

Havenheart

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Kaden

Descension Day had always been a paradoxical celebration. It marked a century of humanity's survival beneath the surface, a testament to resilience and adaptability, but was also a reminder of the world above—a world stolen in a brilliant display of fire. Kaden Lockworth felt the weight of the duality pressing on him as he walked through the bustling streets of Finis, the technological heart of Havenhearth.

The city was alive with a vibrant, palpable energy. Large monitors floated above the crowd, displaying the achievements of the last hundred years. Banners hung from every building, emblazoned with the emblem of Havenhearth—three golden triangles, portraying the interconnected cities, against a silver backdrop. The air was filled with music and laughter, the clatter of festival booths, and the irresistible scent of various foods from a long-forgotten time.

Every year, Kaden experienced the delicacies of the world above, flavors that had been buried under the dullness of the usual rations. Today was a day for people to enjoy how life used to be before the bombs fell.

But for Kaden, the day of celebration was marred with uncertainty. This Descension Day would be different. As a recent graduate of Finis Academy and having reached the age of 18, he would participate in the Choosing, where all fresh adults would receive their placement among the three cities.

The booths lining the sidewalks gave way to a dazzling scene before him. Hundreds of his peers already filled the city square of Finis, packed into neat rows extending toward a granite stage. Each wore the same drab outfit that hung over his body: an aggressive gray jacket decorated with Havenhearth's insignia on the left breast pocket and a pair of black slacks that were a bit too tight for his liking. The dull backslash of graduates clashed with the array of festive colors overhead, which mirrored the emotions flurrying inside his chest.

Kaden's uncertainty was accompanied by anxiety deepened by rumors, whispers of government scandal amid the Council of Seven along with sightings of the Edenborn, a fanatical group that had recently clawed their way up from the shadows and was bent on returning to the surface. He stepped forward to join his peers.

"Kaden!" a voice rang through the din of the city square. Jerking his head to the side, he eyed a lone man running toward him. Trimmed brown hair framed the kind face of his brother, Henry, and the green of his eyes calmed Kaden's temperamental nerves.

"Henry, what are you doing here?" Kaden asked, cocking his head to the side. Two years older, Henry had already gone through his own Choosing.

“Oh, come on! Like I would miss my little brother getting his fist!” Henry pointed a thumb at his shoulder where the gold icon of Aegis gleamed.

Kaden rolled his eyes. “Yeah, right. You are one what? One in several hundred thousand? No one gets chosen for Aegis. That’s what makes you so exceptional.” He threw a punch at his brother who quickly sidestepped.

“Watch it now,” Henry chuckled. “If the enforcers see you throwing a punch at an Aegis you’ll get thrown in a cell for a week!”

Kaden looked his brother up and down, inspecting the formal attire of Havenhearth’s most elite soldiers. It was the goal of anyone who aspired to be anything to make it into Aegis’s ranks eventually. And yet Henry was selected by his Choosing, setting him apart from the rest.

“I’m not like you,” Kaden said, jealousy sneaking into his voice. “I’ll be lucky to make enforcer. Or worse, I could be sent to Initium to work on the water farms.”

“You’re going to be great!” Henry laughed. His brother was so cheerful and full of energy—so different from him . . . He did not stand a chance.

A symphonic chime rose above the cacophony of the festival, and the chatter died down.

“Get in there! And remember, I’m proud of you no matter what.” Henry turned and jogged away, his silver coat disappearing into the sea of gray.

The chords of Havenhearth’s anthem grew louder, a melody from an unseen world, a harmonic blend of brass and percussion, and Kaden took his spot in line, his mind settling on his brother. Henry had taken charge of Kaden since their parents had died four years prior. Working in the Finis

Research Center, they had been an essential part of a project involving the suppression of radiation symptoms. On that fateful night, something went awry, and their entire lab had been engulfed in flames.

Yet Henry never let it get to him as he played the roles of parent and steadfast brother. Since his Choosing had pulled him to Aegis headquarters in Centrum, he visited as often as possible to provide support for Kaden. The tragedy of their parents' deaths had taken a heavy toll on Kaden's heart, but Henry had suppressed it and buried the thoughts deep in order to remain strong for his brother.

To Kaden, it was just a front, a disguise for his brother's true feelings; deep down, Henry was plagued with despair at their loss.

