



Free sample.
Enjoy.

Part One

Down Below

...in the windowless tomb of a blind mother, in the dead of night, under the feeble rays of a lamp in an alabaster globe, a girl came into the darkness with a wail.

--from The Day Boy and the Night Girl

Deuce

I was born during the second holocaust. People had told us legends of a time when human beings lived longer. I thought they were just stories. Nobody even lived to see forty in my world.

Today was my birthday. Each one added a layer of fear, and this year, it was worse. I lived in an enclave where our oldest had seen twenty-five years. His face was withered, and his fingers shook when he attempted the smallest tasks. Some whispered it would be a kindness to kill him, but they meant they didn't want to see their futures written in his skin.

“Are you ready?” Twist stood waiting for me in the darkness.

He already wore his marks; he was two years older than me, and if he'd survived the ritual, I could. Twist was small and frail by any standards; privation had cut runnels into his cheeks, aging him. I studied the pallor of my forearms and then nodded. It was time for me to become a woman.

The tunnels were wide and laid with metal bars. We had found remnants of what might've been transportation, but they lay on their sides like great, dead beasts. We used them for emergency shelters sometimes. If a hunting party was attacked before it reached sanctuary, a heavy metal wall between them and hungry enemies made the difference between life and death.

I had never been outside the enclave, of course. This space comprised the only world I'd ever known, cast in darkness and curling smoke. The walls were old, built of rectangular blocks. Once they had borne color but the years had worn them gray. Splashes of brightness came from items we scavenged from deeper in the warren.

I followed Twist through the maze, my gaze touching on familiar objects. My favorite item was a picture of a girl on a white cloud. I couldn't make out what she was holding; that part had worn away. But the words in bright red, HEAVENLY HAM, looked wonderful to me. I wasn't sure what that was, but by her expression, it must have been very good.

The enclave assembled on naming day, everyone who had survived to be named. We lost so many when they were young that we just called all the brats Boy or Girl, along with a number. Since our enclave was small—and dwindling—I recognized each face shadowed by the half-light. It was hard not to let the expectation of pain knot my stomach, along with the fear I would wind up with a terrible name that would cling to me until I died.

Please let it be something good.

The oldest, who carried the burden of the name Whitewall, walked to the center of the circle. He stopped before the fire, and its licking flame painted his skin in terrifying shades. With one hand, he beckoned me forward.

Once I joined him, he spoke. "Let each Hunter bring forth his gift."

The others carried their tokens and piled them at my feet. A mound of interesting items grew—and a few of them, I had no idea what purpose they might've served. *Decoration, perhaps?* People in the world before seemed obsessed with objects that existed simply to look pretty. I couldn't imagine such a thing.

After they finished, Whitewall turned to me. "It's time."

Silence fell. Cries echoed through the tunnels. Somewhere close by, somebody was suffering, but they weren't old enough to attend my naming. We might lose another citizen before we finished here. Sickness and fever devastated us and our medicine man did more harm than good, it seemed to me. But I'd learned not to

question his treatments. Here in the enclave, one didn't prosper by demonstrating too much independent thought.

These rules permit us to survive, Whitewall would say. *If you cannot abide by them, then you are free to see how you fare Topside.* The eldest had a mean streak; I didn't know if he had always been that way, or if age had made him so. And now, he stood before me, ready to take my blood.

Though I had never witnessed the ritual before, I knew what to expect. I extended my arms. The razor glinted in the firelight. It was our prized possession, and the oldest kept it clean and sharp. He made three jagged cuts on my left arm, and I held my pain until it coiled into a silent cry within me. I would not shame the enclave by weeping. He slashed my right arm before I could do more than brace. I clenched my teeth as hot blood trickled downward. Not too much. The cuts were shallow, symbolic.

"Close your eyes," he said.

I obeyed. He bent, spreading the gifts before me, and then grabbed my hand. His fingers were cold and thin. From whatever my blood struck, so would I take my name. With my eyes closed, I could hear the others breathing, but they were still and reverent. Movement rustled nearby.

