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5 YEARS AGO, I DIED.

178 MINUTES LATER, I WOKE UP.



REBOOT

AMY TINTERA

"FAST-PACED AND THRILLING — I DEVoured THIS BOOK!"

—Veronica Rossi, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Under the Never Sky*

REBOOT

AMY TINTERA

HARPER **TEEN**

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DEDICATION

For my sister, Laura

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THEY ALWAYS SCREAMED.

My assignment wailed as she slipped in the mud, whipping her head around to see if I was gaining on her.

I was.

Her feet hit solid pavement and she broke into a full sprint. My feet grazed the ground as I chased her, my short legs easily overtaking her panicked attempt at running.

I yanked her arm. She hit the ground. The sound that escaped her mouth was more animal than human as she desperately tried to stand.

I hated the screaming.

I pulled two sets of cuffs off my belt and secured them around her wrists and feet.

“No, no, no, no,” she choked out as I attached the leash to her handcuffs. “I didn’t do it.”

I wrapped the leash around my hand and ignored her protests as I hauled her to her feet and dragged her down the street past the crumbling wooden shacks.

“It wasn’t me! I didn’t kill nobody!” Her movements became wild, almost convulsive, and I turned to glare at her.

“There’s some human left in you, ain’t there?” she asked, craning her neck to look at the number above the bar code on my wrist.

She froze. Her eyes flew from the 178 printed on my skin to my face and she let out another shriek.

No. There was no human left in me.

The screaming continued as I led her to the shuttle and threw her inside with the other members of her gang. The metal bars clanged down as soon as I stepped aside, but she didn’t try to make a run for it. She dove behind two bloodied humans in back.

Away from me.

I turned around, my eyes flicking over the slums. The deserted dirt road stretched out in front of me, dotted with poorly constructed wooden homes. One of them was leaning so heavily to the left I thought it might tip over at the slightest gust of wind.

“Wren One-seventy-eight,” I said, adjusting the camera on my helmet so it pointed straight out. “Assignment secure.”

“Assist Tom Forty-five,” a voice on the other end of my com ordered. “In pursuit on Dallas Street. Coming up on the corner of Main.”

I took off down the dirt road and turned into an alley, the stench of rotten trash hanging in the humid air so thick I wanted to bat it away from my face. I sucked in a deep breath and held it in my lungs, trying to block out the smell of the slums.

Forty-five whizzed past the alleyway on the paved road in front of me, his black pants torn and flapping against his skinny legs. He left a liquid trail behind him I assumed was blood.

I darted onto the street and flew past him, the sound of my boots causing the human ahead of us to turn. This one didn’t scream.

Yet.

He stumbled on the uneven road and a knife fell from his hand and skidded across the pavement

was close enough to hear his panicked breathing as he dove for it. I reached for him, but he shot to his feet, whirling around and slicing the blade across my stomach.

I jumped back as the blood trickled down my midsection and the human's lips turned up in a triumphant smile, like this was a victory.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

Forty-five hurled himself at the beefy human, taking them both down. I hadn't trained Forty-five and it was obvious. Sloppy and impulsive, he was barely faster than the human.

Before I could intercede, Beefy took hold of Forty-five's neck, gave his helmet a shove with his palm, and jammed the knife straight through the boy's forehead. I winced as Forty-five gurgled and slid off him, his bright, gold eyes vacant as he hit the dirt.

The human scrambled to his feet, doing a few celebratory jumps and making whooping sounds. "Yeah! What you got, Blondie?"

I adjusted my com, ignoring the human's annoying attempt to bait me. "Wren One-seventy-eight. Forty-five down." Beefy's smile slid off his face at the mention of my number.

"Continue." The voice coming through my com was flat, uninterested.

I locked eyes with Beefy. I wanted him to run. I wanted to kick his legs out from under him and smash that triumphant look on his face into the dirt.

I took a quick glance down at Forty-five.

I wanted it to hurt.

Beefy whirled around and raced away from me, pumping his flabby arms as fast as he could. I bit back a smile as I watched him go. I'd let him have a tiny head start.

The chase was my favorite part.

I leaped over Forty-five's body and the human looked back as I gained on him. I grabbed his shirt and he stumbled with a grunt, his face smacking against the ground. He clawed desperately at the gravel, but it was too late. I jammed my foot into his back as I pulled out my cuffs. I snapped them around his ankles.

He screamed, of course.

"Wren One-seventy-eight. Forty-five's assignment is now secure."

"Report to the shuttle," the voice in my ear said.

I attached a leash to Beefy's wrists, jerking it tighter until he yelped in pain, and tugged him over to Tom Forty-five's body. He was a young kid, maybe fourteen or so, just out of training. I avoided his vacant eyes as I roped the leash around his wrists.

I lugged them past the sad little wooden houses of the slums and back to the shuttle, the blood crusting on my stomach as my wound closed. I shoved Beefy into the black box with the other humans, who cringed at the mere sight of me.

I turned away and headed for the other shuttle, pausing to pull the knife out of Tom Forty-five's head. The door opened and the Reboots looked up from their seats, their eyes immediately skipping over me to rest on Forty-five.

I pushed aside the nagging voice that said I should have been able to save him, and carefully placed him on the floor. I took a quick glance around the shuttle and found my most recent trainee Marie One-thirty-five, strapped into her seat. I scanned her for signs of injury, but didn't see any. She'd survived her first solo mission. Not that I'd expected otherwise.

She looked from me to Forty-five and back again. She'd been silent through most of our training, so I barely knew her any better than I had her first day as a newbie, but I thought the expression on her face was gratitude. My trainees had the best survival rate.

I handed the knife to the shuttle officer, who gave me a sympathetic look. Leb was the only officer I could tolerate. ~~The only human I could tolerate, for that matter.~~

I took one of the small seats lined up inside the black windowless shuttle, pulling the straps down my chest as I leaned back. I stole a glance up at the other Reboots, but they were all looking at Forty-five sadly. One even wiped at tears on her face, smearing blood and dirt across her cheek in the process.

The lower numbers often cried. Forty-five probably cried. He was only dead forty-five minutes before he rose. The less time dead before the Reboot, the more humanity retained.

