

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TAHEREH MAFI

RELEASE
ME

SHATTER ME: SERIES TWO

RELEASE ME

A SHATTER ME NOVEL

TAHEREH MAFI

STORYTIDE

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Epigraph

There are quicksands all about you, sucking at your feet,
trying to suck you down into fear and self-pity and despair.
That's why you must walk so lightly.
Lightly my darling.

—Aldous Huxley

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1 Warner

“Well?” I pivot slowly to face him, leaning one shoulder against a cold concrete wall. “Can you sense anything?”

Adam takes a tight breath.

“I don’t know, man,” he says. He shoves his hands in his pockets and shakes his head, exhaling. “I might need another minute. Something feels off.”

I watch him shift his weight as his eyes track the vast window, assessing the stark scene beyond: Rosabelle Wolff is seated at a metal chair, unmoving, stiff as a stake in the ground as her estranged father, Hugo, attempts another ill-fated interrogation.

“Rosa,” Hugo says desperately, his voice pitching higher. “Please—why won’t you speak to me—?”

Every day has been a failure.

Every day Hugo’s panic rises as the hours progress, his emotional instability spiking to near hysteria as Rosabelle grows only more remote. I’ve encouraged him several times to abandon the assignment, but now that he’s seen her again after so many years apart, he’s lost all objectivity. He’s frantic for a spark of recognition—a moment of redemption—and he won’t relent. I’d hoped his determination to connect with his daughter would give us a much-needed psychological advantage, but the unfortunate truth is that Hugo has become a liability. Worse, he’s costing us time. Most days these sessions end in tears.

His, not hers.

I do my best, every day, to dissociate from his pain.

More concerning is that I haven't been able to get a read on Rosabelle in over a week. Her eyes are vacant, her energy cold. I've grown so accustomed to being flattened by the psychic torrent of other people that it's nearly disorienting to be confronted by her style of silence.

Rosabelle's emotional response is nonexistent.

In my life I've encountered one other person whose emotional state I couldn't fathom—and he's standing right next to me. My half brother Adam Kent Anderson. Only a year apart, we'd grown up never knowing the truth about each other or our family. For so long Adam and I had jettisoned our father's name from our lives; *Anderson* had once torn us apart. Our father had intentionally pit us against each other; in fact, we once sought to kill each other. But over the past decade we've learned to reclaim our shared name, slowly suturing ourselves back together. Me and my brothers, finally united under the same banner.

It was Ella who inspired this. Ella, who refused to be broken or branded by the story once written for her. It's what she taught me was possible when she took back the name Juliette.

She's known to the world as Juliette Ferrars.

She'll always be Ella to me.

I experience a stab of pain at the thought of her, tensing even as I try to ignore the blade of fear that's lately lodged itself between my lungs. A quickening in my blood chases every unguarded beat of my heart these days; my own feelings are so unstable I can't allow myself to experience them in full. The thought of losing her—or our unborn child—is more than my paper soul can survive. Even now I feel an encroaching tremor animate my body and I clench my fists in concert with my jaw, compartmentalizing my life the way I always do.

The way I have to.

"Hey," says Adam suddenly.

I realize only then, meeting his eyes, that he's been watching me.

"You okay?"

The lie comes out fast. "Yes."

"You sure?"

Adam's concern continues to surprise and disarm me, despite its consistency.

"I'm sure," I say, turning away, struggling to rebuild the walls in my mind.

"Hey," he says again. "Look at me for a second."

When I look up I feel the spike in his sympathy. More than that, I see it in the way he studies my face, then scans the rest of me, as if searching for open wounds.

“You want me to ask Alia to check on her?”

These words deliver me a disorienting injury.

I had no idea I was so obvious; I have no desire to be pitied. Still, my heart begins to pound, my fears threatening to bleed beyond their enclosure even as gratitude expands in me like static, bristling under my skin. That familiar blade pierces me again and I can’t compartmentalize quickly enough; instead I retreat so far inside my mind I feel physically distant when I say, tonelessly, “Nazeera is with her now. But thank you.”