"Open your eyes and greet the world, Huntress. From this day forward, you will be called Deuce."

I saw the oldest held a card. It was torn and stained, yellow with age. The back had a pretty red pattern and the front had what looked like a black shovel blade on it, along with the number two. It was also speckled with my blood, which meant I must keep it with me at all times. I took it from him with a murmur of thanks.

Strange. No longer would I be known as Girl15. My new name would take some getting used to.

The enclave dispersed. People offered me nods of respect as they went about their business. Now that the naming day ceremony was complete, there was still food to be hunted and supplies to be scavenged. Our work never ended.

“You were very brave,” Twist said. “Now let’s take care of your arms.”

It was just as well we had no audience for this part because my courage failed. I wept when he put the hot metal to my skin. Six scars to prove I was tough enough to call myself Huntress. Other citizens received less; Builders got three scars. Breeders took only one. For as long as anyone could remember, the number of marks on the arms identified what role a citizen played.

We could not permit the cuts to heal naturally for two reasons: they would not scar properly and infection might set in. Over the years, we had lost too many to the naming day ritual because they cried and begged; they couldn’t bear the white-hot conclusion. Now Twist no longer paused at the sight of tears, and I was glad he didn’t acknowledge them.

I am Deuce.

Tears spilled down my cheeks as the nerve endings died, but the scars appeared one by one, proclaiming my strength and my ability to weather whatever I found out in the tunnels. I had been training for this day my whole life; I could wield a knife or a club with equal proficiency. Every bite of food I ate that had been supplied by someone else, I consumed with the understanding it would be my turn someday to provide for the brats.

That day had come. Girl15 was dead.

Long live Deuce.

After the naming, two friends held a party for me. I found them both waiting for me in the common area. We'd come up together as brats, though our personalities and physical skills put us on different paths. Still, Thimble and Stone were my two closest companions. Of the three, I was the youngest, and they'd taken pleasure in calling me Girl15, after they both got their names.

Thimble was a small girl a little older than me, who served as a Builder. She had dark hair and brown eyes. Because of her pointed chin and wide gaze, people sometimes questioned if she was old enough to be out of brat training. She hated that; there was no surer way to rouse her temper.

Grime often stained her fingers because she worked with her hands, and it found its way onto her clothing and smudged her face. We'd gotten used to seeing her scratch her cheek and leave a dark streak behind. But I didn't tease her anymore because she was sensitive. One of her legs was a touch shorter than the other, and she walked with a whisper of a limp, not from injury, but that small defect. Otherwise, she might easily have become a Breeder.

Because he was strong and handsome, but not especially bright, Stone landed as a Breeder. Whitewall figured he had good material in him, and if matched with a clever female, he should sire good, solid offspring. Only citizens with traits worth passing on were allowed to contribute to the next generation, and the elders monitored births carefully. We couldn't allow more brats than we could provide for.

Thimble rushed up to examine my forearms. "How much did it hurt?"

"A lot," I said. "Twice as much as yours." I gave Stone a pointed look. "Six times as much as yours."

He always joked he had the easiest job in the enclave, and maybe that was true, but I wouldn't want the burden of making sure our people survived to the next generation. On top of siring the young, he also shared the responsibility of looking after them. I didn't think I could deal with so much death. Brats were unbelievably fragile. This year, he'd sired one male, and I didn't know how he dealt with the fear. I could barely remember my dam; she'd died young even by our standards. When she was eighteen, a sickness swept through the enclave, likely carried by the trading party from Nassau. It took a lot of our people that year.

Some citizens thought the offspring of Breeders should stay in that role. There was a quiet movement among the Hunters to take their number from their own—that once a Hunter got too old for patrols, he or she could sire the next crop of Hunters. I'd fought my whole life against that thinking. From the time I could walk, I'd watched the Hunters going off into the tunnels and known it for my destiny.

"It's not my fault I'm handsome," he said, grinning.

"Stop, you two." Thimble got out a present wrapped in faded cloth. "Here."

