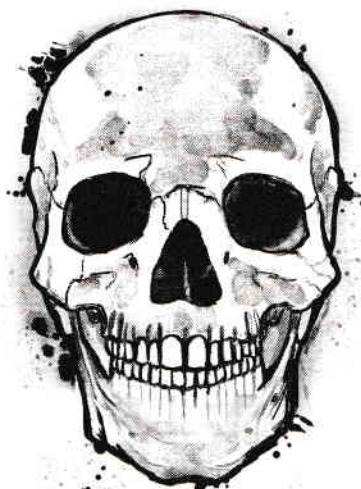


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BRAMBLE

CHAPTER ONE

MERCY IS DEAD



THE FIRST THING you'll learn in New Found Haven is mercy no longer exists. Showing mercy is a weakness, and weakness will get you killed.

The second thing is this—the Veyra are always watching. From the highest glass atrium in the Heart to the windowless slum dens of the Boundary, no movement goes unseen.

The last lesson is the hardest. You must remember it, as Greyson Serel did, standing in the center of the plaza's monolithic platform behind two bound and kneeling rebels.

Love outside of your ring was a death sentence.

The Heart was home to the elite of New Found Haven, the one per cent. The rich. And they wore masks to hide their faces.

The square slowly filled with those who resided in the Heart, coming not for belief in justice, but for proximity—proximity to *power*. To witness the suffering caused by the enforcement of that power upon those they claimed as less than. They came for the satisfaction of seeing blood spilled at someone else's expense.

The elite pressed shoulder to shoulder, obediently silent beneath the evening sky, as the live stream flickered to life against the mirrored surface of the twin towers erected at Greyson's back. The towers stood in the middle of the Heart, the very

center point of New Found Haven, where all corruption spilled from.

A buzz of energy filled the air, saturating through every ring of the city as billboards—usually spewing endless streams of propaganda—switched to the live feed. It was law in New Found Haven that any person who betrayed the Heart was executed publicly.

The raised platform where Greyson stood had been constructed in the absolute center of the plaza, where the veins of the city's four main boulevards crossed. The two condemned rebels knelt, with their hands bound in red cord, and beside them, in a tight formation, the Veyra enforcers stood in ceremonial red, boots shining, helmets on, their batons held at precise right angles, with guns strapped to their backs.

Greyson stayed unmoving, his mask covering his face, gloved hands folded over his militant onyx garb. He looked neither left nor right, nor at the condemned, only straight ahead—watching, observing.

The platform was illuminated not just by the Heart's orbital lamps, but by the harsh blue spotlight of the media drones as they circled, their lenses feeding every gesture, every tremor of the rebels to the rest of New Found Haven.

On monitors across the Cardinal and Boundary rings, the event was broadcast live, in high-definition clarity.

The crowd's attention was absolute. The masked elite looked up toward the rebels, like deadly flowers soaking in a poisonous sun, and waited for the carnage to begin.

Greyson let the silence ferment.

He waited until he felt the nervous pulse of the crowd sync with his own breathing, until the two on their knees began to twitch from the weight of attention. Only then did he step forward, moving his arms behind his back as the thud of his boots echoed against the marble dais.

He did not read from the script; he didn't need to.

His father had beaten the lines into him.

"For crimes against the Mother Land," Greyson started, his voice perfectly modulated, "and for violation of the sacred laws of New Found Haven, these criminals stand judged by the Heart."

Greyson glanced at the crowd. The mask hid the micro-twitches of his jaw, the bloodlessness of his lips, but not the flatness of his gaze.

"By order of President Maximus Serel, justice will be enacted in the manner most befitting the crime. *Death*. The charges are as follows: conspiracy against the Heart, illegal communication between the rings, fornication, and love across faction lines."

A ripple of approval sounded from the masked crowd, as if a liturgy had been completed.

Greyson raised a hand, silencing them.

The man was from the Boundary, the outer ring of the city. A nobody, with a face scarred by acid runoff from the industrial plants and poor nutrition. His clothing had been stripped of all rebel markings. He stared at Greyson with the intensity of someone who had nothing left to lose.

The woman kneeling next to him was a teacher from the Cardinal, the middle ring of New Found Haven. She was small and trembling, her hands mottled with burn scars just from proximity to the Cardinal ring's chemical plants that turned even the air into poison. Even kneeling, she attempted to maintain her dignity, lips pressed tight.

Greyson regarded the couple, and allowed himself to feel nothing. He didn't believe in the necessity of this act, but as he stood there, words from his childhood scraped at the back of his mind. A lesson in biology, an anecdote about wolves and culling, taught not in the classroom, but in the den at night by his father's voice. "*Mercy is weakness, Grey. Weakness is the end of all things.*"

Greyson shook the thought off.

"In accordance with tradition," he started again, "the condemned are allowed a final statement and to choose the method by which they will be executed."