I was dead for 178 minutes.

I didn't cry.

Leb walked to the front of the shuttle and gripped the edge of the open door as he peered inside.

"Ready," he said to the officer piloting the shuttle. He pulled the door closed and I heard the lock snap into place. We lifted off the ground as Leb slid into his seat.

I shut my eyes until I felt the shuttle land with a jerk. The Reboots silently filed out onto the rooftop, and I resisted the urge to look back at Forty-five one more time as I brought up the rear.

I joined the line, pulling my long-sleeved black shirt off to reveal a thin white undershirt. The cool air tickled my skin as I tossed the shirt over my shoulder, spread my legs, and held my arms out like I was trying to fly.

I saw a Reboot fly once. He jumped off the top of a fifteen-story building with his arms spread, hit the ground, and tried to drag his broken body to freedom. He made it maybe two feet before they put a bullet in his head.

A guard, a human who smelled like sweat and smoke, quickly patted me down. He could barely keep the grimace off his face and I turned to look at the squat little buildings of the slums instead. The guards hated touching me. I think they flipped for it.

He jerked his head toward the door, wiping his hands on his pants like he could wash the dead off. Nope. I'd tried.

A guard held the door open for me and I slipped through. The top floors of the facility were staff offices, and I ran down several flights of dark stairs and stopped at the eighth floor, Reboot quarters. Below were two more floors Reboots were allowed to access on a regular basis, but underneath that it was mostly medical research labs I rarely visited. They liked to examine us occasionally, but they mostly used the space to research human diseases. Reboots don't get sick.

I held my bar code out to the guard at the door and he scanned it and nodded. My boots made little noise on the concrete floor as I made my way down the hall. The girls in my wing were all asleep, pretending to be. I could see into every room through the glass walls. Privacy was a human right, not a Reboot one. Two girls per room, one in each of the twin beds pushed against either wall. A dresser at the end of both beds and one wardrobe at the back of the room to share—that's what we called home.

I stopped in front of my quarters and waited for the guard to call in the order for someone upstairs to open my door. Only the humans could open the doors once they were locked at night.

The door slid open and Ever rolled over in her bed as I stepped inside. She hadn't been sleeping much the last few weeks. It seemed she was always awake when I came in after an assignment.

Her big, green Reboot eyes glowed in the darkness and she lifted her eyebrows, asking silently how the mission went. Talking after lights-out was prohibited.

I held up four fingers on one hand, five on the other, and she let out a little sigh. Her face scrunched up with an emotion I could no longer stir up in myself, and I turned away to loosen the straps of my helmet. I put it on my dresser with my camera and com and peeled off my clothes. I quickly

pulled on sweats—I was cold, always cold—and climbed into my tiny bed.

Ever's pretty Fifty-six face was still crumpled in sadness, and I rolled to stare at the wall. It was uncomfortable. We'd been roommates four years, since we were thirteen, but I'd never gotten used to the way emotion poured out of her like a human.

I closed my eyes, but the sounds of human screams pulsed against my head.

I hated the screaming. Their screaming was my screaming. The first thing I remembered after waking up as a Reboot was a shrill yell bouncing off the walls and ringing in my ears. I had thought, *What idiot is making that noise?*

It was me. Me, shrieking like a crack addict two days out from a fix.

Rather embarrassing. I'd always prided myself on being the quiet stoic one in every situation. The one standing there calmly while the adults lost it.

But at the age of twelve, when I woke up in the Dead Room of the hospital 178 minutes after taking three bullets to the chest, I screamed.

I screamed as they branded my wrist with my bar code, my number, and my human name, Wren Connolly. I screamed as they locked me in a cell, as they escorted me to the shuttle, as they put me in line with the other newly undead former children. I screamed until I arrived at the Human Advancement and Repopulation Corporation, or HARC, facility, and they told me screaming meant death. Acting like I was still a human child meant death. Disobeying orders meant death.

And then I was silent.

“DO YOU THINK THERE WILL BE A HOT ONE THIS TIME?” Ever asked as I smoothed my black shirt down to my pants.

“Didn’t you think Seventy-two was hot?” I asked, turning around to give her an amused look. She liked it when I looked amused.

“Kind of a jerk,” she said.

“Agreed.”

“I feel like we’ve had a real dry spell.”

I laced up my boots, genuine amusement sparking inside me. New Reboots arrived about every six weeks, a time many saw as an opportunity to replenish the dating pool.

We weren’t allowed to date, but the birth-control chip they shot into the females’ arms the first day suggested they knew that was one rule they couldn’t actually enforce.

For me, new Reboots meant only the start of a new training cycle. I didn’t date.

The lock on the door to our room clicked, like it did every morning at seven, and the clear door slid open. Ever stepped out, looping her long brown hair into a knot as she waited. She often waited for me in the morning so we could walk to the cafeteria together. I guessed this was a friend thing, I saw the other girls doing it, so I went along with it.

I joined her in the hallway and the pasty human standing just outside our door shrank back at the sight of me. She pulled the stack of clothes she was carrying closer to her chest, waiting for us to leave so she could drop them on our beds. No human working at HARC wanted to enter a small, enclosed space with me.

Ever and I headed down the hallway, eyes straight forward. The humans built glass walls so they could see our every movement. Reboots tried to afford one another a smidgen of privacy. The hallways were quiet in the mornings, the only sounds the occasional murmur of voices and the soft hum of the air-conditioning.

The cafeteria was one floor down, through a pair of big red doors that warned of the danger inside. We stepped into the room, which was blindingly white except for the clear glass that lined the upper portion of one wall. HARC officers were stationed on the other side, behind the guns mounted to the glass.

Most of the Reboots were already there, hundreds of them sitting on little round plastic seats around long tables. The rows of bright eyes shining out against pale skin looked like a string of lights down every table. The smell of death hung in the air, causing most humans who entered to wrinkle their noses. I rarely noticed anymore.

Ever and I didn’t eat together. Once we got our food, she split off to the table for the Under-sixties with her tray and I sat down at the table for One-twenties and higher. The only one who came close to my number was Hugo, at One-fifty.

