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Powerless

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CHAPTER 1

Paedyn

Thick, hot liquid runs down my arm.
Blood.

Funny, I don't remember the guard nicking me with his sword before my fist connected with his face. Despite being a Flash, he apparently couldn't manage to move faster than my right hook to his jaw.

The smell of soot stings my nose, forcing me to clamp a grimy hand over it to stop a sneeze from slipping out.

That would be a very pathetic way to get caught.

When I'm sure that my nose won't alert the Imperials lurking beneath where I'm hiding, I return my hand to the filthy wall my back is currently pressed against with my feet planted opposite me. After taking a deep breath that nearly has me choking on soot, I slowly begin my climb upwards once again. With thighs burning almost as much as my nose, I force my body to continue shimmying while stifling the sneeze.

Climbing up a chimney isn't exactly how I thought I would be spending my evening. The small space has me sweating, swallowing my fear before scrambling to the top of the cramped corridor, eager

to replace grime-caked walls with a starry night. When my head finally peeks over the top, I greedily gulp down the sticky air, then climb up and over, immediately bombarded with a new concoction of smells far more unpleasant than the stench of soot clinging to my body, my clothes, my hair. Sweat, fish, spices, and I'm quite certain some sort of bodily fluid, blends to create the aroma that surrounds Loot Alley.

Balancing atop the chimney, I strain my eyes on the shadowed roof to inspect my sticky arm. I'd nearly forgotten to examine it without the usual biting pain that accompanies a sword slash to remind me.

I rip off a strip of cloth from the sweaty tank that clings to my body, dabbing at the gash with it.

Adena's going to kill me for ruining her stitching. Again.

I'm surprised when I don't feel the familiar twinge of pain as I rub at my arm with the rough fabric, impatiently sopping up the stickiness.

And that's when I smell it.

Honey.

The same honey that belongs to the sticky buns oozing out of the many pockets in my ragged vest and dripping down my arm – mistaken for blood. I sigh, rolling my eyes at myself.

It's a welcome surprise, nonetheless. Even honey soaking my clothes beats trying to wash blood out.

I take in a deep breath and look out over the crumbling, rundown buildings cast in shadows by the flickering lampposts dotting the street. There's not much electricity here in the slums, but the king generously spared us a few lampposts. Thanks to the Volts and Scholars using their abilities to create a sustained power grid, I have to work exceptionally hard to stay in the shadows.

Farther from the slums, the more the rows of shops and homes slowly improve in condition and size. Shacks turn into homes, homes turn into mansions, leading up to the most daunting building of all. Squinting through the darkness, I can just barely make out the looming towers of the royal castle and the sloping dome of the Bowl Arena that resides beside it.

My eyes flick back to the wide street stretched out before me, scanning the surrounding sketchy buildings. Loot Alley is the very heart of the slums, pumping crime and trade throughout the city. I trace the dozens of other alleys and streets jutting off from it, getting lost in the maze that is the city before offering a sigh and small smile to the familiar street beneath me.

Home. Sort of. Technically, a home implies that one has a roof over their head.

But stars are far more fun to stare at than a ceiling.

I would know, seeing that I used to have a ceiling to stare at every night, back when I had no need for the stars to keep me company.

My traitorous gaze sweeps across the city to where I know my former home lies wedged between Merchant and Elm Streets. Where a happy little family is likely sitting around the dinner table, laughing and discussing their day with one another—

I hear a thump, followed by the murmuring of voices that drag me from my bitter thoughts. Straining to hear, I can just make out the muffled, deep voice that belongs to the guard I so kindly relieved of his duties a short while ago.

‘—came up right behind me, quiet as a mouse, and then . . . then the next thing I know, I get a tap on the shoulder and a fist to the face.’

A very irritated and very shrill female voice echoes up the chimney. ‘You’re a Flash, for Plague’s sake, aren’t you supposed to be fast or something?’ She takes a deep breath. ‘Did you at least get a look at his face before you let him rob me? Again?’

‘All I saw were his eyes,’ the guard mumbles. ‘Blue. Very blue.’

The woman huffs in irritation. ‘How helpful. Let me just stop every person on Loot to see if their eyes match your vivid description of very blue.’

I stifle my snort as something creaks from the other end of the room, followed by a chorus of muffled footsteps. From the groan of rotting wood shifting beneath several new pairs of boots, I immediately deduce that three more guards have joined the hunt.

And that’s my cue.

