



FRAGILE



REMEDY

MARIA INGRANDE MORA

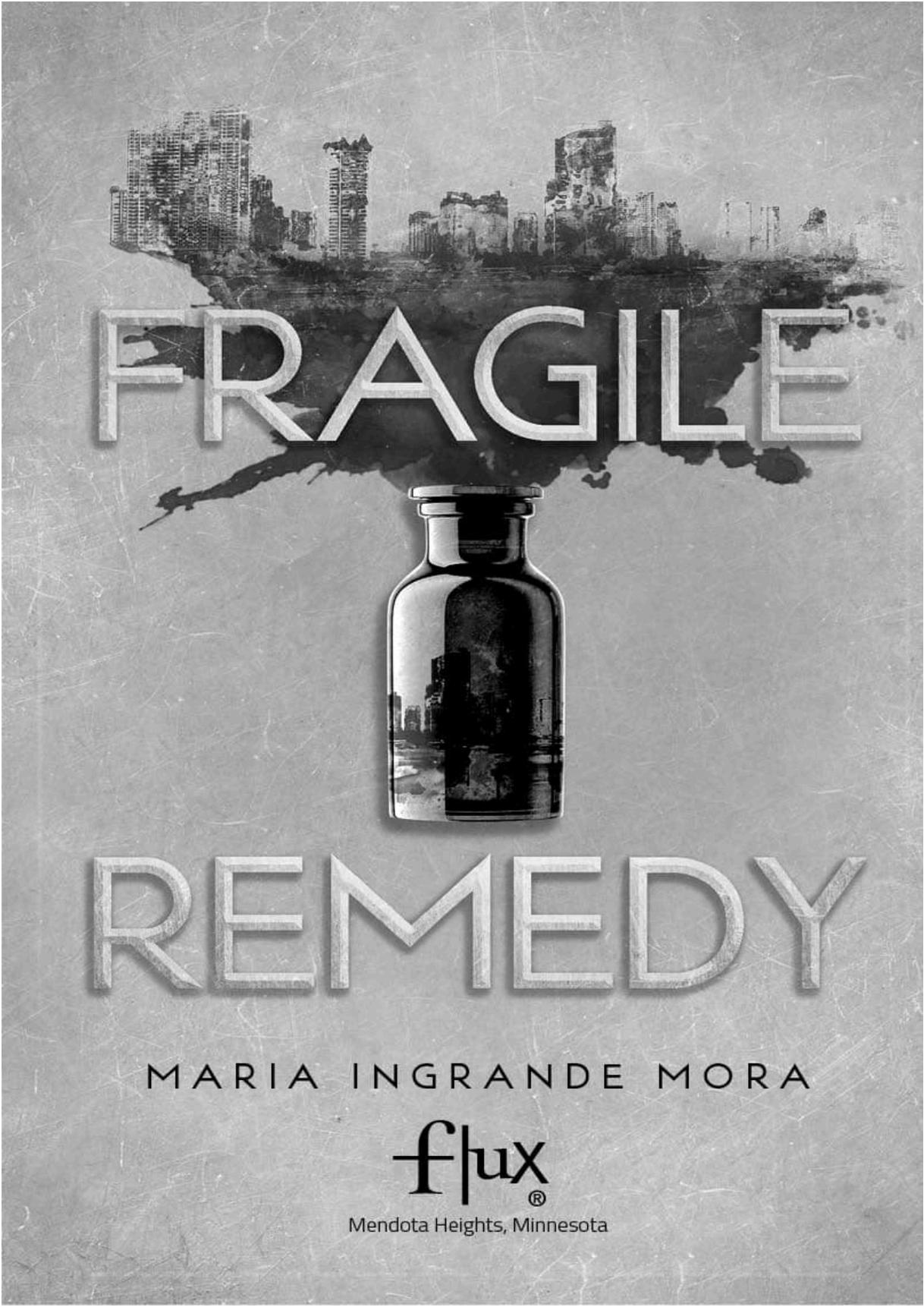


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flux[®]

Mendota Heights, Minnesota

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*To every one of my teachers.
Even the math ones.*

CHAPTER ONE

ate knew better than to slow down on the elevated rail, but he dropped to a crouch anyway. His stomach growled at the sound of fluttering wings. Picking up a sharp piece of broken pavement, he scanned the air to take aim.

