

GOING AND GONE

I shoved one more box of ammunition into my already-stuffed pack, then stood and swung it over my shoulder.

“That’s it for me,” I called to Theo. “I’m top full.”

“Already?” he shouted back. “Asha, I think there’s some old food rations here.”

“Really?” I hurried down the darkened hallway, stepping through an archway into the room Theo was foraging through. A line of blue light traced the outline of the ceiling, dimmed from years of disuse. It only revealed a few rows of shelves, strewn with boxes and a thick layer of dust.

Theo’s imposing figure reached for one of the boxes. He was built like a mountain. His massive arms and broad shoulders showed off his years of physical labor with the Defiant. Between his rugged features, long hair pulled back in a ponytail, and mottled scar running from chin to chest, most found his appearance menacing.

But not me. I knew he’d gotten the scar from a Burner who had tried to draft a young girl in his hometown. To me, it was just another reminder of his soft heart.

He lowered an enormous box to the floor and pulled off the lid. “I knew it!” he crowed, tossing it aside to grab fistfuls of dehydrated food. “Rations!”

My heart leapt as I scanned the shelves, filled with similar boxes. This could add months to our food storage. I grinned at Theo. “Wow. So even the Regime need to eat.”

“They *are* human,” he reminded me with an eye roll, starting to load his own pack.

“That’s easy to forget.” I hesitated, then lowered my bag to trade some bullets for sustenance. “We should have brought more bags.”

“And who would have carried them all the way back to the shuttle? You?” Theo teased, catching a stray strand of my dark hair and tucking it behind my ear.

“We could have brought more *people*, too.” I poked him in the ribs.

“We didn’t know how well-stocked it would be. We’ll come back.”

I nodded. We were lucky the Regime hadn’t emptied this station when they left it to extend their territory—lucky they hadn’t once come back, either. But I didn’t want to press that luck. “We should head out.”

Theo helped me to my feet. “Yeah. Don’t want to miss the shuttle.”

“Though I *wish* we had a little more time to explore,” I said as we stepped back into the hall. “I might find something to help Risa’s part of the plan.”

Theo caught my hand and started tugging me away. “We’re coming back, remember?”

Unable to resist either his quirked smile or forward momentum, I fell into step beside him, retracing our route out. The hall was periodically lit with arched shafts of light. A few rooms stood open, showcasing screens and computers of all different sizes and purposes. I itched to look at the outdated technology—the Regime relied less on modern advances and more on their abilities. Who needed technology when you could get into anyone’s brain, or shoot fire from your hands, or shift the direction of gravity? Using our tech to withstand their psych arsenal was like sending insects to attack a rhino.

But I know how to bring them down.

I shivered, the thought both thrilling and terrifying. I had figured out a weakness that would crumble the entire government. If all went according to plan, the Defiant would be ready to execute my idea in a month.

Not that anyone knew what my plan *was*. It was too dangerous, too possible for a Brain-crawler to get close enough to figure us out. We had agreed that I would strategically divulge parts of the plan to designated people, just enough to get the gears moving.

The Defiant were blindly trusting me.

But it would work. It had to.

A low rumble made the walls tremble.

Theo and I stopped, meeting eyes.

The rumble grew into a roar, and I felt a flutter of panic. The doorway out was close, just ahead of us. Theo and I rushed to either side, pressing ourselves against the wall. Theo pulled his shotgun from over his shoulder. My hand went to my pistol.

He nodded, and I hit a button on the panel next to me. The doorway went translucent, still barricading us from the outside, but allowing us a view.

A dark, sleek Regime ramjet stood stark against the flat gray sky.

I felt kicked in the stomach.

The aircraft kicked up clouds of dust as it lowered to hover above the desolate ground, not a hundred feet from us.

“Asha.”

My eyes flicked to Theo, whose face was drained of color.

“We have to get out of here.”

Though he was right, neither of us moved as a ramp lowered toward the ground. A tall, thick man stepped into view, his crisp blue uniform marking him as a Breacher. He paused midway down the ramp, gray hair blowing as he faced the station head-on.

He spoke, voice amplified so it rang around us. “Asha Cress and Theo Stone, come out with your hands up.”

“We were betrayed,” Theo snarled.

