

Chapter One: Saige

Rhythmic thumps at the door. A code. I cracked the door open and stuck out a fist. He shook. Money and a tube of paint were placed in my palm. I closed the door just as fast as I had opened it, skilled in the transfer of illegal goods.

I squinted into a piece of broken mirror. Having already burned the kinks out of my blondish-brown hair, it was time for the part I hated most. A trail of paint snaked onto my fingers and I began building a face. A pale face. One that matched the rest of the slaves in the Southern Region. Each stroke was creamy and cold, and the smell of clay and turpentine became stronger as I added layer upon layer upon layer.

My caramel-colored skin faded away along with my freak identity.

I threw the mirror fragment against the wall. It broke into two.

White face was necessary, and the only way to avoid capture. The few remaining Impures were being hunted by the Union. To make matters worse, I was out way past curfew carrying Glitter for Manny so he could sell it to some addict. I couldn't stand being indebted to that hog-headed bully, so no matter what idiotic errand he sent me on, I couldn't refuse. I had told him it was getting bad above the Underground Apex, how people were just disappearing after the watchmen took them in. That it was only a matter of time before I was captured again, for my third and final stint.

His response: *better you than me.*

I had learned early on in the Union of Civilization that no one could be trusted. White or Black. Slave or master. I was a mix of both but claimed by neither. An outsider. If I'd had a say, I'd have never chosen to live in a tug-of-war world where everyone vied for power, land, and resources. That's why I was going to do the impossible, I planned on going right over that wall. The Border. I was going to escape into the unknown and take my chances with the so-called Savages in the cold mountains. Who

knew, maybe they weren't as savage as the Union made them out to be. Nothing could've been more savage than living as a third-class citizen in the zones.

Every time I set foot outside the cubes, our tiny living spaces in the projects, I entered another nightmare. Just traveling down the street required me to jump over cracked asphalt and potholes as big as silver platters from the Citadel. Despite the absence of daylight, shards from half busted street lamps shimmered and crunched under my boots. The working bulbs flickered, buzzing like oversized wasps. Most of the buildings leaned like a worker standing on an uneven peg leg. It was only a matter of time before they imploded and swallowed everyone inside. Maybe that'd be a good thing. Just end their struggles all at once.

Graffiti stained the rock and mortar barriers that made up the street buildings and cubes. The sayings were hopeless and scrawled in acid green. *Zombieland*, *Death is near*, and *God can't love us*.

I turned in the direction where the sun had just descended. Thick, gray clouds formed near the skylines as the wind picked up. Empty Glitter vials rolled among scattered debris along a crumbled walkway with no intersection. A path I was forced to take to get to the Underground, to Manny.