



*Christina Leigh Pritchard*

# TORN

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# TORN

Christina Leigh Pritchard

Caleb bandaged my waist. He poured chlorophyll on a deep gash that ran all the way up my stomach. I winced, gripping the seat in front of me. The old, battered school bus jerked, hitting potholes and debris. All the windows were covered with bars and we had six snipers, three on the left and three on the right, spread far enough apart to cover the most ground.

My long, red hair fell in my face and I bit my arm, groaning. He stitched me, pouring whiskey over the cut.

Caleb had followed me to bunker 239-A5-F300.4 and then, after release day, he didn't leave. Ten years ago, he was tall with broad shoulders. His blond hair had been cut short and spiked. Today, he was bald with tattoos that ran from his neck, all the way down his back, ending at his ankles. Life inside the bunkers was brutal. War, nukes, evil dictators and disease ate away the world above like a swarm of locusts and those of us who were bright enough to agree to be breeders and organ donors were given sanctuary. Sponsors hid us in bunkers underneath their massive buildings. But, as their monetary kingdoms fell, our supplies ended. Money finally became exactly what it really was—paper. It's value? Zero.

The torture experienced in our new life, stripped away any bit of humanity we had. In the beginning, we shared the rations and medical supplies, giving to the children and nursing mothers first. The strongest agreed to leave sanctuary and hunt. Hunger and desperation changed even those who once thought they were of high morality.

I shoved Caleb, reaching for my Beretta M9. "Stop, I'm fine." I caulked the handgun. "Where to next?"

He leaned against my shoulder and spoke in a low voice. “Torn, the guys have been talking.”

I didn’t follow suit, raising my pitch to a high octave. “Yeah, so? They can go anytime. No one’s forcing them to stay.”

I hated the way he snickered when he used sarcasm and how he ate his meals, snorting and belching. He’d rub the blood from his kill along his cheeks, the way footballers used to prepare for a game. He was grotesque, but fearsome enough to keep me safe. Without him, I’d have died long ago.

“You looked weak, sparing Gayle.”

“She’s not the enemy. We’re the ones infiltrating municipalities.”

“Gayle’s judicial system was fair.”

“I’m not searching for fair, Caleb. I want food, shelter and safety. When surrounded by contaminated water and risk of attacks from mutated predators, fairness doesn’t make the cut. One of Gayle’s residents came from a camp just west of here where the people farm and have the capabilities to purify their water source. He said to ask for Ben.”

“Why’d he leave?”

I motioned to the driver, to pull over. “We’re trekking the rest of the way.”

Caleb sneered, picking up a rifle. “I guess you forgot to ask for specifics.”

“You know I prefer to come to my own conclusions.”

“We lost a third of our men to Gayle.”

“Isn’t that the point of all this? We’re looking for a place to survive. If that’s where they want to go, then, good riddance. Supplies are low.”

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It wasn’t hard to find Ben’s assailants. We’d hidden the transport under dried brush and marched through dense trees. The snipers guarded us, ready to take down anything that dared to breathe.



I pointed out past an old Banyan, split down the middle. It lay, lifeless, in two pieces. “There they are. They’re waiting for us to make our move.”

“What’s the plan?” Caleb readied his rifle. “We infiltrate or go in as captives?”

“I want to see their strengths. Let’s allow them to capture us.”

Ben’s men circled, wearing poorly patched, ski masks, and used, protective armor. Their feet were bare and their arms covered with scars, created with such precision, you’d think it was due to an operation.

“We come in peace!” I held my gun above my head. “I wish to trade with Ben; I have something he wants.”

“Drop your weapons,” one of the men said. “And put your hands behind your backs.”

We fell in the mud, allowing restraints to be tied to our wrists. They covered our heads with pillow cases and potato sacks. They smelled rancid and I swallowed vomit that threatened to escape.

“Get up.” I was jerked forward, held tightly under the arms. “Ben doesn’t like visitors. You’ve submitted for nothing.”

“We’ll see about that.” I retorted, stumbling down a narrow path. Even with the sacks over our faces, we’d learn to move around in dark tunnels below ground and could easily track back to our last location. We were taken in circles, as a way of extending the journey. It seemed that maybe we were just five minutes from where they’d spotted us. Their militant skills were subpar; it was doubtful they’d survive an attack.

I was shoved to my knees, twigs snapped with impact and I could smell urine. Someone trembled beside me, giving way to tiny whimpers.

“Identify yourself.”

“Who said that?”

“I’m Torn.”

“I’m Emily. What are they going to do to us?”

“This is a typical scare tactic. If they wanted us dead, it would be done. They’re analyzing us, determining if we are of any use to them.”

Emily blubbered, her shoulder touching mine. “What does that mean?”

“It means that if you want to live, you’d better think of something you can give, provide or do, that will be of use to them.”

Caleb sighed. “Why do you talk to victims? This is a perfect example as to why the others question your strength.”

“Shut up, Caleb; she’s scared.”

“I don’t understand,” Emily said. “What can I do for them?”

A fire was lit, warming our bodies. Chants erupted and feet pounded the earth in rhythmic patterns. “What’s happening, now, Torn?”

