

THE PAST WILL NOT FORGET ME



# RESTORE ME

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE SHATTER ME SERIES

TAHEREH MAFI

# RESTORE ME

T A H E R E H M A F I

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# **Dedication**

*For Jodi Reamer, who always believed*

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# Juliette

I don't wake up screaming anymore. I do not feel ill at the sight of blood. I do not flinch before firing a gun.

I will never again apologize for surviving.

And yet—

I'm startled at once by the sound of a door slamming open. I silence a gasp, spin around, and, by force of habit, rest my hand on the hilt of a semiautomatic hung from a holster at my side.

"J, we've got a serious problem."

Kenji is staring at me—eyes narrowed—his hands on his hips, T-shirt taut across his chest. This is angry Kenji. Worried Kenji. It's been sixteen days since we took over Sector 45—since I crowned myself the supreme commander of The Reestablishment—and it's been quiet. Unnervingly so. Every day I wake up, filled with half terror, half exhilaration, anxiously awaiting the inevitable missives from enemy nations who would challenge my authority and wage war against us—and now, finally, it seems that moment has arrived. So I take a deep breath, crack my neck, and look Kenji in the eye.

"Tell me."

He presses his lips together. Looks up at the ceiling. "So, okay—the first thing you need to know is that this isn't my fault, okay? I was just trying to help."

I falter. Frown. "What?"

"I mean, I knew his punkass was a major drama queen, but this is just beyond ridiculous—"

"I'm sorry—what?" I take my hand off my gun; feel my body unclench. "Kenji, what are you talking about? This isn't about the war?"

“The war? What? J, are you not paying attention? Your boyfriend is having a freaking conniption right now and you need to go handle his ass before I do.”

I exhale, irritated. “Are you serious? *Again* with this nonsense? Jesus, Kenji.” I unlatch the holster from my back and toss it on the bed behind me. “What did you do this time?”

“See?” Kenji points at me. “See—why are you so quick to judge, huh, princess? Why assume that *I* was the one who did something wrong? Why me?” He crosses his arms against his chest, lowers his voice. “And you know, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about this for a while, actually, because I really feel that, as supreme commander, you can’t be showing preferential treatment like this, but clearly—”

Kenji goes suddenly still.

At the creak of the door Kenji’s eyebrows shoot up; a soft click and his eyes widen; a muted rustle of movement and suddenly the barrel of a gun is pressed against the back of his head. Kenji stares at me, his lips making no sound as he mouths the word *psychopath* over and over again.

The psychopath in question winks at me from where he’s standing, smiling like he couldn’t possibly be holding a gun to the head of our mutual friend. I manage to suppress a laugh.

“Go on,” Warner says, still smiling. “Please tell me exactly how she’s failed you as a leader.”

“*Hey—*” Kenji’s arms fly up in mock surrender. “I never said she failed at anything, okay? And you are clearly overreact—”

Warner knocks Kenji on the side of the head with the weapon. “Idiot.”

Kenji spins around. Yanks the gun out of Warner’s hand. “What the hell is wrong with you, man? I thought we were cool.”

“We were,” Warner says icily. “Until you touched my *hair*.”

“You asked me to give you a haircut—”

“I said nothing of the sort! I asked you to trim the edges!”

“And that’s what I did.”

“*This*,” Warner says, spinning around so I might inspect the damage, “is not trimming the edges, you incompetent moron—”

I gasp. The back of Warner’s head is a jagged mess of uneven hair; entire chunks have been buzzed off.

Kenji cringes as he looks over his handiwork. Clears his throat. “Well,” he says, shoving his hands in his pockets. “I mean—whatever, man, beauty



is subjective—”

Warner aims another gun at him.

“Hey!” Kenji shouts. “I am not here for this abusive relationship, okay?” He points at Warner. “I did not sign up for this shit!”

Warner glares at him and Kenji retreats, backing out of the room before Warner has another chance to react; and then, just as I let out a sigh of relief, Kenji pops his head back into the doorway and says

“I think the cut looks cute, actually”

and Warner slams the door in his face.

Welcome to my brand-new life as supreme commander of The Reestablishment.

