

Chapter One

Jane checked her wrist one more time as she sighed.

As she stared again at nothing but her skin, she wondered why she kept doing this foolish gesture.

Whenever she got bored or wondered how long she would have to keep waiting for someone, the reflex of swiftly turning her hand would kick in. And as of right now, it seemed her friend was taking her sweet time in the depths of the school. So, yes, she was rightfully frustrated; seconds were stretching into minutes, and she could not get any answer from her memories on why she glanced at her hand just then.

As for how much longer she had to rot in here, Maha should hopefully finish checking the last few rooms of the building soon enough.

Jane was not clinging too hard to that wish, however. She had learned not to get fooled by how tainted perception of time could be under the influence of impatience. Hours seemed to have flown by, but it might have been only a few minutes since the other woman told her to stay in this empty class. And she was patient, so she obeyed.

At first, Jane was often checking her surroundings, as alert to any uninvited sound or movement as she was told, but now? She was only trying to lose time more efficiently than before: picking up her nails, twisting a coil from her hair, trying to identify the few objects keeping her company... She was trying as hard as she could not to sit down on the floor in case someone from her group would come back and barge in. It was a task getting more challenging by the minute as her thighs were burning. Still, it was worth fulfilling if she did not risk getting reported for slacking off at her job.

As for how much longer she would have to rot *here*, she would have to give up searching for an answer to that question like every time she had had this reflection before.

It had been, what, five months since she came here? Perhaps a little over four, yet this was not meant as a celebration. Jane was born an adult, snout in the grass in the middle of a plain. She had walked around in the chill of early spring's mist, unsure where to go or who she was. It did not take long until she encountered a group of farmers, who led her to the clan that had welcomed her in. There, everyone had the same story as hers. Everyone appeared the same way and had as many answers as she could now provide: none.

Jane knew she once was a little girl, but she could not remember it. No pictures were popping in her head, nor memories of anyone or anything that had been part of her childhood. It was rational that such a time existed: if plants grew why would she not? It was pure logic that she had lived before she arrived in this world. So why could she not recall this previous existence? She knew a few facts she had fished out from the back of her mind, and they were enough proof that her past was real to her. The thought of knowing she used to live with both her parents back when she was a kid but not being able to remember their faces was terrifying. How could she remember that her kitchen walls were red but not visualize the room?

She spent her free time digging deeper into her memories to collect more, hoping that one day, it would help her understand why they were here. However, she had sent herself into a panic a couple of times while doing so, and now that she was on shift, it was not the time for that. So, the girl redirected her mind to what she already knew.

Jane could say that *here* was likely Earth, given her intense familiarity with the flora and fauna, but it did not feel like home. Some buildings here and there, scattered across the lands, were the only things that were not plain vegetation. Newly found ones, if unclaimed, often contained supplies that never failed to be helpful. Then, these structures would serve as landmarks, storage bases, or outposts. They were never used as shelters because eeriness would fill one who dared stay inside for too long. Only guards roamed inside, as it was easier to defend concrete walls than a shelter made from forest scraps, especially as thieves were merciless.

However, her clan was not any better than enemies, and her current location was doubtlessly proving it. Today's raid had just ended, and they had successfully chased the other band's members from this base. There was plenty to steal here, but they had intervened quickly enough. After all, this school was far closer to their camp than the enemy's, so this was plain and cruel intimidation rather than for fetching resources. The team had already left, except for Maha, who 'just wanted to check some wires out,' and Jane, who was either very loyal or very stupid to wait for her. It was a relief that this raid had ended in just a few minutes – her team of fifteen had convinced the few rivals to flee – and she lightly chuckled out of contentment. The sound softly bounced on the surrounding walls, running down the hall until she could only hear its ghost.

In the meantime, there was nothing left to do but wait. So, Jane dived right back into her thoughts.