Marie One-thirty-five nodded at me as I sat down, as did a few others, but Reboots over 120 minutes dead were not known for their social skills. There was rarely much talking. The rest of the room was noisy, though; the chatter of Reboots filled the cafeteria.

I bit into a piece of bacon as the red doors at the end of the room opened and a guard marched in, followed by the newbies. I counted fourteen. I’d heard a rumor the humans were working on a vaccine

to prevent Rebooting. It didn't look like they'd succeeded yet.

~~There were no adults among them. Reboots over the age of twenty were killed as soon as they~~ Rebooted. *If* they Rebooted. It was uncommon.

"They ain't right," a teacher once told me when I asked why they shot the adults. "The kids ain't all there anymore, but the adults . . . they ain't right."

Even from a distance, I could see some of the newbies shaking. They ranged in age from about eleven or twelve to older teenagers, but the terror that radiated from them was the same. It would have been less than a month since they Rebooted, and it took most much longer to accept what had happened to them. They were placed in a holding facility at the hospital in their hometown for a few weeks to adjust until HARC assigned them to a city. We continued to age like normal humans, so Reboots under the age of eleven were held at the facility until they reached a useful age.

I'd had to spend only a few days at the holding facility, but it was one of the worst parts of Rebooting. The actual building where they kept us wasn't bad, simply a smaller version of where we lived now, but the panic was constant, all consuming. We all knew there was a good possibility we would Reboot if we died (it was almost certain in the slums), but the reality of it was still horrifying. At first, anyway. Once the shock wore off and I made it through training, I realized I was much better off as a Reboot than I'd ever been as a human.

Rebooting itself was simply a different reaction to the KDH virus. KDH killed most people, but for some—the young, the strong—the virus worked differently. Even those who died of something other than KDH could Reboot, if they'd had the KDH virus even once in their lifetime. It Rebooted the body after death, bringing it back stronger, more powerful.

But also colder, emotionless. An evil copy of what we used to be, the humans said. Most would rather die completely than be one of the "lucky" ones who Rebooted.

The guards ordered the newbies to sit. They all did so quickly, already informed that they followed orders or got a bullet in the brain.

The guards left, letting the doors slam as they hurried out. Not even our hardened guards liked to be in the presence of so many Reboots at once.

The laughter and scuffling started right away, but I turned my attention back to my breakfast. The only newbie I had any interest in was my next trainee, but we wouldn't be paired up until tomorrow. The Nineties liked to break 'em all in right away. Considering the speed at which we healed, I saw no problem with the newbies being roughed up a little. Might as well start toughening them up now.

The Nineties were rowdier than usual today. I shoved the last piece of bacon in my mouth as the hollering rose to an annoying level. I dropped my tray on top of the trash can and headed for the exit.

A flash of color streaked across the white floor, coming to a stop at my feet with a squeak. It was a newbie, shot down the slick tile like a toy. I just missed stepping on his head and planted my boot on the floor.

Blood trickled from his nose and a bruise had formed under one eye. His long, lanky legs were sprawled across the floor, his thin white T-shirt clinging to the frame of an underfed former human.

His close-cropped black hair matched his eyes, so dark I couldn't find his pupils. They probably used to be brown. Brown eyes usually took on a golden sort of glow after death, but I liked his blackness. It was in stark contrast to the white of the cafeteria, to the glow of the other Reboots' eyes.

No one came near him now that he was in my space, but someone yelled, "Twenty-two!" and laughed.

Twenty-two? That couldn't be his number. I hadn't seen anyone under forty in a few years. Well, there was a Thirty-seven last year, but she died within a month.

I nudged at his arm with my boot so I could see his bar code. Callum Reyes. Twenty-two.

~~I raised my eyebrows. He was only dead twenty-two minutes before he Rebooted. He was~~ practically still human. My eyes shifted back to his face to see a smile spreading across his lips. ~~Was~~ was he smiling? This didn't seem like an appropriate time to be smiling.

"Hi," he said, propping himself up on his elbows. "Apparently they call me Twenty-two."

"It's your number," I replied.

He smiled bigger. I wanted to tell him to stop it.

"I know. And yours?"

I pulled up my sleeve and turned my arm to reveal the 178. His eyes widened and I felt a surge of satisfaction when his grin faltered.

"You're One-seventy-eight?" he asked, hopping to his feet.

Even humans had heard of me.

"Yes," I said.

"Really?" His eyes flicked over me quickly. His smile had returned.

I frowned at his doubt, and he laughed.

"Sorry. I thought you'd be . . . I don't know. Bigger?"

"I can't control my height," I said, trying to pull myself up an extra inch or two. Not that it would help. He towered over me and I had to lift my chin to look him in the eye.

He laughed, although I had no idea at what. Was my height funny? His laugh was big, genuine, echoing across the now-silent cafeteria. It didn't belong here, that laugh. He didn't belong here, with those full lips curving up with actual happiness.

I sidestepped him to walk away, but he grabbed my wrist. A few Reboots gasped. No one touched me. They didn't even come near me, except for Ever.

"I didn't catch your name," he said, turning my arm so he could see, oblivious to the fact that that was a weird thing to do. "Wren," he read, releasing me. "I'm Callum. Nice to meet you."

I frowned at him over my shoulder as I headed for the door. I didn't know what it was to meet him, but *nice* was not the word I would have picked.

Newbie day was my favorite. As I headed into the gym later that morning with the other trainers, excitement rippled through my chest. I almost smiled.

Almost.

The newbies were sitting on the shiny wood floor in the center of the large room, next to several black mats. They turned away from the instructor to look at us, their faces tight with fear. It looked like no one had puked yet.

"Don't look at them," Manny One-nineteen barked. He was in charge of wrangling the newbies their first few days here. He'd been doing it for longer than I'd been here, and I figured it was because he was bitter about missing the opportunity to be a trainer by one minute.

All the newbies focused their attention on Manny except Twenty-two, who gave me that weird smile before turning around.

HARC medical personnel were lined up against the wall behind Manny, holding their clipboards and some tech equipment I couldn't begin to understand. There were four of them today, three men and a woman, all dressed in their usual white lab coats. The doctors and scientists always came out to observe the newbies. Later, they would take them down to one of the medical floors to be poked and prodded.

