

YOU WON'T FORGET ME.



IMAGINE ME

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TAHEREH MAFI

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First published in USA in 2020 by HarperCollins Children's Books

First published in Great Britain in 2020

by Electric Monkey, an imprint of Egmont UK Limited

2 Minster Court, 10th floor, London EC3R 7BB

Published by arrangement with HarperCollins Children's Books, a division
of HarperCollins Publishers, New York, New York, USA

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First e-book edition 2020

ISBN 978 1 4052 9704 2

Ebook ISBN 978 1 4052 9711 0

www.egmont.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

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In the dead of night, I hear birds.

I hear them, I see them, I close my eyes and feel them, feathers
shuddering in the air, bending the wind, wings grazing my shoulders when
they ascend, when they alight. Discordant shrieks ring and echo, ring and
echo—

How many?

Hundreds.

White birds, white with streaks of gold, like crowns atop their heads.

They fly. They soar through the sky with strong, steady wings, masters of
their destinies. They used to make me hope.

Never again.

I turn my face into the pillow, digging fingers into cotton flesh as the memories crash into me.

"Do you like them?" she says.

We're in a big, wide room that smells like dirt. There are trees everywhere, so tall they nearly touch the pipes and beams of the open ceiling. Birds, dozens of them, screech as they stretch their wings. Their calls are loud. A little scary. I try not to flinch as one of the large white birds swoops past me. It wears a bright, neon-green bracelet around one leg. They all do.

This doesn't make sense.

I remind myself that we're indoors—the white walls, the concrete floor under my feet—and I look up at my mother, confused.

I've never seen Mum smile so much. Mostly she smiles when Dad is around, or when she and Dad are off in the corner, whispering together, but right now it's just me and Mum and a bunch of birds and she's so happy I decide to ignore the funny feeling in my stomach. Things are better when Mum is in a good mood.

"Yes," I lie. "I like them a lot."

Her eyes brighten. "I knew you would. Emmaline didn't care for them,

but you—you've always been a bit too fond of things, haven't you, darling? Not at all like your sister." Somehow, her words come out mean. They don't seem mean, but they sound mean.

I frown.

I'm still trying to figure out what's happening when she says—

"I had one as a pet when I was about your age. Back then, they were so common we could never be rid of them." She laughs, and I watch her as she watches a bird, midflight. "One of them lived in a tree near my house, and it called my name whenever I walked past. Can you imagine?" Her smile fades as she asks the question.

Finally, she turns to look at me.

"They're very nearly extinct now. You understand why I couldn't let that happen."

"Of course," I say, but I'm lying again. There is little I understand about Mum.

She nods. "These are a special sort of creature. Intelligent. They can speak, dance. And each of them wears a crown." She turns away again, staring at the birds the way she stares at all the things she makes for work: with joy. "The sulphur-crested cockatoo mates for life," she says. "Just like me and your father."

The sulphur-crested cockatoo.

I shiver, suddenly, at the unexpected sensation of a warm hand on my back, fingers trailing lightly along my spine.

“Love,” he says, “are you all right?”

When I say nothing he shifts, the sheets rustling, and he tucks me into his hollows, his body curving around mine. He’s warm and strong and as his hand slides down my torso I cant my head toward him, finding peace in his presence, in the safety of his arms. His lips touch my skin, a graze against my neck so subtle it sparks, hot and cold, right down to my toes.

“Is it happening again?” he whispers.

My mother was born in Australia.

I know this because she once told me so, and because now, despite my desperation to resist many of the memories now returned to me, I can’t forget. She once told me that the sulphur-crested cockatoo was native to Australia. It was introduced to New Zealand in the nineteenth century, but Evie, my mother, didn’t discover them there. She fell in love with the birds back home, as a child, when one of them, she claims, saved her life.

These were the birds that once haunted my dreams.

These birds, kept and bred by a crazy woman. I feel embarrassed to realize I’d held fast to nonsense, to the faded, disfigured impressions of old

memories poorly discarded. I'd hoped for more. Dreamed of more.

Disappointment lodges in my throat, a cold stone I'm unable to swallow.

And then

again

I feel it

I stiffen against the nausea that precedes a vision, the sudden punch to the gut that means there's more, there's more, there's always more.

