



A glance over his shoulder assured Miles Butler the girl was not following him into the forest. Good. Miles didn't need the implications of bringing a Speaker back home with him.

He almost brought a Speaker home!

Miles absent-mindedly pushed a low hanging branch out of his face as he followed the familiar narrow trail from the Outpost to his encampment. His mind whirled. He could have epically messed everything up.

How had he not recognized the girl was a Speaker? She ran out of the thick of the forest as he waited for the right time to intercept her. But she tripped. He was about to make sure she was okay when she peered right at him.

He'd been mesmerized as her steely eyes widened in delight and a genuine laugh escaped her lips before she slung mud across her face, stopping the gleeful noise. Relief washed over him when he realized she wasn't fixated on him but on an owl in a nearby tree. By the time he glanced away from the bird, she was already on the move.

Again.

He'd run out of time to stop her.

Miles had no choice but to knock her to the ground and try to convince her to go back with him. The last thing he wanted to do was scare the girl, but by the time he got her to calm down, he noticed the initial dangling from a thin silver chain. A cursive S for Speaker.

The piercing shrill of the siren sealed their fate. It was too late to right his mistake. He let the girl's joy of watching an owl, a creature he'd seen countless times, distract him from his job.

His carelessness had also cost the girl, and she no doubt was scared out of her mind. Locked out of the one place she understood and had purpose.

Guilt wiggled its way in, but he pushed it aside with facts. The girl shouldn't have been in the forest. He had no way of knowing she wasn't a Runner. Each Outpost sent one runner out into the woods each night, and each morning, they returned with the rules for the Speaker to announce to the Outpost. Assuming the girl was a Runner was only natural.

"Hey! Don't leave, this is all your fault!"

Miles spun around, surprised at the feminine voice calling out from behind him. He scanned the area but couldn't make out anyone in the thick brush.

"Thanks to you, my people are stuck inside until the Gates open again!"

The Speaker. Miles sighed, dread filling his stomach. She followed him after all. He had to lose her and quickly. He sprinted down the trail, jumping over fallen logs and uprooted tree roots.

"Hey!"

She was chasing after him. Miles had to give the girl some credit. She was determined.

"Please stop!" The Speaker's voice came out in gasps of air, confirming she wouldn't be able to keep up with him. But he

had to change trails, he could not lead her towards his encampment.

“I can’t just sit outside the Gates for three days. The lock is on a timer.”

If he remembered correctly, she wasn’t wearing shoes, so there was no way she could keep up with him off the path. Hating himself, he turned suddenly to the right, crashing through low hanging branches and uneven ground.

He glanced behind him and was shocked to see the girl was still chasing after him. Fatigue etched her face, but she barreled on and, every so often, flinched in pain. Still, she pursued Miles.

“I can’t stay at the meadow. I have no trees to block the sun, no water, no plants—nothing.” The more she rambled, the more Miles’s stomach clenched. “Don’t you know the forest is forbidden?”

The brush was becoming too hard to maneuver, and Miles had to stop sprinting and start walking carefully over a section of large rocks. The girl stopped calling after him, and Miles found himself confirming she was still there.

Then it happened. A short scream of pain, followed by silence. Miles stopped to debate whether or not to keep going. Taking a deep breath, he turned around. The girl was on the ground, clutching her foot.

Her hair fell in a tangled mess around her face, and tears streaked her dirty cheeks as she inspected her injured foot. What a jerk move. He couldn’t stand to see someone in pain, and *this* was his fault.

What else could he do? His intervention took a Speaker away from her duty, which was unforgivable.

Now, leaving the girl on her own was just as inexcusable. He rubbed his hand over his face and quickly made his way back to her.

“You come to gloat?” Her voice was hard and cool as she glanced up at him.

“No. I didn’t come to gloat.” He bent down to look her in the eye. “I’m here to make sure you’re all right.”

She snorted, and her cheeks turned bright red.

“Can I see it?” He gestured to her hand clamped around her foot. Blood poured between her fingers.

“If I remove my hand, the wound will keep gushing.”

“We need to tie something around it to add pressure and stop the bleeding.” Miles pulled his pocket knife out of his back pocket, wishing he’d brought his backpack full of supplies. But this was only supposed to be an hour trip. And definitely not something that required medical supplies.

He cut a section of his t-shirt off the bottom. The girl’s eyes narrowed, but she finally relinquished her foot for him to inspect it. More guilt punched him in the stomach. Dozens of tiny scrapes crisscrossed the sole of her foot, but a gash covered her heel. It wasn’t too deep, yet walking would be a nuisance, and there was no doubt it would open back up.

