

The Heart Crusher

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For my mum and dad.

None of this would've been possible without you.

Prologue

The cold night air nibbled at Kori's cheeks as she stood, clutching her baby against her chest, and waited for the truck to arrive.

What was taking so long?

They told her to come to the old, steel gates and here she stood, alone, watching as the bronze tinted rust peeled off the gate's bars and fell to the ground. The wind was getting stronger. They should have been here by now. Determined to keep the fear from creeping its way into her heart, she tightened her woollen grey coat around both herself and her baby and whispered softly into her little girl's ear, "Don't you worry Beck, they'll be here soon."

Of course, the words were intended to reassure herself more than anything. They *would* be here soon. David had promised. But as the minutes slipped by and the first signs of snow began to show, Kori knew something had to be up. Something was holding them back.

Nervously, she began pacing between the two gate poles, her tight black shoes leaving faded imprints in the already settling snow. She never should have come here. Never should have let them persuade her to leave like this. She was everything to them. Without her their world was nothing. But even she knew that if it hadn't been for her daughter, blessed and gifted as she was, Kori would have no reason to leave. It was with great insistence that she reassured herself that what she was doing was not an act of great selfishness but rather of

great love and care for her daughter. That was the way she saw it, but what about them? What if they saw this as her betraying them and in return, they'd set her up to come here, only to leave her to freeze to death in this unbearably cold weather.

Just when the last drop of hope had seeped out of her, a strong wind swept through the air, making her coat feel like the most useless thing on the planet and Kori lifted her eyes to see the truck revving down the road and pulling up in front of her.

The front door swung open, and she braced herself for David's explanation. But no, there in the driver seat of the truck, was Carson, her adoring husband. A cheeky grin played across his lips, "Not too cold out here, are you dear?"

Relieved, Kori let out a small, shaky laugh and climbed into the passenger seat beside him. The truck itself was surprisingly warm in contrast to the bitter cold outside and once the truck started off again, Kori was finally able to settle down properly. It'd been a long time since she allowed herself to even think about getting this comfortable, especially with everything that had been burdened upon her recently.

Getting through the gate was a lot quicker and easier than Kori had dared hoped and within a few minutes, they were already on the main road through the wasteland.

With a hopeful sigh, Kori rocked the baby, who had now fallen asleep in her arms, and spoke to Carson in a hushed voice, "I take it David couldn't make the trip?"

Carson shook his head, "He chickened out at the last second. Claimed we'd never make it unnoticed, though it didn't make any difference to everyone else. We still have another few trucks coming."

"Do *you* think we'll make it?" she asked nervously.

He cast a quick look at her and smiled warmly, "I *know* we'll make it," he said. "We'll have the perfect life there. Just you, me and little Beck. After all the surgeries and procedures she's already been through, I think she deserves a life of ease now. Although she'll have to grow up learning to manage and control her telekinesis - don't give me that look, you know

that telekinesis was the only option we had left, there was nothing else we could do for her - anyway I think it'll be the best place to try and have a normal life. No more running, no more troubles. It'll be perfect."

If there was one thing Kori loved most about her husband, it was his own special ability to create a feeling of optimistic hope in her. No matter how troubled she was, he always found a way to paint a picture in her mind. She could see it perfectly now. The idea of her own daughter being capable of telekinesis had been disturbing at first but the more she thought about it, the more she realised that maybe it could work. A stress-free life that was long overdue.

Yes, it would be perfect.

Carson nodded his head at the glovebox in front of Kori, "Your new card is in there. I had a couple of my own modifications made to it before it was submitted."

Modifications? Kori took the ID card out and stared at it. The name read *Ivy Brooks* and beside it was a picture of a young woman who resembled Kori about as much as a lioness resembled a deer. Both beautiful creatures but the difference in their behaviour, their status amongst others, couldn't have been more different. The straw-like strands of wheat blonde hair, the pale white skin. It was true that the woman she saw printed before her was in fact Kori herself, she'd been through countless procedures to surgically modify her face, her body too, to help camouflage her into the city. The only thing they'd left the same were her eyes, brighter and bluer than ever.

"Why'd you change my name?" Kori murmured as she fingered the plastic covered photo of herself.

"David and a few of the others were against the idea when I first suggested it, so I made the alteration without them knowing," he said. That was all the explanation she needed. To Carson, if anyone was against his ideas with no real reason, then he made it his sole mission to fulfil that idea. A trust issue, no doubt, but Kori respected it nonetheless. It had saved them several times in the past and she knew it was likely to be of use in the future too. "Besides, I think the name is

perfect for you,” Carson added. “Cause, you know, that’s what you are to this world. Poison Ivy.”