Aaron pulls me closer, holds me tighter against his chest.

"Breathe," he whispers. "I'm right here, love. I'll be right here."

I cling to him, squeezing my eyes shut as my head swims. These memories were a gift from my sister, Emmaline. The sister I only just discovered, only just recovered.

And only because she fought to find me.

Despite my parents' relentless efforts to rid our minds of the lingering proof of their atrocities, Emmaline prevailed. She used her psychokinetic powers to return to me what was stolen from my memories. She gave me this gift—this gift of remembering—to help me save myself. To save *her*. To stop our parents.

To fix the world.

But now, in the wake of a narrow escape, this gift has become a curse.

Every hour my mind is reborn. Altered. The memories keep coming.

And my dead mother refuses to be silenced.

“Little bird,” she whispers, tucking a stray hair behind my ear. “It’s time for you to fly away now.”

“But I don’t want to go,” I say, fear making my voice shake. “I want to stay here, with you and Dad and Emmaline. I still don’t understand why I have to leave.”

“You don’t have to understand,” she says gently.

I go uncomfortably still.

Mum doesn’t yell. She’s never yelled. My whole life, she’s never raised a hand to me, never shouted or called me names. Not like Aaron’s dad. But Mum doesn’t need to yell. Sometimes she just says things, things like you don’t have to understand and there’s a warning there, a finality in her words that’s always scared me.

I feel tears forming, burning the whites of my eyes, and—

“No crying,” she says. “You’re far too old for that now.”

I sniff, hard, fighting back the tears. But my hands won’t stop shaking.

Mum looks up, nods at someone behind me. I turn around just in time to spot Paris, Mr. Anderson, waiting with my suitcase. There’s no kindness in his eyes. No warmth at all. He turns away from me, looks at Mum. He

doesn't say hello.

He says: "Has Max settled in yet?"

"Oh, he's been ready for days." Mum glances at her watch, distracted.

"You know Max," she says, smiling faintly. "Always a perfectionist."

"Only when it comes to your wishes," says Mr. Anderson. "I've never seen a grown man so besotted with his wife."

Mum smiles wider. She seems about to say something, but I cut her off.

"Are you talking about Dad?" I ask, my heart racing. "Will Dad be there?"

My mother turns to me, surprised, like she'd forgotten I was there. She turns back to Mr. Anderson. "How's Leila doing, by the way?"

"Fine," he says. But he sounds irritated.

"Mum?" Tears threaten again. "Am I going to stay with Dad?"

But Mum doesn't seem to hear me. She's talking to Mr. Anderson when she says, "Max will walk you through everything when you arrive, and he'll be able to answer most of your questions. If there's something he can't answer, it's likely beyond your clearance."

Mr. Anderson looks suddenly annoyed, but he says nothing. Mum says nothing.

I can't stand it.

Tears are spilling down my face now, my body shaking so hard it makes my breaths rattle. “Mum?” I whisper. “Mum, please a-answer me—” Mum clamps a cold, hard hand around my shoulder and I go instantly still. Quiet. She’s not looking at me. She won’t look at me. “You’ll handle this, too,” she says. “Won’t you, Paris?”

Mr. Anderson meets my eyes then. So blue. So cold. “Of course.”

A flash of heat courses through me. A rage so sudden it briefly replaces my terror.

I hate him.

I hate him so much that it does something to me when I look at him—and the abrupt surge of emotion makes me feel brave.

I turn back to Mum. Try again.

“Why does Emmaline get to stay?” I ask, wiping angrily at my wet cheeks. “If I have to go, can’t we at least go toge—”

I cut myself off when I spot her.

My sister, Emmaline, is peeking out at me from behind the mostly closed door. She’s not supposed to be here. Mum said so.

Emmaline is supposed to be doing her swimming lessons.

But she’s here, her wet hair dripping on the floor, and she’s staring at me, eyes wide as plates. She’s trying to say something, but her lips move too fast

for me to follow. And then, out of nowhere, a bolt of electricity runs up my spine and I hear her voice, sharp and strange—

Liars.

LIARS.