His attention turned to the man and woman kneeling before him.

"Do you understand?" he asked, his voice dropping a decibel.

The woman nodded, tongue darting between chapped lips, eyes not on Greyson but locked somewhere in the far distance.

The man spat onto the platform, barely missing Greyson's boots. "Just get it over with, Veyra scum."

Greyson admired him. Admired that even when there was no hope left, when most would begin to beg for their lives, he stayed true to what he believed, and accepted his fate. For a moment, Greyson wondered, if he were ever to be in the rebel's position, would he show the same resolve?

He turned to the woman. "What would you prefer?"

Her voice was so quiet, it barely registered to his ears, but the drones caught it. With only a second delay, it echoed harsh and loud over the monitors. "Bullet."

The Veyra captain standing to Greyson's left made note of her answer on a datapad.

Greyson looked back to the man, waiting for his answer.

"Go fuck yourself," he growled.

Greyson's hand was already pulling his gun from the holster strapped over his shoulders as the last syllable fell from the man's lips. He didn't look at the rebel man; instead, he looked at the crowd. He found the mask of his mother, three rows back, perfectly composed. He saw the blur of his sister moving away from the platform, almost indiscernible behind the anonymity of her own mask.

He looked into the infinite eyes of the Veyra, the drone hovering in front of him at eye level as he aimed his gun at the base of the man's skull, and watched as he tensed, jaw set.

He did not beg as he took his last breath.

"Noted," Greyson said, and pulled the trigger.

The shot was dull in the open air, more a mechanical pop than a thunderclap, but the effect was immediate. The man's head jerked forward, spattering the white marble platform and the

woman with a fine red spray. For a moment, the body knelt upright, still propped by the tension in the muscles. Then it collapsed sideways, corded hands pinioned behind the back like a trussed animal.

The crowd erupted in applause, like some primordial satisfaction had been delivered as the woman's scream cut through the air with unbridled agony. She doubled over, head pressed to the marble, sobbing into her knees. She was begging now, begging to be spared, to be kept alive through a torrent of wails.

Begging for mercy that didn't exist.

Greyson watched her for one beat, then two.

He felt a shallow sickness grow in his throat, and the tremor in his left hand as he aimed the gun at the back of her head.

His mask hid almost everything but not his breathing.

The captain inclined his helmet, a silent prompt for Greyson to finish her off. He nodded, swallowing as his finger tightened on the trigger but hesitated, *again*.

A shot rang out beside Greyson in the next breath, and he blinked as the sound reverberated in his ears. The woman's body slumped over beside her lover, blood pouring from the gaping hole in the back of her head. Slowly, Greyson turned toward the captain, who was already holstering his own gun.

He'd hesitated, on live stream.

Greyson looked back into the crowd in search of his mother's mask, but she was already gone, had slipped out through the revelry, the celebration of murder.

He'd be punished for this, he knew that.

The President's son was not supposed to hesitate.

He pulled his eyes back to the woman's lifeless body as he shoved his gun back into its holster, and squared his shoulders, waiting for the crowd to exhaust itself. As the applause finally died, Greyson stepped to the edge of the platform.

"Order has been preserved by the swift hand of justice," he said, his voice cutting through the post-elation hush. "The Heart endures."

He turned, not taking another look at the dead rebels, and descended the marble steps now dripping with crimson. The Veyra soldiers closed ranks behind him, a red ripple of authority as laborers began to remove the bodies and sterilize the platform. Above, the drones continued to hover, recording every angle.

Greyson could feel it—the eyes on him, analyzing every step he took away from the platform. He should've felt something, should've felt guilt or shame. But in that deep pit of his stomach, Greyson only felt cold.

He rode the elevator to the seventy-eighth floor of Serel Tower, alone.

The elevator car was lined with smart-glass, which mirrored his mask back at him from every angle, each reflection rendered in harsher contrast by the surgical white light. It wasn't the face of a man, but the emblem of a system—a system that had worked for five generations to keep the city from eating itself alive.

The glass registered his biometrics and glided to a halt with a sigh. The elevator door swept open, only for a second door to appear. He inserted his key into the lock, twisting then pushing the door open. For once, the rooms beyond the door gave him what he needed—*silence*.

His apartment was the largest unit in Serel Tower—outside of the penthouse his parents resided in, which consumed the top three levels—but he felt like it was shrinking in on itself. Anyone would be lucky to have it, and he knew that. Those from the Boundary and even the Cardinal would kill to spend just an hour in the luxury it provided, would commit unspeakable crimes just for the opportunity to shower there and bask in the amenities as if it were heaven. But for Greyson, it felt like a prison.

The execution haunted him, echoing in his ears like a phantom taunt. The feeble pop of the first shot, the desperate way she screamed for mercy, the way he'd hesitated, the way she'd *begged*.

