

The Smothered Light

I jump up to my feet, standing protectively beside Jayda. She hardly blinks at the sudden appearance of the Accursed street gang. None of them bear the tattoos of an Accursed, making me wonder whether they've hidden theirs as well or simply never got them.

Veronika stumbles back a step, standing beside me as if preparing to grab my hand so I can teleport us away. I'm not against that idea, but I'm not sure if Jayda will be with us, or if I have the energy to teleport all three of us again to some unknown location.

The gang, consisting of about five members, approaches us threateningly.

"Just back off!" I'm grateful for how strong and fierce Veronika sounds, but I doubt it will do us any good.

"I don't think so. You're Accursed too and you're on our turf. We'll be bringing you three with us to see what Braelynn decides to do with you!" a boy chimes in gruffly.

"Just try to take us! Just try!" Veronika sounds ready to fight.

"Veronika." I try to warn her in a low tone, but it's too late.

Two identical girls who stand side-by-side raise their hands in unison. Veronika instantly freezes in place and when I try to move, I find I am trapped as well. I'm surprised by the strength of their telekinesis, but I figure them working together must have something to do with it.

Jayda doesn't try to move, but I assume she's stuck as well.

At the signal of the boy who seems to be in charge, a few members circle our small group. The alleyway disappears and I blink, quickly adjusting to our new surroundings.

We're now in a large and busy room. I'm not sure where we are because there are no windows or doors with windows that I can see.

The boy rushes across the room to an older girl barking orders at a couple of scared-looking boys.

"Braelynn! We found some more Accursed. We don't know what type and they were infringing on our territory!" he explains breathlessly as he leads her back to the three of us.

Veronika, by unspoken agreement, stands in front of Jayda as if to shield her. The two of us glare defiantly at the older girl.

"Well? Which of the Accursed are you and what were you doing on our turf?" she asks accusingly.

"We weren't infringing on your turf, we were just out for a walk! And what do you mean, we're Accursed?!" I have to admit that Veronika sounds half-convincing, but Braelynn just scoffs.

"Fess up before I call Calen over to read your minds." she replies casually.

At my discreet nod, Veronika admits. "I'm telekinetic, she's teleportic and she's telepathic."

Braelynn smiles widely. "All three. Good find, Nathan."

"Well, it was actually Bethany and Brooklyn who found them," Nathan admits.

Braelynn waves her hand vaguely through the air as if it doesn't matter who really did find us.

“Welcome to our gang.” Braelynn turns and speaks warmly to Jayda, Veronika and I.

“What if we don’t want to be in your gang?” Veronika seems to have appointed herself spokesperson, but I don’t really mind.

“You wouldn’t have been out on the streets if you didn’t need somewhere to stay. I have a roof and food. All we ask for is a little help.”, Braelynn answers smoothly.

Veronika glances at me, clearly questioning. We don’t have anywhere to go and we do need somewhere to stay, even if only for just a short stretch. And since Jayda doesn’t seem to be doing too well right now, I nod.

“Fine, we’ll join you.” Veronika finally voices our decision.

“Good, good; I knew you would.” Braelynn signals the two girls and they step forward. “Find them a place and provide them with what they need.”

Bethany and Brooklyn nod and lead the three of us towards a door I hadn’t noticed before. Jayda follows along mechanically.

“Braelynn really is nice,” one of the twins defends their leader.

“Even if she comes off as a bit mean at first,” the other adds with a knowing smile.

The two look perfectly identical and I wonder if anyone around here can tell them apart. It can’t help that they both have the same power.

In the other room, we find bunk beds lining the walls. They lead us to the back and motion to a couple of empty bunk beds.

“These are yours.” Bethany informs us.

“Do you need anything else?” Brooklyn asks.

At a quick glance to check with Veronika, I mutely shake my head. “It’s been a long day, we’re probably just going to crash here and figure things out in the morning.” I add.

The twins smile knowingly. Bethany points to a non-descript door across the room from us.

“That’s the washroom there.” Brooklyn explains.

I give a tired smile, then yank off my shoes, climb up to the top bunk and flop down. Jayda follows my lead and lies down on the bunk below me. Veronika shoots me another concerned glance and takes the top bunk beside mine.

The twins leave, quietly shutting the lights and closing the door behind them. I shut my eyes and instantly fall asleep.

The room is dark when I open my eyes, and in the bed next to mine, Veronika is still sleeping. Jumping down from my bunk lightly, I check on Jayda and find her still asleep as well.

