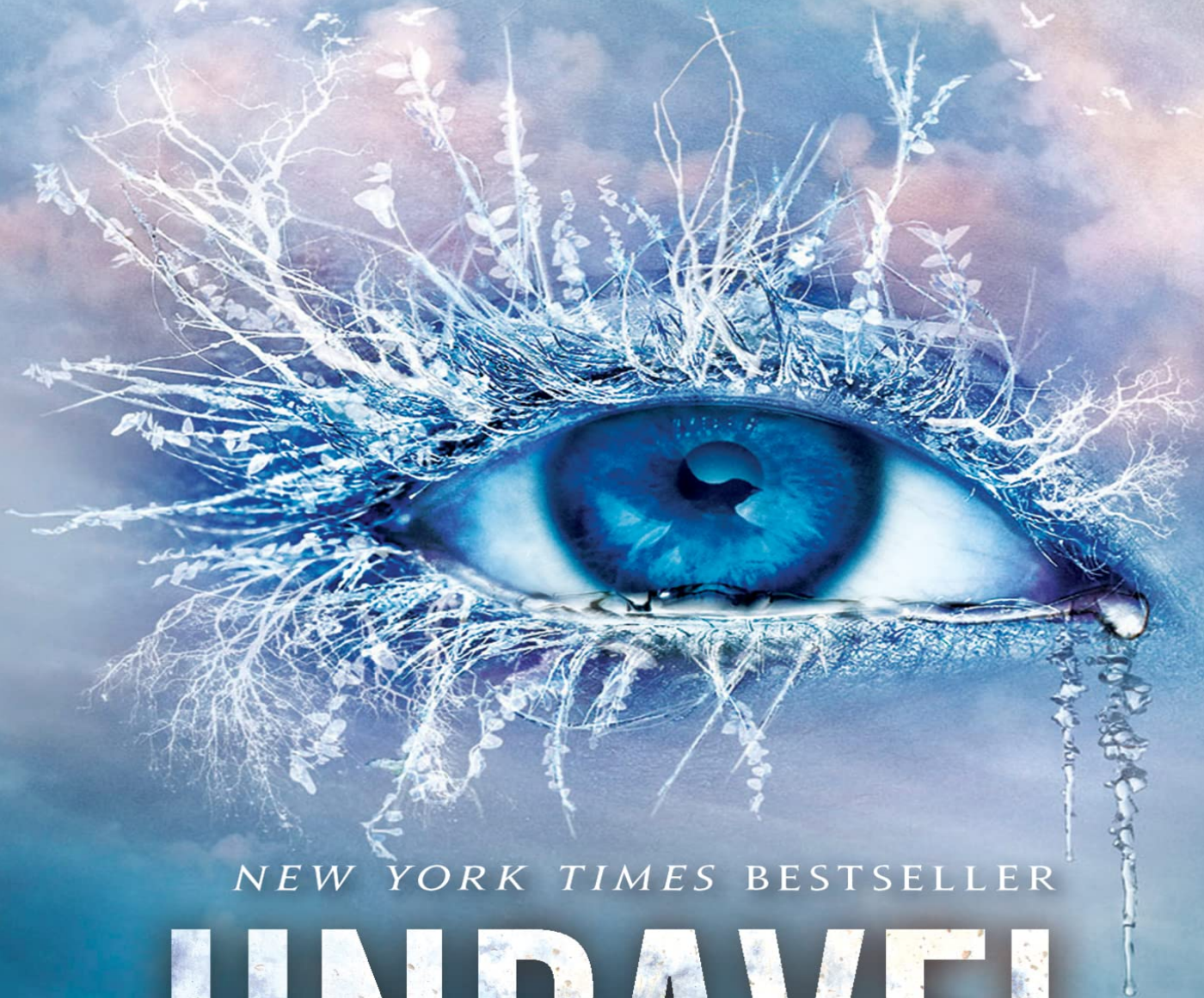


~~THEY WANT TO FIND ME.~~ I WILL FIND THEM FIRST.



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

UNRAVEL

ME



TAHEREH MAFI

UNRAVEL ME

TAHEREH MAFI

HARPER

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DEDICATION

For my mother. The best person I've ever known.

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ONE

The world might be sunny-side up today.

The big ball of yellow might be spilling into the clouds, runny and yolky and blurring into the bluest sky, bright with cold hope and false promises about fond memories, real families, hearty breakfasts, stacks of pancakes drizzled in maple syrup sitting on a plate in a world that doesn't exist anymore.

Or maybe not.