KILL THEM ALL

My eyes fly open and I can't catch my breath, my chest heaving, heart pounding. Warner holds me, making soothing sounds as he runs a reassuring hand up and down my arm.

Tears spill down my face and I swipe at them, hands shaking.

"I hate this," I whisper, horrified at the tremble in my voice. "I hate this so much. I hate that it keeps happening. I hate what it does to me," I say. "*I hate it.*"

Warner Aaron presses his cheek against my shoulder with a sigh, his breath teasing my skin.

"I hate it, too," he says softly.

I turn, carefully, in the cradle of his arms, and press my forehead to his bare chest.

It's been less than two days since we escaped Oceania. Two days since I killed my own mother. Two days since I met the residue of my sister, Emmaline. Only two days since my entire life was upended yet again,

which feels impossible.

Two days and already things are on fire around us.

This is our second night here, at the Sanctuary, the locus of the rebel group run by Nouria—Castle’s daughter—and her wife, Sam. We’re supposed to be safe here. We’re supposed to be able to breathe and regroup after the hell of the last few weeks, but my body refuses to settle. My mind is overrun, under attack. I thought the rush of new memories would eventually gutter out, but these last twenty-four hours have been an unusually brutal assault, and I seem to be the only one struggling.

Emmaline gifted all of us—all the children of the supreme commanders—with memories stolen by our parents. One by one we were awoken to the truths our parents had buried, and one by one we were returned to normal lives.

All but me.

The others have since moved on, reconciled their timelines, made sense of the betrayal. My mind, on the other hand, continues to falter. Spin. But then, none of the others lost as much as I did; they don’t have as much to remember. Even Warner—*Aaron*—isn’t experiencing so thorough a reimagining of his life.

It’s beginning to scare me.

I feel as though my history is being rewritten, infinite paragraphs scratched out and hastily revised. Old and new images—memories—layer atop each other until the ink runs, rupturing the scenes into something new, something incomprehensible. Occasionally my thoughts feel like disturbing hallucinations, and the onslaught is so invasive I fear it's doing irreparable damage.

Because something is changing.

Every new memory is delivered with an emotional violence that drives into me, reorders my mind. I'd been feeling this pain in flickers—the sickness, the nausea, the disorientation—but I haven't wanted to question it too deeply. I haven't wanted to look too closely. The truth is, I didn't want to believe my own fears. But the truth is: I am a punctured tire. Every injection of air leaves me both fuller and flatter.

I am forgetting.

“Ella?”

Terror bubbles up inside of me, bleeds through my open eyes. It takes me a moment to remember that I am Juliette Ella. Each time, it takes me a moment longer.

Hysteria threatens—

I force it down.

“Yes,” I say, forcing air into my lungs. “Yes.”

Warner Aaron stiffens. “Love, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lie. My heart is pounding fast, too fast. I don’t know why I’m lying. It’s a fruitless effort; he can sense everything I’m feeling. I should just tell him. I don’t know why I’m not telling him. I know why I’m not telling him.

I’m waiting.

I’m waiting to see if this will pass, if the lapses in my memory are only glitches waiting to be repaired. Saying it out loud makes it too real, and it’s too soon to say these thoughts aloud, to give in to the fear. After all, it’s only been a day since it started. It only occurred to me yesterday that something was truly wrong.

It occurred to me because I made a mistake.

Mistakes.

We were sitting outside, staring at the stars. I couldn’t remember ever seeing the stars like that—sharp, clear. It was late, so late it wasn’t night but infant morning, and the view was dizzying. I was freezing. A brave wind stole through a copse nearby, filling the air with steady sound. I was full of cake. Warner smelled like sugar, like decadence. I felt drunk on joy.

I don’t want to wait, he said, taking my hand. Squeezing it. *Let’s not wait.*

I blinked up at him. *For what?*

For what?

For what?

How did I forget what had happened just hours earlier? How did I forget the moment he asked me to marry him?

It was a glitch. It felt like a glitch. Where there was once a memory was suddenly a vacancy, a cavity held empty only until nudged into realignment.

I recovered, remembered. Warner laughed.

I did not.