Kaden pulled himself from the depths of his mind and craned his neck, glancing at the colossal screens flanking the stage. Spinning on each were the golden triangles of Havenhearth, which flickered out, shifting the broadcast to the Council Chambers in Centrum and the leader of the underground society, Premier Darian Elridge.

"Hello, citizens of Havenhearth! I wish you all a happy Descension Day." The premier's voice thrummed through the square, commanding attention. Despite witnessing other broadcasts like this one, Kaden studied the man's features as if seeing them for the first time.

The premier was in his mid-fifties. A combed white mane cascaded over his signature silver suit webbed with golden strands. The camera focused closely on his face, accenting his soft, brown eyes, eyes far too friendly to lead a population of six million.

"It is my pleasure to begin the Choosing of 2140. However, this year is unique. We are gathered today to celebrate our unity and resilience.

Humans descended into these depths one hundred years ago to preserve our species. Today, we honor that choice and renew our commitment to the safety and prosperity of our cities!”

The crowd around him stood silently, their clear mistrust toward the Council permeating the square. While they lived in a supposed democracy, the people no longer held the ears of their leaders. Kaden had heard rumors from his peers at the academy, but the hush of the crowd made him think the whispers were more profound than anyone let on.

“We honor every one of you in Initium. In Centrum. And in Finis. Today is a day for celebration. A day for new beginnings. To those of you about to undergo your Choosing, congratulations. You are taking the first step in the journey of your life. Eat, drink, and celebrate. Humanity lives strong within all of you!”

The premier’s image cut off, shuttering back to the rotating triangles representing their subterranean society. Music began again in a hushed tone as an elegant man mounted the stage—one of Finis’s representatives and next in line for the premier’s seat, Markum Tatus. His crimson suit fluttered in a slight breeze, revealing a gold chain around his neck. Graduates waited for his words in tense silence.

“Welcome. It is my pleasure to share this day with you all. Over the last ten years, you have undergone countless hours of studying, training, and preparation for this day. And at long last, your future will be provided to you.” Markum’s words boomed throughout the square, and Kaden hung on to each one, eager to receive his initiative. “As a reminder, these selections have been made based on personal aptitude scores consisting of the following: intuition, survival, combat, adaptability, and overall academic

testing. All designations are final; you must report to your new duty site in one month. Let us begin.”

Kaden knew well what would happen next. The graduates would have their names called and would make their way across the stage one by one. On the right side, they were simple children playing the game of life, but after crossing to the left, they would receive their purpose—ten years’ worth of struggle, all for this one moment. Some would be pleased with the results, others would cry, and some would even hold anger. Wherever they were placed was their own fault.

Beside the stage stood a large white tent, the medical station. This would be Kaden’s first time inside, but he was prepared. Once receiving a designation, each graduate had to submit for routine testing, confirming their health and well-being were up to par. The medical examination was as crucial as the Choosing itself. If a medical or mental issue was identified, it could uproot the placement, resulting in the individual’s resubmission. They would lose their initiative and be reassigned to a lesser duty. Kaden’s skin tingled at the thought.

“Christopher Antoine. Centrum - Level Three Enforcer,” the voice of the Council member called out, and the Choosing began. Kaden made his way forward, his feet tapping the ground. “Betty Caldwell. Finis - Medical Division . . . Theodore Davenport. Initium - Grain Farms . . . Elenor Hopkins. Centrum - Level 6 Enforcer . . . Alyssa Jetting. Finis - Medical Division . . .”

The ceremony was a drab experience, a simple procession of faces eager to move on to the more exciting festivities. But for Kaden, this day was everything. He was hoping for Level One Enforcer in Centrum. He had

done well in his studies and had excelled in training and hand-to-hand combat. He figured he could at least pull off that much; anything to get closer to Henry and Aegis. He could get promoted through the ranks and eventually join his brother in the elite. Everyone had to start somewhere.

“Ava Kensington.”

Kaden jerked his gaze to the stage, the familiar name of one of his closest friends breaking him from the lull. His eyes tracked to a girl moving across the platform, the gray seams of her jacket hugging against her body, forming to every curve. Ava herself was a rarity, a girl of umber skin surrounded by an ocean of pale faces. Her hair flowed over her shoulders, cascading in waves of red and black as if to add to her defiance of the norm.