Maybe it's dark and wet today, whistling wind so sharp it stings the skin off the knuckles of grown men. Maybe it's snowing, maybe it's raining, I don't know maybe it's freezing it's hailing it's a hurricane slip slipping into a tornado and the earth is quaking apart to make room for our mistakes.

I wouldn't have any idea.

I don't have a window anymore. I don't have a view. It's a million degrees below zero in my blood and I'm buried 50 feet underground in a training room that's become my second home lately. Every day I stare at these 4 walls and remind myself *I'm not a prisoner I'm not a prisoner I'm not a prisoner* but sometimes the old fears streak across my skin and I can't seem to break free of the claustrophobia clutching at my throat.

I made so many promises when I arrived here.

Now I'm not so sure. Now I'm worried. Now my mind is a traitor because my thoughts crawl out of bed every morning with darting eyes and sweating palms and nervous giggles that sit in my chest, build in my chest, threaten to burst through my chest, and the pressure is tightening and tightening and *tightening*

Life around here isn't what I expected it to be.

My new world is etched in gunmetal, sealed in silver, drowning in the scents of stone and steel. The air is icy, the mats are orange; the lights and switches beep and flicker, electronic and electric, neon bright. It's busy here, busy with bodies, busy with halls stuffed full of whispers and shouts, pounding feet and thoughtful footsteps. If I listen closely I can hear the sounds of brains working and foreheads pinching and fingers tap tapping at chins and lips and furrowed brows. Ideas are carried in pockets, thoughts propped up on the tips of every tongue; eyes are narrowed in concentration, in careful planning I should want to know about.

But nothing is working and all my parts are broken.

I'm supposed to harness my Energy, Castle said. Our gifts are different forms of Energy. Matter is never created or destroyed, he said to me, and as our world changed, so did the Energy within it. Our abilities are taken from the universe, from other matter, from other Energies. We are not anomalies. We are inevitabilities of the perverse manipulations of our Earth. Our Energy came from somewhere, he said. And somewhere is in the chaos all around us.

It makes sense. I remember what the world looked like when I left it.

I remember the pissed-off skies and the sequence of sunsets collapsing beneath the moon. I remember the cracked earth and the scratchy bushes and the used-to-be-greens that are now too close to brown. I think about the water we can't drink and the birds that don't fly and how

human civilization has been reduced to nothing but a series of compounds stretched out over what's left of our ravaged land.

This planet is a broken bone that didn't set right, a hundred pieces of crystal glued together. We've been shattered and reconstructed, told to make an effort every single day to pretend we still function the way we're supposed to. But it's a lie, it's all a lie.

I do not function properly.

I am nothing more than the consequence of catastrophe.

2 weeks have collapsed at the side of the road, abandoned, already forgotten. 2 weeks I've been here and in 2 weeks I've taken up residence on a bed of eggshells, wondering when something is going to break, when I'll be the first to break it, wondering when everything is going to fall apart. In 2 weeks I should've been happier, healthier, sleeping better, more soundly in this safe space. Instead I worry about what will happen ~~when~~ if I can't get this right, if I don't figure out how to train properly, if I hurt someone ~~on purpose~~ by accident.

We're preparing for a bloody war.

That's why I'm training. We're all trying to prepare ourselves to take down Warner and his men. To win one battle at a time. To show the citizens of our world that there is hope yet—that they do not have to acquiesce to the demands of The Reestablishment and become slaves to a regime that wants nothing more than to exploit them for power. And I agreed to fight. To be a warrior. To use my power against my better judgment. But the thought of laying a hand on someone brings back a world of memories, feelings, a flush of power I experience only when I make contact with skin not immune to my own. It's a rush of invincibility; a tormented kind of euphoria; a wave of intensity flooding every pore in my body. I don't know what it will do to me. I don't know if I can trust myself to take pleasure in someone else's pain.

All I know is that Warner's last words are caught in my chest and I can't cough out the cold or the truth hacking at the back of my throat.

Adam has no idea that Warner can touch me.

No one does.

Warner was supposed to be dead. Warner was supposed to be dead because I was supposed to have shot him but no one supposed I'd need to know how to fire a gun so now I suppose he's come to find me.

He's come to fight.

For me.

TWO

A sharp knock and the door flies open.

“Ah, Ms. Ferrars. I don’t know what you hope to accomplish by sitting in the corner.” Castle’s easy grin dances into the room before he does.

I take a tight breath and try to make myself look at Castle but I can’t. Instead I whisper an apology and listen to the sorry sound my words make in this large room. I feel my shaking fingers clench against the thick, padded mats spread out across the floor and think about how I’ve accomplished nothing since I’ve been here. It’s humiliating, so humiliating to disappoint one of the only people who’s ever been kind to me.