I stumble sleepily into the washroom, push my hair back from my face, and try to smooth out the wrinkles in my shirt. The thin layer of powder I put on yesterday to conceal my tattoo has mostly come off, so I scrub the rest off with some cold water.

I quietly slip out of the washroom and slide into the main room. There I am met with confusion.

“Oh, you’re up. I thought you would sleep longer.” Bethany greets me.

“Good timing though, we need your help in preparing our attack.” Brooklyn recoils slightly upon seeing my tattoo.

“You let them take you?” Bethany asks in surprise.

I nod slightly.

“Why didn’t you just teleport away?” Brooklyn asks, genuinely curious.

“I had nowhere to go.” I reply simply.

The two share a look, but don’t press me any further. “We’re attacking the prison nearby. To free some of our friends who were taken there. You and your two friends will be with us.”, Bethany informs me.

“You just have to teleport the five of us in, and then stick with us.” Brooklyn smiles reassuringly.

“Five people?!” I gasp. “I can barely teleport three!”

“You’ll manage.” Brooklyn isn’t concerned in the least.

“We’re leaving later today. Let’s hope your friends are ready.”, Bethany adds casually.

“We’re doing what now?!” Veronika cries in dismay.

In contrast, Jayda hardly responds to the information I shared with them.

“Just think about it! It makes sense. They took us in, so we do owe them a favour. Besides that, they just want to free the Accursed being held there! That would mean less Accursed will be used to attack other countries which is the exact reason we left.” I point out. I’ve been thinking it over while they slept and arrived at the decision that I will help the gang.

“I suppose you’re right.” Veronika still sounds slightly skeptical. “I’ll come with you.” She agrees slowly.

“Will you come with us?” I turn to Jayda, who stands silently beside me.

Jayda blinks once and nods.

“Are you okay?” Veronika looks concerned at Jayda’s behaviour.

“My own brother. I loved him. My mother and my father. They turned me over, Veronika. They betrayed me.” she answers hoarsely.

I can’t even begin to imagine the pain she must be experiencing now, so I don’t try offering any empty words of comfort.

“Will you be okay to come with us? You won’t get hurt?” I check with her.

“I can take care of myself.” Jayda replies sharply - I don’t press the issue.

“You three ready?” One of the twins calls over.

“As ready as we’ll ever be.” Veronika responds with a wan smile.

At their signal, the five of us link arms. I know what I have to do, but worry if I will be able to do it. I take a deep breath to calm myself and concentrate on my task.

I envision the place I want to go, calling up a specific corridor near my old dorm room. Breathing out, I force myself and the four others away. Out of this place. A second later, we appear in the hallway I planned.

The effect of expending that much effort hits hard and I nearly collapse. Jayda reaches out at the last moment and steadies me.

I smile at her, just glad to see her react to her surroundings. Glancing over at the twins, I find the two sharing a concerned look.

“Hey, you going to be okay?” Brooklyn asks, genuinely concerned.

I force myself to take a deep breath and straighten to stand by myself. I nod, attempting to give them an encouraging smile. They share a dubious look, but again, don't press the issue.

"Alright. We're going to split up.", Bethany informs us. "The two of us and your friend." She indicates Jayda.

"The three of us are going to be going to find some of our old friends and recruit them to join us." Brooklyn jumps in.

Veronika's face darkens, and Jayda draws a step closer to me. I shake my head.

"We don't want to split up." I state bluntly.

"Come on! It will be fine. You two are going to go and secure their weapons locker." Bethany exclaims in exasperation.

"All you have to do is not let any of them get a weapon and if any of our people show up, you're to give one to them." Brooklyn sounds impatient.

Bethany gives us directions to the locker, then grabs Jayda's hand and forcibly pulls her away in the opposite direction.

I signal Veronika discreetly and the two of us start after them.

"*Stop! I'll be fine. Go secure the weapons locker.*" Jayda calls so strongly both Veronika and I physically recoil.

I swallow a sigh and at my signal, we turn to follow out our orders. I can tell Veronika wants to question my decision, but I just push on, not letting her have a chance to.

Soon, we find the small closet. As expected, it's locked. I raise a questioning eyebrow towards Veronika. She nods wordlessly and concentrates for a moment. It isn't long before I hear the quiet click of the lock sliding back.

I reach out and open the door. Veronika and I enter the small room and flick the lights on.

"I guess we'll wait here." I mutter, slumping against the wall.

"Do you think Jayda will be okay?" Veronika finally asks after a stretch of silence.