NA hoarse laugh escaped him. “Those aren’t gulls.”
Ribbons of fabric snapped in the smog-choked wind from laundry lines strung between corroded water towers. Staring at the frayed edge of a sheet stained with exhaust, he dropped the rock and absently rubbed the callus on his pointer finger. It’s not like he would have managed to hit the bird.

His hands ached.

So did his feet from keeping a brisk pace to dodge Gathos City commuter trains that never slowed down as they passed over the Withers.

Below, someone was shouting about spoiled sludge-rat broth. The ugly thuds and cries of a scuffle broke out. Nate spared a glance over the edge of the rail before a swoop of vertigo struck him. He pushed gritty hair behind his ears. High up or not, running the rails beat dealing with streets crowded with hunger and hurt.

The tracks shuddered.

Nate’s body went cold. A train growled at his back.

Fear jolted through him as he sprinted to the next support beam and swung down onto its rusty rungs. A pale girl scrambled down alongside him, narrowly avoiding getting flattened. They exchanged tight nods as the train blasted by, raining hot gravel down on them.

Shielding his eyes with one shaking hand, he dared a look at the blur of the commuter train, hungry for a glimpse of the beautiful gearwork. It was too fast to make anything out. And maybe that was how the Withers looked to the commuters—just a smear of faded color and decay.

Nate coughed against his arm. His chest ached sharply, and a thread of worry wound through him, bigger than the bitterness that struck him every time a train passed, carrying people who weren’t tired or scared.

It hasn't even been a week.

He didn't have time to go to Alden's for help. If he reconciled himself to the mercy of Alden's pace, he'd never get to the port before dark. And before he sold the tech-guts weighing his pockets, he had to sell the precious fishing line he'd bartered an afternoon of tinkering for. If he struck a good bargain, he could get enough credits to buy fresh greens. A month of dried meat and watery broth wasn't doing the gang any good.

Another cough rattled his chest, and he grimaced.

"Lunger?" The girl covered her mouth with the back of her grubby hand and ducked away like she smelled something bad. She gestured to the faded, torn lung-rot quarantine poster on the support beam above them. Someone had drawn a dog peeing on the swirling Gathos City logo.

"Very funny." Nate rolled his eyes. No one had lung-rot anymore.

As one of Gathos City's experiments, he knew that better than anyone. His kind had been developed by scientists to fight the lung-rot outbreak, and later—when the lung-rot was gone—to be used up. Harvested by the wealthy. Kept endlessly asleep or left awake to participate in the horror of it. At least that's what people said when they whispered about GEMs.

Even that word was nicer than the truth. *Genetically Engineered Medi-tissue.*

He wasn't supposed to be here.

She arched a bushy eyebrow. "What then?"

The stray thought of this girl somehow discovering what he was made him itchy to keep moving. He climbed back onto the rail with a groan, wishing he had the strength to rip the poster down, ball it up, and throw it at her face. "It's nothing. Just the dust."

She swung her wiry body up onto the concrete rail platform and tugged at the blue bandana around her neck. "You should wrap something around your face when you run the rails, kid."

"I'm not a kid." Nate wasn't tall by any measure, and this girl only came up to his ears. Irritation—and fear he didn't have time for—sharpened his tongue. "I'm older than you."

“Wanna bet?”

“Only if you’re betting with sausage.”

She laughed. “I’d rather bet with my life than a piece of good meat.”

“I’m nineteen.” He was sixteen, but nineteen sounded more distinguished.

“Nineteen? That’s a funny name. I’m Val.” She took off with a limber jog.

Nate didn’t bother to catch up. The ease of her pace prickled at him. His boots felt like they were full of stones. “My name isn’t Nineteen, little brat!” he called out. “It’s Nate.”

“I *am* older than you.” Val flashed gray teeth at him. “Watch yourself.”

“*You* watch yourself,” he shot back, sore. He didn’t care if she was twelve or twenty. His odds of actually living to nineteen were slim.

He’d only been awake for a few hours, but he felt like his clothes were made of lead. He wasn’t supposed to be this tired. Not this soon.

“Sure you’re not poorly?” Val slowed her pace until Nate caught up.