I hadn't expected this. Brow raised, I took the parcel from her, hefted it, and said, "You made me new daggers."

She glared. "I hate when you do that."

To appease her, I unfolded the fabric. "They're *beautiful*."

And they were. Only a Builder could do such fine work. She'd poured these just for me. I imagined the long hours over the fire and the time in the mold and the tempering and the polishing and sharpening afterward. They gleamed in the torchlight. I tested them and found them perfectly balanced. I executed a couple of moves to show her how much I liked them, and Stone jumped as if I might hit him on

accident. He could be such an idiot. A Huntress never stabbed anything she didn't intend to.

“I wanted you to have the best out there.”

“Me too,” Stone said.

He hadn't bothered to wrap his gift; it was simply too big. The club wasn't Builder quality work, but Stone had a fair hand with carving, and he'd taken a solid scrap of wood for the core. I suspected Thimble must've helped him with the banded metal along the top and bottom, but the fanciful figures cut into the wood came from him, no mistake. I didn't recognize all of the animals, but it was lovely and solid, and I would feel safer with it on my back. He'd rubbed the carvings with some kind of dye, so they stood out from the grain. The decorations would actually make it harder for me to keep the weapon clean, but Stone was a Breeder, and he couldn't be expected to think of things like that.

I smiled in appreciation. “This is wonderful.”

They both hugged me and then produced a treat we'd been saving for my naming day. Thimble had traded for this tin long ago—in anticipation of the occasion. The container itself offered unusual pleasure in that it shone bright red and white, brighter than most things we found down here. We didn't know what was inside it; only that it had been sealed so thoroughly that we needed tools to pry it open.

A lovely scent drifted out. I had never smelled anything like it, but it was fresh and sweet. Inside, I saw nothing but colored dust. Impossible to tell what it might have once been, but the aroma alone made my naming day special.

“What is it?” Thimble asked.

Hesitantly, I touched a fingertip to the pink dust. “I think it might be to make us smell better.”

“Do we put it on our clothes?” Stone leaned in and gave a sniff.

Thimble considered. “Only for special occasions.”

“Anything in there?” I stirred, until I touched bottom. “There is!”

Elated, I drew out a square of stiff paper. It was white with gold letters, but they had a funny shape and I couldn’t read them. Some of them looked like they were supposed to; others didn’t. They looped and dropped and curled in ways that made them confusing to my eye.

“Put it back,” she said. “It might be important.”

It *was* important, if only for being one of the few complete documents we had from the time before. “We should take it to the Wordkeeper.”

Even though we’d traded for this tin fair and square, if it yielded a valuable enclave resource and we tried to keep it for ourselves, we could wind up in serious trouble. Trouble led to exile, and exile to unspeakable things. By mutual agreement, we replaced the paper and closed the tin. We shared a sober look, aware of the potential consequences. None of us wanted to be accused of hoarding.

“Let’s take care of it now,” Stone said. “I have to get back to the brats soon.”

“Give me a bit of time.”

Moving at a run, I headed to look for Twist. I found him in the kitchens, not surprisingly. I still hadn’t been assigned a private living space. Now that I’d been named, I could have a room of my own. No more brat dorm.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

I tried not to take offense. Just because I’d been named didn’t mean his treatment of me would improve overnight. To some, I’d be little more than a brat for a couple of years. Until I started edging toward elder territory.

“Just tell me where my space is?”

Twist sighed, but obligingly he led the way through the maze. Along the way, we dodged so many bodies and wound through the layers of partitions and makeshift shelters. Mine sat in between two others, but it was four feet to call my own.

My room had three crude walls, constructed of old metal, and a ragged length of cloth for an illusion of privacy. Everyone had more or less the same; it only varied in terms of what trinkets people kept. I had a secret weakness for shiny things. I was always trading for something that glittered when I held it to the light.

“That all?”

Before I could answer, he went back toward the kitchen. Taking a deep breath, I pushed through the curtain. I had a rag pallet and a crate for my meager belongings. But nobody else had the right to come in here without my invitation. I’d earned my place.

