

~~THEY WANT ME TO FORGET.~~
I WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER.



DEFY ME

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE SHATTER ME SERIES

TAHEREH MAFI

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HARPER

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Kenji

She's screaming.

She's just screaming words, I think. They're just *words*. But she's screaming, screaming at the top of her lungs, with an agony that seems almost an exaggeration, and it's causing devastation I never knew possible. It's like she just—imploded.

It doesn't seem real.

I mean, I knew Juliette was strong—and I knew we hadn't discovered the depth of her powers—but I never imagined she'd be capable of this.

Of this:

The ceiling is splitting open. Seismic currents are thundering up the walls, across the floors, chattering my teeth. The ground is rumbling under my feet. People are frozen in place even as they shake, the room vibrating around them. The chandeliers swing too fast and the lights flicker ominously. And then, with one last vibration, three of the massive chandeliers rip free from the ceiling and shatter as they hit the floor.

Crystal flies everywhere. The room loses half its light, bathing the cavernous space in a freakish glow, and it's suddenly hard to see what's happening. I look at Juliette and see her staring, slack-jawed, frozen at the sight of the devastation, and I realize she must've stopped screaming a minute ago. She can't stop this. She already put the energy into the world and now—

It has to go somewhere.

The shudders ripple with renewed fervor across the floorboards, ripping through walls and seats and *people*.

I don't actually believe it until I see the blood. It seems fake, for a second, all the limp bodies in seats with their chests butterflyed open. It seems staged—like a bad joke, like a bad theater production. But when I see

the blood, thick and heavy, seeping through clothes and upholstery, dripping down frozen hands, I know we'll never recover from this.

Juliette just murdered six hundred people at once.

There's no recovering from this.

I shove my way through the quiet, stunned, still-breathing bodies of my friends. I hear Winston's soft, insistent whimpers and Brendan's steady, reassuring response that the wound isn't as bad as it looks, that he's going to be okay, that he's been through worse than this and survived it—

And I know my priority right now needs to be Juliette.

When I reach her I pull her into my arms, and her cold, unresponsive body reminds me of the time I found her standing over Anderson, a gun aimed at his chest. She was so terrified—*so surprised*—by what she'd done that she could hardly speak. She looked like she'd disappeared into herself somewhere—like she'd found a small room in her brain and had locked herself inside. It took a minute to coax her back out again.

She hadn't even killed anyone that time.

I try to warm some sense into her, begging her now to return to herself, to hurry back to her mind, to the present moment.

"I know everything is crazy right now, but I need you to snap out of this, J. Wake up. Get out of your head. We have to get out of here."

She doesn't blink.

"Princess, please," I say, shaking her a little. "We have to go—*now*—"

And when she still doesn't move, I figure I have no choice but to move her myself. I start hauling her backward. Her limp body is heavier than I expect, and she makes a small, wheezing sound that's almost like a sob. Fear sparks in my nerves. I nod at Castle and the others to go, to move on without me, but when I glance around, looking for Warner, I realize I can't find him anywhere.

What happens next knocks the wind from my lungs.

The room tilts. My vision blackens, clears, and then darkens only at the edges in a dizzying moment that lasts hardly a second. I feel off-center. I stumble.

And then, all at once—

Juliette is gone.

Not figuratively. She's literally gone. Disappeared. One second she's in my arms, and the next, I'm grasping at air. I blink and spin around, convinced I'm losing my mind, but when I scan the room I see the audience members begin to stir. Their shirts are torn and their faces are scratched, but no one appears to be dead. Instead, they begin to stand, confused, and as soon as they start shuffling around, someone shoves me, hard. I look to up to see Ian swearing at me, telling me to get moving while we still have a chance, and I try to push back, try to tell him that we lost Juliette—that I haven't seen Warner—and he doesn't hear me, he just forces me forward, offstage, and when the murmur of the crowd grows into a roar, I know I have no choice.

I have to go.

Warner

“I’m going to kill him,” she says, her small hands forming fists. “I’m going to kill him—”

“Ella, don’t be silly,” I say, and walk away.

“One day,” she says, chasing after me, her eyes bright with tears. “If he doesn’t stop hurting you, I swear I’ll do it. You’ll see.”

I laugh.

“It’s not funny!” she cries.

I turn to face her. “No one can kill my dad. He’s unkillable.”

“No one is unkillable,” she says.

I ignore her.

“Why doesn’t your mum do anything?” she says, and she grabs my arm.

When I meet her eyes she looks different. Scared.