A headache began to bloom, blood pounding between his ears. Her prying was making it worse. “It’s not catching.”

Val grunted. A couple of kids sprinted by them as the rails began to rumble again. The ache thrummed behind Nate’s eyes.

When had he had his last dose of Remedy? Four days? Maybe five? He could usually go two weeks before the hurting started.

“Move, you fool!” Val grabbed his arm and pulled him into a run. They collapsed onto the next support beam. The train roared by, wheels hissing against the steel track. Silver and black whooshed overhead, too fast to focus on. Too fast to comprehend. “You’ll be nothing but a stain if you keep courting trains like that!”

Hot embers stung Nate’s knuckles.

The train was gone. He could feel his heartbeat in the thick silence.

He pressed his forehead against a cool rung and willed his body to stop trembling. He’d never come that close to getting struck before. If Val hadn’t been there, the train would have eaten him up.

I should have gone straight to Alden’s.

He wouldn’t do Reed and the gang any good smeared across the concrete.

Val flicked his ear and offered her bruised hand. “Come on. Where you headed?”

“The port.” He let her drag him to his feet.

She shook dust out of her short, choppy hair. “Funny. You don’t smell like fish.”

Nate’s arm still stung from the force of her grip—a reminder that she’d saved his life. He offered the truth in exchange. “I’ve got a spool of fishing line to sell.”

“That’s hard to come by,” Val said, gaze keen.

Nate shrugged. He didn’t have to tell her where it came from. Once people knew you were a Tinkerer, they started thinking about all the things that needed mending. He didn’t have time for that.

“You look like a dead sludge-fish.” Val brushed pale specks of gravel from her shoulders. “I don’t want to step in your guts next time I’m on the rails.”

Embarrassment flared at Nate’s cheeks. She was right. He never should have walked the rails in this state, and he was too sick to finish his errands before nightfall. In the darkness, the only trade to come by was chem and flesh. No one would want the scraps of tech-guts that weighed down his pockets. He was too small to defend himself when night drew bleary-eyed fiends from their dens. He needed to go to Alden’s.

Now.

Bitterness dried his mouth. “I’ll take care to avoid the trains.”

“You talk awful high-class for a thieving tech peddler.”

He trailed her steps, wishing she’d hurry up and run off so he wouldn’t have to talk to her. “You’re awful nosy for a stranger.”

“No such thing as a stranger in Gathos, Nine—”

“It’s *Nate*,” he interrupted, losing his patience.

“I like Nine better.” Val took on the disinterested tone of the tinny loudspeakers at the city gates. “*Everyone is encouraged to help each other through these unforeseen circumstances,*” she intoned, reciting the recording.

Nate couldn’t help a small smile. Her impression was spot-on. “Right. *‘We’re all in it together.’*”

“*Stay tuned for further announcements regarding the quarantine.*” She hitched up

her sagging, stained pants and finished with a rude gesture aimed toward the gleaming skyline of Gathos City across the wide sludge-channel.

Lung-rot might not kill people anymore, but decades of quarantine killed plenty. Violence boiled over in the hot months, and exposure and fires ravaged the dwindling population in the cold. Chem killed, making dull-eyed fiends out of anyone who tried to numb the pain of starvation.

A flutter ran through Nate's belly—fear or excitement or hunger. These days, it was hard to tell the difference.

The weight of his errand nagged at him. His gang was hungry.

And they were waiting.

Though she outpaced him, Val lingered. Her gaze darted to his trembling hands. "Haven't I seen you around Victory Park?"

A prickle ran down Nate's spine. He'd lived in that neighborhood once. Years before. She had no way of knowing that.

"No, I live by the market on 53rd." Unsettled by her interest in where he lived, he forced himself to smile through the lie. "Always have."

"My cousin's family lives in the library over there. You know the place?"

Folks had converted the huge library into family housing decades ago, after the books had gotten torn up for bedding and kindling. It was one of the safer places to live—full of people raising little kids.

"Yeah, I see it every day." Nate hadn't seen it in months. The gang stayed away from that side of town. They didn't steal from families.

"Maybe I'll see you around." A crooked tooth caught against her lip when she gave him a sly smile.

"Walk well, old lady." Nate swung down a ladder, knowing Val wouldn't follow if she really had somewhere to be. And if she did tail him, he'd lead her in circles until he passed out or she died of boredom.