Despite my worry, I smiled while I stowed my new weapons. Nobody would touch anything in here, and it was best not to visit the Wordkeeper armed to the teeth. Like Whitewall, he was getting on in years, and tended to be strange.

I didn’t look forward to this interrogation at all.

Trial

It didn't take long to spill our story and show him the tin. He reached inside, letting the pink dust trail through his fingers. The card he handled carefully.

"You say you've had this item for some time?" The Wordkeeper glared at three of us, as if we were guilty of stupidity at least.

Stone explained, "We traded for it together and agreed we'd open it on 15's...er, Deuce's naming day."

"So you had no idea of the contents before now."

"No, sir," I said.

Thimble added a timid nod. Her limp made her self-conscious, as the enclave seldom permitted such imperfections. But hers was minor and didn't impede her performance as a Builder. In fact, I'd say she worked twice as hard, not wanting anyone to feel they'd made a mistake about her.

"Are you willing to swear?" the Wordkeeper asked.

"Yes," Thimble said. "None of us had any idea what it held."

They fetched Copper from the kitchens and she witnessed. The Wordkeeper growled as he took the document into evidence. "Get out, all of you. I'll let you know of my decision in due time."

I felt sick as we went back to my room. I wanted to show them where it was, anyway. Stone could enter with Thimble present as a chaperone. Like in the old days, in the brat dorm, we flopped onto the pallet together. Stone sat between us and

wrapped an arm around each of us. He felt warm and familiar, and I leaned my head against his shoulder. I wouldn't let anybody else touch me like this, but he was different. We were brat-mates, practically related.

"It'll be fine," he said. "They can't punish us for something we didn't do."

Looking at the pleasure in Thimble's face as she nestled against him, I wondered if she might do better as a Breeder. But the elders wouldn't let her, even if she'd wanted to. Nobody wanted imperfections passed on, even the small, harmless ones.

"He's right," she agreed.

I nodded. The elders looked after us. Certainly, they had to consider the matter, but once they'd studied all the facts, no harm would come to us. We'd done the right thing and turned the paper over as soon as we found it.

Absently, Stone played with my hair; for him, it was a simple instinct. Touching wasn't forbidden to Breeders. They hugged and patted so easily it alarmed me. Builders and Hunters had to take such care not to be accused of wrongdoing.

"I have to go," Stone said regretfully.

"To make some brats or look after them?" Thimble asked with a flash of ire.

For a moment, I felt so sorry for her. To me, it was painfully obvious she wanted something she could never have. Unlike me. I had *exactly* what I wanted. I couldn't wait to start work.

He grinned, taking the question at face value. "If you must know—"

"Never mind," I said hastily.

Her face fell. "I should go too. Hope you had a good naming day, Deuce."

"Apart from seeing the Wordkeeper, it was fine." I smiled as they both left and fell back on my pallet to think about my future as a Huntress.

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The first time I saw Fade, he frightened me. He had a lean, sharp face and shaggy dark hair that fell over his forehead into the blackest eyes, like a bottomless pit. And he bore so many scars, as if he'd lived through battles the rest of us couldn't imagine. Hard as life had been here, his silent rage said he'd seen worse.

Unlike most, he hadn't been born in the enclave. He came in through the tunnels, half-grown when we found him, half-starved and more than half feral. He didn't have a number designation, or even any concept of how to behave. Still, the older citizens voted to let him stay.

"Anybody who can survive out in the tunnels on his own has to be strong," Whitewall had said. "We can use him."

"If he doesn't kill us all first," Copper had muttered back.

Copper was second oldest at twenty-four, and she served as mate to Whitewall, though it was a fluid arrangement. She was also the only one who dared to backtalk him, even a little bit. The rest of us had learned to mind. I'd seen people exiled because they refused to obey the rules.

So when Whitewall decreed the stranger stayed, we had to make it work. It was a long while before I actually set eyes on him. They tried to teach him our ways, and he spent long hours with the Wordkeeper. He already knew how to fight; he didn't seem to know how to live with other people, or at least, he found *our* laws confusing.