"Welcome to Rosa," Manny said, arms crossed over his chest, eyebrows low like he was trying to

be scary. Didn't fool me. Not now, and not when I was a twelve-year-old newbie.

~~"Your trainers will pick you tomorrow. Today they will observe you,"~~ Manny continued. His voice echoed across the gym. It was a giant empty room with dingy white walls that had been stained with blood many times.

Manny began listing off their numbers and pointing for our benefit. The highest was One-twenty-one, a well-built older teenager who probably looked intimidating even as a human.

HARC coveted the higher numbers. Me, above all. My body had had more time than most to adapt to the change, so I regenerated and healed faster than anyone at the facility. Rebooting only occurred after every bodily function shut down. The brain, the heart, the lungs—everything had to go before the process could start. I'd heard the number of minutes dead referred to as a "rest," a time for the body to regroup and refresh and prepare for what was next. The longer the rest, the better the Reboot.

Today was no different. Manny paired off newbies and ordered them to go at it, giving them a chance to impress us. One-twenty-one picked up the fighting quickly, his partner a bloody mess within minutes.

Callum Twenty-two spent more time on the floor than standing in front of his shorter, younger partner. He was clumsy and his long limbs went everywhere except where he wanted. He moved like a human—as though he'd never Rebooted at all. The lower numbers didn't heal as fast and they had to deal with much leftover human emotion.

When humans first began rising from the dead they called it a "miracle." Reboots were a cure for the virus that had wiped out most of the population. They were stronger and faster and almost invincible.

Then, as it became apparent a Reboot wasn't the human they'd known, but a sort of cold, altered copy, they called us monsters. The humans shut out the Reboots, banished them from their homes, and eventually decided the only course of action was to execute every one of them.

The Reboots retaliated, but they were outnumbered and lost the war. Now we are slaves. The Reboot project began almost twenty years ago, a few years after the end of the war, when HARC realized putting us to work was far more useful than simply executing every human who rose. We didn't get sick; we could survive with less food and water than a human; we had a higher threshold for pain. We might have been monsters, but we were still stronger and faster and far more useful than any human army. Well, most of us anyway. The lower numbers were more likely to die in the field, making training them a waste of my time. I always picked the highest number.

"I give Twenty-two six months," Ross One-forty-nine said from beside me. He rarely said much, but I got the feeling he enjoyed training as much as I did. It was exciting, the possibility of shaping a scared, useless Reboot into something much better.

"Three," Hugo countered.

"Wonderful," Lissy muttered under her breath. At One-twenty-four, she was the lowest of the trainers, and therefore got last pick of newbies. Twenty-two would be her problem.

"Maybe if you trained them better all your newbies wouldn't get their heads chopped off," Hugo said. Hugo had been my trainee two years ago, and he was just ending his first year as a trainer. He already had an excellent track record of keeping his newbies alive.

"Only one got his head chopped off," Lissy said, pressing her hands against the messy curls that sprang from her head.

"The others were shot," I said. "And Forty-five got a knife through the head."

"Forty-five was hopeless," Lissy spat. She glared at the floor, most likely lacking the courage to turn that glare on me.

“One-seventy-eight!” Manny called, motioning me over.

~~I walked across the gym floor into the center of the circle the newbies had made on the ground.~~

Most avoided eye contact.

“Volunteer?” Manny asked them.

Twenty-two’s hand shot up. The only one. I doubt he would have volunteered if he had known what was coming.

“Up,” Manny said.

Twenty-two bounced to his feet, a smile of ignorance plastered on his face.

“Your broken bones will take five to ten minutes to heal, depending on your personal recovery time,” Manny said. He nodded at me.

I grabbed Twenty-two’s arm, twisted it behind his back, and cracked it with one quick thrust. He let out a yell and jerked the arm away, cradling it against his chest. The newbies’ eyes were wide, watching me with a mixture of horror and fascination.

“Try and punch her,” Manny said.

Twenty-two looked up at him, the pain etched all over his face. “What?”

“Punch her,” Manny repeated.

Twenty-two took a hesitant step toward me. He swung at me weakly, and I leaned back to miss it. He doubled over in pain, a tiny whimper escaping from his throat.

“You’re not invincible,” Manny said. “I don’t care what you heard as a human. You feel pain; you can get hurt. And in the field five to ten minutes is too long to be incapacitated.” He gestured at the other trainers, and the newbies’ faces fell as they realized what was coming.

The cracks reverberated through the gym as the trainers broke each of their arms.

I never liked this exercise much. Too much screaming.

The point was to learn to push aside the pain and fight through it. Each broken bone hurt just as much as the last; the difference was how a Reboot learned to work through it. A human would lie on the ground sobbing. A Reboot didn’t acknowledge pain.

I looked down at Twenty-two, who had slumped to the ground, his face scrunched up in agony. He looked up at me and I thought he might yell. They usually yelled at me after I broke their arms.

“You’re not going to break anything else, are you?” he asked.

“No. Not right now.”

“Oh, so later, then? Great. I’ll look forward to that.” He winced as he looked down at his arm.

Manny pointed for the trainers to go back to the wall and gestured for the newbies to come to him.

“You should get up,” I said to Twenty-two.

Oblivious to Manny’s glare, Twenty-two slowly got to his feet, raising an eyebrow at me.

“Are we doing my leg next?” he asked. “Can I get some warning next time? A quick ‘Hey, I’m going to snap your bone with my bare hands right now. Brace yourself.’”

One of the trainers behind me snorted, and Manny snapped his fingers impatiently. “Get over here, Twenty-two, and sit. Quietly.”

I joined the trainers, taking a quick glance at Twenty-two as he plopped down in the circle. He was still watching me, his eyes sparkling, and I quickly looked away. What a strange newbie.

THREE

I SNUCK ANOTHER GLANCE AT THE END OF THE LINE AS I PICKED up my tray for lunch. Twenty-two was there, scanning the cafeteria. His eyes rested on me and I quickly turned away as he began to wave.

I focused my attention on the human behind the counter as she plunked the steak on my tray. There were three of them lined up behind the glass counter, two women and a man. Reboots used to do the service jobs at HARC as well, until the humans began to get restless about the lack of employment and HARC created a few more jobs to keep them happy. Still, they often looked less than enthused about serving Reboots.