“Or our base was hit with Brain-crawlers.” My voice shook despite myself.

“If you fail to surrender promptly, we will force you out.” The man continued as though commenting on the weather.

“There has to be another exit,” I hissed.

Theo nodded, determination hardening his features.

The Breacher raised his hand.

Theo knew what was happening a split-second before me. “Get back!” he yelled, lunging my direction.

With a boom and screaming metal, the entire doorway burst free of the base. I hit the ground from the reverberation, dazed for an instant as debris showered over me. As I looked up, I caught sight of a dozen men flooding from the ramjet. They maneuvered down the ramp, around the first man, charging in our direction.

They wore green uniforms.

Brain-crawlers.

Theo’s hand was under my elbow, hauling me to my feet. We ran.

Tearing through the dim halls, I strained my ears for their footfalls behind us. “The rhyme, Theo! Think of the rhyme!”

He grunted acknowledgement just as I felt the first brush of the opposition's invasion into my mind. It was cold, probing. I filled my head with the rhyme that could keep them at bay, trying to focus solely on the words and the pounding of my feet in time with the rhythm.

Where are you going? You're going and gone.

We swung around a corner. I let Theo take the lead, trusting his sense of direction more than mine, tightening my hand on my pistol. Another Brain-crawler joined the first, trying to push their way into my head.

No doorway is showing. It's going and gone.

A shot rang out behind us, and we threw ourselves to the left, into a narrower hallway that led deeper into the station. "Where—?" I gasped.

"The bunker usually has a separate exit," Theo explained in a rush. As he ran, he turned and lifted his rifle, firing as the first man in green came into view around the corner. As the Brain-crawler fell, one of the hands reaching for my head vanished, only to be replaced by two others.

Wandering circles, the shadows grow long.

The cold touches against my brain faltered, lessening as they were held at bay by the circling rhyme.

So where are you going? You're going and gone.

Theo pulled me around another corner. "They're not even trying to get in my head." His green eyes swept over me, noting my face screwed up in concentration. "Shards, Asha. They're after *you*. They have to know you have the plan to take them down. That's why they came out here just for us."

"Shut up." I spoke through gritted teeth to warn him I was losing my concentration. If I thought of the plan *now...* *Don't think don't think don't think...* I started the rhyme over. *Where are you going? You're going and gone.*

They were gaining on us. I could hear their footsteps now. Several more shots rang out. We ran in zigzags until we swung around one more corner.

I stumbled to a halt, gasping for breath as I flipped the switch on my pistol. It lit up green, and I ducked back around the wall to fire at the Brain-crawlers.

I missed—which was fine by me.

The bullet hit the back wall, exploding into a choking cloud of fog. It spread like a water, rushing down to engulf the Brain-crawlers. Their disgusting presence in my hand vanished completely for an instant, and I whirled back toward Theo.

“This way!” He had swung open a thick, metal door and was gesturing frantically to the dark stairs beyond.

I plunged into the bunker, scrambling down the stone steps. Theo rushed after, bolting the door behind us. Our slapping feet rang through the chamber. As we made it to the bottom of the stairs, the whole room lit up, the cement walls slowly glowing a pale red as they registered our motion.

The room was long, domed, and completely barren. Straight across, on the other side, a ladder was bolted into the wall, leading up to a set of slanted doors.

Without speaking, we sprinted toward the other exit. Theo got there first, but stepped aside, letting me take the lead again. I leapt onto the second rung and climbed quickly, raising a hand to push against the cold doors.

They didn't budge under my hand.

I shoved harder, hissing, but when they remained firm, I jumped off the ladder. “You try.”

Theo hauled himself up, putting a massive hand on the barrier and shoving. When that did nothing, he braced himself, lifted both hands, and strained against the doors. A sick feeling started to spread through me as his herculean muscles flexed, his teeth gritted, and a bead of sweat rolled down the side of his face.

Still nothing.

There was a bang against the doors on the other end. The thick walls held their prying minds at bay for now, but it was only a matter of time before they would break through.

“Theo,” I said quietly.

Theo jumped off the ladder, pulling his shotgun from his shoulder again. I took a step back as he fired at our only hope of escape, once, twice, three times. Shrapnel from the shells rained around us.