“Finis - Level One Radiation Division.”

Her eyes gleamed, reflecting the lights shining above, their brown blending naturally against her skin. His heart fluttered for her in excitement, knowing this was exactly what she had wanted. A smile spread across her face, revealing shimmering white teeth. She never failed to take his breath away, but their futures were on different paths. He shook her image out of his head.

The ceremony continued as she departed from the stage, heading toward the medical tent.

“Ethan Leinfelt . . .” The young man two spots ahead of him began to move, his long black hair flapping in the wind. Kaden recognized the name as belonging to one of the Academy’s students from the lower levels. As he approached the stage, the boy looked back, revealing a sinister glint in his eyes. “Initium - Level Eight Sanitation.”

The boy stopped halfway across the stage and turned toward Markum, his face contorted with anger.

“Sanitation? This is ridiculous!” He waved his arms around, madness oozing from his voice. “I should be in Centrum. Among the Council! But no, your way of doing this is skewed. It’s all wrong.”

The boy turned to face the crowd. “The Council has been leading us down a dark path for too long. And we follow. Why? I think it is time for a change. The Edenborn are right! We must act now! We must—”

Two enforcers emerged from the sides, cutting off Ethan’s monologue, their dark-gray uniform contrasting with the ocean of graduates, brandishing volt rods—short metal batons that could emit a paralyzing puck of electricity. The boy’s eyes darkened while his words echoed through the square, but he fought against them all the same. The crowd around Kaden shifted, and the tension in the air grew thick with hesitation while Ethan struggled against the men. But as quickly as the outburst began, it was snuffed in an instant. The enforcers hauled the young man off the stage, pulling him toward the examination tent.

Markum shook his head. “Apologies. We will not accept any more outbursts. The Council’s position regarding this group of fanatics has no place in such a day of celebration. Now, let us continue. Elizabeth Lettleman . . .”

Ethan’s voice faded into obscurity as Kaden slipped back into his thoughts. The Edenborn had been shadows for some time, their voices dancing like leaves in a slight breeze. In recent months, however, their words had gained traction, especially among the struggling lower levels of the population, feeding their anger with mistrust of the Council. No one

could pinpoint who the Edenborn were, but Kaden imagined a conflict would soon emerge.

“Kaden Lockworth.”

His own name jolted him back to reality, and he realized the stage was now directly before him. He took a deep breath, every beat of his heart sending adrenaline through his veins. This was the moment for which he had prepared. All that remained was to take a step forward, cross this stage, and begin his journey toward his brother.

His right foot moved on its own, propelling him onto the concrete platform. Beads of sweat began to roll down his palm, dripping from his fingertips, as his heart rate rocketed, but the only path was to walk forward.

“Centrum.”

That was a good start. His mouth was dry and parched like he had never known cold water. At this critical moment, he was unsure what was moving faster: his racing heart or the maelstrom of emotions in his head.

“Aegis Corp.”

Kaden stopped. A hush had fallen over the crowd, every eye locked on him. Did he hear that correctly? He turned his attention to the regal man standing before him. Markum held out his hand.

“Congratulations, young man. You’re quite the rarity.”

His head spun, threatening to send him tumbling into the sea of faces below, as he outstretched his own hand, which connected with the Councilman’s, and suddenly, he worried about how wet his palm was.

“Thank-thank you,” he said, still in a state of disbelief. The man nodded then gestured toward the side of the stage. Kaden nodded, taking another step. Questioning eyes filled his view, and it was as if a target was on his

back, as the whole of Finis looked upon him with wonder and awe. It was rare that anyone was selected for Aegis out of the academy, and a testament to how skilled they had to be. He felt like an impostor.

His feet pattered down the steps, his legs trembling from excitement and nerves. Behind him, Markum continued reciting names, but his voice was drowned in the tide of Kaden's mind. In a haze, he made his way to the medical tent, brushing past gray blurs whose features were lost to him.

Beyond the fabric that served as a doorway was a cavernous tent full of medical beds. Nurses in bland gray uniforms rushed around, checking everyone's vitals. One lady approached him, guiding him to an open bed.