I let them fill my tray, and then I headed across the cafeteria to take my usual seat next to Hugo. I stuck my fork into the perfectly cooked steak and popped a bite in my mouth. HARC gave a line of parents of Reboots about how we were so much better off in their care (not that the parents had much choice). We would be useful, they said. We could have something resembling a life. I didn't know if we were better off, but we were certainly better fed. A Reboot could survive on less food, but we performed at our best when we were fed regularly, and well. We became weak and useless, like a human, if we were denied food.

"Can I sit here?"

I looked up to see Twenty-two standing in front of me, tray in hand. His white shirt was bloodied, probably from one of the Nineties taking a second opportunity to break him in. It would often go on for a couple days, until the guards got tired of the commotion.

"The Under-sixties are over there," I said, pointing to Ever's table. They were talking and laughing, one boy gesturing wildly with his arms.

He looked back at them. "Is that a rule?"

I paused. Was it? No, we started that one ourselves. "No," I replied.

"Then can I sit here?"

I couldn't think of a reason why not, although it still struck me as a bad idea.

"Okay," I said hesitantly.

He plopped down in the seat across from me. Several of the One-twenties turned to me, a combination of confusion and annoyance on their faces. Marie One-thirty-five squinted, her head swinging from me to Twenty-two. I ignored it.

"Why do you do that if it's not a rule?" he asked, gesturing around the cafeteria.

"The closer numbers have more in common," I said, taking a bite of steak.

"That's stupid."

I frowned. It wasn't stupid. It was the truth.

"I don't see how the minutes you were dead affect your personality," he said.

"That's because you're a Twenty-two."

He raised an eyebrow before returning his attention to his meat. He poked it like he was afraid it might jump up and return the favor if he bit into it. He wrinkled his nose and watched as I popped a chunk in my mouth.

"Is it good?" he asked. "It looks funny."

"Yeah, it's good."

He looked down at it doubtfully. "What is it?"

"Steak."

"Cow, then?"

"Yes. Never had meat, huh?" All types of meat were hard to come by in the slums, unless a human took a job with HARC. They controlled the farms, and hunting was often a fruitless effort. Overhunting had stripped the land of most wild animals years ago. A rabbit or squirrel would pop up on occasion, but I didn't see them often. Reboots ate better than most humans, which only made them hate us more.

"No," Twenty-two replied. His expression suggested he had no interest in changing that.

"Try it; you'll like it."

He raised a bite to his lips and shoved it in quickly. He chewed slowly and swallowed with a grimace. He looked down at the hunk of steak left on his plate.

"I don't know. It's weird."

"Just eat it and quit bitching about it," Lissy snapped from a few seats down. She had little patience for her newbies. Twenty-two would be no exception.

He glanced over at her briefly, then back to me. Lissy frowned at his total disregard for her.

"She's kinda grouchy, huh?" he said quietly to me.

Always. I almost smiled when I looked over to see Lissy stabbing her meat like it was trying to get away. Hugo raised his knife over his steak with a grimace, imitating her. Ross One-forty-nine blinked twice at him, which I was pretty sure was his version of a smile.

"Everyone's saying she'll be my trainer," Twenty-two said.

Lissy's head popped up and she pointed her knife at him as she spoke. "Everyone is right. So she'll eat it and eat that."

Twenty-two's defiant face was different from any other I'd seen. His smile didn't disappear; it merely changed to a mocking, challenging grin. He dropped his fork and leaned back in his chair. He didn't have to say *make me*. It was clear.

Lissy shoveled her remaining food in her mouth and jumped to her feet, muttering to herself. She shot a look at Twenty-two as she stomped past.

"I hope you get yourself killed quickly so I don't have to put up with you for long," she growled.

"I think that's the strategy she takes with all her newbies," Hugo said with a chuckle, watching as she pushed Fifty-one out of her way and flew through the exit doors.

"She's supposed to make them good Reboots," I said, the memory of pulling the knife out of Forty-five's head flashing through my mind.

"Then maybe you should do it," Twenty-two said, perking up. "You get to pick, don't you?"

"Yes. And I don't train such low numbers."

"Why not?"

"Because they're no good."

Marie One-thirty-five let out a short laugh, and Twenty-two cast an amused glance from her back to me.

"Maybe because they don't have you. Also, I'm insulted." His smile suggested he was not.

I poked at my plate with a fork. He could have a point. The lowest of the newbie groups never stood a chance. Was it because of their number? Or because of Lissy, who trained by screaming at them? I looked up at him, at a loss for what to say. I'd never thought about it.

His smile faded, clearly taking my silence as a rejection. It was not how I meant it, but I kept my mouth shut as he began eating.

I wandered down to the sixth floor after lunch. I was often bored in the days between training cycles, unsure what to do with myself. I couldn't imagine being a lower-number Reboot, one of the many n cut out to be a trainer. They had little to fill their days, especially since HARC considered most forms of entertainment unnecessary for a Reboot.

I peeked into the indoor track room and saw several Reboots running, some racing or chasing after one another. I moved on to the next room, the shooting range, which was full, as usual. It was my favorite pastime. Reboots at every booth pointed their guns at the paper men lined up against the wall. Most hit the intended target—the head—every time. HARC didn't trust us with real bullets, so the ones we used inside the shooting range were made of plastic.

I pushed my hands into the pockets of my black pants as I headed for the last door, the gym. I pulled it open and glanced at the groups of Reboots in various corners. Some were just talking; others were making halfhearted attempts at fighting to avoid yells from the guards.

Ever was in the corner, one of the paper men from the shooting range taped to the wall in front of her. She bounced from foot to foot as she gripped a knife in her hand, studying the target in front of her seriously. A tall girl stood next to her, Mindy Fifty-one, and she watched as the knife flew from Ever's hand and landed in the wall, in the middle of the paper man's head.

Ever stepped closer to Fifty-one and leaned in to talk to her as I headed toward them. Reboots usually to play darts in this corner of the gym, but HARC had put a stop to that. The knife throwing was a game, too, just one that looked like practice. I didn't participate, but a few Under-sixties kept a record of how many throws hit the head in a single session. Ever was in the top three, last I'd heard.