I hop off the chimney and grab onto the raised ledge of the roof,

swinging my legs over the side to dangle above the street. Blowing out a breath, I let go and bite my tongue against a yelp as gravity yanks me towards the ground. With a soft thud I drop ungracefully into a merchant's wagon brimming with hay. The stiff straw pokes through my clothes like one of Adena's pincushions, and a cloud of soot and hay rises on the night breeze when I jump out onto the street.

Passing the time by plucking straw from my tangled hair, I begin my journey back to the Fort, weaving through beat-up merchant carts, all abandoned for the night, feet dancing over trash and broken trinkets. Looters slumped against alleys or tucked in between buildings whisper among themselves as I pass.

I feel the weight of the dagger tucked into my boot and relax at the comfort of the cool steel as I pass groups of fellow homeless huddling together for the night. I can see the faint shimmer of purple forcefields shielding some, while others don't even have an ability strong enough to allow them to sleep peacefully, which is the exact reason they call the slums their home.

I keep my steps swift and sure as my eyes sweep back and forth across the alleys, never letting my guard down. The poor don't discriminate. A shilling is a shilling, and they don't care if they jump someone worse off than them to get it.

Several guards cross my path as I zigzag down streets, forcing me to slow down to steer clear of them. Every shop, corner, and street has been bestowed the gift of leering, white-uniformed law enforcers. These brutal Imperials have been stationed everywhere along Loot Alley by decree of the king due to an increase in crime.

Clearly has nothing to do with me.

I slip down a smaller alley, making my way towards the dead end. There, tucked in the corner, is a mangled barricade of broken merchant carts, cardboard, old sheets, and Plague knows what else. Before I'm even halfway to the pile of garbage we call home, a face obscured by wild shoulder-length curls pops up over the Fort.

'Did you get it!?'

Untangling her long legs from where she sits, she effortlessly stands and phases right through the three-foot wall of our trash

barricade without a second thought, and then she's bounding towards me with so much hope in her eyes that you'd think I've offered her a real roof over her head and a warm meal. And though I can give her neither of those things, I do have something far better in her opinion.

I sigh. 'I'm offended you doubted me, Adena. I thought you'd have a little more faith in my abilities after all these years.' I sling my pack from my back and pull out the crumpled red silk from within, unable to suppress my smile as a look of awe settles on her face.

She greedily claws the silk from my hands, running her fingers through the soft folds of the fabric. Peeking up through the curly bangs hanging in her hazel eyes, she looks at me as though I've just singlehandedly eradicated the Plague rather than steal fabric from a woman not much better off than we are.

Like I'm the hero and not the villain.

Adena's smile could rival the sun over the Scorches desert. 'Pae, you and your sticky fingers work magic, you know that?'

She throws her arms around my neck, pulling me into a crushing embrace that causes more honey to ooze down my vest and pool in my pockets.

'Speaking of sticky fingers . . .' I peel myself from her hug to fish around in my pockets. I retrieve six smashed sticky buns, only slightly unappetizing with the hay now decorating them.

Adena's eyes go wide at the sight before snatching one from my hand just as greedily as she did the fabric. She turns mid-bite and strides right back through our fort without a second thought, plopping herself down on the colorless, rough rugs that lie on the inside of the barricade. She pats the spot beside her expectantly, and unlike her, I ungracefully leap over the wall before I can take a seat.

'I bet Maria wasn't too happy about her shop being looted. Again. Poor thing should really up her security,' Adena says between bites, a crooked smile joining the crumbs on her face.

Despite my robbing the woman at least once a month for the past several years, she's still only managed to conclude that I am a he. At least she's trying.

'Actually,' I say with a shrug, 'she had two more Imperials

stationed around her shop than normal. She must be getting tired of all the stolen sticky buns over the years.'

Adena narrows her hazel eyes at the sight of my smile. 'Thank the Plague you didn't get caught, Pae.' As soon as the familiar phrase slips past her lips, my jaw sets instinctively while hers falls open mid-bite. She visibly cringes, her brow crinkling and throat clearing. 'Sorry. Bad habit.' My fingers drift to the thick ring on my thumb, spinning it mindlessly while I muster a weak smile. This topic is one we typically try to avoid, though it's my fault the subject became suddenly awkward to speak of in the first place.

All due to a moment of weakness that I wish I wasn't so relieved about. 'You know it's not the words that bother me, it's—'

'It's the meaning behind them,' she cuts in with a smile and a shockingly accurate imitation of my voice.

I nearly choke on my laugh and a piece of sweet dough. 'Are you quoting me, A?'

By way of answering, she takes a bite of sticky bun before declaring between mouthfuls, 'And it's not the Plague that makes you sick, it's what came after.'