Adam holds my gaze a beat longer; finally, he nods.

I once thought he was a brainless soldier.

I’d read him wrong, all those years ago. In fact, I couldn’t read him at all. His interior quiet was never as complete nor as deafening as Rosabelle’s; instead, his emotional cues came across as both vague and wooden, and I thought I had the latitude, as a result, to make the tragic assumption he was a garden-variety idiot. As it turns out, Adam has the uncommon ability to neutralize the preternatural powers of others—and he’d been unconsciously exercising a skill to shut me out. There was a time when he didn’t even know how to unlatch this armor; now he rarely bothers to hide his emotions from me. He calls it *growth*.

I call it loud.

“So,” Adam says, building toward a segue. He takes a breath as he returns his eyes to the interrogation. “You really think this girl is activating some kind of a shield?”

I step closer to the window, pulling up beside my brother. As my heart rate steadies, I feel the pager vibrate in my pocket, each buzz like a shot to the head. I glance at the notifications, scanning for emergencies and finding none for the moment. In my head I build the scaffolding for the work to come: I silently add things to my to-do list; draft responses to questions; sketch out solutions to problems; delegate responsibilities; attempt to anticipate the next pitfall. All this I’ll set aside to manage later.

Right now I give Adam a cursory glance.

I thought I was dressed casually today, forgoing my standard uniform for a leather field jacket, slacks, and boots; but Adam redefines the word *casual*. He’s wearing a lightweight puffer jacket over an old hoodie and a pair of faded jeans, at least a day’s stubble shadowing his jaw. He could use a haircut. His sneakers are scuffed and worn, and he’s pulled his shoelaces so tightly the tongue and toe box are pinched, the sight of which so aggressively repulses me I have to force myself to look away. I spin my wedding ring around my finger. It costs me something to say nothing about his shoes.

Still, despite our outward differences, we share an uncanny moment of alignment: exhaling at the same time.

"I don't know if it's a shield," I admit, returning my eyes to Rosabelle.

There's a dim clang of metal as she sits up in her seat, her manacles knocking together, and Hugo, who's sunk to the ground in defeat, looks up at the sound.

"Rosa," says Hugo, his voice fraying as he repeats the same lines over and over. "Please. You have to believe me—I never would've left you. They forced me to leave you. Please, say something—"

I look at Adam, anchoring myself in the room.

"As you already know," I say to him, "we discovered last week that the mercenary has the unprecedented ability to die at will. It's possible she's able to shut off her mind by extension. But logic would insist that were she capable of such a thing, she might've activated this power earlier."

"And you don't think she has?"

"I don't know," I say again, more quietly this time. "I've never had an issue sensing her emotions, which leads me to assume for the moment that this is some new kind of power—something we haven't seen from her before."

Adam nods, even as he frowns. "And you think I might be able to disarm her. You think it's something she turns on and off."

"I don't know," I say for the third time. "I'm not ready to commit to absolutes yet. If you find that you're able to shut off her power, I might be able to understand its origins. I'm trying to determine whether this—whatever this is—is an internal power, activated from within, or an external power, generated remotely."

"Remotely?" Adam raises his eyebrows. "Like, you think The Reestablishment might've turned off the chip in her brain?"

"The problem is, there is no chip in her brain," I say, my mood darkening as I meet his eyes. "If there were, she'd be a lot easier to understand. All I know is that *this*"—I nod at the window—"is not her natural state. I know her to be capable of heightened emotion and brain activity, but her mind has been impenetrable since the moment of her incarceration. It's like nothing I've ever encountered."

"Really?" asks Adam, his surprise peaking. "Not even with me?"

I feel him throw up a shield between us to illustrate his point, and his shock quiets to a note of flat, anemic interest.

"No," I say, returning my eyes to the inmate. "Not even with you."

Rosabelle's silence is so complete she might as well be dead.