I forgot the name of Castle's daughter. I forgot how we landed at the Sanctuary. I forgot, for a full two minutes, how I ever escaped Oceania. But my errors were temporary; they seemed like natural delays. I experienced only confusion as my mind buffered, hesitation as the memories resurfaced, waterlogged and vague. I thought maybe I was tired. Overwhelmed. I took none of it seriously, not until I was sitting under the stars and couldn't remember promising to spend the rest of my life with someone.

Mortification.

Mortification so acute I thought I'd expire from the full force of it. Even now fresh heat floods my face, and I find I'm relieved Warner can't see in the dark.

Aaron, not Warner.

Aaron.

“I can’t tell just now whether you’re afraid or embarrassed,” he says, and exhales softly. It sounds almost like a laugh. “Are you worried about Kenji? About the others?”

I grab on to this half-truth with my whole heart.

“Yes,” I say. “*Kenji*. James. Adam.”

Kenji has been sick in bed since very early this morning. I squint at the slant of moon through our window and remember that it’s long past midnight, which would mean that, technically, Kenji got sick yesterday morning.

Regardless, it was terrifying for all of us.

The drugs Nazeera forced into Kenji on their international flight from Sector 45 to Oceania were a dose too strong, and he’s been reeling ever since. He finally collapsed—the twins, Sonya and Sara, have checked in on him and say he’s going to be just fine—but not before we learned that Anderson has been rounding up the children of the supreme commanders. Adam and James and Lena and Valentina and Nicolás are all in Anderson’s custody.

James is in his custody.

It's been a devastating, awful couple of days. It's been a devastating, awful couple of weeks.

Months, really.

Years.

Some days, no matter how far back I go, I can't seem to find the good times. Some days, the occasional happiness I've known feels like a bizarre dream. An error. Hyperreal and unfocused, the colors too bright and the sounds too strong.

Figments of my imagination.

It was just days ago that clarity came to me, bearing gifts. Just days ago that the worst seemed behind me, that the world seemed full of potential, that my body was stronger than ever, my mind fuller, sharper, more capable than I'd ever known it.

But now

But now

But now I feel like I'm clinging to the blurring edges of sanity, that elusive, fair-weather friend always breaking my heart.

Aaron pulls me close and I melt into him, grateful for his warmth, for the steadiness of his arms around me. I take a deep, shuddering breath and let it all go, exhaling against him. I inhale the rich, heady scent of his skin, the

faint aroma of gardenias he somehow carries with him always. Seconds pass in perfect silence and we listen to each other breathe.

Slowly, my heart rate steadies.

The tears dry up. The fears take five. Terror is distracted by a passing butterfly and sadness takes a nap.

For a little while it's just me and him and us and everything is untarnished, untouched by darkness.

I knew I loved Warner Aaron before all this—before we were captured by The Reestablishment, before we were ripped apart, before we learned of our shared history—but that love was new, green, its depths uncharted, untested. In that brief, glimmering window during which the gaping holes in my memory felt fully accounted for, things between us changed.

Everything between us changed. Even now, even with the noise in my head, I feel it.

Here.

This.

My bones against his bones. This is my home.

I feel him suddenly stiffen and I pull back, concerned. I can't see much of him in this perfect darkness, but I feel the delicate rise of goose bumps along his arms when he says, "What are you thinking about?"

My eyes widen, comprehension dethroning concern. “I was thinking about you.”

“Me?”

I close the gap between us again. Nod against his chest.

He says nothing, but I can hear his heart, racing in the quiet, and eventually I hear him exhale. It’s a heavy, uneven sound, like he might’ve been holding his breath for too long. I wish I could see his face. No matter how much time we spend together, I still forget how much he can feel my emotions, especially at times like this, when our bodies are pressed together.

Gently, I run my hand down his back. “I was thinking about how much I love you,” I say.

He goes uncommonly still, but only for a moment. And then he touches my hair, his fingers slowly combing the strands.

“Did you feel it?” I ask.

When he doesn’t answer, I pull back again. I blink against the black until I’m able to make out the glint of his eyes, the shadow of his mouth.

“Aaron?”

“Yes,” he says, but he sounds a little breathless.

“Yes, you felt it?”

“Yes,” he says again.

“What does it feel like?”