Ever started to run her hand down Fifty-one's arm but caught sight of me and quickly stepped away from her, pasting a smile on her face as I approached. "Hey."

"Hi," I said, glancing at Fifty-one. She wiped her eyes with shaky fingers and I wished I hadn't come over. Under-sixty emotion made me uncomfortable. I moved back, ready to make an excuse to leave, when she took a few steps away from us.

"I gotta go," she said. "Ever's at forty-two throws."

I nodded and turned back to Ever, who was pulling the dull knife out of the cork wall. She held it out to me and I shook my head. She went back to her spot on the gym floor and squinted at the target as she turned the knife around in her hands.

"You let Callum sit with you today at lunch," she said, raising an eyebrow at me just before she threw the knife. It landed right in the middle of the forehead.

"He can sit anywhere he wants," I said, that defiant look he'd given Lissy today flashing in front of my eyes.

Ever laughed as she grabbed the knife out of the wall. "Right. Because you always eat with Under-sixties."

I shrugged. "He asked. I couldn't figure out a good reason to say no."

She laughed again and took her spot a few feet in front of the paper man. "Fair enough." Her eyes lit up as she glanced over at me. "Do you like him?"

"No."

"Why not? He's cute."

"Everyone here is."

It was true that all Reboots were attractive, in a way. After death, when the virus took hold and the body Rebooted, the skin cleared, the body sharpened, the eyes glowed. It was like pretty with a hint of deranged.

Although my hint was more like a generous serving.

Ever gave me a look like I was a cute puppy who had wandered over for attention. I never liked that look. “It’s okay to think he’s cute,” she said. “It’s natural.”

Natural for her. I didn’t have feelings like that. They didn’t exist.

I shrugged, avoiding her eyes. She often looked distressed when I told her I didn’t have the same emotions she did. I found it was better to say nothing at all.

She turned away and rocked from foot to foot, letting out a breath as she prepared to throw again. She stilled as she focused on the target, the knife poised in the air and ready to throw. As she let go, one boot came off the ground, her body shifting forward with the effort. She smiled at the knife lodged in the wall.

She threw the knife several more times as I watched, until she hit an even fifty and turned to look at me.

“What did you talk about?” she asked. “I saw him trying to engage you in conversation, that brave soul.”

A smile tugged at the edges of my lips. “Food, mostly. He’d never had meat.”

“Ah.”

“And he asked me to train him.”

Ever snorted as she turned away from me. “Poor guy. I can’t imagine you training a Twenty-two. You’d probably break the guy in half.”

I nodded, watching as the knife sped through the air again. Ever was only a Fifty-six, and she was a good Reboot. Or an adequate one, at least. She’d kept herself alive four years, following orders and successfully completing her assignments.

“Who was your trainer?” I asked. I hadn’t paid much attention to Ever as a newbie, even though we lived in the same room. She’d come to HARC almost a year after me, and I hadn’t been a trainee myself yet.

“Marcus One-thirty,” she said.

I nodded. I vaguely remembered him. He’d died in the field several years ago.

“I was the lowest number in my newbie group, so he got stuck with me.” She shrugged. “He was good, though. Thank goodness Lissy wasn’t here yet. I probably would have been dead the first week.”

Plenty of Lissy’s trainees had made it through training perfectly fine, but a string of bad ones had cemented her reputation as a newbie killer. Perhaps it was deserved. Perhaps Twenty-two would be the next victim of her bad luck.

I looked up at Ever as she sank the knife into the wall again.

“How many is that?” she asked.

“Fifty-two.”

“Hot damn.”

I couldn’t help a smile as she grinned at the target. Maybe the Under-sixties weren’t all hopeless.

MANNY MARCHED THE NEWBIES INTO THE GYM EARLY THE NEXT morning for the choosing. They followed him through the door in a straight line, their faces tight with fear and exhaustion.

They were followed by a few doctors in lab coats. Their tests and X-rays continued into today which contributed to the newbies' exhaustion. I remembered having to run on a treadmill at a steep incline while attached to all sorts of contraptions. The doctors kept increasing the speed until I finally fell off.

Groups of Reboots stood in clumps behind the trainers, curious to see who got which trainer. Even I was in the corner to my left with several Under-sixties, leaning against the wall as she watched the newbies line up in front of us.

I turned and my eyes went immediately to Twenty-two. His gaze was on Lissy, but when he caught me looking a smile broke out on his face, followed by a pout.

Please? he mouthed.

Pleading didn't work with me. Human targets pleaded with me all the time. "Please don't talk to me." Or, "Please don't touch me." Or, "Please don't kill me." Didn't work.

That smile, on the other hand . . . I almost let one creep onto my own face.

No. That was ridiculous. I couldn't let this weird smiling boy convince me to do something stupid. I was the best trainer; I only took the best newbies.

Maybe they're the best because you make them that way. The thought had been nagging at me since last night.

The door banged open and the gym quieted as Officer Mayer, commanding officer of the five HARC facilities, strolled across the room. He came to a stop next to the medical personnel and folded his arms over his protruding stomach. Officer Mayer spent the most time in Rosa, the largest of the five facilities, and often showed up to observe the newbies. He watched them throughout the entire six-week process, to keep an eye out for the good ones and weed out any who might be trouble.

"One-seventy-eight," Manny said.

I turned my gaze to One-twenty-one, who nodded at me. He already knew I would choose him. The other Reboots would have told him.

I looked at Twenty-two. How long did he have with Lissy? They'd be out in the field in a couple weeks, and with Lissy's track record, he'd be dead within two months.

His dark eyes held mine. Not many people looked me in the eye. Humans didn't want to look at me at all and Reboots were either scared or felt I was some sort of superior.

And that smile. That smile was strange here. Newbies didn't come in smiling; they came terrified and miserable.

He was definitely weird.

"One-seventy-eight?" Manny repeated, looking at me expectantly.

"Twenty-two." It was out of my mouth before I could change my mind. A grin spread across his face.

The trainers looked down the line in astonishment. Lissy's mood was already improved.

