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WATCH ME

A SHATTER ME NOVEL

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ROSABELLE

CHAPTER 1

When I open the cupboard, the shelves are empty.

This is no surprise, of course; the shelves have been empty for weeks. It's for Clara's sake that I make a show of opening them every morning, pretending there might be more than the same skittering cockroach living inside.

I close the cabinet door, then turn to face her. Clara never leaves the bed unless I carry her; today she's sitting up and staring out the icy window, her pale eyes made paler by the blast of early morning light. Her hand trembles as she twitches the threadbare curtain, and a blue glare briefly illuminates the glass.

"We're out of bread," I announce. "I'm heading out."

Some days Clara lets me leave without asking questions. Other days she asks me how I pay for the food I bring home. Today she says, "I dreamed of Mama last night."

I keep my face impassive. "Again?"

Clara turns toward me, so gaunt her eyes appear sunken in her face. "She wasn't well, Rosa. She was suffering."

I step into my boots, shaking my head as I move into a shaft of light. "It was only a dream," I say to her. "The dead don't suffer."

Clara looks away again. "You always say that."

"And you stare at her photograph too much," I say, knotting my laces. My right hand doesn't shake today, and I experience a rush of relief as I straighten, then a flash of terror as I note the dwindling fire in the hearth—and the disappearing pile of firewood beside it. I force the terror down. "Besides," I add, "you hardly knew her."

"Well, you hardly speak of her," Clara counters with a sigh.

Through the window I glimpse a redheaded woodpecker and watch, transfixed, as it hammers its beak into a mossy trunk. It's been just over a decade since the fall of The Reestablishment—just over a decade since we've lived here, on Ark Island—and I, too, wish I could bash my head over and over against a hard surface every day. I take a sharp breath, ignoring the ever-present ache of hunger.

It's still strange to see the birds.

They fill the sky with sound and color, rattling roofs and branches. All around us evergreens spiral skyward, never surrendering to the seasons. It's always damp here; viridescent; cold. Lakes shimmer unprovoked. Distant mountain ranges seem painted in watercolors, layers of teeth made translucent by fog. The warm and well-fed have been known to call this land beautiful.

"I won't be long," I say, buttoning myself into Papa's old coat. Years ago I cut off the military insignias with a dull blade, earning myself a scar in the process. "I'll see about rebuilding the fire when I get back."

“Okay,” Clara says quietly. Then: “Sebastian came by yesterday.”

I stiffen.

Very slowly I reanimate, wrapping my mother’s tattered scarf too tightly around my neck. I was allowed to work at the mill yesterday, and by the time I got home Clara had been asleep.

“He came to deliver the mail,” she says.

“The mail,” I echo. “He came all this way just to deliver the mail.”

Clara nods, then reaches under her pillow to retrieve a folded newspaper and a thick, unmarked envelope, both of which she holds out in offering. I tuck the two into my coat pocket without glancing at either.

“Thank you,” I say softly. I imagine, for a moment, how it might feel to slit Sebastian’s throat.

Clara tilts her head at me. “He said you missed last week’s meeting.”

“You were sick.”

“I told him that.”

I look toward the door. “You don’t need to tell him anything.”

“He still wants to marry you, Rosa.”

I lift my head sharply. “How do you know about that?”

“Would it be so terrible?” She ignores my question, shivering violently. “Don’t you like him? I thought you liked him.”

I turn to face our little kitchen, the small stove, the

rickety table and chairs we never use. The wooden plaque hanging above the sink.

Our society

REESTABLISHED

Our future

REDEFINED

My eyes unfocus.

I was ten when I came home to find a black bear tearing through the last of our food. Clara was three; Mama had been dead three days. I don't remember killing the bear or burying what remained of my mother.

I remember the blood.

I remember the weeks it took to scrub the floorboards. The bars of Clara's crib. The ceiling. Mama's last words to me had been *close your eyes, Rosa*, except that she'd closed her eyes and I'd kept mine open. She put the gun in her mouth just hours after we heard that Papa would no longer be executed for war crimes. He'd traded all of us in for a half-life, selling secrets to the enemy in exchange for a slow rot in prison. I used to think Mama killed herself because she couldn't withstand the shame. Now I'm certain it was because she knew she'd be forced to pay for Papa's treason.

Maybe she thought they'd spare her children.

I grab the bear pelt from its hook and drape it around Clara's trembling limbs. She hates the pelt. She says the bear's pain still lingers in the cottage, that it makes her

retch even after all these years. So when she allows the fur to settle on her shoulders without protest, I know the situation is dire.

“If you married Sebastian, things would be better,” Clara says, suppressing another shiver. She pauses to cough, and the hacking sound drives a hole through my head. “They’d lift the sanctions. You wouldn’t have to pretend we have food in our cupboards every morning.”