“Why doesn’t anyone stop him?”

The wounds on my back are no longer fresh, but, somehow, they still hurt. Ella is the only person who knows about these scars, knows what my dad started doing to me on my birthday two years ago. Last year, when all the families came to visit us in California, Ella had barged into my room, wanting to know where Emmaline and Nazeera had gone off to, and she’d caught me staring at my back in the mirror.

I begged her not to say anything, not to tell anyone what she saw, and she started crying and said that we had to tell someone, that she was going to tell her mom and I said, “If you tell your mom I’ll only get into more trouble. Please don’t say anything, okay? He won’t do it again.”

But he did do it again.

And this time he was angrier. He told me I was seven years old now, and that I was too old to cry.

“We have to do something,” she says, and her voice shakes a little. Another tear steals down the side of her face and, quickly, she wipes it away. “We have to tell someone.”

“Stop,” I say. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“But—”

“Ella. Please.”

“No, we have t—”

“Ella,” I say, cutting her off. “I think there’s something wrong with my mom.”

Her face falls. Her anger fades. “What?”

I’d been terrified, for weeks, to say the words out loud, to make my fears real. Even now, I feel my heart pick up.

“What do you mean?” she says. “What’s wrong with her?”

“She’s . . . sick.”

Ella blinks at me. Confused. “If she’s sick we can fix her. My mum and dad can fix her. They’re so smart; they can fix anything. I’m sure they can fix your mum, too.”

I’m shaking my head, my heart racing now, pounding in my ears. “No, Ella, you don’t understand—I think—”

“What?” She takes my hand. Squeezes. “What is it?”

“I think my dad is killing her.”

Kenji

We're all running.

Base isn't far from here, and our best option is to go on foot. But the minute we hit the open air, the group of us—myself, Castle, Winston, injured Brendan, Ian, and Alia—go invisible. Someone shouts a breathless *thanks* in my direction, but I'm not the one doing this.

My fists clench.

Nazeera.

These last couple of days with her have been making my head spin. I never should've trusted her. First she hates me, then she hates me even more, and then, suddenly, she decides I'm not an asshole and wants to be my friend? I can't believe I fell for it. I can't believe I'm such an idiot. She's been playing me this whole time. This girl just shows up out of nowhere, magically mimics my exact supernatural ability, and then—right when she pretends to be best friends with Juliette—we're ambushed at the symposium and Juliette sort of murders six hundred people?

No way. I call bullshit.

No way this was all some big coincidence.

Juliette attended that symposium because *Nazeera* encouraged her to go. *Nazeera* convinced Juliette it was the right thing to do. And then five seconds before Brendan gets shot, *Nazeera* tells me to run? Tells me we have the same powers?

Bullshit.

I can't believe I let myself be distracted by a pretty face. I should've trusted Warner when he told me she was hiding something.

Warner.

God. I don't even know what happened to him.

The minute we get back to base our invisibility is lifted. I can't know for sure if that means Nazeera went her own way, but we can't slow down long enough to find out. Quickly, I project a new layer of invisibility over our team; I'll have to keep it up just long enough to get us all to a safe space, and just being back on base isn't assurance enough. The soldiers are going to ask questions, and right now I don't have the answers they need.

They're going to be pissed.

We make our way, as a group, to the fifteenth floor, to our home on base in Sector 45. Warner only just finished having this thing built for us. He cleared out this entire top floor for our new headquarters—we'd hardly even settled in—and things have already gone to shit. I can't even allow myself to think about it now, not yet.

It makes me feel sick to my stomach.

Once we're gathered in our largest common room, I do a head count. All original, remaining Omega Point members are present. Adam and James show up to find out what happened, and Sonya and Sara stick around just long enough to gather intel before carting Brendan over to the medical wing. Winston disappears down the hall behind them.

Juliette and Warner never show.

Quickly, we share our own versions of what we saw. It doesn't take long to confirm we all witnessed basically the same thing: blood, mayhem, murdered bodies, and then—a slightly less-bloody version of the same thing. No one seems as surprised by the twisted turn of events as I was, because, according to Ian, "Weird supernatural shit happens around here all the time, it's not that weird," but, more important:

No one saw what happened to Warner and Juliette.

No one but me.

For a few seconds, we all stare at each other. My heart pounds hard and heavy in my chest. I feel like I might be on fire, burning with indignation.

Denial.

Alia is the first to speak. "You don't think they're dead, do you?"

Ian says, "Probably."