I was just a brat at the time, so I wasn't involved in his assimilation. I was training to become a Huntress. Since I wanted to prove myself with blade and boot, I worked tirelessly. When the strange boy got his name, I wasn't there. He didn't know how old he was, so they guessed when to christen him.

After that, I saw him around, but I certainly never spoke to him. Brats and Hunters didn't mix, unless lessons were involved. Those earmarked for combat and patrol duties studied under the veteran Hunters. I'd spent most of my time training with Silk, but a few others had schooled me over the years as well. I formally met Fade much later, after my own naming. He was teaching the fundamentals of knife-work when Twist delivered me to his class.

"That's all," Fade said, as we joined them.

The brats dispersed with quiet grumbling. I remembered how sore my muscles had been when I started training. Now I took pleasure in the hardness of my arms and legs. I wanted to test myself against the dangers beyond our makeshift walls.

Twist tilted his head at me. "This is your new partner. Silk ranked her as the best in her group."

"Did she?" Fade's voice sounded odd.

I met his black eyes with a lift of my chin. *Can't let him think he intimidates me.* "Yes. I scored ten out of ten in throws."

He raked me with a scathing look. "You're puny."

"And you're quick to judge."

"What's your name?"

I had to think; I almost said Girl15. I fingered the card in my pocket, finding comfort in its edges. It was my talisman now. "Deuce."

"I'll leave you two to talk," Twist said. "I have other things to do."

He did, of course. Since he was small and fragile, he couldn't hunt. He served as a second to Whitewall, running errands for him and taking care of administrative tasks. I couldn't remember ever seeing him just sitting still, not even at night. I lifted

my hand as he went around the jagged metal partition to another section of the settlement.

“I’m Fade,” he told me.

“I know. Everyone knows you.”

“Because I’m not one of you.”

“You said it, not me.”

His head jerked in a nod that said he didn’t want to answer any questions. Since I refused to be like everyone else, I swallowed my curiosity. If he didn’t want to talk, I didn’t care. Everyone wondered about his story, but only Whitewall had ever heard it—and maybe *he* didn’t even know the truth. But I was only interested in Fade as the one who guarded my back, so it didn’t matter.

He changed the subject. “Silk assigns hunting parties daily. We join the rotation tomorrow. I hope you’re as good as she claims.”

“What happened to your last partner?”

Fade smiled. “He wasn’t as good as Silk claimed.”

“You want to find out?” I lifted my brow in a challenge.

The space had cleared of brats, so he shrugged and took a position in the center. “Show me what you’ve got.”

It was a clever tactic, but I wasn’t that green. The offensive fighter lost the chance to assess his opponent’s style. I shook my head at him and curled my fingers. He almost smiled; I saw it start in his eyes, but then he focused on the fight.

We circled a few times. I leaned toward caution because I’d never seen him spar with anyone. I watched the Hunters every chance I got, but he didn’t spend much time with them outside of patrols.

He lashed out with a quick left, followed by a right cross. I blocked one but not the other; kind of him not to use his full strength. Still, the blow rocked me. I used the new angle to sink a fist into his ribs and spin away. *He wasn't expecting me to recover so fast*, I thought.

Our sparring gathered an audience. I tried to ignore them, as I wanted to make a good showing. I went for his leg but he leaped and I recovered in a clumsy stumble while he pressed forward. When he swept, I didn't slide away in time and he took me down smoothly. I tried to roll out of the lock, but he had me. I glared up at him, but he held me until I tapped.

Fade offered me a hand up. "Not bad. You lasted a couple of minutes."

With a grin, I took it. I refused to make the excuse that my arms were sore. He could see that for himself. "You got lucky today. I'd like a rematch."

He walked away without giving me an answer. I'd take that as a maybe.

That night, I honed my blade. I double—and triple—checked my equipment. Even with all my training and my preparations, I found it hard to sleep. I lay and listened to the comforting sounds of life around me. A brat cried. Someone was breeding. Moans of pain mingled with softer sighs.