She wears no expression despite having been recently united with her father after more than ten years of separation. Occasionally she shifts in her

seat, her shackled hands clasped behind her, and the sounds of metal ring softly through the room. Each time this happens Hugo seizes with a visibly painful hope, practically holding his breath at the thought that she might finally speak, but in eight days, she hasn't said a word. If it weren't for the human blink of her eyes, the rise and fall of her chest, the occasional rearrangement of herself in her chair—she might be mistaken for a machine.

Or a ghost.

There's something spectral about her. She's surprisingly slight, lacking in substance and color. She's almost porcelain white; her skin and hair leached of pigment. Even her eyes are desaturated—some kind of gray. Still, the pallor of her skin is secondary to the real issue, which is perceptible only in her presence: Rosabelle doesn't seem to belong here. She emanates an otherworldly resonance, as if she might've died in birth but was sentenced to life.

Looking at her for too long makes me uncomfortable.

Looking at her for too long takes me to dark places. In her I see shades of myself, and I don't like the comparison.

"She really hasn't said anything in a week?" Adam asks me, his voice dropping to a near whisper.

"Eight days," I say to him, shifting slightly. Fatigue is beginning to wear at my edges. I press the heel of my hand to my forehead in a vain attempt to dispel the building pressure. "And no. Not a word."

I know she's capable of volatility.

I got a clear read on her when she'd first regained consciousness upon arrival in The New Republic. She'd been so unwell that her heart had nearly flatlined; she was so unstable that she'd vomited. I've seen her eyes brighten with fear; I've seen her face animate with feeling; I've seen her cheeks flush with color. I was able to get a read on her even when she'd been lying in the morgue, freshly awoken from the dead. She'd seemed to be processing something like grief, of all things, which surprised me. I even got a read on her right before her incarceration, when she'd been able to hide neither her shock nor her chaotic feelings toward my younger brother. I knew my tactical maneuver had paid off when I felt her horror at reuniting with her father; and I didn't mistake her feelings then.

We should've seen results by now.

Without warning, I feel Adam relent to a crashing wave of disappointment. He gives up his position by the window and flops down in a hard chair, the metal legs scraping the concrete floor as he sighs. Right away, his knee starts bouncing. His body language alone shouts that he doesn't

want to be here, but I can actually feel his anxiety building, nervous energy gathering in the room like a storm. It makes me restless. My chest tightens.

I already know what he's going to say.

I've known for several minutes now. I've been trying to resolve my own disappointment as I wait for him to tell me what's now obvious.

In the interim, I glance at the time.

These days have begun to take on a pattern. Hugo gave up any proper efforts at interrogation about fifteen minutes ago; he's now sagging against the back wall, visibly distraught. I close my eyes a moment, trying to shut his escalating pain out of my head. Hugo is on track for a complete breakdown, which is usually how these sessions end.

"I'm sorry, man," Adam finally says. "I wish I could help, but it's like—I don't know how to explain it. It's like trying to catch a fish with my bare hands. Sometimes I think I've got something, but then it's gone, like I might be imagining it. If she has some kind of power or shield up, I don't think it's normal. I can't get a handle on it."

I manage to nod. My head is pounding. Adam's misplaced guilt is assaulting me. "Thank you for coming in anyway," I say to him. "I know you don't like involving yourself in these matters."

Adam doesn't disagree with me.

In fact, my words seem to give him tacit permission to surrender to his own discomfort, and suddenly I'm shotgunned by the weight of his unleashed aversion.

"It's so damn creepy in here," he says, looking around the enclosed space. "I don't know how you do this every day."

There's a sudden upsurge in Hugo's agony, and I nearly strain my neck trying to shake it off.

"You say that," I force out, "as if you think I enjoy being here."

"Don't you?" Adam asks.

I shoot him a dark look. He laughs.

"What?" he says, crossing his arms. "Isn't this, like, your natural habitat? I thought you liked—" Adam physically recoils, metal screeching through the room as he pushes back in his chair, nearly falling over. "Jesus, is he crying?"

I glance at Hugo, and the tension in my body coils tighter. "He's been having a hard time."

"You mean he does this regularly?"

"Most days," I say.

I steel myself before touching my fingers to the window to awaken the glass; a digital list of commands glow green, superimposed over the scene beyond. A melodic murmur echoes through the room.