"Please, sit and relax," she said. As he followed her orders, she lifted his shirt to attach several sensors to his skin which lit up a monitor. The readings meant little to him, but he imagined they fascinated Ava. "Your vitals all appear in order. Your heart rate and blood pressure are high, but I imagine it's from the excitement of your designation. I only need to take a blood sample and you'll be on your way."

Kaden nodded, pulling up his sleeve to give her access. Her fingers pressed against his skin, moving in uncomfortable circles, pulling the heat from his veins. But his eyes didn't waver; he didn't mind watching. And when she popped the lid off the needle, he did not flinch; the metal tip bit into his skin, sending warm blood splattering inside a vial. Every second was accompanied by a drip until the vial was full, obscuring its opacity. It was not much blood, but his stomach still churned from the loss. She popped the lid on the vial, clinking it into a container with several others, his name marked on it in bold black letters.

“Easy,” she said. “You’re good to go. Congratulations, and enjoy Descension Day.”

She handed him a small bandage, and he pulled himself off the gurney. With his nerves still shot, he left the tent in a hurry. Back in the horde of graduates, Markum was still spouting off names in the background. He was to the Ps now, meaning several of his friends had made it through, but he would catch up with them later. The first order of business was to talk to Henry.

And to his surprise, Henry was already waiting for him, propped against a nearby lamppost.

“Kaden!” Henry waved his hand above his head, and Kaden smiled, his mind easing with his brother’s presence. He jogged over, covering the distance quickly. “See, I told you. Nothing to worry about.”

Kaden chuckled, a sense of calm washing over him. His hands no longer sweat, and his racing heart had slowed. He had made it through the Choosing, and the future looked bright. “I can’t believe it, man! The Aegis. I’m going to be joining you.”

“Two brothers at it again,” Henry said. “We can’t be stopped. Before you know it, they’ll be letting us run the show.”

The thought of them being in charge brought a smile to Kaden’s face. At one point, it had only been a dream, a reality hidden by years of obstacles. But with this selection, that dream was now possible.

“Yeah, in one month, I’ll be in Centrum with you,” Kaden said. “And who knows? Maybe a month after that, I will be giving you orders!”

Henry cackled, his laugh shaking with every breath. “In your dreams, bro. You may have gotten into Aegis, but you’re still far behind me.”

The line of graduates continued to flow past the duo, but as far as Kaden was concerned, it was the two of them against the world. The chain of events that had happened since their parents' deaths had been difficult to overcome, but they had made it.

"Hey, listen, man." Henry leaned in close, his voice calm. "I'm not supposed to be talking about this, but I'm glad I was able to make it today so I could tell you in person. I've been selected for a new mission and will be off the grid for a while. I'll be heading out immediately, but this assignment may last a while. Chances are that when you arrive at Aegis headquarters, I won't be there. That's good, though. It'll give you some time to get acclimated without having your big brother around to protect you."

"Wait," Kaden said. "You're leaving? But you just got here. I thought at least you could spend some time at the festival."

Henry shook his head. "Unfortunately, not. I'm expected to return for mission briefing within a few hours. This is congratulations, but also goodbye. I'm proud of you."

Kaden beamed. His whole life he had looked up to Henry and wished to be like him. Now, he was one step closer to realizing that.

"But be careful," Henry warned, grasping Kaden's shirt and embracing him. "A lot is going on with the disappearances that have been happening. Watch out for yourself and make sure you make it to Centrum. But I got to go. Take care, Kaden. Love you!"

Henry released him and darted off into the crowd. Kaden's eyes followed him until the glint of the Aegis uniform melded together with the flat gray

of the graduates' uniforms. Sighing, he turned away, the hole left in his heart by Henry's absence growing.

He navigated the mass of bodies, his thoughts a turbulent mix of frustration and hope. His mind was stuck on the image of Henry's face, filled with the same intensity and determination that boiled within him. His brother had always been the dreamer, the one who sought hidden truths and pushed boundaries. It was why he had pursued Aegis and found success with the militant group. But beneath the optimistic show his brother put on, Henry distrusted the Council. On more than one occasion, Henry had spoken of the darkness that plagued the lower levels of Havenhearth, and the secrets that were being hidden. He had never agreed with the Council's ways and preached that revealing the truth to the world was his duty. It was both his greatest strength and his most dangerous trait.