He sighs. Rolls onto his back. He’s quiet for so long that, for a while, I’m not sure he’s going to answer. Then, softly, he says:

“It’s hard to describe. It’s a pleasure so close to pain I sometimes can’t tell the two apart.”

“That sounds awful.”

“No,” he says. “It’s exquisite.”

“I love you.”

A sharp intake of breath. Even in this darkness I see the strain in his jaw—the tension there—as he stares at the ceiling.

I sit straight up, surprised.

Aaron’s reaction is so unstudied I don’t know how I never noticed it before. But then, maybe this is new. Maybe something really has changed between us. Maybe I never loved him this much before. That would make sense, I suppose. Because when I think about it, when I really think about how much I love him now, after everything we’ve—

Another sudden, sharp breath. And then he laughs, nervously.

“*Wow*,” I say.

He claps a hand over his eyes. “This is vaguely mortifying.”

I'm smiling now, very nearly laughing. "Hey. It's—"

My body seizes.

A violent shudder rushes up my skin and my spine goes rigid, my bones held in place by invisible pins, my mouth frozen open and trying to draw breath.

Heat fills my vision.

I hear nothing but static, grand rapids, white water, ferocious wind. Feel nothing. Think nothing. Am nothing.

I am, for the most infinitesimal moment—

Free.

My eyelids flutter open *closed* open *closed* open *closed* I am a wing, two wings, a swinging door, five birds

Fire climbs inside of me, explodes.

Ella?

The voice appears in my mind with swift strength, sharp, like darts to the brain. Dully, I realize that I'm in pain— my jaw aches, my body still suspended in an unnatural position—but I ignore it. The voice tries again:

Juliette?

Realization strikes, a knife to the knees. Images of my sister fill my mind: bones and melted skin, webbed fingers, sodden mouth, no eyes. Her

body suspended underwater, long brown hair like a swarm of eels. Her strange, disembodied voice pierces through me. And so I say, without speaking:

Emmaline?

Emotion drives into me, fingers digging in my flesh, sensation scraping across my skin. Her relief is tangible. I can taste it. She's relieved, relieved I recognized her, relieved she found me, relieved relieved relieved—

What happened? I ask.

A deluge of images floods my brain until it sinks, I sink. Her memories drown my senses, clog lungs. I choke as the feelings crash into me. I see Max, my father, inconsolable in the wake of his wife's murder; I see Supreme Commander Ibrahim, frantic and furious, demanding Anderson gather the other children before it's too late; I see Emmaline, briefly abandoned, seizing an opportunity—

I gasp.

Evie made it so that only she or Max could control Emmaline's powers, and with Evie dead, the fail-safes implemented were suddenly weakened. Emmaline realized that in the wake of our mother's death there would be a brief window of opportunity—a brief window during which she might be able to wrest back control of her own mind before Max remade the

algorithms.

But Evie's work was too good, and Max's reaction too prompt. Emmaline was only partly successful.

Dying, she says to me.

Dying.

Every flash of her emotion is accompanied by torturous assault. My flesh feels bruised. My spine seems liquid, my eyes blind, searing. I feel Emmaline—her voice, her feelings, her visions—more strongly than before, because *she's* stronger than before. That she managed to regain enough power to find me is proof alone that she is at least partly untethered, unrestrained. Max and Evie had been experimenting on Emmaline to a reckless degree in the last several months, trying to make her stronger even as her body withered. This, *this*, is the consequence.

Being this close to her is nothing short of excruciating.

I think I've screamed.

Have I screamed?

Everything about Emmaline is heightened to a fever pitch; her presence is wild, breathtaking, and it shudders to life inside my nerves. Sound and sensation streak across my vision, barrel through me violently. I hear a spider scuttle across the wooden floor. Tired moths drag their wings along

the wall. A mouse startles, settles, in its sleep. Dust motes fracture against a window, shrapnel skidding across the glass.

My eyes skitter, unhinged in my skull.

I feel the oppressive weight of my hair, my limbs, my flesh wrapped around me like cellophane, a leather casket. My tongue, my tongue is a dead lizard perched in my mouth, rough and heavy. The fine hairs on my arms stand and sway, stand and sway. My fists are so tightly clenched my fingernails pierce the soft flesh of my palms.