I must have dozed because Twist roused me with a foot in the ribs. "Get up and eat. You're due on patrol in a little while. And don't think I'll be bothering to wake you personally after today."

"I won't," I said.

It was a wonder I'd slept at all. *My first patrol*. Excitement warred with nerves. Using a touch of oil, I slicked my hair into an efficient tail and geared up. That meant looping my club across my back and sliding my blades into the thigh sheaths. I had

made all of the equipment myself; Whitewall thought such self-sufficiency encouraged greater care, and maybe he was right.

As I approached the kitchen area, the smoke stung my eyes. Copper was roasting something on a spit, and the grease hissed as it dropped into the fire. She got out her dagger and cut me a hunk of meat. It burned my fingers as I took it and gobbled it down. I'd never eaten breakfast first; only hunters did that. Pride blazed in me.

I watched the Hunters wolf down their portions, each larger than I'd ever received before. They all looked hard and ready, not nervous at all. I glanced around for Fade and found him eating alone. The others didn't talk to him. Even now, he was an outsider, still regarded with subtle suspicion.

As we finished our food, Silk stepped up onto a table. "There have been sightings closer to the enclave than we want."

A male Hunter whose name I didn't know asked, "Freaks?"

A shiver ran through me. Freaks looked almost human—and weren't. They had lesions on their skin, razor sharp teeth, and claws instead of fingernails. I'd heard you could detect them by smell, though in the tunnels, that could be hard. It already smelled of a hundred things down here, only half of them good. But Twist had told me Freaks stank like carrion meat. They feasted on the dead, but they would eat fresh meat if they could get it. We had to make sure they didn't.

Silk nodded. "They're getting bolder. Kill any you come across." She held up a cloth sack. "Your goal today is to fill this bag with meat. As long as it's not Freak, I don't care what you put in it. Good hunting."

The others headed out. I cut through the throng and headed for Fade. He looked even scarier than he had the night before. He might not be more than a couple of

seasons older than me, but it was a lifetime of hunting experience. His weapons shone, a reassuring sight. For all I wanted to prove myself, I also wanted a partner I could count on. I would be stupid not to worry that his last one had died out there. Maybe someday he'd tell me the circumstances.

“Let's do this,” he said.

I followed him through the kitchen area and into an adjunct tunnel. Long ago, we'd erected barricades in key points, preventing an easy flow to our main settlement. We exited through the east blockade, and it required me to scramble using my hands and knees before I got past the rubble. To my eyes, it needed shoring up again with new salvage, but that was Builder work.

Beyond the light of the enclave, it was dark, darker than I'd ever seen. It took my eyes long moments to adjust. Fade waited while I made the shift.

“We hunt like this?” Nobody ever told me. Primitive fear scuttled up my spine.

“Light attracts Freaks. We don't want them to see us first.”

Reflexively, I checked my weapons as if mentioning the monsters could bring them slaving out of the murk. My club slid free cleanly. I put it back. Likewise, my knives found my palms in a smooth motion.

As we moved, my other senses compensated. I had done visual deprivation, as part of my training, but I hadn't understood just how much I would need that skill out here. Now I was glad I could hear him moving ahead of me because I could make out only vague shadows. No wonder Hunters died.

Ahead of me, Fade checked the various snares. A couple yielded meat. Another partner might've put me at ease; he left me trailing in the darkness and the silence.

Fine, I could handle myself. I wasn't scared.

I told myself that right up until we made a left turn and I heard noises in the distance. Wet, sucking sounds echoed, so I had no idea how close they really were. The ground roughened beneath my feet, broken metal and chunks of stone. Fade melted into the dark, going *toward* danger.

Because it was my job, I followed.

We came to a crossing, where four tunnels connected. Above, the ceiling had cracked and fallen, leaving debris everywhere. Sickly light trickled in from a great distance, speckling everything with a peculiar glow, and I spotted my first Freak.

Because we moved silent as twin knives, the monster hadn't seen or heard us yet. It crouched over a dead thing, tearing raw flesh with its teeth. There would be more nearby. In my lore classes, they'd told us Freaks ran in packs.