“They’ve either killed or are about to.”

“What?”

“Stay calm. There’s nothing you can do about what is to happen next.”

“Is it going to be me? Torn?”

“I’m sorry, Emily.”

She screamed, her body smacking into mine. She convulsed, blood soaking my shirt. “Why are they doing this?”

“Think about something that makes you happy.”

“I don’t—”

“Once, before the war, I saw two squirrels playing together in the park. They were digging holes to hide their nuts for winter.”

“Torn—”

“Stop fighting to live and it will end faster.”

Someone grabbed me underneath the shoulders.

“Torn!”

“Think of something pleasant!”

They dragged me through wet piss and what could only be fecal matter. It was foul and squished against my calves. Hands touched the edges of my clothes, voices grunted and my sack was removed. On either side of me, make-shift cages held people. They were cramped together with their arms stretched through the cracks, begging for their freedom. The urine and feces came from them, collecting in the overused pathway.

Caleb and the others were carried through the same filth, and their head coverings were removed too.

“Ben says you have thirty seconds,” one of the hitmen said. “Then, we hunt.”

Caleb laughed. “Who hunts, who?”

The armed men did not respond.

A goon tossed me into a pile of ash. There were remnants of animal bones and flies covered a decaying carcass. “Start running,” he said. “Now!”



I stood, brushing my knees off. “I came to meet Ben. He needs something that I have access to.”

The man’s eyes narrowed, glancing back towards the hidden camp. “What do you have?”

“Solar panels. He’ll be able to control you much better from his gaming station with it.”

Caleb wiped sweat from his brow. He rose, towering over me. “She’s a clever girl, right?” I cringed as his arm wrapped around my shoulders. “It’s what keeps her alive.”

Rifles were pointed, aimed at moving shadows. Some of my crew dashed into the open field. “No!” I shouted. “They’re not going to shoot you!”

It was too late. Mutated monsters jumped out from the tall grasses, pouncing upon them. Blood curdling screams echoed in my ears. A group of enormous, flightless seagulls with enlarged beaks and giant bloody sores, where their wings once were, pecked my best sniper to death. They surrounded him, their black eyes set upon his flesh, making a sound that resembled that of a growling dog.

He begged for help. “Torn! Shoot them!”

I turned, hiding my face against Caleb.

“Torn!”

Double-headed crocodiles and mutated monster-sized rabbits, devoured the rest, leaving behind a stench I’d become all too familiar with.

*Death.*

Predators turned their gruesome heads our way.

I gripped Caleb’s shirt. “Let’s go, we know the way!”

The rest of my men and Ben’s goons ran, heading towards the camp.

“How do you know the way back? We had your head covered.” The man who carried me out asked.

“I’m from the bunkers. We can find our way in the dark.”

A large metal door rose, right where the cages of humans once sat. There was nothing there this time. We skidded in waste, ducking to enter the fort.

The doors screeched, closing behind us.

Animals pounded their heads against the door. The croc’s tail hit the metal with such force, an indentation appeared.

A wall dropped from the ceiling, covering the entrance. The men motioned for us to follow them down a long, steel corridor. Our reflections danced beside us, distorted. I was long and tall, while Caleb, short and fat.

“You’re the first to figure out Ben’s trick.”

“He’s talented.”

“I’m Mantis.” He removed his mask, revealing long hair tied in a messy bun and crescent-shaped eyes. They reminded me of the Asian photos that once hung in the bunkers. Beautiful hand-painted illustrations of people and landscapes I’d only dreamed to one day visit, were nailed to the walls in the recreation area. They kept me sane—for a little while at least.

“Where’s Ben?”

Mantis frowned. “You’re going to meet him.”

A divider of windows appeared to my right. I peered through at scientists in white coats. They leaned over hydroponic eco-systems.

“We grow our own food source.”

“What about protein?”

He didn’t respond to my question. “And, here’s Ben.”

Before me was an old safe, possibly from an old bank. Was his fortress secured inside? “Are you for real? He’s in a vault?”

Mantis nodded, turning the handle. He covered the keypad as he entered the code. “He says only you can go in. Everyone else must complete the sanitation process.”

Caleb sneered. “Careful, Torn. I don’t trust him.”

The safe’s circular door opened. I ducked, entering. “What’s this, an ingress for a dormouse?”

Mantis shielded his mouth with his hand, withholding his opinion.

Huge screens covered every square inch of the walls and even part of the ceiling. There were cameras of the surrounding areas, the torture camp and cages at the entrance to the bunker. I squinted in disbelief. “You’ve got mutants in the cages, not humans.”

Ben sat in a tall, black chair with his back to us. “Only in the one farthest away. The other is just a hologram, a scare tactic to keep intruders away.”

“Where’s Emily?”

“Dead.”

“Liar. She’s quite the actress though. The animal blood and her convulsing body, now that was convincing.”

Ben spun in his chair so that he faced me. His long beard was unkempt and my eyes went to his attire. He wore a vintage tee-shirt covered in comic book heroes and a long, bohemian skirt. “Emily hasn’t done my laundry. She’s an aspiring actress and can’t be bothered.”

“So, you wear her clothes?”