I feel a hand on me. Where? Am I?

Lonely, she says.

She shows me.

A vision of us, back in the laboratory where I first saw her, where I killed our mother. I see myself from Emmaline's point of view and it's startling. She can't see much more than a blur, but she can feel my presence, can make out the shape of my form, the heat emanating from my body. And then my words, my own words, hurled back into my brain—

there has to be another way

you don't have to die

we can get through this together

please

i want my sister back

i want you to live

Emmaline

i won't let you die here

Emmaline Emmaline

we can get through this together

we can get through this together

we can get through this

together

A cold, metallic sensation begins to bloom in my chest. It moves through me, up my arms, down my throat, pushes into my gut. My teeth throb.

Emmaline's pain claws and slithers, clings with a ferocity I can't bear. Her tenderness, too, is desperate, terrifying in its sincerity. She's overcome by emotion, hot and cold, fueled by rage and devastation.

She's been looking for me, all this time.

In these last couple of days Emmaline has been searching the conscious world for my mind, trying to find safe harbor, a place to rest.

A place to die.

Emmaline, I say. Please—

Sister.

Something tightens in my mind, squeezes. Fear propels through me,
punctures organs. I'm wheezing. I smell earth and damp, decomposing
leaves and I feel the stars staring at my skin, wind pushing through darkness
like an anxious parent. My mouth is open, catching moths. I am on the
ground.

Where?

No longer in my bed, I realize, no longer in my tent, I realize, no longer
protected.

But when did I walk?

Who moved my feet? Who pushed my body?

How far?

I try to look around but I'm blind, my head trapped in a vise, my neck
reduced to fraying sinew. My breaths fill my ears, harsh and loud, harsh and
loud, rough rough gasping efforts my head
swings

My fists unclench, nails scraping as my fingers uncurl, palms flattening, I
smell heat, taste wind, hear dirt.

Dirt under my hands, in my mouth, under my fingernails. I'm screaming,
I realize. Someone is touching me and I'm screaming.

Stop, I scream. Please, Emmaline— Please don't do this—

Lonely, she says.

l o n e l y

And with a sudden, ferocious agony—

I am displaced.

[KENJI](#)

It feels weird to call it luck.

It feels weird, but in some perverse, twisted way, this is luck. Luck that I'm standing in the middle of damp, freezing woodlands before the sun's bothered to lift its head. Luck that my bare upper body is half-numb from cold.

Luck that Nazeera's with me.

We pulled on our invisibility almost instantly, so she and I are at least temporarily safe here, in the half-mile stretch of untouched wilderness between regulated and unregulated territories. The Sanctuary was built on a couple of acres of unregulated land not far from where I'm standing, and it's masterfully hidden in plain sight only because of Nouria's unnatural talent for bending and manipulating light. Within Nouria's jurisdiction, the climate is somehow more temperate, the weather more predictable. But out here in the wild, the winds are relentless and combative. The temperatures are dangerous.

Still— We're lucky to be here at all.

Nazeera and I had been out of bed for a while, racing through the dark in an attempt at murdering one another. In the end it all turned out to be a complicated misunderstanding, but it was also a kind of kismet: If Nazeera hadn't snuck into my room at three o'clock in the morning and nearly killed me, I wouldn't have chased her through the forest, beyond the sight and soundproof protections of the Sanctuary. If we hadn't been so far from the Sanctuary, we never would've heard the distant, echoing screams of citizens crying out in terror. If we hadn't heard those cries, we never would've rushed toward the source. And if we hadn't done any of that, I never would've seen my best friend screaming her way into dawn.

I would've missed this. This:

J on her knees in the cold dirt, Warner crouched down beside her, both of them looking like death while the clouds literally melt out of the sky above them. The two of them are parked right outside the entrance to the Sanctuary, straddling the untouched stretch of forest that serves as a buffer between our camp and the heart of the nearest sector, number 241.

Why?

I froze when I saw them there, two broken figures entwined, limbs planted in the ground. I was paralyzed by confusion, then fear, then

disbelief, all while the trees bent sideways and the wind snapped at my body, cruelly reminding me that I'd never had a chance to put on a shirt.

If my night had gone differently, I might've had that chance.