Kaden's thoughts turned to Henry's vague warning. Mysterious disappearances had plagued Havenhearth for the past few months, and the Council had yet to release an official statement. Beginning in Initium, the disappearances had spread across Centrum and Finis like a shadowy hand, snatching people away in the dark. It had put him, and everyone, more on edge.

But today was not a day to worry about that. It was a day of celebration. Turning, Kaden immersed himself in the crowd, pushing his way toward a brighter future.



Ava

The Descension Day festivities were in full swing, a vibrant tapestry of colors, sounds, and emotions. Ava's heart soared amid this kaleidoscope of joy; the chaos of the celebration was a welcome addition to her current high. She had received her desired assignment during the Choosing: Finis's Level One research facility where she would study radiation and create plans for the surface. Ava and her friend, Claire, had been taking part of the celebrations for an hour, their enthusiasm undampened by the revelations of the day. But Ava was on a different kind of quest—one that had nothing to do with the day's official ceremonies.

With her bright eyes and infectious smile, Claire Renaud was busy taking in the sights and sounds of Finis's festive atmosphere. She had been chosen as a Council Aid in Centrum, along with her boyfriend, Eli Nordstrom. It was no wonder to Ava that her friend was dating Eli; his personality was equally contagious.

“Look at that!” she said, pointing to a colorful array of traditional foods served at a nearby stall. “I’ve never seen meat shaped like that before!”

Ava chuckled, her heart warmed by her friend’s unrelenting optimism. “It’s called bratwurst. And I know its shape is a bit irregular.” Claire’s smile widened at her joke, her laughter cascading over the festival music. “But come on! We can eat food later; I want to find Kaden and Eli.”

Claire’s smile dimmed, her gaze shifting to the bustling crowd. “I know. But it is hard not to feel caught up in it. The celebrations are so . . . vibrant.”

Her friend twirled in the crowd, drawing the attention of surrounding eyes. Claire was a striking figure whose appearance immediately captured the gaze of others. Though petite, she carried herself in a way that made her appear larger than others. Her long, flowing blonde hair bounced in silky waves down her back, catching the light with every movement. Her blue eyes were bright and expressive, their clarity perfect for her complexion. Her skin, porcelain in its smoothness, contrasted beautifully with her golden locks and the vibrant hue of her eyes.

Ava laughed as she watched her friend, thinking about how they each stood out in their own way—Claire with her dazzling beauty and herself with her mixed heritage. Living in an underground bunker, locked away from the sun, resulted in a majority of Havenhearth’s citizens having fair, pale skin. But Ava was one of the exceptions, and she chose to wear her color with pride. She even went as far as to dye her hair a mix of red and black, a fiery depiction of her personality.

“Seriously.” Ava rolled her eyes, grasping at Claire’s hand. “Let’s go. We’ll have the whole night to try all the different foods. Don’t you want to find Eli?”

Claire perked up at hearing her boyfriend's name and took Ava's hand. "Okay, you convinced me. Let's find them!"

And then Claire darted forward through the crowd, pulling Ava behind her to find their friends. Her sudden haste pulled a laugh from Ava's belly, as they rushed through the crowds, the cool air whipping at Ava's hair.

The four of them had long been friends, with Claire and Eli being the glue that bound the group together. Even though they were all in the academy together, Ava had rarely the time outside her studies to become close with Kaden. Though even when she hadn't seen them for a while, she'd always been drawn back by her desire to be part of the group. And with the Choosing assignments doled out, Ava's desire to find Kaden only increased. Their time together was growing shorter by the day.

For months, she had been fawning over Kaden. The memory of his eyes washed over her, like the relaxing waves of an unknown ocean, a sea she very much wanted to explore. Yet, the two had never been more than good friends. With her so involved with her studies and him with his training it left little time for a deeper connection.

The excitement of Descension Day was palpable, but it did not diminish the fact that their group would be separated in one month. Claire had filled her in, informing her that Kaden was bound for Aegis, and she and Eli were heading for Centrum as well, leaving Ava alone in Finis. The looming separation cast a shadow over their celebrations, reminding Ava of the preciousness of their time together.