I nod slowly while absentmindedly tracing the rug's worn pattern beneath us, the feeling familiar beneath my finger. The idea of thanking the Plague that killed thousands of Ilyans makes me lose my appetite for even sticky buns. Thanking the thing that caused so much pain and death and discrimination.

But all anyone cares about now is who the Plague didn't kill. The kingdom was isolated for years to keep the sickness from spreading to the surrounding cities, and only the strongest in Ilya survived the disease that altered the very structure of humans. The fast became exceptionally faster, the strong became unbeatable, and those who lurked in the shadows could become the shadows. Dozens of supernatural abilities were bestowed upon Ilyans alone, all varying in strength, purpose, and power.

Gifts given as a reward for surviving.

They are Elite. They are extraordinary. They are exceptional.

'Just . . .' Adena trails off, poking at her sticky bun while struggling to form words for once. 'Just be careful, Pae. If you get caught and

aren't able to talk yourself out of it—

'I'll be fine,' I state far too casually, ignoring the worry that washes over me. 'This is what I do, A. What I've always done.'

She sighs through her smile, waving a dismissive hand. 'I know, I know. You can handle yourself with the Elites.'

I feel that rush of relief once again, making me feel both guilty and grateful that she truly knows me. Because not all those who survived the Plague were fortunate enough to be gifted with abilities. No, the Ordinaries were just that – ordinary. And over the next several decades following the Plague, the Ordinaries and Elites lived in peace.

Until King Edric decreed that Ordinaries were no longer fit to live in his kingdom.

It was over three decades ago when sickness swept through the land. Due to the outbreak of what was likely a common illness, the king's Healers used the opportunity to claim that Ordinaries were carrying an undetectable disease, saying it was likely the reason they hadn't developed abilities. Extended exposure to them became harmful to both Elites and their powers, and over time, the Ordinaries were dwindling the abilities Elites are so protective of.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes at the thought.

My father believed that was bullshit, and I think no differently. But even if I had proof of the king lying through his teeth, it's not as though a girl from the slums is in any position to be believed.

But the king couldn't allow his Elite society to be weakened or worse by mere Ordinaries. Extinction was not an option for the extraordinary.

And so began the Purging.

Even now, decades later, tales of the bodies that scattered the sand under the scolding sun are casually passed around campfires, scary stories whispered among children.

Sticky fingers close over mine, the honey coating Adena's hands as sweet as the spreading smile she shares with me. My secret is stowed in the glint of her eyes, in the loyalty lining her expression. I've spent so much of my life resigned to the fact that nothing would ever be real. Every friendship false, every kindness calculated.

'Hide your feelings, hide your fear, and most importantly, hide behind your facade. No one can know, Paedy. Trust no one and nothing but your instincts.'

My father's gentle voice is oddly jarring as it echoes in my head, reminding me that every part of my life *should* be a lie and the girl sitting before me *should* be as deceived as the rest of the kingdom.

Selfishness only stole my sanity for a single night, but that was all it took for me to endanger the both of us.

'Alright, enough talk of the Plague,' Adena says cheerily, scanning the alley before adding, 'and your . . . situation.'

I don't bother stifling my snort. 'It seems that two years haven't been enough time for you to practice subtlety, A.'

I doubt she even heard me. Doubt she can focus on anything other than the fabric now gliding between her fingers. With hazel eyes scanning over sewing supplies, Adena abandons our previous conversation to ramble about what pieces she'll be making with the new silk. Her warm brown hands dig through scraps of fabric in the flickering lamplight, beginning to fold edges, pin corners, prick fingers, curse relentlessly.

We fall into the type of easy conversation that only comes after spending years surviving on the streets together, making it easy to interpret Adena's garbled words around the pins pressed between her lips. I roll over, finally falling quiet as I watch her steady fingers and furrowed brow, too engrossed with her work to sleep.

A stabbing pain in my side has my drooping eyes flying open, drowsiness forgotten. The jagged stone jutting up from the alley floor has me groggily grumbling, 'Mark my words, I'm going to steal a cot one day.'

Adena rolls her eyes at me, just as she does every night I make the same empty promise. 'I'll believe it when I feel it, Pae,' she singsongs.

I've rolled over about a dozen times before a scratchy, balled-up blanket collides with my head. 'If you don't quit your squirming, I swear I'll sew you to the bloody ground,' Adena says with all the sweetness of a sticky bun.

'I'll believe it when I feel it, A.'