I swallowed. “They must have barricaded this exit before they evacuated. As a security precaution.”

There was more pounding on the bolted door behind us.

Theo’s jaw clenched. “We have to be able to break through.”

I caught his arm. “That door behind us won’t hold forever. They could get the Breacher to tear it free at any point.”

Theo looked at me with a kind of intense desperation that I’d never seen before. “Then we’ll fight them.” His voice was hoarse. “Every one of them. It’s bottlenecked, we can—”

“Theo...” I whispered, tightening my grip on his arm.

“No. We can get out of this.”

“Theo.”

“We *can*, Asha.” He was white-faced, a flicker of panic showing in his green eyes, as though he knew what I was going to say next.

“Theo.” My lips trembled. “You have to wipe my memory.”

“No.” He pulled his arm free and took a couple of steps back.

“You *have* to. Listen to me. We can’t let them discover their weakness, or the Defiant will never get a shot to take them down.”

“If we wipe your memory, then *no one* will know their weakness,” Theo growled. “Not a single person in the Defiant knows what you know.”

My mind went to the scrap of paper where I had so carefully written my plan. *I hid the information, just in case something like this would happen.* I thought. *But if you know that, we will have to wipe your brain, too.*

So I just said, “There’s still hope without me.”

Theo searched my face, knowing there was something else I couldn’t share with him. There was another enormous boom against the metal doors. The ground trembled.

“This is why we brought the gloves,” I reminded him urgently. “There was always a chance I’d be caught.”

“Yes, but I didn’t think it would actually ever come to—”

Boom. The ground shook again.

“Alright. Alright, fine. I’ll focus on the day you figured out their flaw. We’ll wipe that.”

Theo was struggling to keep his voice reasonable.

“Theo, you have to wipe it all.” My breath caught in a dry sob. “It took me a long time to figure it out. If you only wipe the day I actually did, they could still piece it together from my memories. You have to make me forget everything in the last two years.”

Theo took two quick strides over to me, catching my face in his hands. “Asha, that means...Us. Everything.”

“Gone,” I whispered. A tear slipped down my cheek.

Theo’s face crumpled.

Boom.

The doors shuddered again, and when I risked a glance over, I saw that they bowed in slightly.

“Do it, Theo.”

His hands shook against my cheeks.

Boom. The doors groaned under the force of the assault.

“*Do it,*” I begged, tears flowing more freely now.

Theo pulled me to him in a crushing embrace, lowering his head to press his mouth against mine. I curled my fingers in his rough shirt. The kiss was fierce, tender, and brief.

Then he pulled away. He dropped the bag from his back, reaching inside for a pair of silver gloves. Slipping them on, he flexed his fingers, and they glowed at the fingertips.

His hands were still shaking as he reached out to press his fingers to my temples.

At first there was nothing, then vibrant images flared behind my eyes. Bits and pieces of memories flashed past—racing Theo to the river, getting caught behind enemy lines, rows of Burners, raising their hands...As soon as I recognized a memory it was gone, racing by as a train.

Boom.

The door to the bunker must have cracked open, because at that moment a violent force shoved its way into my mind, groping through my thoughts with icy, careless fingers. I cried out.

“Where are you going?” Theo’s voice spoke right in my ear, soft and reassuring. “You’re going and gone.”

I seized the words like a lifeline, and the hands inside my head began to retreat.

“No doorway is showing. It’s going and gone,” Theo continued.

More memories flashed by. I watched them slip away like water in cupped hands—a spectator to my own life.

“Wandering circles, the shadows grow long.”

Distantly, beyond the racing pictures in my head, I could hear shouting. Footsteps pounded on stone. Confusion clouded my thoughts.

“So where are you going? You’re going and—”

I looked up.

A wild man stood before me, tall, with long hair pulled back in a ponytail. A large, disfiguring burn ran all the way down his neck to disappear under his shirt, and he wore strange, glowing gloves. My eyes widened, and I took a step back.

“Gone,” he whispered, a shadow of pain in his intense green eyes.

“What?” I asked, noting my racing heart. “Who are you?”

Men in green uniforms descended on us, pouring through a set of twisted metal doors.

I could only stand there, stunned and confused, as they grabbed us.