

LILY HAYES



AFTER SAVANNAH'S CAPTURE

Everything aches.

Pain, like I've never known it, has settled within my soul. Because here I stand, among a world that screams of panic and confusion, with my baby brother.

The river spins in front of us, a gaggle of Tamaz's followers cleaning their weapons and talking loudly, a screen flashing before them all with the news feed of Savannah Shaw's capture. Night has befallen the Kingdom, a darkness settling over the place we congregate by the river. Off near the water, one of Tamaz's followers has a house that looks like it's about to lean over. Lights are on inside, spreading golden warmth onto the lawn around it. But not a single person enters that house, we stand a distance away, around metal drums breathing with fire to keep us warm, surrounding a long table filled with plans and

security feeds.

Well, Tamaz's people do.

Jesse and I haven't quite made it that far.

Next to me, Jesse Hayes grips the knife I gave him, spinning it in circles before him, absently panicking. The love of his life has been taken, pinned to a post, and paraded into the castle on top of the mountain, and there's nothing we can do about it.

Our meeting with the resistance hasn't even begun, it hasn't had the chance to, we arrived just to witness the capture of Savannah from the resistance screens, and then all of us proceeded to lose our wits. Jesse has started sweating at the brow hours ago and now smells so despicable I can barely be near him. Stress covers every crook of his face, his blue eyes darting in every direction.

The sight of it makes me sick.

Everything aches as I stare at my brother and wonder if this is how he looked the day I 'died'.

In truth, Cerberus saved my life—he was injured, and I helped him, and then he led me to a cave. I couldn't tell you how long it took, only that time stretched and the cold night hurt.

But physical pain I can deal with.

The sight of seeing my brother in agony rips me to shreds.

"We can leave now—go and get her back," I suggest to him.

Slowly, like the sound of my voice grinds his skull, he turns to me.

We've been here for hours, Savannah is already inside the castle—Jesse has tried to escape this meeting a total of 5 times in the last few hours, but each time he comes back to the river, pacing back and forth in and out of the forest behind us.

"No," he shakes his head, "no, Savannah needs us here, she sacrificed herself so that we can build an army. She needs us

here.”

I sigh loudly.

Nerves tingle up my neck as the people before us start talking louder—the beginnings of Savannah’s army—and it takes everything in me not to smack some sense into him.

“Let’s leave,” I breathe, “come with me, back over the river.”

“Savannah needs *us here*,” he snaps, his tone seething as he turns and faces me.

I stop breathing as I stare at him.

He looks like our father.

Tentatively, I reach out a shaky hand and tap him on the nose with my finger. “Then be here.”

He blinks, his eyes nearly rolling back in his head.

Savannah’s potential army has done nothing to stop us being here, but they also haven’t spoken to us since we arrived. As we speak, they could be planning a way to get her out, and yet Jesse still has not joined them.

“Huh?” he blinks.

“If you want to be here and plan the army then *be here*, little brother. You look like a fool, pacing in and out of the forest,” I explain.

“I have not been pacing—”

“You’ve been in and out of the trees 5 times,” I say, lifting my brows. As he stares at me, my heart ticks in my throat. Right now, the world is distracted by Savannah. Jesse can build their army, and I can escape and go home. The road is clear.

And yet, I can’t...

My baby brother takes a shaky breath and lowers his eyes from mine, fiddling with the knife as he steadies himself.

I can’t leave him.

But I should. I really should.

I should've left him the moment we crossed the river, but the thought of leaving him behind, faced with such danger, fills me with such an agony I can barely breathe.

The night I died, it was easy to leave. My family were safe, locked behind the military base, ready to go on with their lives. My brother was the best training pilot in his unit, ready to follow our father's footsteps. And my mother lived a full life, always smiling, always serving. She had Jesse. I had Cerberus.

But right now, Jesse has no one.

He stares at the army, knowing it's something he has to do and yet unable to take that final step towards them, towards Tamaz, who keeps glancing over with a frustrated expression.

"You know," I say softly, as my brother prepares to join the army, "the night I died, after the Second Night ended, I came back."

He flashes his eyes towards me, blinking.

"I'm sorry?" he asks.

"I came back home, I stood outside of our window, looking into our bedchambers, and saw you and mother embracing. You had each other."

He looks at me with such a pained expression that suddenly I wish I hadn't spoken.

His fingers shake as he tightens them around his knife.

When he speaks, his voice is raw, "you saw us in pain and you left us like that."

"I had no life there, Jesse. Everyone knew it. I hated the base, and I made yours miserable because of it. Sometimes leaving is the best thing you can do to help someone," I explain. Breathing becomes hard as he stares at me, picking me apart.

He takes a long, pulled in breath, his eyes darkening, "this

is what you want me to do for Savannah?”

“Go to Tamaz, before he comes over here and punches you for stalling. Go over there and build the best damn army Umbra has ever seen, and then go and save your girl,” I say with such clarity, Jesse’s knees buckle at my words.

He sinks to the ground, shaking slightly, as I pull my eyes away from him and stare across the river.

