



SHE WILL CHOOSE ME

DESTROY ME

A SHATTER ME
NOVELLA

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
TAHEREH MAFI

DESTROY ME

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HARPER

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Prologue

I've been shot.

And, as it turns out, a bullet wound is even more uncomfortable than I had imagined.

My skin is cold and clammy; I'm making a herculean effort to breathe. Torture is roaring through my right arm and making it difficult for me to focus. I have to squeeze my eyes shut, grit my teeth, and force myself to pay attention.

The chaos is unbearable.

Several people are shouting and too many of them are touching me, and I want their hands surgically removed. They keep shouting "Sir!" as if they're still waiting for me to give them orders, as if they have no idea what to do without my instruction. The realization exhausts me.

"Sir, can you hear me?" Another cry. But this time, a voice I don't detest.

"Sir, please, can you hear me—"

"I've been shot, Delalieu," I manage to say. I open my eyes. Look into his watery ones. "I haven't gone deaf."

All at once the noise disappears. The soldiers shut up. Delalieu looks at me. Worried.

I sigh.

"Take me back," I tell him, shifting, just a little. The world tilts and steadies all at once. "Alert the medics and have my bed prepared for our arrival. In the meantime, elevate my arm and continue applying direct pressure to the wound. The bullet has broken or fractured something, and this will require surgery."

Delalieu says nothing for just a moment too long.

"Good to see you're all right, sir." His voice is a nervous, shaky thing. "Good to see you're all right."

"That was an order, Lieutenant."

"Of course," he says quickly, head bowed. "Certainly, sir. How should I direct the soldiers?"

"Find her," I tell him. It's getting harder for me to speak. I take a small breath and run a shaky hand across my forehead. I'm sweating in an excessive way that isn't lost on me.

"Yes, sir." He moves to help me up, but I grab his arm.

"One last thing."

"Sir?"

"Kent," I say, my voice uneven now. "Make sure they keep him alive for me."

Delalieu looks up, his eyes wide. "Private Adam Kent, sir?"
"Yes." I hold his gaze. "I want to deal with him myself."

One

Delalieu is standing at the foot of my bed, clipboard in hand.

His is my second visit this morning. The first was from my medics, who confirmed that the surgery went well. They said that as long as I stay in bed this week, the new drugs they've given me should accelerate my healing process. They also said that I should be fit to resume daily activities fairly soon, but I'll be required to wear a sling for at least a month.

I told them it was an interesting theory.

"My slacks, Delalieu." I'm sitting up, trying to steady my head against the nausea of these new drugs. My right arm is essentially useless to me now.

I look up. Delalieu is staring at me, unblinking, Adam's apple bobbing in his throat.

I stifle a sigh.

"What is it?" I use my left arm to steady myself against the mattress and force myself upright. It takes every ounce of energy I have left, and I'm clinging to the bed frame. I wave away Delalieu's effort to help; I close my eyes against the pain and dizziness. "Tell me what's happened," I say to him. "There's no point in prolonging bad news."

His voice breaks twice when he says, "Private Adam Kent has escaped, sir."

My eyes flash a bright, dizzying white behind my eyelids.

I take a deep breath and attempt to run my good hand through my hair. It's thick and dry and caked with what must be dirt mixed with my own blood. I'm tempted to punch my remaining fist through the wall.

Instead I take a moment to collect myself.

I'm suddenly too aware of everything in the air around me, the scents and small noises and footsteps outside my door. I hate these rough cotton pants they've put me in. I hate that I'm not wearing socks. I want to shower. I want to change.

I want to put a bullet through Adam Kent's spine.

"Leads," I demand. I move toward my bathroom and wince against the cold air as it hits my skin; I'm still without a shirt. Trying to remain calm. "Tell me you have not brought me this information without leads."

My mind is a warehouse of carefully organized human emotions. I can almost see my brain as it functions, filing thoughts and images away. I lock away the things that do not serve me. I focus only on what needs to be done: the basic components of survival and the myriad things I must manage throughout the day.

“Of course,” Delalieu says. The fear in his voice stings me a little; I dismiss it. “Yes, sir,” he says, “we do think we know where he might’ve gone—and we have reason to believe that Private Kent and the—and the girl—well, with Private Kishimoto having run off as well—we have reason to believe that they are all together, sir.”

The drawers in my mind are rattling to break open. Memories. Theories. Whispers and sensations.

I shove them off a cliff.

“Of course you do.” I shake my head. Regret it. Close my eyes against the sudden unsteadiness. “Do not give me information I’ve already deduced for myself,” I manage to say. “I want something concrete. Give me a solid lead, Lieutenant, or leave me until you have one.”

“A car,” he says quickly. “A car was reported stolen, sir, and we were able to track it to an unidentified location, but then it disappeared off the map. It’s as if it ceased to exist, sir.”

I look up. Give him my full attention.