And I jump to my feet. "STOP. They're not dead."

"How can you be sure?" Adam says.

"I would know if they were dead."

"What? How w—"

“I would just know, okay?” I cut him off. “I would know. And they’re not dead.” I take a deep, steadying breath. “We’re not going to freak out,” I say as calmly as possible. “There has to be a logical explanation. People don’t just *disappear*, right?”

Everyone stares at me.

“You know what I mean,” I snap, irritated. “We all know that Juliette and Warner wouldn’t, like, run away together. They weren’t even on speaking terms before the symposium. So it makes the most sense that they would be kidnapped.” I pause. Look around again. “Right?”

“Or dead,” Ian says.

“If you keep talking like that, Sanchez, I can guarantee that at least one person *will* be dead tonight.”

Ian sighs, hard. “Listen, I’m not trying to be an asshole. I know you were close with them. But let’s be real: they weren’t close with the rest of us. And maybe that makes me less invested in all this, but it also makes me more level-headed.”

He waits, gives me a chance to respond.

I don’t.

Ian sighs again. “I’m just saying that maybe you’re letting emotion cloud your better judgment right now. I know you don’t *want* them to be dead, but the possibility that they *are* dead is, like, really high. Warner was a traitor to The Reestablishment. I’m surprised they didn’t try to kill him sooner. And Juliette—I mean, that’s obvious, right? She murdered Anderson and declared herself ruler of North America.” He raises his eyebrows in a knowing gesture. “Those two have had targets on their backs for months.”

My jaw clenches. Unclenches. Clenches again.

“So,” Ian says quietly. “We have to be smart about this. If they’re dead, we need to be thinking about our next moves. Where do we go?”

“Wait—what do you mean?” Adam says, sitting forward. “What next moves? You think we have to leave?”

“Without Warner and Juliette, I don’t think we’re safe here.” Lily takes Ian’s hand in a show of emotional support that makes me feel violent. “The soldiers paid their allegiance to the two of them—to Juliette in particular. Without her, I’m not sure they’d follow the rest of us anywhere.”

“And if The Reestablishment had Juliette murdered,” Ian adds, “they’re obviously just getting started. They’ll be coming to reclaim Sector 45 any

second now. Our best chance of survival is to first consider what's best for our team. Since we're the obvious next targets, I think we should bail. Soon." A pause. "Maybe even tonight."

"Bro, are you insane?" I drop down into my chair too hard, feeling like I might scream. "We can't just bail. We need to look for them. We need to be planning a rescue mission right now!"

Everyone just stares at me. Like *I'm* the one who's lost his mind.

"Castle, sir?" I say, trying and failing to keep the sharp edge out of my voice. "Do you want to chime in here?"

But Castle has sunk down in his chair. He's staring up, at the ceiling, at nothing. He looks dazed.

I don't have the chance to dwell on it.

"Kenji," Alia says quietly. "I'm sorry, but Ian's right. I don't think we're safe here anymore."

"We're not leaving," Adam and I say at exactly the same time.

I spin around, surprised. Hope shoots through me fast and strong. Maybe Adam feels more for Juliette than he lets on. Maybe Adam will surprise us all. Maybe he'll finally stop hiding, stop cowering in the background. *Maybe*, I think, Adam is back.

"Thank you," I say, and point at him in a gesture that says to everyone:

See? This is loyalty.

"James and I aren't running anymore," Adam says, his eyes going cold as he speaks. "I understand if the rest of you have to leave, but James and I will stay here. I was a Sector 45 soldier. I lived on this base. Maybe they'll give me immunity."

I frown. "But—"

"James and I aren't leaving anymore," Adam says. Loudly. Definitely. "You can make your plans without us. We have to take off for the night, anyway." Adam stands, turns to his brother. "It's time to get ready for bed."

James stares at the floor.

"James," Adam says, a gentle warning in his voice.

"I want to stay and listen," James says, crossing his arms. "You can go to bed without me."

"*James—*"

"But I have a theory," the ten-year-old says. He says the word *theory* like it's brand-new to him, like it's an interesting sound in his mouth. "And I want to share it with Kenji."

Adam looks so tense that the strain in his shoulders is stressing *me* out. I think I haven't been paying close enough attention to him, because I didn't realize until right now that Adam looks worse than tired. He looks ragged. Like he could collapse, crack in half, at any moment.

James catches my eye from across the room, his own eyes round and eager.

I sigh.

"What's your theory, little man?"