The drums of fire line the water, casting everything orange. Tamaz pulls away from the group, wringing his fingers, a flustered expression on his face.

I softly hold up a hand, urging him to wait.

From the ground, Jesse mutters, “and what will you do, sister?”

My pulse ticks, my nerves flaring at the question. Behind me, the dense forest is dark, beckoning me. I can climb into the trees and swing my way towards the Ocean Train, where the village peppers out, and scale across the river unseen.

My cats will be prowling the edge of the river for me by now, I’ve been gone for too long. I can locate one, ride home, and never come back.

The urge overcomes me.

But still, I can’t do it.

I can’t leave Jesse.

“I will do whatever you need me to do,” I breathe.

Jesse lifts his head, face empty. He pops open his mouth to speak, but Tamaz finally storms over, his face hard.

“Jesse,” the man says, voice deep and monotone as he glares us down.

“He’s coming,” I purr, glancing up.

Jesse stands shakily, but he isn’t looking at Tamaz, he’s looking at me.

“I keep seeing her being nailed to that post and paraded through town, it plays through my mind like a damn playlist,” he says.

Tamaz overhears, “we’ve been talking, and if you cared to join us, you would know of our plans to get your princess back.”

Jesse still doesn’t turn to face the man, which makes a muscle in his scarred face twitch.

“He will join you now,” I insist, trying to keep the frustration out of my tone. Heat crashes up my neck as the damn man stares at me, anger pooling between us.

Jesse finally decides, standing abruptly. “I need to see it myself first, I need to go to the castle.”

“We’re sending a crew over there soon, to check out the perimeter. Another mob is forming, so we’re using people the Elders won’t recognise,” Tamaz instructs.

“Put me on that crew,” Jesse says, whipping around to face him.

“No,” Tamaz declines.

“Put me on.”

Tamaz turns to face me, a muscle twitching in his lip. “Your sister runs with the cats, doesn’t she?”

Heat flares my vision, my hands balling into fists as I look down at him.

Oh, stars no.

A cold dread passes through me, instantly registering.

He wants my cats.

The condition to letting Jesse on his crew will be Cerberus.

So I say, “no.” the same time Jesse responds, “what about it?”

I turn and hiss at my brother.

Tamaz simply smiles.

“How well have you trained them?” he asks, tilting his head.

“They’re wild beasts,” I growl.

My fingers clench into claws as I glare at him, all sense flying out the window as he smirks at me, greed clashing over his features.

“As are you,” he observes, trying not to grimace. “Jesse can join the crew we’re sending to the castle on the condition that you bring your cats over the river. Those animals are fast, and quiet, and impossible to detect. If we can attach surveillance on them, we might be able to get into places and take record of what the Elders are planning.”

I swallow some bile, but don’t speak.

Jesse pushes his shoulders back, levelling himself before the man, “would that help Savannah?”

Tamaz tilts his head, smiling, “you already know the answer.”

Sheepishly, Jesse turns to me.

Fright overtakes anger as he observes me, nerves pounding their way down my body. I take a tentative step back towards the trees, urging my heart to still.

“Lily?” Jesse asks.

Pain wracks through my body as he stares at me, making a home within my soul.

I need to leave, get to my cats, keep them away from the Silver Kingdom. If they Elders catch them they will be skinned and their pelts worn to mock me.

I can’t let that happen.

I won’t let that happen.

But if I leave, I’ll be abandoning my baby brother. And I can’t do that either.

“Don’t ask this of me,” I gasp, my body straining to flee as

I take another step back.

“We won’t hurt your beasts, Lily Hayes,” Tamaz mutters, “but you have to admit they—”

“Don’t *ask this of me*,” I repeat, hissing at them.

“We can set some ground rules, come up with an equally beneficial agreement,” Jesse explains, softening his eyes as he takes me in. “Maybe just one... instead of all.”

He holds himself steadier before me, his shoulders back, the creases missing from his eyes. But he still spins his blade, over and over, settling his nerves.

Tamaz has offered him a plan, a way to get Savannah back.

But it’s an awful plan.

And he’s too much of a wreck to realise it.

I take another step back from them, the branch of a tree whispering behind my back. With a steady breath, I push myself that last step into the forest. Both of them glance at each other, exhaustion lining their features, and I use the distraction to whip around and yank myself up into a long hanging tree.

By the time they glance back, only the branches rustle.

Tamaz arches his head, looking for me, but I scale higher into the tree, fingers arching for hand holds.

“She’ll come around,” Tamaz mutters.

And as I swing myself away from them, brain churning, I realise he is right.

I keep climbing, jumping from tree to tree, moving towards the Ocean Train where the village disappears. Towards safety.

A sense of security fills me, my muscles straining as I yank myself onwards.

But I won’t make it to the river.

Not without Jesse.

And I can’t keep being here without Cerberus.

Which only means one thing: Tamaz is right.

Unwillingly, Cerberus will come with me into the Silver Kingdom. One way or another.

Stars, I hate people.