“Good afternoon, General,” says a smooth, disembodied voice. “Play back transcript?”

“Not now,” I respond. “Prepare to end session. Page Samuel. Initiate security protocols for prisoner transfer.”

“Yes, General.”

“Upload today’s transcript to my files upon termination of the session. But first, confirm that you’ve made note of every instance of sound and movement from Rosabelle Wolff today.”

A rhythmic ping.

“Confirmed, General.”

“Previous transcripts noted only dialogue—or lack thereof—from Rosabelle Wolff. Search through all previous recordings and update existing transcripts to include sound and movement from Rosabelle wherever applicable.”

“Yes, General,” says the voice. There’s a pause, then another rhythmic ping. “Transcripts have been updated.”

“Increase the voltage on Rosabelle’s manacles to seventy-five percent,” I say. “Reduce to forty-five percent when she’s safely inside her cell.”

“Yes, General. Increasing voltage now.”

As always, Rosabelle evinces no reaction to the surge.

In eight days, she’s displayed no evidence she even experiences pain. Now, as the manacles radiate what I know to be a breathtaking charge of electricity, she doesn’t so much as draw audible breath. She waits patiently to be collected, as lifeless as a doll.

My jaw tightens.

If all this is a strategic effort on her part, I’m forced to admit it’s effective. I’m beginning to lose my patience with these methods. I’m losing my patience with *her*.

I’d be tempted to pivot to a less humane approach to provoke a reaction, except that I’ve witnessed enough of her eccentricities to know that she can somehow deaden herself to suffering, even while maintaining consciousness. Weeks ago I made the deduction that physical torture would not be enough to compel her to speak. Psychological manipulation was my only recourse. I assumed her weakness for her sister would translate to a weakness for her father. Clearly, I was wrong. Clearly, she knows what she’s doing.

And I have no idea what she’s planning.

“Voltage increased, General. Session has now been terminated.”

The lights in the interrogation room brighten to painful levels, a soft alarm chiming through the space. Hugo remains rooted to the floor, his knees

pulled up to his chest like a child. He buries his face in his hands as the door unseals, guards storming inside.

Another day, another failure.

My anxiety ratchets only higher.

There's no doubt in my mind that Rosabelle is biding her time. She, like me, was built by The Reestablishment. Our type was bred on cruelty, custom-designed to survive the harshest conditions, trained to thrive as prisoners of war. The trouble is, I've never encountered anyone quite like her before. Not only is she apparently numb to external stimulus, but she's proven immune even to the tech we have that might've shut off her power.

Exposing her to Adam was a worst-case scenario.

I take a slow, even breath as a band of pressure seems to tighten around my skull. I have the ability to sense the emotions of others, but greater than that is my ability to draw upon any latent preternatural power. In a normal scenario I'd be able to take Rosabelle's power and use it against her.

Instead, dealing with her is like handling a dead battery.

Another melodic murmur sounds throughout the room. "Can I assist you with anything else, General?"

"Compile a separate file," I say, "highlighting all of Rosabelle's nonverbal responses over the past eight days. I want a day-over-day comparison."

"Compiling now, General."

"That's all for today."

There's a reverberating slam of a metal door as Rosabelle is safely escorted from the room. In my periphery, Adam startles. I clear all the prompts, ending the comms with another melodic ding.

Finally, reluctantly, I turn back to Adam.

All this time, I've felt him openly staring at me. I've felt his silent, hesitant, confused admiration.

It bothers me.

"Is it weird," he says, his smile growing as he studies me, "that I keep forgetting how fancy you are now?"

"Yes."

He laughs out loud. "It's cool that you're so humble about it."

"It's not a matter of humility," I say, bristling. "I oversee all branches of the military in The New Republic. You'd have to make an effort to forget what I do."

"I never said I forget what you do," he says. "I just keep forgetting your title."

I only stare at him, my impatience building.

"What?" he says. "It keeps changing. Doesn't it keep changing?"

“No.”