James's face lights up. "I was just thinking: maybe all the fake-killing thing was, like, a distraction."

I raise an eyebrow.

"Like, if someone wanted to kidnap Warner and Juliette," James says. "You know? Like you said earlier. Causing a scene like that would be the perfect distraction, right?"

"Well. Yeah," I say, and frown. "I guess. But why would The Reestablishment need a distraction? When have they ever been secretive about what they want? If a supreme commander wanted to take Juliette or Warner, for example, wouldn't they just show up with a shit ton of soldiers and take what they wanted?"

"*Language*," Adam says, outraged.

"My bad. Strike the word *shit* from the record."

Adam shakes his head. He looks like he might throttle me. But James is smiling, which is really all that matters.

"No. I don't think they'd rush in like that, not with so many soldiers," James says, his blue eyes bright. "Not if they had something to hide."

"You think they'd have something to hide?" Lily pipes up. "From *us*?"

"I don't know," James says. "Sometimes people hide things." He steals a split-second glance at Adam as he says it, a glance that sets my pulse racing with fear, and I'm about to respond when Lily beats me to it.

"I mean, it's possible," she says. "But The Reestablishment doesn't have a long history of caring about pretenses. They stopped pretending to care about the opinion of the public a long time ago. They mow people down in the street just because they feel like it. I don't think they're worried about hiding things from us."

Castle laughs, out loud, and we all spin around to stare at him. I'm relieved to finally see him react, but he still seems lost in his head somewhere. He looks angry. I've never really seen Castle get angry.

“They hide a great deal from us,” he says sharply. “And from each other.” After a long, deep breath, he finally gets to his feet. Smiles, warily, at the ten-year-old in the room. “James, you are wise indeed.”

“Thank you,” James says, blinking up at him.

“Castle, sir?” I say, my voice coming out harder than I’d intended. “Will you please tell us what the hell is going on? Do you know something?”

Castle sighs. Rubs the stubble on his chin with the flat of his palm. “All right, Nazeera,” he says, turning toward nothing, like he’s speaking to a ghost. “Go ahead.”

When Nazeera appears, as if out of thin air, I’m not the only one who’s pissed. Okay, maybe I’m the only one who’s pissed.

But everyone else looks surprised, at least.

They’re staring at her, at each other, and then all of them—*all of them*—turn to look at me.

“Bro, did you know about this?” Ian asks.

I scowl.

Invisibility is *my* thing. My thing, goddammit.

No one ever said I had to share that with anyone. Especially not with someone like Nazeera, a lying, manipulative—

Gorgeous. Gorgeous human being.

Shit.

I turn, stare at the wall. I can’t be distracted by her anymore. She knows I’m into her—my infatuation is apparently obvious to everyone within a ten-mile radius, according to Castle—and she’s clearly been using my idiocy to her best advantage.

Smart. I respect the tactic.

But that also means I have to keep my guard up when she’s around. No more staring. No more daydreaming about her. No more thinking about how she looked at me when she smiled. Or the way she laughed, like she meant it, the same night she yelled at me for asking reasonable questions. Which, by the way—

I don’t think I was crazy for wondering out loud how the daughter of a supreme commander could get away with wearing an illegal headscarf. She told me later that she wears the scarf symbolically, every once in a while, that she can’t get away with wearing it all the time because it’s illegal. But when I pointed this out to her, she gave me hell. And then she gave me shit for being confused.

I'm *still* confused.

She's not covering her hair now, either, but no one else seems to have registered this fact. Maybe they'd already seen her like this. Maybe everyone but me already had that conversation with her, already heard her story about wearing it symbolically, occasionally.

Illegally, when her dad wasn't watching.

"Kenji," she says, and her voice is so sharp I look up, stare at her despite my own very explicit orders to keep my eyes on the wall. All it takes is two seconds of eye contact and my heart hits itself.

That mouth. Those eyes.

"Yeah?" I cross my arms.

She looks surprised, like she wasn't expecting me to be upset, and I don't care. She should know that I'm pissed. I want her to know that invisibility is my thing. That I know I'm petty and I don't care. Plus, I don't trust her. Also, what is up with these kids of the supreme commanders all being super-good-looking? It's almost like they did it on purpose, like they made these kids in test tubes or someshit.

I shake my head to clear it.

Carefully, Nazeera says, "I really think you should sit down for this."

"I'm good."

She frowns. For a second she looks almost hurt, but before I have a chance to feel bad about it, she shrugs. Turns away.

And what she says next nearly splits me in half.