If my night had gone differently, I might've enjoyed, for the first time in my life, a romantic sunrise and an overdue reconciliation with a beautiful girl. Nazeera and I would've laughed about how she'd kicked me in the back and almost killed me, and how afterward I almost shot her for it. After that I would've taken a long shower, slept until noon, and eaten my weight in breakfast foods.

I had a plan for today: take it easy.

I wanted a little more time to heal after my most recent near-death experience, and I didn't think I was asking for much. I thought that, maybe, after everything I'd been through, the world might finally cut me some slack. Let me breathe between tragedies.

Nah.

Instead, I'm here, dying of frostbite and horror, watching the world fall to pieces around me. The sky, swinging wildly between horizontal and vertical horizons. The air, puncturing at random. Trees, sinking into the ground. Leaves, tap-dancing around me. I'm seeing it—I'm actively witnessing it—and still I can't believe it.

But I'm choosing to call it luck.

Luck that I'm seeing this, luck that I feel like I might throw up, luck that I ran all this way in my still-ill, injured body just in time to score a front-row seat to the end of the world.

Luck, fate, coincidence, serendipity—

I'll call this sick, sinking feeling in my gut a fucking magic trick if it'll help me keep my eyes open long enough to bear witness. To figure out how to help.

Because no one else is here.

No one but me and Nazeera, which seems crazy to an improbable degree.

The Sanctuary is supposed to have security on patrol at all times, but I see no sentries, and no sign of incoming aid. No soldiers from the nearby sector, either. Not even curious, hysterical civilians. Nothing.

It's like we're standing in a vacuum, on an invisible plane of existence. I don't know how J and Warner made it this far without being spotted. The two of them look like they were literally dragged through the dirt; I have no idea how they escaped notice. And though it's possible J only just started screaming, I still have a thousand unanswered questions.

They'll have to wait.

I glance at Nazeera out of habit, forgetting for a moment that she and I

are invisible. But then I feel her step closer, and I breathe a sigh of relief as her hand slips into mine. She squeezes my fingers. I return the pressure.

Lucky, I remind myself.

It's lucky that we're here right now, because if I'd been in bed where I should've been, I wouldn't have even known J was in trouble. I would've missed the tremble in my friend's voice as she cried out, begging for mercy. I would've missed the shattering colors of a twisted sunrise, a peacock in the middle of hell. I would've missed the way J clamped her head between her hands and sobbed. I would've missed the sharp scents of pine and sulfur in the wind, would've missed the dry ache in my throat, the tremor moving through my body. I would've missed the moment J mentioned her sister by name. I wouldn't have heard J *specifically* ask her sister not to do something.

Yeah, this is definitely luck.

Because if I hadn't heard any of that, I wouldn't have known who to blame.

Emmaline.

ELLA

JULIETTE

I have eyes, two, feel them, rolling back and forth, around and around in my

skull I have lips, two, feel them, wet and and heavy, pry them open have
teeth, many, tongue, one and fingers, ten, count them
onetwothreefourfive, again on the other side strange, ssstrange to have a
tongue, ssstrange it's a sssstrange ssort of thing, a strange
sssssssssortofthing

loneliness

it creeps up on you

quiet

and

still,

sits by your side in the dark, strokes your hair as you sleep wrapssitself
around your bones squeezing sotightyoualmostcan't breathe almost can't
hear the pulse racing in your blood as it rush, rushes up your
skin

touches its lips to the soft hairs at the back of your
neck

loneliness is a strangesortof thinga ssstrangesortofthing an old friend
standing beside you in the mirror screaming you're notenoughneverenough
never ever enough
sssssometimes it just

won't

let

go

[KENJI](#)

I sidestep an eruption in the ground and duck just in time to avoid a cluster of vines growing in midair. A distant rock balloons to an astronomical size, and the moment it starts barreling in our direction I tighten my hold on Nazeera's hand and dive for cover.

The sky is ripping apart. The ground is fracturing beneath my feet. The sun flickers, strobing darkness, strobing light, everything stilted. And the clouds— There's something newly wrong with the clouds.

They're *disintegrating*.