Kori laughed, “If I’m Poison Ivy to this world then what does that make you?” Carson pouted as he mulled over the question and Kori grinned. She was now Ivy Brooks, a woman from the wastelands who hoped to build a better life in the capital city. No one would raise an eyebrow. No one would see the truth. They would never know the horror and power that was Kori and Carson’s life.

The truck turned another corner and that’s when the gunshots began. The sound had emerged so suddenly, it took Kori a few moments to register that they were under attack. The right two tyres of the truck exploded in a flurry of rubber and flame and the truck swerved heavily into a nearby tree. A scream spilled through Kori’s lips as a round of bullets shattered through the back windscreen.

“Go!” Carson yelled. “Get out of here, quick!”

Before she could respond, he unbuckled his belt, reached across her for the door handle and pushed the door beside her open. She’d only just undone her own belt when Carson gave her a hard shove from the back, and she flew from the truck. The snow had reached almost knee length now but still did very little to cushion her landing. For what seemed like an eternity, she rolled down a hill, keeping a tight, protective hold of little Beck, who was now wailing in distress, until the ground levelled out and the awful spinning feeling cleared from her head. She gave herself a minute to simply lay there on the pearly white ground, panting in the frosty air and quickly checking both herself and Beck for any major wounds. Except for a few minor cuts and bruises, they were surprisingly okay. Carson, on the other hand, couldn’t have been worse.

Kori watched in agony from the bottom of the hill as a man walked up to the truck and yanked Carson from his seat.

“Where is she?” the man roared in a thick, ragged voice. On instinct, Kori turned and quietened Beck so that her wails were no more than little sobs and the occasional hiccup, then she turned back and watched as the man asked again. But

Carson remained silent. It was too dark now to make out the man completely, but she still clearly saw the first punch, then the second, and then Carson crumpling to the ground and being dragged away.

Never once did Kori wonder what she would do if Carson died. She might have expected tears. Maybe she would have screamed and cried until the last bit of life left her too. But no. When the moment came, she simply sat there. Frozen. Frozen like the air around her. Frozen in a hunched position, both hands wrapped around her baby, waiting for someone, or something to thaw her.

The next hour dragged on until another truck passed by. It stopped at the top of the hill and Kori heard her name being called out from an all too familiar voice.

Aaron. Her younger brother.

In an attempt to make herself noticed she tried to call out to him, but her voice only allowed a gargled cry. She could see the glow of lanterns now and heard Aaron as he commanded his men to search the different areas surrounding the banged-up truck against the tree. They'd never find her at that rate. It took a few moments for her to pluck the courage to try again and this time her voice rang clear above the commotion at the top of the hill.

"Aaron!"

One of the lanterns, a small dot at first, grew larger and larger as Aaron sprinted towards her.

"She's here!" he called over his shoulder and like metal to a magnet, all the little glowing dots milled towards her at once. Aaron set the bright lantern on the ground and knelt beside Kori. His eyes glistened with tears of both fear and relief, and he pulled her into a hug.

"What happened?" he whispered into her ear. When she didn't respond, he pulled back and examined her tear-streaked face. A few men arrived and wrapped another coat around her frozen frame. Someone pried Beck from her hands and wrapped her up in another blanket.

“We need to get her into the city,” Aaron ordered. “It’s probably best to take her to the Regional Sector and get her checked by one of their medics.”

“Will you be coming to the city too?” the man holding the baby asked.

Aaron took a long look at Kori’s melancholy face before finally nodding. He helped Kori to her feet and walked her back to his truck. This truck was a lot different to their own, with tattered seats lined along the back for their mass load of passengers. Kori took a seat in the far corner, away from all the points and stares and Aaron sat beside her. A small girl came forward with Beck cradled in her arms and handed her over to Kori.

The truck started up and juddered along the route towards the city. Though it was clear Aaron longed for some form of explanation as to what happened, Kori decided it was something she would keep to herself. Maybe if she didn’t acknowledge it, she might be able to convince herself it never happened. What she did decide to say to Aaron was, “Once we’re in the city, you and I are no longer brother and sister. We’ll live our own separate lives and do everything we can to keep our paths from crossing.”

The look of surprise on his face pained her but they both knew it was for the best. The president had a way of making life a misery for those who came from the wasteland and any family links only made it worse for them.

“What about the device?” Aaron had dropped his voice to a low whisper. “You’ve taken care of it, right?”