Warner is still facing the closed door as he exhales, his shoulders losing their tension as he does, and I’m able to see even more clearly the mess Kenji has made. Warner’s thick, gorgeous, golden hair—a defining feature of his beauty—chopped up by careless hands.

A disaster.

“Aaron,” I say softly.

He hangs his head.

“Come here.”

He turns around, looking at me out of the corner of his eye like he’s done something to be ashamed of. I clear the guns off the bed and make room for him beside me. He sinks into the mattress with a sad sigh.

“I look hideous,” he says quietly.

I shake my head, smiling, and touch his cheek. “Why did you let him cut your hair?”

Warner looks up at me then; his eyes round and green and perplexed. “You told me to spend time with him.”

I laugh out loud. “So you let Kenji cut your hair?”

“I didn’t let him *cut* my hair,” he says, scowling. “It was”—he hesitates—“it was a gesture of camaraderie. It was an act of trust I’d seen practiced among my soldiers. In any case,” he says, turning away, “it’s not as though I have any experience building friendships.”

“Well,” I say. “We’re friends, aren’t we?”

At this, he smiles.

“And?” I nudge him. “That’s been good, hasn’t it? You’re learning to be nicer to people.”

“Yes, well, I don’t want to be nicer to people. It doesn’t suit me.”

“I think it suits you beautifully,” I say, beaming. “I love it when you’re nice.”

“You would say that.” He almost laughs. “But being kind does not come naturally to me, love. You’ll have to be patient with my progress.”

I take his hand in mine. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. You’re perfectly kind to me.”

Warner shakes his head. “I know I promised I would make an effort to be nicer to your friends—and I will continue to make that effort—but I hope I’ve not led you to believe I’m capable of an impossibility.”

“What do you mean?”

“Only that I hope I won’t disappoint you. I might, if pressed, be able to generate some degree of warmth, but you must know that I have no interest in treating anyone the way I treat you. *This*,” he says, touching the air between us, “is an exception to a very hard rule.” His eyes are on my lips now; his hand has moved to my neck. “*This*,” he says softly, “is very, very unusual.”

I stop

stop breathing, talking, thinking—

He’s hardly touched me and my heart is racing; memories crash over me, scalding me in waves: the weight of his body against mine; the taste of his skin; the heat of his touch and his sharp gasps for air and the things he’s said to me only in the dark.

Butterflies invade my veins, and I force them out.

This is still so new, his touch, his skin, the scent of him, so new, so new and so incredible—

He smiles, tilts his head; I mimic the movement and with one soft intake of air his lips part and I hold still, my lungs flung to the floor, fingers feeling for his shirt and for what comes next when he says

“I’ll have to shave my head, you know”

and pulls away.

I blink and he’s still not kissing me.

“And it is my very sincere hope,” he says, “that you will still love me when I return.”

And then he's up up and away and I'm counting on one hand the number of men I've killed and marveling at how little it's done to help me hold it together in Warner's presence.

I nod once as he waves good-bye, collect my good sense from where I left it, and fall backward onto the bed, head spinning, the complications of war and peace heavy on my mind.

I did not think it would be *easy* to be a leader, exactly, but I do think I thought it would be easier than this:

I am racked with doubt in every moment about the decisions I have made. I am infuriatingly surprised every time a soldier follows my lead. And I am growing more terrified that we—that *I*—will have to kill many, many more before this world is settled. Though I think it's the silence, more than anything else, that's left me shaken.

It's been sixteen days.

I've given speeches about what's to come, about our plans for the future; we've held memorials for the lives lost in battle and we're making good on promises to implement change. Castle, true to his word, is already hard at work, trying to address issues with farming, irrigation, and, most urgent, how best to transition the civilians out of the compounds. But this will be work done in stages; it will be a slow and careful build—a fight for the earth that may take a century. I think we all understand that. And if it were only the civilians I had to worry about, I would not worry so much. But I worry because I know too well that nothing can be done to fix this world if we spend the next several decades at war within it.

Even so, I'm prepared to fight.

It's not what I want, but I'll gladly go to war if it's what we need to do to make a change. I just wish it were that simple. Right now, my biggest problem is also the most confusing:

Wars require enemies, and I can't seem to find any.