As the two friends pushed through the bodies, she began to overhear others at different stalls spouting nonsense—slights at the Council of Seven, accusing them of more faults than one, and the Edenborn, the fanatical

group that had risen from the depths. The group had many spreading their rhetoric. Ava could not help but reflect on the irony of their situation. The very day meant to celebrate survival and unity was the same day that brought to light fractures and fears hiding beneath the surface. Everything swirled together in her mind, creating a vortex of uncertainty and fear.

Claire tugged gently on Ava's sleeve. "Look over there—Kaden and Eli's usual spot during the festival. We should check it out and see if they're nearby."

Ava squinted at a less crowded corner of Finis's square where a small stand flanked a wooden stage. Kaden and Eli often went there to enjoy the less commercialized aspects of the celebrations.

"Good idea, those two were never ones to hang around the crowds," Ava said, steering Claire through the multitude of festivalgoers. "I hope they're over there."

Ava stepped forward, pushing past a group of graduates. Her mind raced with thoughts of Kaden and the possibilities of the future. The festive atmosphere appeared mocking in its cheerfulness, while anxious feelings swirled inside her head.

Descension Day was meant to be a celebration, but for Ava, it was a day fraught with hidden challenges. As the music swelled and lights danced across the square, Ava's resolve hardened. She was determined to find Kaden and share her feelings with him. If she did not do it now she may never have the opportunity again.

She jumped as Claire grabbed her hand, the suddenness startling her. Turning to face her friend, Claire's bright eyes stared back at her, and a cold substance slipped between her fingers.

“Come on! You absolutely must try this!” Claire said as she took a bite out of the treat. “It’s called ice cream, and they haven’t had it on Descension Day in twenty years! It’s so good.”

Ava rolled her eyes. Her friend’s cheerfulness was the complete opposite of her own anxiety. Claire was never a problematic type, so this was in character.

“Claire,” she said.

“One bite isn’t going to kill you, so try it. Come on, please,” Claire begged. The softness in her eyes always got the better of Ava, so she obliged.

She carefully placed the fabulous concoction in her mouth, and the consistency threw her off. Her tastebuds exploded into snowy flakes that sent a chill down her spine. The sensation was immediate—a rush of icy sweetness that seemed to flurry into flavors, each note distinct and yet harmoniously blended.

“Okay, okay,” she conceded, her eyes wide with surprise. “You got one this time; that was incredible.”

Claire’s laughter was enough to drown out the music for a moment, then it faded into a beaming smile. “Right? That is why you should always listen to Claire.” She curtsied slightly, her golden hair flowing against the backdrop of her gray jacket.

Clutching the creamy delicacy in her hand, Ava once again took her eyes to the crowd. As impressive as this treat was, the fear lingering in her mind crept back in. Soon enough, the whispers returned, and she knew it was time to return to their search for the boys.

But their search would go no further as a familiar face emerged from the crowd.

“Hey!” Eli called out, his tall, muscular frame a commanding presence amid the people around him. He raised his hand to signal his location, and Ava shook her head as she knew it was unnecessary. He towered over everyone else, and if that was not enough, his dirty-blond mane fluttered in the wind like a flag on a ship. Eli’s green eyes pierced through the distance and locked onto Claire.

Without skipping a beat, Claire skipped away from Ava, rushing across the street to throw herself into his arms, simultaneously shoving what remained of her ice cream into his face. Her laughter mixed with his, a symphony that played only for the two of them.

Ava watched with a ping of jealousy, a fleeting feeling that she hid away. The two had been dating for several years, and it was through Eli that she had met Kaden, starting the long history of their friendship surrounding her inability to gather the courage to tell him how she felt. But with their assignments pulling them apart, she would change that.

“Where have you been?” Claire asked, her eyes concerned. “We were supposed to meet right after I finished in the med-tent!”

Eli set his petite girlfriend back on the ground, towering over her at full height. His smile shifted into an expression at odds with the festive atmosphere around them.

“I was looking for Kaden,” Eli said. “But I didn’t have any luck. I did, however, catch a glimpse of someone who looked like Henry. And if he’s here, then we can kiss goodbye to our chances of hanging out with Kaden.”

Ava’s heart skipped. Her entire day was planned around Kaden and getting some alone time with him. If Henry was here that was not going to happen, and she would find herself one day closer to his departure.

Claire pushed against Eli, her slight form crashing against his. “People have been going missing,” she said. “You should have at least found me first. It wasn’t very nice of you.”