Kori stroked the small tufts of Beck’s hair absentmindedly, “They can search me, beat me up, kill me for all I care, but they’ll never find it. I’ve made sure of that.”

Aaron only nodded in response.

Tired and restless, Kori leaned her head against the back of her seat, and it felt like she’d only just closed her eyes when Aaron was shaking her shoulder lightly. “Kori, wake up,” he said softly. “We’re here.”

Her eyes immediately flung open. Here. The city. Where they would be safe forever. And nothing would hurt them anymore.

1.

I stare into her eyes which are so full of bright blue light that I can feel their strong impulse penetrating through me, exposing all my darkest secrets. My mother. Once beautiful, kind, assertive, now shrivelled up from the effects of age and malnourishment. My mother. Someone who would always protect me, always loved me no matter what. My mother, minutes away from death.

To fill this awkward silence I should confess, admit to every sin and wrongdoing I've ever done, every guilt that's ever haunted me, but what use is it now? The only thing left of her is her eyes, which are still bright enough to illuminate the dark room, the rest of her lies limply on the bed, broken. Broken by society. Broken by our president. Broken by life. The only movement is the shaky rise and fall of her chest with every small intake of breath - the same way it always does when she's afraid. I'm running out of time. I fumble for words, but nothing comes to mind. *It's okay? I'm sorry?*

It's pathetic of me to not know what to say to comfort my own mother in her final moments but there really is nothing to it; she wants to kill herself and leave me in the hands of what's become of our world. She asked me to do it for her, to spare her the trouble, but I refused. There's no way I could kill my own mother. Not now, not ever. And she knows it just as well as I do.

Either way her death is something that will break or make me. I'm about to speak when her head lifts, and her hand reaches out and closes like a wire cage around my wrist.

"Beck," she whispers. Her eyes still bore into me, and I struggle to find a means of escape. "It's time."

I swallow the lump that's formed in my throat and nod. With her other hand she lifts up the knife that's curled beside her. It quakes in her shaking hand.

"You need to calm down," I say, though I can't imagine what she must be feeling right now.

"You're right," she whimpers and she takes a deep, shuddering breath. "Beck, can I ask you to do something for me?"

"I'm not going to kill you."

"No, I know that," she shakes her head. "I want you to focus on my heartbeat." I frown at the strange request and lift my free hand toward her ribs, but she lets out a small laugh, "With your mind," she adds. Tension builds up inside me, it's not often that my mother insists on me using my telekinetic abilities for little things. Despite the coldness of the room, I can feel beads of sweat trickling down my neck but still I do as she asks and when I focus on her heartbeat, I can feel the quick pounding racking in my head. I wince and pull back.

"It's very fast," is all I can manage. She rests her head back on the pillow but doesn't release her iron grip on my wrist.

"I want you to focus on my heartbeat again and this time I want you to imagine calming it - putting it at ease if you like." I'm wary of her tone; soft yet somehow insistent, desperate in a way. I focus once again on her heartbeat and try to think of a way to calm the pounding. I decide to try to compress it, to pressurise the heavy drumming into a steady beat.

I start compressing it with my mind but once I start, I can't stop. I will my mind to stop and try to pull away, but I can't stop. I can't stop.

I can't stop.

"What have you done?" I shriek. She says nothing, her eyes are wide but still she manages to smile dimly through the pain. A scream escapes my lips. It's becoming too much.

Then I feel it - my mother's heart crushing between the forces of my mind as easily as if crushed between my forefinger and thumb. My mind savours the act in a horrifically satisfying way and when I pull back, there's screaming but now I don't know who it comes from.

Her wiry hand is no longer on my wrist, it hangs limply by her side. The other still clutches the knife. I force myself to look into her eyes and then wish I hadn't.

The once bright light of her eyes rapidly diminishes, swallowing her whole. A small smile curls at the edge of her mouth and she breathes out her last words to me: "Thank you."

Then the light leaves her eyes, and I am left in a room immersed in darkness, screaming and screaming and screaming.

She tricked me.

She never intended to kill herself in the first place.

She tricked me.

Because she knew she would make me do it in the end.

She tricked me.

I killed my own mother.

2.

I wake with my gloved hand clamped over my mouth to stop the screaming; it doesn't work. I can't help it, a sob racks my body and I bury my face into my palms.

I should be reassuring myself now to say that it was a dream. It wasn't real. But it wasn't a dream, it was a memory - the same memory that's haunted me since the day I did it. The day I was tricked into killing my mother and subconsciously relished every second of it. Sick. Completely sick. I scream again, the intensity scraping my throat, but I don't stop.