In the sixteen days since I shot Anderson in the forehead I have faced zero opposition. No one has tried to arrest me. No other supreme commanders have challenged me. Of the 554 remaining sectors on this continent alone, not a single one has defected, declared war, or spoken ill of me. No one has protested; the people have not rioted. For some reason, The Reestablishment is playing along.

Playing pretend.

And it deeply, deeply unnerves me.

We're in a strange stalemate, stuck in neutral when I desperately want to be doing more. More for the people of Sector 45, for North America, and for the world as a whole. But this strange quiet has thrown all of us off-balance. We were so sure that, with Anderson dead, the other supreme commanders would rise up—that they'd command their armies to destroy us—to destroy *me*. Instead, the leaders of the world have made our insignificance clear: they're ignoring us as they would an annoying fly, trapping us under glass where we're free to buzz around, banging broken wings against the walls for only as long as the oxygen lasts. Sector 45 has been left to do as it pleases; we've been allowed autonomy and the authority to revise the infrastructure of our sector with no interference. Everywhere else—and everyone else—is pretending as though nothing in the world has changed. Our revolution occurred in a vacuum. Our subsequent victory has been reduced to something so small it might not even exist.

*Mind games.*

Castle is always visiting, advising. It was his suggestion that I be proactive—that I take the upper hand. Instead of waiting around, anxious and defensive, I should reach out, he said. I should make my presence known. Stake a claim, he said. Take a seat at the table. And attempt to form alliances before launching assaults. Connect with the five other supreme commanders around the world.

Because I may speak for North America—but what of the rest of the world? What of South America? Europe? Asia? Africa? Oceania?

Host an international conference of leaders, he said.

Talk.

Aim for peace first, he said.

“They must be dying of curiosity,” Castle said to me. “A seventeen-year-old girl taking over North America? A teenage girl killing Anderson and declaring herself ruler of this continent? Ms. Ferrars—you must know that you have great leverage at the moment! Use it to your advantage!”

“Me?” I said, stunned. “How do I have leverage?”

Castle sighed. “You certainly are brave for your age, Ms. Ferrars, but I'm sorry to see your youth so inextricably tied to inexperience. I will try to put it plainly: you have superhuman strength, nearly invincible skin, a lethal touch, only seventeen years to your name, and you have single-handedly

felled the despot of this nation. And yet you doubt that you might be capable of intimidating the world?”

I cringed.

“Old habits, Castle,” I said quietly. “Bad habits. You’re right, of course. Of course you’re right.”

He leveled me with a straight stare. “You must understand that unanimous, collective silence from your enemies is no act of coincidence. They’ve certainly been in touch with one another—they’ve certainly agreed to this approach—because they’re waiting to see what you do next.” He shook his head. “They are awaiting your next move, Ms. Ferrars. I implore you to make it a good one.”

So I’m learning.

I did as he suggested and three days ago I sent word through Delalieu and contacted the five other supreme commanders of The Reestablishment. I invited them to join me here, in Sector 45, for a conference of international leaders next month.

Just fifteen minutes before Kenji barged into my room, I’d received my first RSVP.

Oceania said yes.

And I’m not sure what that means.

# Warner

I've not been myself lately.

The truth is I've not been myself for what feels like a long time, so much so that I've begun to wonder whether I ever really knew. I stare, unblinking, into the mirror, the din of buzzing hair clippers echoing through the room. My face is only dimly reflected in my direction, but it's enough for me to see that I've lost weight. My cheeks are hollow; my eyes, wider; my cheekbones more pronounced. My movements are both mournful and mechanical as I shear off my own hair, the remnants of my vanity falling at my feet.

My father is dead.

I close my eyes, steeling myself against the unwelcome strain in my chest, the clippers still humming in my clenched fist.

*My father is dead.*

It's been just over two weeks since he was killed, shot twice in the forehead by someone I love. She was doing me a kindness by killing him. She was braver than I'd ever been, pulling the trigger when I never could. He was a monster. He deserved worse.

And still—

*This pain.*

I take in a tight breath and blink open my eyes, grateful for the time to be alone; grateful, somehow, for the opportunity to tear asunder something, anything from my flesh. There's a strange catharsis in this.