The woman was too young yet to understand the nature of the hostilities between the two clans. It seemed reasonable to her that, by joining forces, everyone's chances to go back would immensely increase. They could share their knowledge or work more efficiently on existing hypotheses. Still, she doubted any alliance would emerge from the existing tensions. She knew the twisted history, but only from words, and did not share her clanmates' anger towards the other group. Of course, she would never feel safe in the same room as a living enemy. Yet this war was stupid.

However, she knew not to voice her opinion on such matters to anyone, especially if it could reach her leaders' ears. She had gained a title she was satisfied with by bending to the rules, so she would not try against them now. It had been easy for her to fit into the hierarchy, and her obedience had quickly pulled her up in ranks and respect. Even if she uncovered more flaws in her clan daily, she would keep her mouth shut like always. Besides, what might she do even if she strongly disagreed with the heads' decision? She could always run away but to where? If there really were other groups out there, there was no guarantee she would survive the trip.

Tools were rare, engines a myth, and civilization a joke. Thus, staying here was the best she could do, even if looking away from the call of the horizon was hard. She knew she would manage to eventually, especially since some of her friends had been there for years. Plus, deep down, she loved her clan and its people.

Jane was frustrated. She let out another exasperated sigh and shook her head. These thoughts never failed to creep up on her when she was alone, and oh, how she wished Maha would come back already. Or anything to distract her, frankly. How long had it been since her friend left? She rolled her wrist to look at it and growled in annoyance at herself for doing it again. What was this gesture supposed to mean? What part of her previous life was associated with it? Perhaps—

A faint call snapped her out of her thoughts.

She was not sure what it was and where it came from, and her heartbeat began accelerating too much for her liking. As she only participated in assessing lost items from the raid, she had not seen the enemies fall, but she had been promised they were gone. Still, she allowed herself to doubt there could be one hiding in a corner. She gulped nervously, not daring to answer the voice. Yet, she slowly approached the doorway and popped her head out. The few opened classrooms, where the sunlight breached through the windows, lit the dark corridor enclosed by steel doors. The chills running up and down her spine could make her violently shake, but she still had enough control not to run towards the exit.

Then, again, the call reached her, but this time, she could clearly distinguish her name from her friend. Taking a deep breath, she went down the hall after the sound.

However, Jane's walk was short-lived as she came face to face with a T-junction. Perfect. There was no way she would eeny-meeny-miny-moe her way to Maha, and she took the handcrafted knife from her belt as a precaution. She was not good at fighting, but seeing an armed person would heavily discourage any sane person from trying anything. Besides, no one could know she sucked at defending herself.

"Maha?" Jane let out rather loudly after a minute.

An answer came from her right, breathed out in an annoyed tone that perfectly matched her friend's character. She walked towards her objective, yet someone emerged from a perpendicular hall just a meter before Jane.

"You di—" they began but froze.

They both stared at each other with shocked looks on their faces. The unknown girl had a medium-sized staff in one hand. What caught Jane's attention was the camo ribbon on her wrist. That woman was not Maha or someone from her clan but a survivor from the other group. Jane took a second too long to react and was forcefully pushed against the wall. In the same motion, the enemy's cane threw aside her knife, and a forearm pressed on Jane's throat. The sharp pain of being choked surprised her much more than she expected. It quickly transformed into the realization that she was unable to inhale.

She felt tears welling up in her eyes as she struggled to breathe, gasping for air that would not go down her crushed windpipe. She was desperately trying to grab her assaulter's arms to get them away from her throat, but the other girl had her pinned against the wall. There undeniably was some auto-defense move she could pull here, but the panic was making her unable to think. Jane looked down at her, meeting her amber eyes. If she could not fight, she had to beg. A few interminable seconds passed before the other released her grip, and Jane fell onto the floor, finally breathing in.

The oxygen finding its way through her lungs felt like fire, and she let a few pained gasps through. She started coughing, crying with each painful squeeze of her neck. She registered a set of feet standing in front of her before they left and turned down the hall where they came from. Once her vision cleared, she massaged her throat and processed the situation. The girl had taken her knife and disappeared, but she spared her. Right, Jane's throat was burning up, but she was alive.