Adam’s frown deepens. “But you’ve had a couple of title changes, right?” He bounces his knee again and I snag on the sight of his unforgivable laces, the pinched toe box, the triple-knotted mess. The pounding in my head is only getting worse. I’m reminding myself to say nothing about his shoes, to keep my unsolicited advice to myself, when he adds, “I thought you were a chief commander of something. Or head of state. But the robot just called you General. I think it’s fair to say it’s a little confusing.”

“It’s not confusing,” I say coldly. “Juliette is head of state. I’m general of defense.”

“Can you remind me again how those jobs are different?”

“No.”

“It is new, though, right? Weren’t you recently promoted?”

“No.”

I silence another series of incoming notifications on my pager, scrolling through at least a dozen urgent missives to glance at the few highlighted as priority—

Nothing to report. Calm down. She’s sleeping.

STOP FUCKING PAGING ME

Bro I think James is on his period

Inconclusive, sir. We’ll need another extract from the vial in order to run a new set of trials

I stretch my neck and clench the pager too tightly in my fist, trying to release the tension radiating through my shoulders. I fight to organize my thoughts, but there are too many things vying for my attention. My mind is like a faulty camera lens, hunting for focus and failing.

My head is overrun.

Hugo’s soft cries are haunting me; echoes of Rosabelle’s skittish movements continue to susurrate through my memory; the low buzz of overhead lights is compounding my headache; the bouncing of Adam’s foot is starting to drive me insane.

I close my eyes. Open them.

I miss my wife.

I want to go home.

“Oh,” Adam is saying, his frown deepening. “Maybe I’m thinking of Kenji? Did Kenji get a promotion?”

“Two years ago,” I say, forcing myself to be present.

Adam’s confusion is palpable and annoying. “Someone got a promotion, though, right?” he says. “Why do I feel like someone got a promotion?”

“Maybe you’re thinking of James,” I say unkindly. Too sharply. “Who was recently *demoted*.”

Adam sits back in his chair, one foot propped up on his knee. Bouncing. “Hey, whoa—I’m on your side in this, okay? I’m just as pissed off at James as you are.”

“I doubt that.”

“Okay,” he says slowly. “Whatever. It’s not a competition.”

I can’t seem to breathe deeply enough. This pounding in my skull is nearly blinding. I tell myself to return to center, to finish out this session, to focus only on the emergencies ahead of me. *Priorities*. Instead, I hear myself snap: “Your sneakers are too big for you.”

Adam’s head shoots up. “My what?”

“Your sneakers,” I say, turning my eyes to the window. Hugo is sitting like a dead insect in the corner, collecting dust. As always, I’ll need to manage this emotional fallout. “You shouldn’t have to pull the laces that tightly. Get a smaller size.”

Adam laughs, unamused. “Uh, I’ve been buying my own shoes all by myself for a long time, man. I think I know my shoe size.”

I turn to face him. “Apparently not.”

“What the hell is your problem?”

“I know how shoes are supposed to fit,” I say, even as I wish I’d never spoken. I don’t know why I brought this up. I don’t know why I’m still talking. I wish I could take it back. “You shouldn’t have to choke the laces in order for the shoes to stay on. If you have to strain the laces like that, then you’ve chosen the wrong fit for your foot—”

“You know,” he says, cutting me off, “it’s shit like this that makes people hate you. Why do you need to lecture me about my shoes? Let me choke my fucking laces if I want to. Why do you care?”

“Because someone has to care,” I counter. “Someone has to know that there’s a correct way of doing things. Why would you choose to do it wrong when there’s a better way? Why insist on the path of ignorance simply because it’s familiar? And why do you need to use profanity to emphasize your point? How many times have we talked about this?”

“You know what I love?” says Adam, crossing his arms.

I can feel his anger building now.

"I really, really love it when you, the reigning king of virtue, give me life advice."

I shake my head, looking away.

"Like, you could be shooting someone in the face," Adam goes on, "and if I walked by at that exact moment and said, *Holy shit, you just shot someone in the face!* you'd look at me like I was the one who did something wrong."