Castle stands directly in front of me, waits until I finally look up. “There’s no need to apologize,” he says. His sharp, clear brown eyes and friendly smile make it easy to forget he’s the leader of Omega Point. The leader of this entire underground movement dedicated to fighting The Reestablishment. His voice is too gentle, too kind, and it’s almost worse. ~~Sometimes I wish he would just yell at me.~~ “But,” he continues, “you do have to learn how to harness your Energy, Ms. Ferrars.”

A pause.

A pace.

His hands rest on the stack of bricks I was supposed to have destroyed. He pretends not to notice the red rims around my eyes or the metal pipes I threw across the room. His gaze carefully avoids the bloody smears on the wooden planks set off to the side; his questions don’t ask me why my fists are clenched so tight and whether or not I’ve injured myself again. He cocks his head in my direction but he’s staring at a spot directly behind me and his voice is soft when he speaks. “I know this is difficult for you,” he says. “But you must learn. You have to. Your life will depend upon it.”

I nod, lean back against the wall, welcome the cold and the pain of the brick digging into my spine. I pull my knees up to my chest and feel my feet press into the protective mats covering the ground. I’m so close to tears I’m afraid I might scream. “I just don’t know how,” I finally say to him. “I don’t know any of this. I don’t even know what I’m supposed to be doing.” I stare at the ceiling and blink blink blink. My eyes feel shiny, damp. “I don’t know how to make things happen.”

“Then you have to think,” Castle says, undeterred. He picks up a discarded metal pipe. Weighs it in his hands. “You have to find links between the events that transpired. When you broke through the concrete in Warner’s torture chamber—when you punched through the steel door to save Mr. Kent—what happened? Why in those two instances were you able to react in such an extraordinary way?” He sits down some feet away from me. Pushes the pipe in my direction. “I need you to analyze your abilities, Ms. Ferrars. You have to focus.”

Focus.

It’s one word but it’s enough, it’s all it takes to make me feel sick. Everyone, it seems, needs me to focus. First Warner needed me to focus, and now Castle needs me to focus.

I’ve never been able to follow through.

Castle’s deep, sad sigh brings me back to the present. He gets to his feet. He smooths out the only navy-blue blazer he seems to own and I catch a glimpse of the silver Omega symbol

embroidered into the back. An absent hand touches the end of his ponytail; he always ties his dreads in a clean knot at the base of his neck. “You are resisting yourself,” he says, though he says it gently. “Maybe you should work with someone else for a change. Maybe a partner will help you work things out—to discover the connection between these two events.”

My shoulders stiffen, surprised. “I thought you said I had to work alone.”

He squints past me. Scratches a spot beneath his ear, shoves his other hand into a pocket. “I didn’t actually want you to work alone,” he says. “But no one volunteered for the task.”

I don’t know why I suck in my breath, why I’m so surprised. I shouldn’t be surprised. Not everyone is Adam.

Not everyone is safe from me the way he is. No one but Adam has ever touched me and enjoyed it. ~~No one except for Warner.~~ But despite Adam’s best intentions, he can’t train with me. He’s busy with other things.

Things no one wants to tell me about.

But Castle is staring at me with hopeful eyes, generous eyes, eyes that have no idea that these new words he’s offered me are so much worse. Worse because as much as I know the truth, it still hurts to hear it. It hurts to remember that though I might live in a warm bubble with Adam, the rest of the world still sees me as a threat. A monster. An abomination.

~~Warner was right. No matter where I go, I can’t seem to run from this.~~

“What’s changed?” I ask him. “Who’s willing to train me now?” I pause. “You?”

Castle smiles.

It’s the kind of smile that flushes humiliated heat up my neck and spears my pride right through the vertebrae. I have to resist the urge to bolt out the door.

~~Please please please do not pity me, is what I want to say.~~

“I wish I had the time,” Castle says to me. “But Kenji is finally free—we were able to reorganize his schedule—and he said he’d be happy to work with you.” A moment of hesitation. “That is, if that’s all right with you.”

Kenji.

I want to laugh out loud. Kenji *would* be the only one willing to risk working with me. I injured him once. By accident. But he and I haven’t spent much time together since he first led our expedition into Omega Point. It was like he was just doing a task, fulfilling a mission; once complete, he went back to his own life. Apparently Kenji is important around here. He has a million things to do. Things to regulate. People seem to like him, respect him, even.

I wonder if they’ve ever known him as the obnoxious, foul-mouthed Kenji I first met.

“Sure,” I tell Castle, attempting a pleasant expression for the first time since he arrived. “That sounds great.”

Castle stands up. His eyes are bright, eager, easily pleased. “Perfect. I’ll have him meet you at breakfast tomorrow. You can eat together and go from there.”

