

[REDACTED]



BETTE TUCKER

Time is running out. Remember who you are.

A thirty-second countdown starts overhead. Red numbers flash. I lunge forward, pressing against the door with my good hand. I try pushing the handle, but it's locked for this evacuation sequence.

It can't be undone.

"I can't come with you," Alexandria says, her voice muffled through the pod window. For maybe the first time in our acquaintance her chin is lifted, her voice is steady. "We're doing this now because I can hide the missing pod as we crest, but not if we're under, and not if I go with you."

"Why are you doing this?" I have to ask. I have to know. Because what changed? What gave her courage in these last minutes when over a year of trying to win her to my side had been unsuccessful?

Fifteen seconds.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I didn't realize ... They never told me who you were and what you'd done."

I don't understand. What had I done? Who was I? And why does that matter to Alexandria?

Ten seconds.

"Listen to me," Alexandria says. Her words are fast, but they don't shake. "You have to disable the emergency beacon as soon as you surface. If you don't, any Pangaea craft within a five-hundred-mile radius will be able to lock onto your signal if they're looking. Help will come."

For months, I've been trying to manipulate Alexandria into this exact scenario, but I never imagined I would leave her behind.

I'm thrown off my feet when the pod is discharged, and Alexandria disappears from view. I know next to nothing about the world I'm about to enter. But the prison I'm leaving? I know enough. Alexandria Mutt will be executed for this.

[REDACTED]

BETTE TUCKER



Genre-Fluid Books



Author's Note



The story of [REDACTED] is set in a near-future, post-apocalyptic world with Khansa and her siblings acting as the heart of the story. The overall themes are not meant to be dark and hopeless, however, violence, torture, and death of siblings do appear on the page. If these are sensitive topics for you, please take care while reading.

Khansa (the Point of View character) is also Black, while I, the author, am a white woman. The Black experience, even in this book's fictional universe, is not something that I can ever understand, nor is it one that is written about overtly in this story. The nuances of race and racism are not discussed in this book because I do not believe that those nuances and their impacts are my story to tell. Instead, I strove to write Khansa as a character whose struggles and triumphs within the plot are unrelated to her identity as a Black woman.

The intention and goal of my writing is to have a diverse cast of characters because I believe diversity makes a more interesting and compelling world in fiction and in life. More information on my choices can be found in the back of the book in sections titled, "Why is Khansa a Black woman?" and "A note on Kavango Zambezi"

In addition, I utilized sensitivity readers so that the representation of Khansa and other characters of color are free of prejudice and unintentional stereotypes. I did my best to do no harm, but acknowledge that any mistakes are my own.

Chapter One



ALEXANDRIA MUTT IS my ticket out.
She's been my Interrogator for over a year in this hell-hole submarine prison. Frankly, she doesn't have the stomach for it, and today is no exception.

My lips twitch, but I force them back to neutral.

After the rapport we've built, smiling like a lunatic won't endear me to Alexandria, so I attempt stoic acceptance instead as two Pangaea security guards—Odin and Leer—in their dark gray uniforms lead me into the room. Odin unknowingly plays the role I've cast him in, shoving me into the Interrogation chair with no remorse.

Alexandria sees him for what he is: a bully and brute mishandling a small, broken woman. That's my role, one I play by curving my shoulders and meeting her eyes with my wobbly, yet brave smile.

Odin is an idiot on a power trip, and he leaves marks. Alexandria would sympathize even more if she saw the fingerprint-shaped bruises he leaves on the dark brown of my skin. But, alas, the white prison uniform has sleeves. Leer, on the other hand, while not as outwardly cruel, respects the chain of command. Unfortunately for me, that's Odin. And, although she technically outranks both of them, Alexandria doesn't have the courage to tell them off.

Yet. She doesn't have the courage *yet*.

But I've been working on her.

She pities me. She hates Interrogating me. She's lost weight since she arrived here. Sooner or later, she'll cave. Until then, I have to not fuck it up.

She moves competently around me as she locks my wrists and ankles into place. She can't meet my gaze as she secures the clamp

around my neck.

"Bio-scans are normal," she says, as ostensibly to reassure me as it is for the required voice-recorded notes. "Heart rate is eighty-five beats per minute, with BP one-twenty over seventy."