Not wishing to push her luck further, she stood up and scurried down the hall, praying no one would jump her, until she stumbled into a dimly lit room. Maha was standing beside a heavy metallic fence, with annoyance and disbelief on her face.

"You could not have been louder, could you?" she asked. "Got spooked from your own shadow again?"

"I..." Jane began, but that was what her voice could make for now.

Her friend raised an eyebrow. The other shook her head and pointed to the enormous lock Maha was holding. The single word had almost sent her into a coughing fit.

"Yeah, I'm almost done," Maha looked down at the clasp. "Hand me the hexagonal key, please. It turns out I still needed it after all."

Jane ruffled in her pocket before pulling out a relatively large key ring. The jingling was loud, but she was not too worried about it now that Maha was with her. Still, she stared at the doorway while her friend fumbled with the lock. It did not give way, and her movements were more erratic by the second.

"Argh, you do it," she rose for Jane to take her place. "You're much more patient than me with—"

Her icy blue eyes shot up to meet Jane's, and she quickly looked her friend up and down.

"What happened to you, you said?" she nervously asked, yet she did not wait for a reply and lightly pushed Jane. "Why didn't you tell me *first* that you ran into a Green?"

She picked up a small bag from the floor and wasted no time rushing back to the hall Jane had come through moments before, the other close behind. As they sped through the corridor, Maha was swearing under her breath. Three halls, and they would be back outside, safe in the sunlight.

Maha let her friend go before her, and the latter complied with a sigh. The lack of sense of direction from everyone in her clan was exasperating. Jane had always known she was skilled, but now and

then, she believed she must have superpowers. It was the main reason she would tag along in raids. That, and being quite subtle when it came to scouting new locations.

Halfway through the last corridor, Maha grabbed her friend's arm, spinning her around and pointing to the next opened door. Jane felt her limbs go numb. They had *almost* been out.

"Note to self: never trust Mariya's 'don't worry, there's no one left,'" Maha whispered. "Okay, we're rushing inside. We'll hope for some trapped bird."

After noticing Jane had lost her knife, she handed out one of hers to the latter and barged into the room. Jane's panic state was unutterable. She could only hear her heartbeat, pounding and fast, and had seemingly lost control of her members. But Maha was with her. And this was their only way out. Running away in a straight line meant exposing their back, and no one from their clan would hear their screams.

Swallowing down a choking lump, she followed her friend inside. On the opposite side of the room was standing the girl from earlier.

"They're alone," Maha said after quickly checking the empty class. "Take care of them, and I'll inspect the other rooms."

And the two were left alone, facing each other. The woman's staff was not out of reach, but she did not motion to get it, fearing the knife would get thrown if she were to move. Anyway, what would her twig do against the shining weapon? Jane stared at her and contemplated the visible fear in her gold eyes. She felt powerful now that the roles were reversed.

A faint whistle from behind snapped her out of her thoughts. From the sudden relief in the other's stare, she knew she had to move fast. All she had to do was kill the girl and leave... but *why*? Why kill that woman who spared her earlier? Jane lowered her knife, yet the girl did not move to reach her staff. She backed out of the room, even daring to loosen the grip on the knife. No reaction from the other. So, she took that as her go and ran to Maha.

Jane entered every room on her way to the exit in search of her friend and finally opened the last door that led outside. The sudden brightness made her hiss in pain.

"The rest of the group are over there, but we will catch up to them in no time," Maha, leaning on the school's cement wall, pointed to the massive cloud of dust in the distance. "It's too bad I couldn't test if the electricity were working, but now that we've claimed this place back, there will be plenty of safe time for that."

Jane scoffed and started to walk, yet her friend forcefully grabbed her shoulder to turn her around.

"What the heck," Maha breathed out as she intensely gazed at her friend's neck.

The worried look she bore made the other's intestines twist.

"Like you said, I ran into someone..." Jane said.

"The line between running into someone and getting seriously assaulted is not *that* fine," the other spat as she let go of her friend. "What happened?"