Trees can't decide whether to stand up or lie down, gusts of wind shoot up from the ground with terrifying power, and suddenly the sky is full of birds. Full of fucking *birds*.

Emmaline is out of control.

We knew that her telekinetic and psychokinetic powers were godlike— beyond anything we've ever known—and we knew that The Reestablishment built Emmaline to control our experience of the world. But that was all, and that was just talk. Theory.

We'd never seen her like this.

Wild.

She's clearly doing something to J right now, ravaging her mind while lashing out at the world around us, because the acid trip I'm staring at is only getting worse.

"Go back," I cry out over the din. "Get help—bring the girls!"

A single shout of agreement and Nazeera's hand slips free from mine, her heavy boots on the ground my only indication that she's bolting toward the Sanctuary. But even now—especially now—her swift, certain actions fill me with no small measure of relief.

It feels good to have a capable partner.

I claw my way across the sparse forest, grateful to have avoided the worst of the obstacles, and when I'm finally close enough to properly discern Warner's face, I pull back my invisibility.

I'm shaking with exhaustion.

I'd only barely recovered from being drugged nearly to death, and yet here I am, already about to die again. But when I look up, half-bent, hands on my knees and trying to breathe, I realize I have no right to complain.

Warner looks even worse than I expected.

Raw, clenched, a vein straining at his temple. He's on his knees holding

on to J like he's trying to hold back a riot, and I didn't realize until just this second that he might be here for more than just emotional support.

The whole thing is surreal: they're both practically naked, in the dirt, on their knees—J with her hands pressed flat against her ears—and I can't help but wonder what kind of hell brought them to this moment.

I thought I was the one having a weird night.

Something slams suddenly into my gut and I double over, hitting the ground hard. Arms shaking, I push up onto all fours and scan the immediate area for the culprit. When I spot it, I gag.

A dead bird, a couple feet away.

Jesus.

J is still screaming.

I shove my way through a sudden, violent gust of wind—and just when I've regained my balance, ready to clear the last fifty feet toward my friends—the world goes mute.

Sound, off.

No howling winds, no tortured screams, no coughs, no sneezes. This is not ordinary quiet. It's not stillness, not silence.

It's more than that.

It's nothing at all.

I blink, blink, my head turning in slow, excruciating motion as I scan the distance for answers, willing the explanations to appear. Hoping the sheer force of my mind is enough to sprout reason from the ground.

It isn't.

I've gone deaf.

Nazeera is no longer here, J and Warner are still fifty feet away, and I've gone deaf. Deaf to the sound of the wind, to the shuddering trees. Deaf to my own labored breathing, to the cries of citizens in the compounds beyond. I try to clench my fists and it takes forever, like the air has grown dense. Thick.

Something is wrong with me.

I'm slow, slower than I've ever been, like I'm running underwater.

Something is purposely keeping me back, physically pushing me away from Juliette—and suddenly, it all makes sense. My earlier confusion dissolves.

Of course no one else is here. Of course no one else has come to help.

Emmaline would never allow it.

Maybe I got this far only because she was too busy to notice me right away—to sense me here, in my invisible state. It makes me wonder what else she's done to keep this area clear of trespassers.

It makes me wonder if I'll survive.

It's growing harder to think. It takes forever to fuse thoughts. Takes forever to move my arms. To lift my head. To look around. By the time I manage to pry open my mouth, I've forgotten that my voice makes no sound.

A flash of gold in the distance.

I spot Warner, shifting so slowly I wonder whether we're both suffering from the same affliction. He's fighting desperately to sit up next to J—J who's still on her knees, bent forward, mouth open. Her eyes are squeezed shut in concentration, but if she's screaming, I can't hear it.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't terrified.

I'm close enough to Warner and J to be able to make out their expressions, but it's no good; I have no idea whether they're injured, so I don't know the extent of what we're dealing with. I have to get closer, somehow. But when I take a single, painful step forward, a sharp keening explodes in my ears.

I cry out soundlessly, clapping my hands to my head as the silence is suddenly— *viciously*—compounded by pressure. The knifelike pain needles into me, pressure building in my ears with an intensity that threatens to crush me from the inside. It's like someone has overfilled my head with helium, like any minute now the balloon that is my brain will explode. And