascending to the roof. I rehearsed the directions Dalton had given me in my head before walking over to the edge of the building and looking down over the city.

The door flew open with a bang open and uniformed figures rushed out onto the roof. The Justice Patrol arrived just in time to see a figure leaping from rooftop to rooftop before vanishing into the night.