"I had the honor of getting strangled. Truly a once in a lifet—"

"That's a serious injury!" Maha shouted.

Jane knew her friend's anger was directed at her attacker but still jumped at the sudden rise in volume.

"They're dead, I hope? Or are they still inside? Do you remember their face?"

"You're overreacting, Maha. I'm alive, that's great. Now, let's get away from here."

"How can you be so nonchalant? You almost died! There's a black stripe covering more than half of your neck. What more proof do you need that whoever did that wished to kill you?"

Jane's chest dropped to her stomach. She suddenly felt an intense disgust towards that girl. Before sparing her, all that inhabited her mind was that bestial, murderous instinct, like everyone else. For a moment, Jane had believed she had found someone else still clean of bloodthirsty thoughts. But no, enemy was still purely enemy.

"How did you manage to free yourself?" Maha asked.

"I'm not sure; I threw them off of me," the other lied quietly, then lightly pushed her friend to motion at her to go. "Come on, let's forget that ever happened."

Jane picked up her bag, which mainly contained various broken objects she believed the builders could fix.

"My knife," Maha asked calmly.

She felt relieved to hear her tranquil again, and Jane complied, drawing it from her waistband. She triple-checked the inventory in her sack and, once ready to go, nodded at her friend. However, Maha's focus was on the blade, a poised expression on her face.

"That's an oddly clean blade for a kill," she bluntly said.

Jane sighed exasperatedly and began to walk, still relieved to hear her friend catch up to her.

"Here I was fantasizing about boasting your first kill to Judy and getting you a few notches up in prestige," Maha said. "You must be pretty darn happy they did not decide to stab us both in the back. What if your companions were here and their lives depended on it?"

"I wouldn't have to because killing is not *my* passion, and I'd appreciate it if you'd quit putting me into such situations."

"Alright, I suppose I'll have to report that so the raid team will know what to expect of you next time."

Her tone was very calm, but Jane knew this meant deep trouble. Maha was right: this was a test, and she failed it. Who could safely rely on her now? But no, that was not what happened. Her situation had been an exception.

"The girl in the room saved me," she explained. "I couldn't."

"Saved you from what? You never mentioned her before."

"She's the one who strangled me, but she let me go. I returned the favor."

"And the thought that she released you not out of compassion but because a friend of yours could be swooping in did not cross your mind?" Maha hissed. "Your trust for strangers is what will get you killed someday, Jane."

"This stupid war is."

"Do you want to go back home?"

"Fine, you're right; she wanted to kill me."

"Do you *want* to go back home?"

The tension was thick. The two rarely argued, and Jane chose not to talk back.

"If you want to go back, stick to the rules," Maha completed, "we don't spare them. Each one alive is yet another nuisance driving us away from reaching our common goal."

Jane rolled her eyes at this phrase she had heard so many times. Their footsteps in the dry grass were the only sound for a solid minute.

"The look in her eyes was intense," she risked adding. "You would have spared her, too."

"She would have been gone before this thought would reach my mind. And I'd be up and running again before feeling any remorse."

"You don't truly think that."

There was no answer. At least now Jane knew her friend would not rat her out.

"Two more things," Maha continued. "First, sparing an enemy is a never-seen-before. Keep it shut, and I will too."

Jane nodded, even if she was already planning on doing that. Still, she felt relieved she had a friend with whom to share her divergent morals.

"And second?" she asked.

"Mark my words: she did try to kill you, and I've seen her face."

Jane felt her heart sink at the implication of that.

"And I don't owe her anything."

This, however, she believed her friend wholeheartedly. Maha cleared her throat.

"Do you think the hunters will bring some real meat tonight?" she said.

"You're sick," the sudden change of topics made Jane giggle.

"Wrong, I'm *starving* for an elk."

The two of them could not stay tense for long, and soon enough, they were back to their usual selves for the rest of their walk. The back of Jane's mind even cleared for a split second, although unanswered questions about that girl roamed around for the remainder of the day.