“Oh but I usually—”

“I know.” Castle cuts me off. His smile is pressed into a thin line now, his forehead creased with concern. “You like to eat your meals with Mr. Kent. I know this. But you’ve hardly spent any time with the others, Ms. Ferrars, and if you’re going to be here, you need to start trusting us. The people of Omega Point feel close to Kenji. He can vouch for you. If everyone sees you spending time together, they’ll feel less intimidated by your presence. It will help you adjust.”

Heat like hot oil spatters across my face; I flinch, feel my fingers twitch, try to find a place to look, try to pretend I can’t feel the pain caught in my chest. “They’re—they’re afraid of me,” I tell him, I whisper, I trail off. “I don’t—I didn’t want to bother anyone. I didn’t want to get in their way....”

Castle sighs, long and loud. He looks down and up, scratches the soft spot beneath his chin. “They’re only afraid,” he says finally, “because they don’t know you. If you just tried a little harder—if you made even the smallest effort to get to know anyone—” He stops. Frowns. “Ms. Ferrars, you have been here two weeks and you hardly even speak to your roommates.”

“But that’s not—I think they’re great—”

“And yet you ignore them? You spend no time with them? Why?”

~~Because I’ve never had girl friends before. Because I’m afraid I’ll do something wrong, say something wrong and they’ll end up hating me like all the other girls I’ve known. And I like them too much, which will make their inevitable rejection so much harder to endure.~~

I say nothing.

Castle shakes his head. “You did so well the first day you arrived. You seemed almost *friendly* with Brendan. I don’t know what happened,” Castle continues. “I thought you would do well here.”

Brendan. The thin boy with platinum-blond hair and electric currents running through his veins. I remember him. He was nice to me. “I like Brendan,” I tell Castle, bewildered. “Is he upset with me?”

“*Upset?*” Castle shakes his head, laughs out loud. He doesn’t answer my question. “I don’t understand, Ms. Ferrars. I’ve tried to be patient with you, I’ve tried to give you time, but I confess I’m quite perplexed. You were so different when you first arrived—you were excited to be here! But it took less than a week for you to withdraw completely. You don’t even look at anyone when you walk through the halls. What happened to conversation? To friendship?”

Yes.

It took 1 day for me to settle in. 1 day for me to look around. 1 day for me to get excited about a different life and 1 day for everyone to find out who I am and what I’ve done.

Castle doesn’t say anything about the mothers who see me walking down the hall and yank their children out of my way. He doesn’t mention the hostile stares and the unwelcoming words I’ve endured since I’ve arrived. He doesn’t say anything about the kids who’ve been warned to stay far, far away, and the handful of elderly people who watch me too closely. I can only imagine what they’ve heard, where they got their stories from.

Juliette.

A girl with a lethal touch that saps the strength and energy of human beings until they’re limp, paralyzed carcasses wheezing on the floor. A girl who spent most of her life in hospitals and juvenile detention centers, a girl who was cast off by her own parents, labeled as certifiably insane, and sentenced to isolation in an asylum where even the rats were afraid to live.

A girl.

So power hungry that she killed a small child. She tortured a toddler. She brought a grown man gasping to his knees. She doesn’t even have the decency to kill herself.

None of it is a lie.

So I look at Castle with spots of color on my cheeks and unspoken letters on my lips and eyes that refuse to reveal their secrets.

He sighs.

He almost says something. He tries to speak but his eyes inspect my face and he changes his mind. He only offers me a quick nod, a deep breath, taps his watch, says, “Three hours until lights-out,” and turns to go.

Pauses in the doorway.

“Ms. Ferrars,” he says suddenly, softly, without turning around. “You’ve chosen to stay with us, to fight with us, to become a member of Omega Point.” A pause. “We’re going to

need your help. And I'm afraid we're running out of time."

I watch him leave.

I listen to his departing footsteps and lean my head back against the wall. Close my eyes against the ceiling. Hear his voice, solemn and steady, ringing in my ears.

We're running out of time, he said.

As if time were the kind of thing you could run out of, as if it were measured into bowls that were handed to us at birth and if we ate too much or too fast or right before jumping into the water then our time would be lost, wasted, already spent.

But time is beyond our finite comprehension. It's endless, it exists outside of us; we cannot run out of it or lose track of it or find a way to hold on to it. Time goes on even when we do not.

We have plenty of time, is what Castle should have said. We have all the time in the world, is what he should have said to me. But he didn't because what he meant *tick tock* is that our time *tick tock* is shifting. It's hurtling forward heading in an entirely new direction slamming face-first into something else and

tick

tick

tick

tick

tick

it's almost

time for war.