“We followed the tracks it left in our radar,” he says, speaking more calmly now, “and they led us to a stretch of isolated, barren land. But we’ve scoured the area and found nothing.”

“This is something, at least.” I rub the back of my neck, fighting the weakness I feel deep in my bones. “I will meet you in the L Room in one hour.”

“But sir,” he says, eyes trained on my arm, “you’ll need assistance—there’s a process—you’ll require a convalescent aide—”

“You are dismissed.”

He hesitates.

Then, “Yes, sir.”

Two

I manage to bathe without losing consciousness.

It was more of a sponge bath, but I feel better nonetheless. I have an extremely low threshold for disorder; it offends my very being. I shower regularly. I eat six small meals a day. I dedicate two hours of each day to training and physical exercise. And I detest being barefoot.

Now, I find myself standing naked, hungry, tired, and barefoot in my closet. This is not ideal.

My closet is separated into various sections. Shirts, ties, slacks, blazers, and boots. Socks, gloves, scarves, and coats. Everything is arranged according to color, then shades within each color. Every article of clothing it contains is meticulously chosen and custom made to fit the exact measurements of my body. I don't feel like myself until I'm fully dressed; it's part of who I am and how I begin my day.

Now I haven't the faintest idea how I'm supposed to dress myself.

My hand shakes as I reach for the little blue bottle I was given this morning. I place two of the square-shaped pills on my tongue and allow them to dissolve. I'm not sure what they do; I only know they help replenish the blood I've lost. So I lean against the wall until my head clears and I feel stronger on my feet.

This, such an ordinary task. It wasn't an obstacle I was anticipating.

I put socks on first; a simple pleasure that requires more effort than shooting a man. Briefly, I wonder what the medics must've done with my clothes. *The clothes*, I tell myself, *only the clothes*; I'm focusing only on the clothes from that day. Nothing else. No other details.

Boots. Socks. Slacks. Sweater. My military jacket with its many buttons.

The many buttons she ripped open.

It's a small reminder, but it's enough to spear me.

I try to fight it off but it lingers, and the more I try to ignore the memory, it multiplies into a monster that can no longer be contained. I don't even realize I've fallen against the wall until I feel the cold climbing up my skin; I'm breathing too hard and squeezing my eyes shut against the sudden wash of mortification.

I knew she was terrified, horrified, even, but I never thought those feelings were directed toward me. I'd seen her evolve as we spent time together; she seemed more comfortable as

the weeks passed. Happier. At ease. I allowed myself to believe she'd seen a future for us; that she wanted to be with me and simply thought it impossible.

I'd never suspected that her newfound happiness was a consequence of Kent.

I run my good hand down the length of my face; cover my mouth. The things I said to her.

A tight breath.

The way I touched her.

My jaw tenses.

If it were nothing but sexual attraction I'm sure I would not suffer such unbearable humiliation. But I wanted so much more than her body.

All at once I implore my mind to imagine nothing but walls. Walls. White walls. Blocks of concrete. Empty rooms. Open space.

I build walls until they begin to crumble, and then I force another set to take their place. I build and build and remain unmoving until my mind is clear, uncontaminated, containing nothing but a small white room. A single light hanging from the ceiling.

Clean. Pristine. Undisturbed.

I blink back the flood of disaster pressing against the small world I've built; I swallow hard against the fear creeping up my throat. I push the walls back, making more space in the room until I can finally breathe. Until I'm able to stand.

Sometimes I wish I could step outside of myself for a while. I want to leave this worn body behind, but my chains are too many, my weights too heavy. This life is all that's left of me. And I know I won't be able to meet myself in the mirror for the rest of the day.

I'm suddenly disgusted with myself. I have to get out of this room as soon as possible, or my own thoughts will wage war against me. I make a hasty decision and for the first time, pay little attention to what I'm wearing. I tug on a fresh pair of pants and go without a shirt. I slip my good arm into the sleeve of a blazer and allow the other shoulder to drape over the sling carrying my injured arm. I look ridiculous, exposed like this, but I'll find a solution tomorrow.

First, I have to get out of this room.

Three

Delalieu is the only person here who does not hate me.

He still spends the majority of his time in my presence cowering in fear, but somehow he has no interest in overthrowing my position. I can feel it, though I don't understand it. He's likely the only person in this building who's pleased that I'm not dead.

I hold up a hand to keep away the soldiers who rush forward as I open my door. It takes an intense amount of concentration to keep my fingers from shaking as I wipe the slight sheen of perspiration off my forehead, but I will not allow myself a moment of weakness. These men do not fear for my safety; they only want a closer look at the spectacle I've become. They want a first look at the cracks in my sanity. But I have no wish to be wondered at.

My job is to lead.

I've been shot; it will not be fatal. There are things to be managed; I will manage them.

This wound will be forgotten.

Her name will not be spoken.