"Gods watch you, Nine," she replied easily. The roar of a passing train drowned out her laughter as she braced herself for the next blast of exhaust. The scorching air stung Nate's skin.

When the cloud of dust and smoke faded, she was gone.

Nate skirted a tent city crowded in the bombed-out shell of a building. Some days, the people who lived there got fired up and strung out on chem and hurled rocks at the passing trains.

It was quiet today, colorful tarps sighing in the breeze. A handful of Servants in drab robes walked from tent to tent, murmuring prayers in hushed tones and asking after those frail with age and sickness. Nate had always been fascinated by them. They believed in the Old Gods, a mythology that, for most, had long been overtaken by science—by the things people did to each other with no help from the makers of the world. He longed for the simplicity of believing in something good.

He'd seen too much of the bad to have faith.

Still, the Servants intrigued him. They alone gave aid to the sick and suffering in the Withers. Those who were chosen by the Servants to join their ranks left behind their families and vowed to care for those who could not care for themselves. They lived together in sick-dens, helping anyone they could.

Feeling one of their gazes, Nate ducked his head automatically. Attention was rarely a good thing in the Withers, and he'd learned a long time ago to stay small and quiet. A short Servant with white hands and a face hidden by her hood stopped to watch him stumble along. She continued to study him too closely, and he let his hair fall into his face and hurried off—wary of questions. When he glanced over his shoulder, she was still watching him, her face shadowed by her hood.

Whatever she thought she had to offer, it didn't matter. Servants' prayers and salves couldn't help him.

Two scrawny children chased a chewed-up plastic ball around in the mud and paused, watching Nate closely as he shuffled by. He offered a wave and earned a pair of scowls. A grin tugged at his dry lips. They were smart to be suspicious. It would keep them alive longer.

Nate approached the bustling heart of the Withers. The quarantined island had once been known as Winter Heights—the largest of the chain of islands that dotted the wide sludge-channel that ran through Gathos City.

Here, in the oldest neighborhood on the decaying island, the musical sound of voices echoed between crooked buildings. Nate crammed into a narrow alley, avoiding the crowded main street, his boots squelching through muck and filth on the pavement. It wasn't easygoing, but at least he wouldn't get flattened by a train or trampled.

He shook with exhaustion and braced himself against a rough brick wall to catch his breath.

The smell of rendered fat overtook the alley's musty stench. His stomach rumbled, but he knew better than to fall for the oily scent of grease. Most street meat in the Withers was a mixture of guts and gravel.

And he couldn't eat until he'd sold the gang's haul and picked up enough food for all of them to share.

He might have enough time. The sun winked down at him between the slats of rusted fire escapes. As long as he kept this pace, he could make it to Alden's for Remedy and over to the market before sundown. He wouldn't be able to sell the fishing line there, but he could sell the rest.

Val's words itched at him. He'd never liked the common prayer: *Gods watch you.*

Nate wanted to believe in the Old Gods—ancient makers of thunder and dirt and blood, according to Servants and old folks. But he knew where he came from.

Not from the deep jewel sea or the tall trees that had once stood against the storms that battered the islands of Gathos in the summer. Not from the gray sky or the green shadows of dusk. Not dropped from the beak of a fat gull, the way children sang when they pointed at the birds that rode the smog-breezes high overhead. In the Withers, babies were plenty—and died plenty too.

Nate tripped on a pothole, stumbling to his hands and knees. Pain flared at his joints. Sighing, he scrambled back up and wiped his stinging hands against his coat.

Hurt made him maudlin and clumsy.

The horizon tilted, and his elbow scraped along the grime-smearred brick as he righted himself. His feet dragged, heavy. Uncoordinated. He couldn't have jogged if he'd tried.

So much for keeping this pace.

At least he was close to where he needed to be.

On the stoop of Alden's shop, he doubled over with dry heaves, suddenly grateful for his empty stomach.

"My," a voice said at his ear. "A lost little boy."

Nate jerked away, struck by the urge to lean in—and the revulsion that followed. "Alden, you rat."

Alden caught his wrist and tugged him into his curio shop. "You should keep a better lookout when you're wandering about."