My focus draws momentarily to the Pangaea pin over Alexandria's right breast. It's smaller than my palm: a dark gray outline of the global map overlaid with a white "P." The pin isn't just to showcase Pangaea's reach across the world. Each Pangaea pin is holotech, and as unique as a fingerprint, allowing different accesses and document storage dependent on role and rank.

Pangaea was created after the Decimation to gather information necessary for recovery efforts: food, education, shelter. For years, I believed that Pangaea had saved the world. After the Seven Territories restored their governments and Pangaea refused to relinquish total control to the Civilians ... I thought it was *right*.

I want to laugh, but as Alexandria gets closer to putting me under for this Interrogation, I can't. The laugh catches and rattles in my throat like a wheeze. When she places the helmet on my head and tightens the chin strap, I don't have to fake my shuddered breath.

After two years, I should be used to it. The drug injections don't faze me. Being manhandled by guards doesn't bother me. But as soon as the damn helmet is placed on my head, claustrophobia has my breath hitching. For a moment, my vision goes black and the rapid beat of my pulse disorients me.

"You'll be okay," Alexandria whispers as she returns with a needle injection.

Speaking during Interrogations is frowned upon, so her willingness to break this tiny unspoken rule pleases me. The words are simple and quiet, but there's a small promise in them.

This time she does meet my gaze, and I try to focus on the pretty green color there, and the soft brown of her hair. Anything other than what's about to happen.

You know it doesn't hurt, an oh-so-helpful voice in the back of my head says. It's not physical pain. Rarely has it ever been physical

pain. What hurts is the inescapable knowledge that I did this to myself.

This Interrogation Machine I've been resisting for the last two years is my own personal creation. Frankenstein tortured by Frankenstein's monster. Life is still imitating art, even three hundred years later.

Irony is *such* a toothy bitch.

The drug, Thoranta, takes less than a minute to course through my system and drag me under. The pristine white prison laboratory disappears and my mindscape takes its place.

I'm unconscious and alert, deep inside my own brain.

A long hallway with twenty-nine rooms appears before me. The doors are labeled by year, by my years. They contain my memories and everything visible and audible is on a feedback screen in front of my interrogators, even my mindscape.

Mindscales are unique to the individual, and mine is boring by all accounts. Orderly. Clinical.

Thoranta, pumping in my veins, urges me toward a specific set of doors, a specific set of years and memories. After two years of dosages, I can fight the drug, resist it, but I have to be careful. Resisting too often or too successfully will force Alexandria to increase the dosage, and its suggestive tendencies will become more difficult to combat. So today, I walk dutifully to the end of the hallway where the drug is already pulling me.

My eyes flicker to the doors labeled 2150 and 2151. Those are my years of imprisonment. In the mindscape, I shake my head. Those aren't the years my captors are interested in. My attention turns to the five doors leading to my personal hellscape. Odd years on my left, even on my right. I take a brief moment to spin and examine each door in turn. These five doors are identical to each other, and different from all the rest.

These doors are locked.

They're built like bunker doors, like whatever is inside needs to be protected against a horror akin to a nuclear blast. In material and color, they differ starkly from the others. As if "keep out" weren't already obvious, the seven locks on each door send the message

home. It's overkill, but it's also my brain, so I trust it's overkill for a reason.

And here, at last, is the crux of all my problems. The cause of my imprisonment and Interrogations.

These five doors are locked, even to me, because my memories are gone. Completely blank from the years 2145 to 2149.

Well, more likely, just inaccessible.

My symptoms are remarkably similar to localized dissociative amnesia, but I've never been able to swallow that explanation when faced with these doors. The defenses are too strong. Too comprehensive. My working theory is that the doors and locks in my mindscape are my own creation, an intentional block.

Which means—I'm guessing—I knew I was being watched or hunted, and suspected I would be caught. Why would I betray Pangaea when they fed me, clothed me, and provided funding for my research?

I have some powers of deduction.

I may have been a loyal child of Pangaea's system, and I might have even believed in their cause, but the evidence of my involvement against them, just from these five little doors' existence, is damning. And in all my imprisonment, I've never questioned *whether* I betrayed Pangaea. I've only questioned *why*.

This is Pangaea's highest-security prison. There's only one because Pangaea is not known for letting their enemies live. To be sent here means my crimes were expansive, intentional, and likely international. It also stands to reason, whatever information exists in my memories is valuable to Pangaea.