*My mother is dead*, I think, as I drag the electric blade across my skull. *My father is dead*, I think, as the hair falls to the floor. Everything I was, everything I did, everything I am, was forged from the twins of their action and inaction.

Who am I, I wonder, in their absence?

Shorn head, blade switched off, I rest my palms against the edge of the vanity and lean in, still trying to catch a glimpse of the man I've become. I feel old and unsettled, my heart and mind at war. The last words I ever spoke to my father—

“Hey.”

My heart speeds up as I spin around; I'm affecting nonchalance in an instant. “Hi,” I say, forcing my limbs to slow, to be steady as I dust errant strands of hair from my shoulders.

She's looking at me with big eyes, beautiful and worried.

I remember to smile. “How do I look? Not too horrible, I hope.”

“Aaron,” she says quietly. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” I say, and glance again in the mirror. I run a hand over the soft/spiky half inch of hair I have left and wonder at how the cut manages to makes me look harsher—and colder—than before. “Though I confess I don't really recognize myself,” I add aloud, attempting a laugh. I'm standing in the middle of the bathroom wearing nothing but boxer briefs. My body has never been leaner, the sharp lines of muscle never more defined; and the rawness of my body is now paired with the rough cut of my hair in a way that feels almost uncivilized—and so unlike me that I have to look away.

Juliette is now right in front of me.

Her hands settle on my hips and pull me forward; I trip a little as I follow her lead. “What are you doing?” I begin to say, but when I meet her eyes I find tenderness and concern. Something thaws inside of me. My shoulders relax and I reel her in, drawing in a deep breath as I do.

“When will we talk about it?” she says against my chest. “All of it? Everything that's happened—”

I flinch.

“Aaron.”

“I'm okay,” I lie to her. “It's just hair.”

“You know that's not what I'm talking about.”

I look away. Stare at nothing. We're both quiet a moment.

It's Juliette who finally breaks the silence.

“Are you upset with me?” she whispers. “For shooting him?”

My body stills.

Her eyes widen.

“No—*no*.” I say the words too quickly, but I mean them. “No, of course not. It’s not that.”

Juliette sighs.

“I’m not sure you’re aware of this,” she says finally, “but it’s okay to mourn the loss of your father, even if he was a terrible person. You know?” She peers up at me. “You’re not a robot.”

I swallow back the lump growing in my throat and gently extricate myself from her arms. I kiss her on the cheek and linger there, against her skin, for only a second. “I need to take a shower.”

She looks heartbroken and confused, but I don’t know what else to do. It’s not that I don’t love her company, it’s just that right now I’m desperate for solitude and I don’t know how else to find it.

So I shower. I take baths. I go for long walks.

I tend to do this a lot.

When I finally come to bed she’s already asleep.

I want to reach for her, to pull her soft, warm body against my own, but I feel paralyzed. This horrible half-grief has made me feel complicit in darkness. I worry that my sadness will be interpreted as an endorsement of his choices—of his very existence—and in this matter I don’t want to be misunderstood, so I cannot admit that I grieve him, that I care at all for the loss of this monstrous man who raised me. And in the absence of healthy action I remain frozen, a sentient stone in the wake of my father’s death.

*Are you upset with me? For shooting him?*

I hated him.

I hated him with a violent intensity I’ve never since experienced. But the fire of true hatred, I realize, cannot exist without the oxygen of affection. I would not hurt so much, or hate so much, if I did not care.

And it is this, my unrequited affection for my father, that has always been my greatest weakness. So I lie here, marinating in a sorrow I can never speak of, while regret consumes my heart.

I am an orphan.

“Aaron?” she whispers, and I’m pulled back to the present.

“Yes, love?”

She moves in a sleepy, sideways motion, and nudges my arm with her head. I can’t help but smile as I open up to make room for her against me.



She fills the void quickly, pressing her face into my neck as she wraps an arm around my waist. My eyes close as if in prayer. My heart restarts.

“I miss you,” she says. It’s a whisper I almost don’t catch.

“I’m right here,” I say, gently touching her cheek. “I’m right here, love.”

But she shakes her head. Even as I pull her closer, even as she falls back asleep, she shakes her head.

And I wonder if she’s not wrong.