Fade made a silent gesture, telling me he would take this one. I should watch for the rest. A lift of my head confirmed my understanding of the plan. He went in, lean and deadly, and ended the creature with a lightning-fast spike of his blade. It shrieked, likely alerting the rest. The death call carried like a mournful song.

Movement to the north drew my eye. We had two more incoming at a dead run. Instinct kicked in, leaving me no space for fear. My knives slipped into my hands—unlike most Hunters, I could fight with two at the same time.

Silk didn't lie. I am the best of my group.

I told myself that as the first Freak slammed into me. But I greeted it with an upward slash and an outward thrust with my left hand. *Hit the vitals. Go for the kill shot.* I heard Silk's voice in my head, telling me, *every moment you spend fighting this thing drains energy you won't have later, when you need it most.*

My blade bit into rank, spongy flesh and slammed through bone. I shook my head mentally. Too high. I didn't want the rib cage. It howled in pain and raked its

filthy claws toward my shoulder. This wasn't like training; this thing didn't use moves I knew.

Grimly, I countered with my right hand. I wished I had the leisure to watch Fade, assess his style, but this was my first real fight, and I didn't want to come out of it looking worse than an untrained brat. It mattered that I earned my partner's respect.

My leg lashed out, and I combined the kick with an angled knife thrust. Both connected, and the Freak went down, gushing foul blood. It didn't look like ours, darker, thick and fetid. I popped it in the heart with my left hand and danced back to avoid getting clawed while it was in its death throes.

Fade finished faster than me. To be expected, I supposed, given his greater experience. I cleaned my knives on the rags the Freak wore and slid them back into their sheathes. Now I understood on a visceral level why the Hunters spent so much time caring for their weapons. I felt like I might never get the stain off the metal.

"Not bad," he said at last.

"Thanks."

I'd done it. I was officially blooded. As much as the new scars on my arms, that marked me as a Huntress. My shoulders squared.

We left the three corpses. Horrible as it sounded, other Freaks would eat them. They had no care for their dead. They did not attack each other, but otherwise, anything in the tunnels—living or dead—offered fuel for their endless appetites.

By comparison the rest of our patrol passed with relative ease. Half the traps yielded meat. A number of animals lived down here with us; four legged furry creatures we called food. I killed a wounded one, where the snare hadn't broken its neck clean, and that bothered me more than the Freak. I held its warm body in my

hands and bowed my head over it. Wordless, Fade took it from me and dropped it in the sack with the others. We had brats to feed.

I didn't know how he marked the time, but eventually he said, "We should head back."

On the return, I tried to memorize our route. Though no one had stated it, one day Fade would expect me to lead. He wouldn't accept excuses, anymore than I was inclined to offer them. So on our way, I counted our steps and turns and committed them to memory.

By the time we reached the enclave, other Hunters had already begun reporting in. Twist took charge of the bags, weighing the meat and either commending or berating the team. We heard 'nice job' while the pair after us got 'thanks to you, the brats go hungry in the morning.'

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said to Fade.

He inclined his head and circled around the fire. Without meaning to, I found myself watching the lean, muscular lines of his back and the way his hair fell against the nape of his neck. Fade moved like he fought, economically and without wasted effort.

"What do you think of him?" Silk asked. At twenty, she stood a little taller than me with fair hair she wore shorn close to her head. Her toughness made her an ideal leader. But her face contorted with contempt as she gazed at Fade. She didn't like what he stood for and that he didn't accept his orders with the same zeal as everyone else.

My opinions about Fade were far too tangled to talk about, so I murmured, "Too soon to say."

“A lot of citizens fear him. They say he must be part Freak or he’d have been eaten out there.”

“People say a lot of things,” I muttered.

Silk took it as a tacit defense of my new partner and her mouth twisted. “That they do. *Some* say you should be a Breeder like your dam.”

I set my teeth and strode out of the kitchen, determined to find a partner and do a little extra training. Nobody would dismiss me as unfit to be a Huntress. Nobody.