"I only shoot people when they deserve it," I point out. "Yet you feel the need to punctuate every other sentence with a vulgar epithet that only serves to diminish you in the process—"

"Wow," he says, feigning amazement. "You should be studied. I don't think I've ever met anyone more delusional in my life. Except maybe James, and we both know that's your fault."

"My fault?" I say, stiffening as I turn to face him. Fury radiates through my chest. "*My fault?*"

Adam scowls. "Yes, bro, fucking your fault—"

"If this situation is anyone's fault, it's yours," I say sharply. "You made him think it was okay to disrespect authority, to live arrogantly. You made him think it was okay to be reckless. You made him think it was acceptable to speak using the cheapest words language has to offer—"

"*Me?*" Adam makes a sound of disbelief. He uncrosses his legs; sits forward; finally stops bouncing. "Are you serious? If I had any influence over that kid I would've prevented him from turning into *you*—"

I physically recoil. "He's nothing like me."

"He's exactly like you!" Adam cries, throwing up his hands before rising to his feet. "You both occupy the same delusional landscape! He thinks he's some kind of superhero. He thinks he can go around murdering bad guys for a living. You made him believe he could grow up to become king of the fucking world—"

"I did no such thing—"

"Bullshit—"

"He never even listens to me," I argue. "I've spent ten years trying to teach him to be disciplined and thoughtful, and instead he's turned out to be entirely unmanageable—"

"I really thought it'd be good for him, you know?" Adam is saying. "I knew he'd seen some dark things. I could tell he was desperate to prove himself. Even as a kid he was doing dangerous shit, always nearly getting himself killed, and I was worried he'd end up hurting himself without an avenue to work out his anger. I thought training him would be productive. I thought he'd at least learn proper self-defense. I thought it would make his life safer. I thought he'd spend a few years working things out of his system and then

he'd come to his senses, and instead he's lost his fucking mind and fallen for a psychopath—and all because of you—”

“You coddled him!” I counter. “You gave him too much positive reinforcement. You fed him too many lies about life. You didn't want him to be afraid of the world. You made him think he could be anything he wanted to be if he just believed in himself—”

“Oh yeah? Well, you fucking spoiled him,” Adam shouts back. “You gave him whatever he wanted. You gave him a fancy title and too much power. You let him go everywhere with you. You let him see how people look at you and talk to you and shit their pants around you and he fucking loved every second of it. Hell, he even looks like you—”

“It's not my fault,” I say, my voice rising dangerously, “that James decided to take the wealth of knowledge I gave him and use it to make bad decisions —”

“It sure as hell isn't my fault—”

“Yes, it is—”

“No, it isn't—”

“*You did this to him,*” we both say at the same time.

2

James

When my pager goes off for the third time, I unearth it from my pocket and chuck it angrily into the ocean.

Kenji looks up, stunned.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he says, his heavy boots kicking up sand as he rushes toward the shoreline. He shields his eyes against a cool glare of sunlight. “That’s government-issued tech. You can’t just throw it into the nuclear-infested waters—”

“Too late,” I mutter, glowering at the unsorted test tubes before me. I’m perched on one knee, sinking slowly into cold, damp beach. Judgmental shorebirds stare at me. Crows caw rudely overhead. I’m tired and hungry. My head hurts.

It’s possible I’ve never been so pissed off.

To be fair, I’m not sure anything could’ve made this day better. It’s wet and blustery and smells like sewage. Nests of seaweed, jetsam, and decomposing fish surge in and out with the tide. I slot the sand and sea samples into my kit and listen to Kenji curse colorfully into the wind.

Over the past decade we’ve dedicated great resources to reviving natural bodies of water, monitoring and rehabilitating marine life. It was one of the many reasons we decided to leave the landlocked middle of the continent and move back to a temperate, coastal area: Juliette, my sister-in-law and revolutionary icon, wanted to be able to keep a closer eye on the ocean.

Obviously there are entire departments dedicated to this work, but once every quarter Warner sends some poor bastard out here to make sure the samples we collect match up with the samples we receive. That’s just like