I decide to stay awake after that, the fear of returning to that moment is too hard for me to bear. Once I sit up, I'm still shaking. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and run my white gloved hands through my dishevelled hair to try and hide all evidence of a nightmarish night.

Now calm and at ease, I reach out for my necklace on the bedside table. It's a weird sort of a black diamond with three black spikes sticking out of it, the outer two arched inwards and the whole thing outlined in red. As weird as it is, it is the only remnant left of my mother and I guard it with my life. She gave it to me the day before I killed her.

I get up and reluctantly face myself in the mirror. I'm short and thin and my long brown hair envelopes my pale face, making me look even smaller. But it's my own eyes that always catch my attention. Where my mother's eyes were brighter than the sun, mine are the opposite, more of a deep sea blue. But within them I see a new mark, like an engraving,

of who I've become. And every time I look at my reflection it's like it reaches out and speaks to me and what it says is something I can never seem to shake off:

I am a murderer.

I turn away before I can dwell on the thought and quickly put on my necklace, re-fasten my gloves, and grab my T-shirt off the back end of the bed.

As I slide it on, I skim over the painful black and blue 2 branded into my upper left arm. A reminder that I am forever tethered to my birthplace, Sector 2, which was once known as North-Western Europe. The rest of the continent sank before I was even born.

In accordance with the Civilisation Project - a project declared thirty years ago, in which every person was forced to return to their country of origin for a global civilisation upgrade - everyone, no matter which Sector, is to be branded by hot iron with the Sector number in which they presently find themselves in. Each Sector is given its own colour which, by using a vast amount of chemicals and dyes, should have been the colour branded into the arm.

But it didn't work out as well as they'd originally planned and the chemicals caused the skin to burn more than they'd intended, leaving behind the Sector number in a grotesque black with the original colour remaining only as a faded outline. Really, they should have stopped when they saw how it went wrong, but they didn't. The president desperately wanted everyone branded so that anyone who tries to cross boundaries into another Sector can be easily identified and sent back to their own Sector for punishment. Often death, sometimes worse.

Of course, almost no one tries to break out of our Sector, usually it's from 3 or 4, where from rumours I've discovered they are struggling badly, even with the help from our project workers.

No matter how hard the struggle, the world shall stay in this 'Civilisation period' until the unity year, when every country will supposedly be civilised to the same level and leaving your own Sector to mix with others will finally be

permissible. Until then we're expected to grit our teeth and get on with our lives, abiding by the law and contributing as much as we can to the project.

When I go down into the kitchen it's empty, as expected. No one else is usually up at this time. I eat a small breakfast of nuts and raisins and get a start on my workload.

Generally I'm rather good at the cooking side of things but when it comes to cleaning, I can be a wreck. Still I do the best I can, never complaining, always reminding myself to be grateful I'm not rotting in some orphanage or prison for that matter. Instead I get to live hidden inside this well-kept home that is Martin's fabrics market. This is the place where the top tailors buy their materials from, made fresh from the sheep we keep out behind the store. Martin's a genius with wool and threads.

I grab a broom and begin sweeping the cobbled ground.

There are many markets in our city, some small and bare, whilst others grand and posh. Each one has its own speciality, and they never mix their produce. For example if I needed shoes, I would have to go to the shoemaker instead of the tailor because the tailor only deals with clothing. The only problem I have with the markets is that they all follow the same system. No matter what is being sold, all items are to be kept on shelves behind the counter to try and reduce the risk of theft. The customer is then expected to request anything they need at the counter and the merchant would get it for them. Only when the money is handed over are the merchants allowed to give the products. The only exception is the tailors, who have to bring out the fabrics from behind to measure it against the customer, but even then they sometimes demand payment first.

Yeah, I know, it's a strange way to go about things. I guess our society lacks trust.

Big time.

Within an hour I've cleaned all the surfaces of the entire store, restocked the shelves with more materials, fed and tended to the sheep out back, and already have the water boiling over a fire in the back garden for when Martin comes

down for his coffee. I've only just started to sweep the market's cobbled floor when I hear his annoyingly charming voice from behind me.

"And how is my telekinetic murderer today?" I whip around, my eyes wide.

"Martin!" I hiss. "Could you not be any louder?" I cast a nervous glance behind his shoulder, and he lets out a great laugh.

"Don't worry girl, your secret's safe with me."

I shake my head angrily in response. He's the only other person who knows about my horrific ability but when he acts like it's some sort of special secret ready to spill at any moment, that's when I wish it was his son, Lee, who knew instead of him.