“But I’m here now, aren’t I?” Eli asked, throwing his arms up in defense.

“Yeah, but even as big as you are, I still worry.” Claire shifted from attacking him to hugging his arm. She was much quicker to forgive than Ava.

“But Kaden has to be overwhelmed with excitement right now,” Ava spoke up, her face flushed with a new urgency. “We should find him. Even if Henry is with him we should be there to congratulate him.”

“Oh, hey there, Ava.” Eli walked toward her, offering a light jab on her arm. “What are you so worked up over? There’s no rush. Kaden will still be here tomorrow.”

She let out a frustrated sigh, her shoulder slumping over. She wanted to be there to support Kaden, but she also wanted to give him space. The extra time to think was sending her mind tumbling.

“Claire just said people have been going missing,” Ava said, defiantly crossing her arms. “And it would be pretty easy to get snatched away with all these people. So, let’s go find him.”

Eli rolled his eyes. “Kaden’s the last one you have to worry about. He’s doing fine, I’m sure of that.”

“You say he is fine, but what if he isn’t?” Ava questioned. “Why wouldn’t he meet up with us like planned?”

Eli threw his hands up again, cutting her off. “Woah, woah, don’t go shooting the friend here. Kaden is his own person. Why are you so concerned about his well-being anyway, huh? You have a case of the Descen-

sion Day blues?” He jabbed his elbow playfully into Claire’s side, obviously wanting her to partake in his jokes. An icy glare was all he received.

“Shut it, you oversized oaf,” Ava snapped at him.

“Just saying, I think you two would make a great couple!” He laughed, jumping out of the way of her swinging fist. He was saved only by Claire who pulled him towards a group of graduates making their way from the main square, where Kaden was emerging from the group, his face taut with determination.

Kaden’s presence always overtook Ava with its striking ferocity. His brown hair often sat tousled atop his head, hanging loosely over his blue eyes, giving him an enigmatic look. And those eyes, a vivid blue that pierced her soul from across the distance, were intense and thoughtful, hinting at a depth of emotion beneath his calm exterior.

“Ah, there you guys are,” Kaden said, running up to the group. Anyone would appear diminutive next to Eli, but Kaden stood confident with his lean, muscular build, which reflected his life of training. His mere presence kept Ava on her toes, awaiting any word from his mouth.

“Took you long enough, buddy.” His brute of a friend laid an arm around his shoulder. “Now tell us, how does it feel to have conquered the Choosing? To stand atop the highest peak looking down at us peasants?”

After rolling his eyes, Kaden’s gaze met her own, scattering the knot that had formed in her belly.

“It’s not that serious, guys,” he said. “Hi, Ava. How have you all been?”

“We’re good, man,” Eli said, his hand slapping against Kaden’s back. “Where have you been?”

Kaden's eyes softened for a moment. "Henry came to see me. He's leaving for Centrum on some sort of lengthy mission. Said he probably wouldn't be there when I arrive."

Sadness seeped from his voice, reaching deep into Ava's heart. She yearned to extend her arms and pull him into an embrace but resisted. Instead, she could offer only her support.

"So, he is gone already?" she asked. A solemn nod was his only response.

"Well, he is Aegis. That's to be expected," Claire said. Ava shot her a glare, her eyes burning into her friend, and she quickly added, "It's still sad, of course. But you'll be with him before you know it, and he can share all his Aegis stories with you."

Eli laughed, pushing Kaden forward. "Exactly. Now come on, we have food to try!"

Eli yanked Claire with him as Kaden stumbled. The three of them were already moving ahead, leaving Ava alone momentarily. What was only a few steps now would become miles of separation in a couple of weeks, and Ava's heart sank with the realization. The coming days would be spent preparing for their departure and her move, so this could very well be the last time they were all four together.

Stretching out a hand toward her friends, she stopped herself. There was no need to make today about sadness and change. No, she needed to reflect on their friendships and enjoy every possible second.

But even as Ava rushed forward to join them, her boots thudded against the ground, heavy with the uncertainty of the future. The streets around her were still alive with the vibrant chaos of the celebrations, and the air buzzed with the hum of excited voices and the occasional burst of laughter.

But there was a gnawing in her soul, a strange omen, as if everything were about to change in ways she could never anticipate.