“Will I live?” He glanced up to see her half-smile mixed with pain and accusation.

Taking his canteen, he did his best to clean her wound before wrapping the fabric around it and made quick work to knot it. “Yep.” He cinched it, probably a little too hard, but she didn’t say anything else. “Walking may be a little difficult.”

“Just what I needed. More difficulty.” She struggled to get to a standing position, so he reached out to help her. She shoved his hand away. “I can do it myself.”

Miles sighed. “I was trying to help.” Evidently, it was the wrong thing to say because the girl gasped.

“You were trying to help? You are the reason why I’m in this mess!”

The girl’s charge stabbed him straight in the heart. He sighed, averting his eyes from her face back to her foot. Blood

stained the side of the fabric, except there wasn't much he could do at the moment.

"I'm sorry." He bent down and tucked a strand of cloth back around the knot and then met her gaze. "I didn't know you were a Speaker."

The girl's eyes widened at his admission. "You know who I am?"

He had to tread carefully with his reply. How much should he tell her? Most people he encountered in the woods were already curious or at least suspicious about the forest. They had the seeds of doubt sprouting in their mind about the Outpost. But a Speaker would never trespass into the forest. Would never leave the comfort of the Monitors. So why did the girl? It didn't make any sense.

The girl's face changed from surprise to wariness. He needed to get the conversation on more neutral ground until he could figure out what to say. "I think you might need some stitches." He gently reached towards her foot. "It's a gnarly cut."

"Thanks to you."

Another stab, but she was right. He knowingly led her off the beaten path in hopes it would slow her down. Once she fell and called out for help, he couldn't ignore her pleas. No matter that she was a Speaker, and he was a Forest Walker.

A deserter of the Outpost.

And she was the one person who was off-limits. To harm or lure a Speaker away from the Outpost was a fate worse than death.

He stood and took a step away from her. He had to find a way to distance himself from this mess. "You're the one who followed me. It's not my fault you aren't wearing shoes."

"You left me outside the Gates. Just walked off into the forest and left me alone." She pushed back her hair from her face. "I had no choice but to follow you." She shuddered. "I couldn't have stayed out in the open for seventy-two hours!"

Ugh, this girl twisted everything. “You had to be back before the siren blared, not me.” He didn’t even try to hide his annoyance. She needed to take some responsibility for the situation. Did she not realize what would happen if she wasn’t back inside before the siren ended?

Tears welled up in her eyes, but her tone was cold. “I wouldn’t have been late if you hadn’t knocked me down. Then grabbed my legs.” She shuddered. “For a moment, I thought you were going to ...” Her voice trailed off, and terror filled her eyes.

All of the breath left Mile’s lungs as the implications of her words filled him with nausea. “I could never do that to someone.” He clenched his jaw so hard it ached. He only wanted to get her attention, but when she fell, she freaked out, and he’d only meant to get her to calm down. His stomach twisted at the thought of horror and panic she felt. “I’m so sorry you thought ... I only wanted to stop you from going back to the Outpost.”

“Why stop me?” Her voice was quiet but no longer held the same venom and disdain it had before. “And why did you run away from me after the siren?”

Sweat dripped down his neck distracting him from her question. He spotted the sun slowly making its way above the trees. He was running out of time before he needed to be back. But what was he going to do with the girl? He couldn’t leave her here. Not now. Not after she thought the worst of him, and not on her injured foot.

“Obviously, you can’t stay here.” He gestured around them. “We aren’t exactly in the safest spot in this forest. Let’s get you to my camp where we can stitch up your foot, and then we can talk.”

The girl tilted her head, considering his words. It was the best he could offer at the moment. If they started now, he could help her walk back to his village and get her to the healer. He

could find her some shoes, but he needed time to figure out what he was going to say to his village's leader, Thomas.

He grinned, hoping for a fresh start, and extended a hand, his leather bracelet moving up his arm. "I'm Miles Butler."

The corners of her mouth slowly lifted to a smile, and her eyes lit up. "Renna James." She slipped her hand into his, and Miles tried to ignore that it fit perfectly within his. He concentrated on getting her to a standing position and wrapped his arm around her waist to help take the weight off of her injured foot.

"All right, Renna James, one step at a time."

She took a couple of steps and then inhaled a sharp breath. "How many more?"

"A few hundred, give or take a few thousand."

"I was afraid you would say that."