If I were a simple traitor, they'd have killed me already. Should I be impressed with myself or horrified?

Intense curiosity, hungry for whatever's behind these doors, claws at me. A curiosity that belongs to me or the drug I've never quite been able to tell. I've always believed if I gain access to 2145, the first locked year, the rest will follow, like a string of dominoes. Today is no different as I concentrate my efforts on the door, glaring at the seven locks fortifying it.

Combination lock.

Keypad.

Eye scan.

Cypher.

Key card.

Voice activation.

The seventh lock, though I have no evidence of it, is a chain link, from the inside, like the one at my old apartment. The last line of defense. As I haven't been able to get through the first six locks, it doesn't make a difference, but there's a certainty in my gut.

I try the combination lock, even though I've tried it and a hundred alternatives to get through the door. Like sensing chronologically is the best way to open the doors, to me the combination lock is the logical first step.

Since it's my Interrogation, and it's happening inside my mindscape, I have certain abilities here. The machine itself was created by using neurological indicators to tap into the area of the brain responsible for lucid dreaming. It's harder with the memories themselves, because they aren't located in one central spot. But as we developed Thoranta into a drug to open the brain's neural pathways, and used lucid dreaming as the navigator, everything started to fall into place.

I, of course, don't remember how the drug evolved into such a persuasive little bitch. At its insistent prompting, I stand in front of the combination lock in my mindscape considering my options.

I tried opening the combination with bolt cutters once. It successfully snapped the lock, but it did something to me too. Sent some type of shockwave through my brain. The pain was excruciating, shooting through my head, down my spine. I woke, covered in sweat, my nose bleeding, and shaking so hard my teeth rattled under the hands of an Interrogator who was not as sympathetic as Alexandria.

The next time I went into Interrogation, the lock had been restored. I've lost track of the times I've tried something similar, with varied, but painful and unsuccessful results.

I wish the doors at least showed my previous efforts. Boot marks. Scratches from trying to pick the locks. One memorable

Interrogation with a battering ram. But nothing. They're the same doors, with the same level of integrity they've had from the first. Brute force and clever tricks will never work. The only way through is with the keys.

Thoranta is pulling at my gut, pushing me forward to the doors. I could resist, but today I don't.

"Are you going to let me through today?" I ask the door, 2145.

"Do you have the keys?" I reply in a deeper voice, pretending to be the door. It'll amuse Alexandria and hopefully showcase my spiraling sanity.

"You know I don't have the keys, '45. The keys are inconveniently locked within you, and your friends. It's a catch-22. Need the keys to get in, need to be inside to get the keys."

"Sucks to suck," I reply as the door, my voice more guttural.

I argue with each of the doors in turn. Alexandria won't ask me to use brute force again, but she needs to report something every once in a while. Also, if there's hope of my progress, Pangaea will be less likely to kill me. And since dead women aren't guaranteed answers, I square off with the door. With a mock salute, I dutifully conjure a tool. This time, regrettably, it's a block of C4. I set it in front of Year 2146 because even though I argue with '45, I don't actually want access, not when success means revealing secrets to Pangaea.

When the explosion goes off, the pain is so acute, so hot, that breathing becomes impossible. My brain is melting and it seemingly goes on for hours and hours as I remain in the hallway, prone on the floor, to see what's behind the gaping hole in the door.

My breath comes in heaving pants, and little spots of black dance across my vision.

A single image appears. Though blurry around the edges, a woman's face is in the center of it in full definition. She's thick-set with dark black hair, curly like mine. This woman who I don't quite know is my eldest sister, Dianna. She's crying, but she's smiling too, and she's putting her hand in front of her mouth like she's embarrassed by her emotion.

"*Oh, Khansa,*" Dianna says.

I want the memory to last longer.

I want to stay with her.

I'm on the verge of begging to go back as I groggily resurface into consciousness, blinking against the harsh fluorescent lighting of the lab. I'm weak, but not from the Interrogation, not from the drug. I'm weak because Dianna—the sister I only recognize from her photos in the media—is someone I haven't seen in over twenty years.

Confusion and longing for answers overwhelms me, until Alexandria ends the session quietly.

"This concludes Interrogation three hundred seventeen of Dr. Khansa MacGregor."

It's a quiet and brutal reminder that my sisters are in the past, but Alexandria Mutt, she's my ticket out.