The punishment would come soon; his father's wrath would be waiting to greet him. "*Mercy is weakness, Grey. Weakness is the end of all things.*" The lesson returned, more than a whisper

now, more than a scrape at the edges of memory. He could almost taste the consequences, could feel them sharpening the air like broken glass.

He locked the door behind him, allowing himself a small gesture of exhaustion, a quiet rebellion against the rest of the world as he let out a heavy sigh, and rested the back of his head against the cool door. He slowly peeled the gloves from his fingers, setting them on the entry table beside him before removing the mask from his face. He set it on its stand and stared at it.

The burden of privilege.

Five generations ago, they were no more than symbols, ritualistic garnishments only worn during Vow ceremonies. As time progressed, and New Found Haven became more stratified, they began to be used as tools for oppression and social control. Elaborate customs and laws were created around masking, making it illegal for lower rings to look upon any of the elite's unveiled faces.

Now, even the elite were not allowed to see behind others' masks. Outside of those you were vowed to through ceremony, looking upon the face of another elite was considered an extreme violation of New Found Haven law.

If one of the elite were found guilty of a crime, only then would they be unmasked on live stream before their execution.

Greyson pulled his eyes away from the mask and rolled his jaw, biting back the rage it ignited in him. *As if you could oppress the citizens of this city any more than they already were.* His father only cared about power, and being the seat of it. He didn't care that the people under his watch, outside of the Heart, were dying every day from starvation.

President Serel told his son that this was an act of God—letting those not strong enough to survive die. Though Greyson knew his father wouldn't last a single day in the Boundary.

He swept the gloves off the entryway table and made his way to the bedroom, unbuttoning his jacket as he moved. The uniform went on a hanger, the gloves tucked into a drawer with

compulsive neatness. He went to the far end of the large walk-in closet where the polished wooden floor met the baseboard, and knelt. The floor panel lifted at his touch, revealing a deep compartment lined with insulation and anti-scan mesh.

He reached his hand in and pulled out a large duffel bag, setting it beside him as he put the wooden panel back in place, and leaned against the wall. His fingers wrapped around the handle of the bag, pulling it toward him as he unzipped it. The contents spilled onto the floor in front of him, and he sat down and began his inventory for the next scheduled drop.

Fifteen vials of antibiotics, five of narcotics, ten ampoules of enzyme suppressant for children, a thousand credits worth of meal stamps, and rolls of bandaging tape. He split the items equally, packing everything tight into five separate black padded pouches, checking the seals, then slipping them into the bottom compartment of his duffel bag.

He sat there on the floor in the dim light for a long while, his mind running through the plans.

He'd go to the maintenance levels while the Heart slept and security was at its weakest, sneak into the garages, and strap the items to the bottom of the Veyra patrol vehicles. The vehicles were weighed upon entry and exit of each of the three rings, so they had to be light. Light enough that the guards at the checkpoints wouldn't notice the loss of a few extra ounces between rings.

First, they'd stop at the industrial plants in the Cardinal ring and make their rounds to ensure all chemicals were flowing downstream toward the Boundary. While rounds were being completed, the rebels in the Cardinal would retrieve the first two packages.

Next, they would go to the Boundary.

The Veyra didn't leave their vehicles there—it was too dangerous even for the militia. The Daggermouths owned the Boundary, and they did not take kindly to the Veyra coming into their ring.

Greyson flinched at the thought, his hands balling into fists as his knuckles blanched. He hated the Daggermouths with every atom of his being. They were murderers, contract killers, who only answered to one man.

Jaeger Nolin.

They were the reason his brother was dead.

Daggermouths were ruthless mercenaries, hungry for blood, and Greyson saw Jaeger as no better than his father. He saw an opportunity to snatch power and he took it, without caring who it could hurt.

Greyson took a deep breath to steady himself, to quell the fury that was all too easily ignited these days, and refocused his thoughts.

The Boundary—the Veyra.

If they stepped out of their vehicles, there would be a bullet between their eyes faster than they could take their next breath. Their patrols were driven, but they were predictable, and predictability made them an easy target.

The Boundary rebels used the sewage system. They waited until the patrol vehicles stopped over water drains and snuck up from the pipes to remove their packages. Every time it had worked without fail, and every time Greyson couldn't rest until the Veyra called in the completed patrols with no issues.

He recited the numbers in his head. Sixteen minutes between patrol cycles; enough for him to get into the maintenance levels if he was not stopped along the way. Five minutes to reach the patrol vehicles, two minutes to secure the packages and get out before the next patrol came through. He rehearsed it the way other men might rehearse a prayer.

It should've felt heroic, but it didn't. It felt like routine. It felt like the desperate act of a man who couldn't reconcile the crimes he'd committed against the very people he was trying to help.

Greyson's involvement with the resistance was the only reason he didn't fight the masks. It kept him safe, kept him unseen and anonymous. The thought sent guilt churning in his stomach.