Lee's the one who found me in the first place, the one who insisted on Martin letting me stay with them. Over the last few years we've developed a strong trust in one another, and I love him as if he were my own brother. But my secret forms an impenetrable barrier between us. He lives through every day with the burning desire to hunt and kill my mother's murderer at any cost. There's no way I could explain myself to him.

"Just keep your mouth shut, okay?" He nods and pinches his thumb and forefinger together and drags it across his lips.

At that moment Lee walks in, his brown eyes bleary and his long hair ruffled. Unlike me he makes no effort to cover up the evidence of an awful night, it's painted simply in his appearance. I guess if he were to ever commit a crime, he would probably have to come clean and admit to it because his face is an automatic giveaway.

"Didn't sleep so well last night Lee?" Martin asks.

"No, not really." He shrugs but doesn't emphasise. Instead he pats me on the head and walks over to the kitchen sink to wash his face.

"You know what day it is today right Beck?" he calls over his shoulder.

I keep my eyes on the ground and carry on sweeping, trying to act like I didn't hear him. Up until now I'd managed to

convince myself today is like any other day. Boring and uneventful. Though I knew at some point reality would take over and I'd have no choice but to acknowledge the day.

I can feel Lee's eyes on me, questioning my lack of response. "You gonna go?" he probes.

I don't feel like I have much of a choice. For the last three years since my mother's death, a service has been held in the city square to commemorate her. I've never been to one in person, they always broadcast any speech the president has to make live on our holo-TV anyway.

However this year is the final year where they will give her a special mention and Lee felt that I should go to the square to hear the speech in person. After today the search for my mother's murderer will become the responsibility of the night and day watchers instead of the president.

I'm not worried about being caught. If I keep to myself and don't conversate with others, it's unlikely anyone will even recognise me. No, what worries me is the speech itself. How can I possibly stand there listening to the ironic speech about my mother, knowing the whole time they're directing it at me? But at the same time embracing the last memory of her? The truth is I can't, and I don't want to but like I said, I don't really have much of a choice.

I realise I haven't given Lee a response and my mouth is still fumbling uselessly for words when Martin comes to my aid and says, "I think I'm going to need you to stay behind and deal with one of the sheep, Beck. Poor little thing's got a splinter in her leg. She's been hobbling around the grass for the last couple of days, so I reckon it's time we treat it ourselves."

I smile gratefully, "Okay, I guess I'll have to stay and do that then. You can both go, and I can catch the speech on the TV later."

Lee's expression is beyond irritated. "I'm sure your mother means more to you than the *sheep*," he says. "You can come back and deal with it afterwards." His voice softens, "I know this is hard for you, Beck, but who knows? Maybe after today

you'll feel like something really is being done to hunt down your mother's killer. You might be able to feel safe again."

Now I'm stuck. I look up desperately at Martin, but he shrugs in a way that tells me there's nothing more he can do. "Just come Beck," he says. "It won't be that bad."

And that's how an hour later I find myself standing in the busiest part of the city, King's Square, awaiting the president's speech.

My mother used to tell me stories of how places like this were once loved and visited by so many people not only from here but from *other* countries too, all across the globe. However I struggle to believe it. Our square is the exact opposite of attractive; there's a water fountain that might have looked elegant and beautiful if the water hadn't dried up and left behind a seething bacteria pit. And the vast, old buildings that once surrounded the square have been demolished and reconstructed into smaller homes to facilitate the ever-increasing population of our city. The ground is cobbled stone all the way, paving the streets and rising to form the houses. And there in the centre of it all is the Tower.

I've never been fond of the Tower, its size amplified in comparison to the shrunken houses, the way it looms over the city as if it were inspecting our every move and no matter how far you run, you can never stop seeing it. It's probably the only building in the entire city that's made from brick. The tall structure reaches to what could be the clouds, that's how high it is and there, right in the centre of it, is the brightly coloured glass that is the seal of the Civilisation Project. The so-called jewel of this world. A massive, multicoloured flower made of five conjoined hearts, one for each Sector, and a white glass circle in the centre.

Well, actually the white glass is more of a podium that slowly brings itself outwards as a balcony so the president can stand above us all, with his seal behind him, adding to his ever-increasing impression of power.

I can't see him from way down here, but I know that's where he stands now, where he wields his power while the rest of us stand in ranks before him, in order of class,

encircled by the Officials who stand poised with their guns at the ready, pressurising us into an even smaller crowd.

For a moment there's the loud squealing sound of the feedback and the smaller sound of people bustling about as they try to squeeze into the square. When there's nothing left in the air except the songs of a distant bird, a voice booms to the miniscule crowd "Good afternoon to you all."