"I don't really know. I've known her for awhile now, but before this, she struck me more as the type to react with anger. Her family's betrayal - it hit her hard. I don't know how long it'll take her to recover." I answer carefully as I peer out into the hallway.

Veronika falls silent once more. The two of us wait, checking the hallway periodically, but no one comes. We can't hear any sound of fighting and I begin to get antsy waiting.

I perk up instantly when I hear shouts approaching. Down the hall towards us run a group of men. Behind them, I can easily recognize some of the gang members. Veronika leaps to her feet and stands in the doorway.

As were our orders, she stops the men where they stand. I start in surprise, shocked that she's able to exert that much control. A boy shoots us a grateful look and leads the others into the room behind us. They emerge carrying guns.

The same boy who seems to be in charge of this group signals Veronika and she releases them. The men fall to their knees, raising their hands.

"Please! Don't kill us!" one man begs.

"After everything you've done to us? You've used us as your weapon for years! That ends here!" The boy yells back angrily.

At his signal, some other members of his group swing up their guns and, without flinching, shoot the men.

Veronika gasps and turns aside, looking as if she might be sick. The boy awkwardly pretends not to notice, nods his thanks to us and rushes off down the hall again.

Once they're gone, I teleport the bodies away, pushing through the strain of teleporting them without touching them.

"It's okay," I tell Veronika after catching my breath.

"I didn't realize they would be killing..." Veronika trails off uncertainty.

"I know." I pause, then add, "If they're killing them, what makes us any better than they are?"

Veronika nods in agreement, understanding my sentiment.

A mental scream of agony rips through my mind, leaving me breathless. It carries no words, but I know it's Jayda. Through the link, I can roughly sense where she is.

After my head clears, I grab onto Veronika's hand and teleport her towards where I felt Jayda. I blink hard against the rush I get from teleporting but stagger on.

Veronika follows me and the two of us round a corner. There I find her. Jayda lies on the ground, blood dripping from a bullet wound in her side. Her eyes flutter, and I can tell that she's drifting towards unconsciousness. The twins stand around her, defending the three of them from the bullets that rain down upon them.

Veronika joins her strength to the twins' and I rush to Jayda's side. Dropping down onto a knee, I examine the amount of blood. I'm no doctor, and don't know how much blood loss is too much, but it looks bad. I can't tell if she got hit in a critical body part, but think she must have been.

Jayda groans and weakly rolls her eyes over to meet mine. Words, both spoken aloud and mentally, are beyond her. I struggle to stay calm, roughly brushing away a tear and stand to talk to Veronika.

"We need to get her medical attention." I state.

One of the twins, sounding strained at holding off the bullets, responds. "We have a medical base set up in the cafeteria - take her there."

The other twin adds, "When you get there, send anyone else over who can still stand to help us."

I nod and crouch down, cradling Jayda's limp body in my arms. Taking a deep breath and fighting through my growing fatigue, I teleport the two of us into the cafeteria. I stumble to my feet and lay her gently down on a bench.

Spotting Braelynn, I rush over to her and inform her of Brooklyn, Bethany, and Veronika's position. She sets about organizing a team to go help them and I return to Jayda's side, looking for someone to help her.

"Hey, I need help! My friend needs medical attention." I call out to a young man who is walking by.

At my cry he comes over quickly, running his hand through his hair. I notice the tiredness etched into his features and wonder if he's been the only one treating the injured.

"What happened?" he asks as he examines Jayda, eyeing the pool of blood that's already formed on the bench.

"I don't know - she was shot about five minutes ago, I think." I try to come up with something to tell him.

He nods grimly and, crouching down, he gently peels back Jayda's shirt to look at the entry wound. He pulls in a sharp breath and slowly shakes his head.

"I think the bullet hit her vena cava," he shares, as if it should mean something to me.

I don't respond, but stare at him uncomprehendingly, dread pounding through my body and making it hard to breathe. He sighs softly and leans down, positioning his cheek over her mouth. After a moment, he straightens up.

"She's dead," he informs me bluntly, unable to meet my eyes. "I'm very sorry."

And then he just turns and leaves. The world spins around me and I have to place a hand on the table to stay upright. I stare after him for a long time, willing him to turn around, to take another look and somehow save her. I don't move until Veronika comes running up behind me.

"I came as quickly as I could.", she pants, stopping by my side and peering down at Jayda. Concern creases her eyebrows. "Is she okay?"

I shake my head, unable to keep my tears from spilling over. "She's dead." I whisper softly, as if that could make the words less painful.