CHAPTER 2

Rai

A ball of fire skims past my face, nearly singeing my hair off. I barely have the time to duck when I feel a second wave of heat rippling towards me.

Plagues, Kitt's in a lovely mood today.

Dancing on the balls of my feet, I watch as another sphere of fire comes hurtling in my direction as the familiar feel of adrenaline floods through me. I throw up a shield of water, hearing the fire hiss before it melts into nothing more than a thick cloud of steam. Kitt squints, attempting to see me through the smoke before his eyes widen when I suddenly collide with him. We tumble to the ground as I pin him down, raising a flaming fist aimed at his face.

'Yield?' I can't keep the smile from twitching my lips. He coughs out a laugh, his gaze flicking between my face and the blazing fist raised beside it.

'If I say no, are you really gonna punch me, little brother?' Despite the fire burning mere inches from him, Kitt's green eyes glint with amusement.

'I'd think you would know the answer to that by now.' I smile slightly as I cock my fist back farther, posing to strike.

‘Alright, alright, I yield!’ Kitt sputters. ‘But only because I wouldn’t want poor Eli to have to set another one of our broken noses.’

I chuckled darkly at the thought of seeing the look on the royal physician’s face if we were to stumble in with yet another broken bone. After standing to my feet, I offer a hand to Kitt who’s still sprawled on the ground.

The smile he gives me doesn’t quite reach his eyes when he finally says, ‘Plagues, Kai, you’re better with my powers than I am.’

‘And that is why *you* will be ruling the country,’ I say simply, ‘while I’ll be fighting on the battlefield, distracting the enemy with my dashing good looks.’

‘Are you saying I couldn’t distract the enemy with my own dashing good looks?’ Kitt asks through his deep laughter, feigning offense.

‘I’m saying that we are only half-brothers, so I’m afraid that means you only have half my charms.’

Kitt barks out another laugh. ‘By that logic, I suppose you only have half my brains then.’

‘Thank the Plague for that.’ The words are barely out of my mouth before he’s shoving me with a grin.

We walk the worn path between the dirt training circles that reside on the castle grounds. Imperials in training and other Elites of higher status continue their sparring as we pass, most using abilities while few use weapons.

Heads turn towards us, their eyes burning my skin mirroring the sun beating down on us from above. Ignoring the stares, I breathe in the training grounds’ familiar scent of literal blood, sweat, and tears before grabbing a sword from a weapons rack and tossing one to Kitt, who’s expression can only be described as exasperated.

‘You know I’ve always enjoyed fighting with weapons more than abilities,’ I say in answer to his pointed look as I mindlessly test the balance of my blade.

Kitt saunters farther into the muddy ring, all but rolling his eyes. ‘Yes, I’m well aware of how much you love to beat down on me with a sword.’ I rotate my wrist, swinging my blade as we

begin circling each other. 'It does happen to be one of my favorite hobbies, yes.' I advance suddenly, swinging my sword down hard against his and sending a jolt up my arm. 'See, isn't this fun?'

Kitt grits his teeth against my strike. 'Riveting.'

I fall into a familiar trance, letting my feet dance around the ring as we spar, getting lost in the rhythm. My mind clears. My body hums with energy. I've always felt most alive when I fight. It's what I was made to do, what has kept me sane over the years of training and tutoring.

'A dimwitted king is a dead king.'

Father's words ring through my mind, having been drilled through my skull after every complaint about my tedious lessons as a boy. Though, I won't have to worry about being a dead or dimwitted king, seeing that I won't be a king at all. And after arguing just that to Father, he kindly created a new saying for me to live by.

'A dimwitted Enforcer is a defeated empire.'

Encouraging.

A sharp pain sears up my forearm, dragging me from my thoughts with a jolt.

'Better get your head in the game, Kai, or I might actually beat you.' Kitt has a look of triumph on his face that I intend to wipe off. 'I wouldn't want my future Enforcer slacking on the jo—'

Before he can even finish his remark, I'm pushing his sword to the ground and pinning it under my own before swiveling behind him. In one swift motion, I kick my boot up, sliding a dagger from it to settle the sharp tip against his back.

'I'm sorry, what was that, Your Majesty?' I release my hold on him, and he turns as I sweep into a mocking bow while tucking the dagger back into my boot. That earns me a solid shove that nearly has me staggering, one I return in kind while Kitt chuckles.

His dirty blond hair is far more dirty than blond at the moment, splattered with chunks of mud from rolling around in the ring. Our shirts have long been abandoned in the summer heat and, like me, sweat slicks his tanned chest.

It's almost comical how obvious it is that we're only half-brothers.