“It fits.” Ben motioned for me to sit on a stool close to him. He sat, reaching for a plate of grapes, taking one in his fingers, he studied it, plopping it in his mouth.

I tapped my foot, watching him chew, and chew. He took another, biting into it like a sloth. I couldn’t wait any longer. “Ben, we’re here because we’re from the bunkers and want to join forces with a group we feel is strong, able to flourish in the world’s new conditions and has great military protection.”

Ben finished his second grape, swallowing. “What can you offer?”

“We’ve got solar panels, army-grade weapons and tracking skills.”

He glanced down at my belly and smirked. “Your first one?”

I covered my scar, turning aside.

“I’m not referring to the battle wound. Does he know?”

“I’m a breeder,” I said. “It’s what I do.”

“It’s your first one?”

“You’re pregnant!” Emily squealed, entering from behind a velvet curtain. There must’ve been a hidden passageway to the vault, or maybe another room to the vault where she slept. “Ben, darling, I’m desperate for a baby.” Her looks matched her voice. Emily’s hair was long and blonde. Her body was dainty and as she sat in his lap, she smiled. Her doe eyes fluttered as she offered to shake my hand. “So, Torn, please be honest, what did you think of the hands reaching out of the

cages, touching your clothes while you were dragged through waste? I wanted it to be theatrical, this time.”

“If I hadn’t seen my men experience the same torture, I’d have thought you were dead. You played us well.”

She giggled, massaging Ben’s shoulders. “Let’s keep them!”

“Emily wants a baby.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “How do you feel about a negotiation?”

“Why don’t you have your own? Wouldn’t you prefer to have your genes live on?”

“Emily is infertile.”

“Get a breeder.”

“I have one. You. Once your fetus is out—you’ll give me mine.”

Emily’s fingers played with his beard, twisting tufts of hair into long, icicle shapes. “I tested her and her heart is good. Our child would be strong and compassionate.”

Alarms rang, and flashing, red lights blinded me. “Brutus is back! He’s such trouble.” Emily slipped through her red curtain. “I’ve a headache. Performances are exhausting!”

Ben swiveled in his chair, facing the main screen. He picked up controllers, unleashing the captured mutants. “Do you know what’s scarier than a preying mutant?”

“What?”

“A starving one.”

The cages opened, their gates raising upwards. Beasts escaped, attacking the ones casing the perimeter.

Ben was right. Starving creatures were more deadly. They grouped together in some sick union, devouring each animal, one by one. Blood ran, puddling with the waste.

Mantis whispered in my ear. “Babies don’t survive here.”

I stood, frozen.

“I’m sure, when you entered, you noticed there are no children. Emily is infertile for a reason. She was punished for neglect in her last village.”

“Where’d she come from?”

“South of here. Their leader goes by the name Ember. It’s a tribe of mothers with fierce young.”

I touched my belly.

Ben stood, grabbing an AK-47. “Are you ready? It’s time to take down the beast.”

“What’s the beast?”

“Brutus, he’s on the roof.” Ben pointed to the ceiling screens. A monstrous dog with canines too large for his face, clutched the side of the building, holding on with claw-like talons. “He’s a cockroach.”

The mutant jumped, stretching his limbs out like a sugar-glider. His skin expanded, and he floated to the next fort. “That’s new,” I said. “I’ve never seen one of them yet.”

“They’re the only kind I can’t capture. Mutants have vitamin-enriched manure. I’ve grown strong produce with it. I want that creature—alive.”

“Why?”

“I wish to dissect him.”

“What’s that going to do?”

Ben positioned the strap for his AK-47. “I’m disabling the grenade launcher. Last time, I got a little carried away.”

“What’s that going to do?”

“What?”

I cleared my throat. “Dissecting the dog, what’s the benefit of that?”

“I dissect everything.”

I glanced at Mantis’ arms, unable to swallow.

“Let’s go! Time to play!”

We followed Ben, skirt and all, out into the corridor. “Men!” He shouted. “Let’s catch ourselves a prize!”

Mantis chased after his leader and I clutched Caleb’s arm.

He whispered in my ear. “Well?”

“Not the right place.”

“The other women can’t take much more of this journey. Some are ready to pop and we’ve lost our snipers.”

“There’s another village South of here where mothers have teamed together to protect their young.”

“This place has the best sustainability for life.”

“For adults,” I said. “Children do not survive and Ben dissects, not only his captures, but also his men.”

Caleb frowned, touching my belly. “Okay, let’s hurry, while they’re busy.”

We motioned for the others to follow us, running out towards an overhang. Hopefully our bus was still undiscovered, hidden in the brush.

Caleb jerked me backwards, his face serious. “Are there men?”

“What?”

“You said it was a village of *mothers*.”

I hesitated, maybe a little too long. “How do you think the women get pregnant? Of course, they have men.”

“You’re still mad at me for my decision.”

“It should have been my choice to pick when and who I procreated with.”

“You’re a breeder, it’s your job. You don’t get to decide.”

We stood on a hill, staring down at the mutant massacre below in Ben’s camp. Blood streamed through winding pathways, painting the grasses pink.

Caleb reached for my hand and I cringed.

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