He scanned the street behind Nate and slammed the door, setting the chimes off so loudly it made Nate's eyeballs hurt. Broken-glass suncatchers in the front window cast tiny rainbows all over the shop. Nate's breath hitched softly, and he ached with more than sickness. Despite everything, the shop still felt like home. Having a real place to stay had been so much easier than scrambling to find safe hideouts with the gang.

"You look vile," Alden said impassively.

He stood a head taller than Nate, willowy and graceful, black hair spilling down his back like ink. He'd been beautiful once, before he'd ravaged his body with chem. Alden wasn't much older than Nate, but he carried himself like a man three times his age, as if the air around him weighed too much.

"I realize that," Nate bit out. "I almost got smashed by a train. A girl pushed me out of the way, or I would have been a stain on the tracks."

"Thrilling," Alden murmured.

Alden's grandmother came out from behind a woven curtain. "GEMs don't grow up," she announced, laughing like a gull and pointing a knotted finger at Nate. Fran's face was so wrinkled the folds drooped over her jewel-black eyes. She wore her hair in a neat silvery bun at the top of her head.

"I'm not grown," Nate said, unbothered by the sound of his secret. Fran's mind had gone long before Nate had met her. No one would believe her if she claimed to know a fugitive GEM.

She poked his ribs and belly as if examining an exotic fruit before turning her

attention to a bowl full of faded sequins on the counter. Embroidered robes swayed from her shoulders, hiding the frail angles of her body. Unlike Alden, she had always treated Nate like family—at least when she could remember who he was. His skin stayed warm where she'd touched him.

Alden locked the shop door. He swept his thin arm out like he was putting on a street-corner play, sizing Nate up with an elegant wave. The movement faltered, and he frowned. "You really do look dreadful."

"I need Remedy." Nate crossed his arms and sagged against the counter. "I'm tired."

The weight of his understatement hung between them. This wasn't normal exhaustion. He stared Alden down, daring him to acknowledge it. Wondering, for a sickening heartbeat, if he had a part in it.

"But I have guests arriving soon." Alden curled his long fingers around Nate's shoulders, his touch icy. "Impatient guests."

"They can wait." Nate didn't want to think about the stuffy basement or Alden's guests. Alden didn't sell the moldy herbs in gleaming canisters or glass jewelry glittering around his shop. He sold high-quality chem to anyone with enough credits to buy a few minutes of peace.

Most of the time, Alden's guests were sweaty and thin and haunted by their hunger. The worst were curiously well-dressed and lingered in the shop, touching everything within reach and sneaking glances at every dusty nook and cranny.

When those people came around, Alden made Nate hide in Fran's bedroom, surrounded by her silky robes and mildewed books and baskets full of colorful yarn.

Nate squirmed, tugging his shoulders out of Alden's grip, already feeling like he'd been here far too long.

"And what if I'm impatient?" Alden understood the needs of the fiends who stumbled wild-eyed into his shop—he looked the same way every morning.

His hungry gaze was the perfect cure for nostalgia. Nate fought the urge to storm off. If he did, he'd be dead in days. Maybe hours.

"You can't make me," he said instead.

“I can be persuasive, darling.”

“Not as persuasive as you think.”

Nate only had the upper hand in one way: he'd already left once. Alden's need, laid bare and tormented, hadn't been enough to keep Nate around, and he'd finally left him. Nate hadn't even known if Alden would survive or if his heart would give like the fiends on the street who fell asleep on doorsteps and never woke up.

He'd leave again before he allowed Alden to sink into the suffocating grip of his own desire.

“You haven't even asked what I'm offering.” Alden kissed the top of Nate's head and sputtered, gagging like he'd tasted something awful. Which was probably true. Nate hadn't bathed in days.

The ache behind Nate's eyes rattled around in his skull with each word. It sapped his anger. All he wanted to do was curl up on the floor and close his eyes before the pain blossomed. He didn't care how much he sounded like a demanding child. “Just help me, Alden.”

“How do you explain all these visits to your darling Reed?” Alden asked.

Nate bristled, but couldn't work up the energy to stomp across the room away from Alden's knowing gaze. Couldn't do anything except tremble. The thought of Reed waiting for him made shame and desire collide in his blood, a hot-and-cold feeling that didn't do anything for his headache.