My fingers clench and unclench as I make my way toward the L Room. I never before realized just how long these corridors are and just how many soldiers line the halls. There's no reprieve from their curious stares and their disappointment that I did not die. I don't even have to look at them to know what they're thinking. But knowing how they feel only makes me more determined to live a very long life.

I will give no one the satisfaction of my death.

"No."

I wave away the tea and coffee service for the fourth time. "I do not drink caffeine, Delalieu. Why do you always insist on having it served at my meals?"

"I suppose I always hope you will change your mind, sir."

I look up. Delalieu is smiling that strange, shaky smile. And I'm not entirely certain, but I think he's just made a joke.

"Why?" I reach for a slice of bread. "I am perfectly capable of keeping my eyes open. Only an idiot would rely on the energy of a bean or a leaf to stay awake throughout the day."

Delalieu is no longer smiling.

“Yes,” he says. “Certainly, sir.” And stares down at his food. I watch as his fingers push away the coffee cup.

I drop the bread back onto my plate. “My opinions,” I say to him, quietly this time, “should not so easily break your own. Stand by your convictions. Form clear and logical arguments. Even if I disagree.”

“Of course, sir,” he whispers. He says nothing for a few seconds. But then I see him reach for his coffee again.

Delalieu.

He, I think, is my only course for conversation.

He was originally assigned to this sector by my father, and has since been ordered to remain here until he’s no longer able. And though he’s likely forty-five years my senior, he insists on remaining directly below me. I’ve known Delalieu’s face since I was a child; I used to see him around our house, sitting in on the many meetings that took place in the years before The Reestablishment took over.

There was an endless supply of meetings in my house.

My father was always planning things, leading discussions and whispered conversations I was never allowed to be a part of. The men of those meetings are running this world now, so when I look at Delalieu I can’t help but wonder why he never aspired to more. He was a part of this regime from the very beginning, but somehow seems content to die just as he is now. He chooses to remain subservient, even when I give him opportunities to speak up; he refuses to be promoted, even when I offer him higher pay. And while I appreciate his loyalty, his dedication unnerves me. He does not seem to wish for more than what he has.

I should not trust him.

And yet, I do.

But I’ve begun to lose my mind for a lack of companionable conversation. I cannot maintain anything but a cool distance from my soldiers, not only because they all wish to see me dead, but also because I have a responsibility as their leader to make unbiased decisions. I have sentenced myself to a life of solitude, one wherein I have no peers, and no mind but my own to live in. I looked to build myself as a feared leader, and I’ve succeeded; no one will question my authority or posit a contrary opinion. No one will speak to me as anything but the chief commander and regent of Sector 45. Friendship is not a thing I have ever experienced. Not as a child, and not as I am now.

Except.

One month ago, I met the exception to this rule. There *has* been one person who’s ever looked me directly in the eye. The same person who’s spoken to me with no filter; someone who’s been unafraid to show anger and real, raw feeling in my presence; the only one who’s ever dared to challenge me, to raise her voice to me—

I squeeze my eyes shut for what feels like the tenth time today. I unclench my fist around this fork, drop it to the table. My arm has begun to throb again, and I reach for the pills tucked away in my pocket.

“You shouldn’t take more than eight of those within a twenty-four-hour period, sir.”

I open the cap and toss three more into my mouth. I really wish my hands would stop shaking. My muscles feel too tight, too tense. Stretched thin.

I don't wait for the pills to dissolve. I bite down on them, crunching against their bitterness. There's something about the foul, metallic taste that helps me focus. "Tell me about Kent."

Delalieu knocks over his coffee cup.

The dining aides have left the room at my request; Delalieu receives no assistance as he scrambles to clean up the mess. I sit back in my chair, staring at the wall just behind him, mentally tallying up the minutes I've lost today.

"Leave the coffee."

"I—yes, of course, sorry, sir—"

"Stop."

Delalieu drops the sopping napkins. His hands are frozen in place, hovering over his plate.

"Speak."

I watch his throat move as he swallows, hesitates. "We don't know, sir," he whispers. "The building should've been impossible to find, much less to enter. It'd been bolted and rusted shut. But when we found it," he says, "when we found it, it was . . . the door had been destroyed. And we're not sure how they managed it."

I sit up. "What do you mean, *destroyed*?"

He shakes his head. "It was . . . very odd, sir. The door had been . . . mangled. As if some kind of animal had clawed through it. There was only a gaping, ragged hole in the middle of the frame."

I stand up entirely too fast, gripping the table for support. I'm breathless at the thought of it, at the possibility of what must've happened. And I can't help but allow myself the painful pleasure of recalling her name once more, because I know it must've been her. She must've done something extraordinary, and I wasn't even there to witness it.

"Call for transport," I tell him. "I will meet you in the Quadrant in exactly ten minutes."

"Sir?"

I'm already out the door.