"Twenty-two?" Manny repeated. "Callum?"

“Yes,” I confirmed. I stole a look across the gym to see Officer Mayer rubbing his chin, his mouth twisted in something bordering on disappointment. I thought he might object, make me choose a high number, but he stayed silent.

“All right,” Manny said. “One-fifty?”

Hugo opened his mouth, closed it, and turned to me with a frown. “Are you sure?”

Twenty-two laughed, and Manny motioned for him to be quiet.

No. “Yes,” I said.

“I . . . One-twenty-one, then,” Hugo said, looking at me like I might protest.

I didn't. I stood there as the other trainers picked their newbies and broke off to start discussing the process. I waited, numb from my decision, until Twenty-two strolled over to me, his hands shoved into the pockets of his black pants.

“You like me after all,” he said.

I frowned. I didn't know about that. I was curious. Intrigued. Like? That was pushing it.

“Or maybe not,” he said with a laugh.

“I considered what you said. About the lower numbers not having me.”

“Ah. So not because of me.”

He smiled at me and I got the impression he didn't believe a word that had just come out of my mouth. I shifted from foot to foot uncomfortably. I wanted to fidget, and I never fidgeted.

“Are you a good runner?” I asked quickly.

“I doubt it.”

I sighed. “We'll meet at the indoor track every morning at seven.”

“Okay.”

“Try not to scream when I break your bones. It bothers me. You can cry if you want; that's fine.”

He burst out laughing. I didn't realize that was a funny statement.

“Got it,” he said, trying unsuccessfully to cover his grin. “Screaming, no. Crying, yes.”

“Have you ever handled any weapons?”

“No.”

“Skills?”

“I'm good with tech stuff.”

“Tech stuff?” I repeated with a confused frown. “Where did you see computers in the slums?”

“I'm not from the slums.” He lowered his voice when he said it.

I blinked. “You're from the *rico*?”

He laughed slightly. “No one calls it that. It's just Austin.”

No one from the *rico* called it that. Outside, in the slums, we used the Spanish word for *rich* to refer to the wealthy side of the cities.

I took a quick glance around the gym. There were a few Reboots from the *rico*, but they were certainly in the minority. I'd never trained one. My last trainee, Marie One-thirty-five, had lived on the streets in Richards, and she'd been tougher for it. Slum life made better, stronger Reboot. Twenty-two was doubly screwed. I wasn't sure I would have picked him if I'd known that.

“How'd you die?” I asked.

“KDH.”

“I thought they had mostly eradicated the KDH virus in the wealthy parts of town,” I said.

“They're close. I'm just one of the lucky few.”

I grimaced. KDH was a nasty way to die. They named the virus for the city that had been ground zero of the outbreak, Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina. It was a different strain of a respiratory virus.

common in children, and killed most humans within a few days.

~~“My parents took me to a slum hospital because they couldn’t afford any medicines,”~~ I continued.

“That was dumb.” Everyone knew KDH was rampant in the slums. No one was getting treated for it there.

“Yeah, well, they were desperate. And they didn’t realize . . .”

“You only go to the hospital in the slums to die and be sorted.”

“Yes. How did you die?” he asked.

“I was shot,” I said. “Any other skills?”

“I don’t think so. Wait, how old were you when you died?”

“Twelve. We’re not talking about me.”

“Who would shoot a twelve-year-old?” he asked with the innocence that could only come from living his entire life inside walls where nothing bad happened.

“We’re not talking about me,” I repeated. What was the point, anyway? How would I explain a life of strung-out parents and dirty shacks and the fighting and screaming that came when they went too long without a fix? A rich kid would never understand.

“Newbies!” Manny called, motioning for them to join him by the gym door.

“We’re not starting now?” Twenty-two asked.

“No, you have more tests to do,” I said, gesturing to the medical personnel. “We’ll start tomorrow.”

He let out a sigh as he ran a hand down his face. “Seriously? *More* tests?”

“Yes.”

He looked from me to the other newbies, who had already joined Manny. “All right. I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“Twenty-two!” Manny yelled. “Move it!”

I gestured for him to go and he jogged across the gym and disappeared out the door. The trainees all stared at me as they filed past. Hugo and Lissy stopped in front of me, wearing matching confused expressions.

“What’s wrong with you?” Lissy asked. She had her hands on her hips, her eyebrows lowered.

“Is he special or something?” Hugo asked.

Lissy rolled her eyes. “Yeah. He’s real special, Hugo.”

I shrugged. “Maybe I can make him better.”

“Don’t count on it,” Lissy muttered. She stalked away. Hugo gave me another befuddled look, then followed her out.

I turned to go, my eyes catching Ever’s. She was smiling, her head cocked to the side, then she nodded as if to say, *Good for you*.

A SOUND WOKE ME IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT.

I blinked my eyes until the dream I'd been lost in faded, loosening the death grip I had on the sheets. I'd been in the corner of a tiny apartment, watching my parents yell at the people in the living room. In the dream, they were yelling about me. In reality, I'm not sure they had cared about me enough for that sort of attention.

I rolled over to see Ever crouching on her bed, her teeth bared as she let out a low growl. The noise grew louder as she rocked back and forth on the mattress.

"Ever," I said, sitting up. Violation of the rules, but surely they would want someone to wake her up and stop the racket.

She turned to me. Her bright eyes showed no sign that she recognized me. In fact, she snarled.

"Ever," I said again, tossing off my covers and placing my feet on the cold floor. I reached for her shoulder and her head whipped to me. She opened her mouth and her teeth scraped across the skin of my hand.

I snatched it away. *What the hell was that?*

I held my hand to my chest, my heart beating oddly. I was nervous, I think. I was rarely nervous.

My eyes darted to the hallway. Through the glass wall at the front of our cell I could see a guard approaching, his flashlight aimed in our direction. He stopped in front of our room and peered inside, reaching for his com. He turned away as he spoke into it and I looked back down at Ever, rocking on her bed and growling from deep within her throat. I wanted to press my hand to her mouth to stop the noise, to make the guard go away before Ever got into trouble.