Reed didn't know what Nate was hiding. Couldn't know.

“It doesn't matter what I tell him.”

When they'd first met, Alden had seemed like the wisest, most sophisticated person in the Withers. He flirted with Nate relentlessly, but it was just Alden's nature. He'd flirt with a lamppost if he thought he could get something from it.

Now they both knew Nate had something to give.

“I think I have a right to know what stories you're telling about me.” Alden clasped an arm around Nate's chest and held him still while Fran came close again, sniffing the air and cackling softly.

“He's sick, my boy.” Her voice rustled like dry paper. “Sick, sick.”

“Please, Alden. It’s not lasting as long.”

“He’s dying!” Fran crowed.

“Enough, Grandmother!” Alden snapped, releasing Nate to shoo Fran through the curtain to her bedroom. He stood in the folds of the blood-red fabric as if wearing a cloak, turning his black eyes on Nate.

“You’re not dying,” he said. It sounded like a question.

“If you won’t let me have Remedy, I’ll go to someone else.” Nate’s voice thinned. “I have to.”

“Do you really think others will go to the great lengths I’ve gone through to keep you safe?” Alden enunciated each word tightly. “Do I need to remind you just how many people would happily snatch you off the street?”

“You don’t care about keeping me safe. You just want to keep me.” Nate pressed his fingers to the ridge of bone at his cheeks. Even his teeth hurt.

“One and the same, sweet thing.”

“Alden.”

“Anyone who has Remedy will hand you over to the Breakers the moment you ask for it. They’ll never let you go. You’ll go to the highest bidder before you can beg the Old Gods to end it all.”

“Stop.”

“You’ll spend the rest of your life strung up in a basement far less hospitable than mine.” Alden’s steely expression faltered. “They’ll take everything, Natey.”

The echoes of what had passed between them left no doubt in Nate’s mind. If Alden had nearly killed him, a stranger would do far worse.

Nate grabbed Alden’s cold hand. “Then don’t make me wait. I’ll let you feed next week,” he said, knowing he wouldn’t. Never again. Not when he couldn’t go a solid week before stumbling around half dead. Not when it put Alden at risk of relapsing. “You know my word is good. I can’t be sick like this. I’ve got to move this tech and bring food home for—”

“For the gang,” Alden spat, shaking off Nate’s hand. His gaze went cold. “Reed’s merry band of orphans and whores.”

Nate bit back a reply. There was no use talking to Alden once he shut off like a

snapped wire. It was all business now.

Alden led him into the small side room with a locked curio cabinet. “Don’t make bargains you can’t keep,” he said quietly. “It’s not a good look.”

Nate shied away from Alden’s ornate, rusted mirror and smoothed back the stringy dark hair that had fallen from his ponytail. He hated seeing his reflection—the deep circles under his gray eyes and streaks of soot mottling his golden-brown skin like bruises.

He knew he looked sick.

He knew that’s all that Reed saw. Weakness. Illness.

Secrets.

Someone quickly becoming a liability to the gang.

A cramp twisted his body. He sank into the cushions in the corner as the last of his strength gave out, exhaustion snipping the tendons holding him upright. It wasn’t supposed to happen this fast.

Alden glanced over his shoulder and frowned, his icy gaze softening. “Nate.”

“Please.” Nate’s teeth chattered. “Hurry.”

“So pushy,” Alden said tightly as he unlocked the cabinet and shifted aside delicate bottles full of street-meds and chem-laced tinctures. He exposed an antique safe and pressed a code into the switchpad that Nate had installed two years ago. The door creaked open to reveal thin glass vials of pale-blue liquid—Remedy. “If you’re in such a hurry, go back to the city for it.”

Nate choked on a grunt of laughter. “I’ll pass.”

In Gathos City, he’d be kept in a chilled box, hooked up to a machine cycling air and waste. He’d sleep forever, fed upon until his body finally decayed. GEMs kept the wealthiest people healthy and happy in the city. But even the poorest in the city had unimaginable luxuries. Soft, clean beds. Climate control. Fast cars and motorized bicycles. Bright lights that gleamed night after night across the sludge-channel. Beautiful music that drifted toward the Withers when the wind shifted on a quiet day.

I can’t remember.

Nate hugged his middle, trying to banish the memory of what his aunt Bernice