“Woah, cool!” Eli pointed at a vendor who was selling colorful puffs on a stick. “What is that?”

The young man burst away from the group, stumbling forward like a pup. Claire followed from behind, pushing through a group of graduates to reach her boyfriend, which left Ava alone with Kaden.

“By the way,” Kaden said, pulling her attention away from the couple, “congratulations on making the Radiation Division. That’s absolutely amazing.”

Her face burned. “Thanks,” she said, shrinking into herself. “It’s exciting, but I’m nervous. But it is nothing compared to Aegis. You must be so happy.”

The young man blushed, running his fingers through the brown locks dangling before his face. The kindness from his eyes quickened her heart, and her head spun as if she might faint. “Nah, it isn’t that big a deal,” he said. “Aegis is just the military. What you’ll be doing is so much more. Giving humanity a future—that’s something to be proud of.”

Ava’s skin tingled, and she found herself scratching away the sensation. “Well, we all got what we wanted, which is incredible. I am going to be sad, though, with everyone leaving.”

Her eyes scanned from Kaden to the duo, who were shoving the vibrant puffs into their mouths, their laughter overpowering the noise from the crowd. Her mind had begun to calm in the presence of her friends. The uncertainties of tomorrow could wait. The threat of the Edenborn and the rumors of the Council mattered little to her at this moment. All she cared

about was making unforgettable memories with the people who mattered most.

“Come on,” she said, her hand grasping onto Kaden’s. His calloused palm rubbed against hers, and his eyes widened, their azure shining against the gray backdrop of their world. “We need to try as much food as we can! Descension Day only lasts for a day!”

She rushed forward, pulling her friend along with her. Ava laughed as she pushed through the crowd, her heart racing. Together with her friends, celebrating their achievements, nothing could sour this day.

Hours flew by in a blur. She yanked her friends along past stalls that lined the road. They tried everything. A drink that sent chills to her brain, frozen in tiny crystals mixed with hints of berries. Fried dough that at first hurt her teeth, but then the sweetness became almost addicting. Juicy sandwiches piled with smoke-rich meats and a savory sauce decadent with hickory. Music played, filling her ears with the tunes of a lost world. She sang. She danced. She pulled Kaden into the street, twirling with him, his smile reflecting the domed lights.

Finally, she collapsed on a bench, gasping for air between fits of laughter. Kaden fell next to her, joined by Eli and Claire. The four sat in silence for a moment, their stomachs bulbous from gorging on the delicacies of the festival. Her hand fell to the bench, resting mere inches from Kaden’s. In a moment of confidence, Ava slid her hand closer until her fingers practically mingled with his. Night had settled over them after the daylights of the dome were powered off, leaving them sitting in the sparkling luminescence of the festival vendors’ dazzling streetlamps. This was the perfect time to tell Kaden how she felt.

Just then, the festive music and chatter began to fade as the screens throughout the city came to life. The holographic projections displayed bustling crowds and celebratory banners. Kaden's attention turned toward the broadcast, his hand pulling away from hers, leaving Ava with a knot in her stomach. Premier Darian Elridge stood at a podium on the balcony overlooking Centrum's square. This broadcast signaled one thing: It was the end of the festivities.

The premier's voice was clear and authoritative, amplified by the city's sound system, as he began his closing remarks on the day of remembrance. "Citizens of Initium, Centrum, and Finis. I thank you for your years of service and commitment to Havenhearth. Obstacles have marked the past century, but humankind has overcome every one. We would not be standing here today without you, the citizens."

Kaden's eyes were fixated on the projected image of the premier, whose face was a mix of stern determination and practiced calm. He leaned in to Ava, his voice a hushed whisper.

"Maybe if they got a handle on all these missing people I would actually care about what he had to say." Ava turned toward Kaden, his teeth bared for a moment. He softened when he noticed her gaze. "Sorry, I guess I'm anxious about what will be in store for me in Centrum."

Ava nodded as the premier continued his speech when a loud shriek broke the steady rhythm of Havenhearth's anthem. The broadcast abruptly stuttered and shifted. The feed crackled, and a figure silhouetted by shadows replaced the clear image of the premier. A new voice boomed throughout the streets, harsh and filled with a vibrant intensity.

“Attention, citizens of Havenhearth. This is a message from the Eden-born . . .”