I heard the pounding of footsteps and turned to see a scientist in a white lab coat running down the hall. I took in a sharp breath as I watched the scientist talk frantically to the guard, his bushy eyebrows lowered in worry as he watched Ever.

Humans didn't worry about Reboots. They didn't run to help them.

The scientist pulled a syringe from his pocket and my stomach turned over as I pieced together what was happening.

They'd done something to her, and now they'd realized they'd messed up. Messed *her* up.

Ever pounced out of bed with a height and speed I had never seen before, smashing her body against the wall. I gasped, stumbling back until my legs hit the bed.

She head butted the glass, a line of blood trickling down her face when she straightened. She bared her teeth at the humans and they both jumped away, the scientist almost dropping his syringe.

"One-seventy-eight."

I turned my eyes to the guard yelling from the other side of the wall.

"Subdue her."

Ever began pounding her hand against the wall, a slow, rhythmic hammering.

Pound.

Pound.

Pound.

Her face determined, she looked at the humans like she would rip their faces off if given half a second.

“I said subdue her, One-seventy-eight. Get her down on the ground.” The guard glared at me. I slowly rose from my bed, clenching my hands into fists when I realized I was shaking.

I’m not scared.

I repeated it in my head. There was no reason to be scared of a Fifty-six. She couldn’t hurt me. Or could she? I’d never seen a Reboot act this way. There wasn’t a hint of the Ever I knew in her.

I’m not scared.

I reached for her arm but she was too fast, darting across the room and jumping on top of her bed. She bounced from foot to foot on the mattress, looking at me as if she accepted my challenge.

“Ever, it’s fine,” I said.

What was wrong with her?

She launched herself off the bed and landed on me. I hit the ground hard, the back of my head knocking against the concrete. I blinked the dots of white out of my eyes as she slammed my wrists to the floor above my head and opened her mouth, bending low as though she wanted to take a chunk out of my neck.

I kicked my legs, knocking her off me, and she flew into the bed with a grunt. I leaped on top of her, pressing my body into her back as she thrashed and snarled.

The door unlocked with a click and slid open, the footsteps of the two humans echoing across the room.

“Keep her down,” the guard ordered.

I locked my teeth together, lowering my face closer to Ever’s shoulder so he couldn’t see the disgusted look I wanted to aim at him.

The scientist knelt down and plunged the syringe into her arm. His fingers shook.

What was that idiot doing? We didn’t need medicine.

“It will help her sleep,” he said, glancing at me. “She’s just having a nightmare.”

It wouldn’t help her sleep at all. Reboots processed everything too quickly. Her body would metabolize it before it even had a chance to work.

Ever went limp beneath me and I looked down at her in surprise. When I turned to the humans they both gave me their hard expressions, the ones that were supposed to scare me.

Hard to be scared of them when I could break their necks before they realized I was on my feet.

“You’re not to tell anyone about this,” the scientist said sternly. “Understand?”

No. I didn’t understand. *What did they just give her?*

What had they given her before?

What had they done to her?

The humans looked down at me for confirmation that I believed this ridiculous explanation.

Dumb Reboot—her brain doesn’t work right.

A guard said that to me once.

I nodded. “I understand.”

They left the room and the door closed behind them. I slid off Ever, studying her face. Her eyes were closed, her breathing deep and even.

Asleep. I’d rarely seen her sleep lately.

I gently rolled her over and picked her up under the arms, hauling her onto the bed. I scooted her legs under the comforter and pulled it over her body.

I climbed into my own bed, unable to stop staring at her.

I didn’t sleep. Instead I spent the night alternating between gazing at Ever and the ceiling. When she began to stir I rushed to get into my running clothes and bolted out the door, hiding my face when

I thought I saw her roll over to look at me.

~~Twenty-two was waiting for me at the indoor track, his eyes on the other Reboots speeding around the room.~~

“Good morning,” he said brightly.

I just nodded, because it was not a good morning. I could think of nothing but Ever and her angry vacant eyes. Would she be back to normal now? Would she even remember?

I was ordered not to say anything.

I had never disobeyed an order.

“Let’s go,” I said, stepping onto the black rubber. The indoor track was one of my least favorite parts of the HARC facility. It was a 400-meter ring with a guard in the middle, encased in bulletproof plastic box. The windows could lower quickly to stop a fight with a bullet to the brain.

Destroy the brain. The only way to kill a Reboot.

The ugly lighting gave my pale skin a puke-green hue. Twenty-two’s olive skin looked mostly the same, almost nice, under the glow. I looked away, pushing aside thoughts of what my blond hair must look like in here.

Twenty-two could barely run a quarter mile without stopping, which did not bode well for his escaping angry humans chasing after him. Hopefully we’d avoid those for a while.

A few other Reboots were on the track with us, including Marie One-thirty-five, who looked over her shoulder with a laugh as she blew past us, her dark hair swinging. She was one of the fastest trainees I’d ever had.

“Let’s do two minutes of walking and one of running,” I said with a sigh as Twenty-two’s pace stuttered to an impossibly slow jog.

He nodded, taking in gulps of air. I had to admit, I wasn’t in the mood to run this morning. The break was welcome.

“Were you a good runner when you came here?” he asked when he’d caught his breath.

“I was fine. Better than you.”

“Well, that’s not difficult.” He smiled at me. “How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“Me too. How long do we stay here? Is there an adult facility somewhere? I haven’t seen any old Reboots.”

“I don’t know.” I doubted it. As Reboots approached their twenties they stopped coming back from missions. Maybe they did transfer them to some other facility.

Maybe they didn’t.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

“Austin.”

“Me too.” He smiled like we had something in common.

“We’re not from the same Austin,” I said tightly.

He frowned. “Sorry?”

“You’re from the *rico*. I’m from the slums. We’re not from the same Austin.” I had never seen the Austin *rico* beyond the lights I glimpsed over the wall that divided us from them, but I’d seen some of the other United Cities of Texas. New Dallas. Richards. Bonito (someone was being funny—it was anything but). A few hundred miles in the middle of Texas was all that was left of the large country my parents knew as children. HARC managed to save only Texas from the virus and the Reboot attacks that followed.

“Oh. I’ve never been to the Austin slums,” Twenty-two said. “I mean, except when my parents

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