Slowly, I meet her eyes.

I remember when Clara was born, when I’d looked at her and wondered whether Mama had given birth to a doll. Only later did I realize I must’ve looked just as strange when I was born: all ghost and glass. I study her often when she sleeps, or when the illness overtakes her so completely she slips into a coma. At thirteen, she’s tender and optimistic; nothing like I was at her age. Still, despite the seven years between us, she and I are physically similar: shockingly pale; hair so blond it’s nearly white; eyes a disorienting shade of cold. Staring at Clara is like staring into the past, at what I used to be, who I could’ve been.

I was soft once, too.

“I really think he loves you,” she says, her eyes brightening with feeling. “You should’ve heard the way he talked about you— Rosa, wait—”

I don’t say goodbye to my sister.

I reach for the automatic rifle tucked away in the entry, pulling the strap over my head before tugging a battered balaclava over my face. I step into the cold, and thick flakes

catch in my eyelashes just as the front door slams shut behind me, the sound briefly drowning out his voice. It's my only explanation for being startled.

“Rosabelle,” he says, cutting in front of me with a smile. “Still dead inside?”

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ROSABELLE

CHAPTER 2

I sidestep Lieutenant Soledad, absently running my hand along the cold weapon slung across my chest. Soledad is no longer a lieutenant the way he once was; the title is a relic of another time. In this newly imagined world he's the head of our island's security, which makes him nothing more than a glorified busybody. And a tyrant.

I nod at familiar faces as they pass, their eyes anxiously tracking between myself and Soledad, who's fallen into step beside me. Snow is beginning to stick to the ground; spirals of smoke curl away from stacked chimneys, smudging the skies like errant brushstrokes. I adjust the balaclava on my face; the wool is old and itchy. I am impatient.

"I thought our appointment was for tomorrow," I say flatly.

"I thought I'd surprise you," he says. "Impromptu interrogations often yield interesting results."

I come to a halt, turning to face him.

I remember when Soledad was young and fit and full of bravado—when he served under my father, the chief commander and regent of Sector 52. Now he's somehow barrel-chested but soft; stooped. His skin is waxy, his hair thinning. He wears the stale air of another time, the only

lingering evidence of that epoch imprinted on his face. A soft blue glow pulses at his temples, his dark eyes occasionally brightening, then dimming.

Unbidden, my right arm trembles.

Quietly I change course for the day, feeling the pressure of a single, physical key tucked inside in the false pocket sewn into Papa's old coat. The only lock I own is bolted to the shed camouflaged in the wilds beyond the cottage—which I meant to visit first, and which I'll now have to avoid. No one in the pit knows about the lock because the lock is illegal; the homes in the pit are meant to be borderless. Our minds, too, are meant to be open at all times for inspection. It was the way of our parents, the way of The Reestablishment.

Surveillance is security, Papa used to say. Only criminals need privacy.

I glance at Soledad, who still wears his old military fatigues, the front pocket adorned with the tricolored emblem of a buried era. He lost an arm during the post-revolution skirmishes and wears his prosthetic proudly, one sleeve rolled up to reveal the silver gleam of muscular machinery.

"So," he says. "We can set up here, or we can head back to central. Your choice."

I cast a furtive glance around the pit, which comprises a cluster of cottages, square windows aglow in the gray morning light. People scurry along, heads down, avoiding eye contact with Soledad, who's never paid the pit a visit without doing some damage. Those who live here have been

sanctioned—cut off from the community for any number of infractions—but no one has lived here longer than Clara and me, who've never known another home on the island. In the chaotic weeks after our supreme commanders were slaughtered, Papa sent us here with Mama, promising to follow as soon as he could. It turned out Papa had stayed behind on purpose, voluntarily surrendering to the rebels. As a reward, we were sanctioned upon arrival.

“Do we have to do this now?” I ask, thinking of Clara, shivering and starved. “I’d rather keep our appointment for tomorrow.”

“Why, you have plans this morning?” He says this like it’s a joke. “You’re not allowed a shift at the mill today.”

A sharp pang of hunger cuts through me then, nearly taking my breath away. “Just some things to do.”

Soledad grabs my chin and I suppress a flinch, steadying myself as he forces me to look at him. He stares into my eyes for a long beat before letting go, and I kill the flare of revulsion in my chest, compelling my racing heart to slow.

I remind myself that I am dead inside.

“So strange not to know what you’re thinking,” he says, a notch forming between his brows. “All these years and I still haven’t gotten used to it. Makes it hard to believe you’re always telling the truth.”

Another slight tremor moves through my right hand. I’m the only person here unconnected to the Nexus. Even Clara was brought online before Papa was arrested. Just before the end, all civilians under the directive of The Reestablishment