

## **Raised**

By

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The crowd was larger than he expected. Hayes glanced at the people milling around, some shuffling their feet, others studying the framed pictures lining the great hall. Their tunics and pants were identical; the brilliant blue worn for special occasions. And this was the most exclusive of occasions. 10-31. The day they Raised.

Balconies circled the hall, flags depicting Havenfall's history hung from the railings. He studied the garlands, images of bloody battles, sun-baked earth, dried-up rivers. The landscapes were gray and bleak and he found it hard to look at them. He turned his head to the right where streamers depicted life as it once was, and, they promised, still could be. Colorful chaos, gardens dripping with fruit, tables laden with food. His mouth watered and his stomach clenched.

Soon, it would be his turn.

He'd be able to bite into an apple, lift a glass to his mouth, savor his first sip of wine.

There was a sound above them and he lifted his head automatically. One of the doors on the balcony opened and a gorgeous woman dressed in a glittering blue gown stepped out. She spread her arms wide and smiled. The crowd rippled, but no one spoke.

"10-31, I welcome you. Tonight, you will learn the magic of Havenfall and join those who have come before you. You have sacrificed much and today you will earn your reward." He let his mind wander as her voice droned on and he considered the people around him.

A woman to his left saw him studying her face and she smiled, revealing two dimples that framed her lips in a parenthesis. “Thompson, 10-31 T79,” she whispered.

“Hayes, 10-31, X11,” he replied. She smiled wider and he found himself smiling back.

“... and now you will queue up to the riches that await you,” the dazzling woman said dramatically. As she stepped back from the railing, the doors in the great hall opened and she said, “You have been Raised.” The crowd let out a cheer.

There was a rush toward the openings, but the attendants at the doorways herded people into a line, two by two. Hayes found himself next to Thompson. She grinned at him again and he was struck by the sparkle in her eyes, the excitement quivering her lips.

“I didn’t think this day would ever come,” she whispered. “I’ve been waiting so long!”

He had, too. The past flashed through his mind, the endless hunger, the meager rations of Pro-H-sel. He hated the gritty powder mixed with treated water, which had been their only source of nutrition for almost as long as he could remember. The protein drink had a vague meaty flavor, packed as it was with “high nutritional quantities of protein, minerals and carbohydrates.”

As if she could read his mind, Thompson said, “I hate Pro-H-Sel, don’t you?” Before he could answer, she said, “I can still remember other things.” She glanced at him sideways, and he nodded. Encouraged, she went on. “My mother used to dress me up on 10-31 in a costume and she’d give me a plastic bucket. We’d walk from house to house collecting....” Her forehead wrinkled as she tried to come up with the word.

“Candy,” Hayes said, and now he was smiling too. “I remember.” And he did. He remembered his mother slipping a plastic mask over his face. He recalled it was black and covered his eyes and he wore a cape... was he supposed to be a hero? He remembered her laughter and for a brief second, swore he could taste the sweetness of ... was the word chocolate? ... melting on his tongue. But that was in the Long Ago, before the Great War of 2025, before the plague, before the rivers dried up and the earth turned black. Before the climate turned the world all but inhabitable.

“Halloween,” he said suddenly. Thompson cocked her head and looked at him inquiringly. “That’s what 10 31 was called. Halloween.”

But it wasn’t just that. It was also the day his mother gave him a cake with flaming candles pressed into the frosting and his entire family would sing ...

“Happy birthday,” Thompson said.

He looked at the faces around him again, wondering if there was more of a connection to them than the date of their births. Today they turned 30. Raised Day.

As they passed through the doors, a wave of unease passed over Hayes. There was something about the guard’s eyes... the look on his face. Was it contempt? But then Hayes saw what awaited them and his unease was forgotten.

Long tables covered in shimmering blue cloth flanked the walls, overloaded with food, real food. The kind of things only the Risen could eat. From the time he was a child, he’d been told sacrifice was necessary for survival. He’d sacrificed eating for drinking protein drinks for over 25 years and today, finally, he’d join the elite group of Risen and for the rest of his life, he could eat his fill. Sacrifice hadn’t really been a choice; after the war, the class system solidified into those who were allowed to chew

and those who had to swallow. His mother had been a factory worker, lower class. He didn't remember his father. Hayes pushed the thoughts of his past away and reached for a plate with a shaking hand. He covered the dish with meat, vegetables, bread! He'd forgotten bread! The smell alone made his eyes close in sweet anticipation. Most 10 31's were eating where they stood, shoveling food into their mouths greedily, but there were tables and chairs in the center of the room and he made his way there, forcing himself to wait for his first bite. He took a chair, picked up a fork and lifted the food to his lips. The taste was indescribable. He didn't know what he was eating and he didn't care. It was heaven.

Thompson took the chair next to his and he was oddly pleased that she had shown control, too. His mother had told him true power was found in restraint and it was a lesson he abided.

He was full far too quickly. He managed to finish the plate, enjoying every moment, but when Thompson got up to get more and gestured to his dish, he shook his head. He'd had enough for now. He looked around the room and noticed things he'd missed when he first entered.

Guards were not just at the doors; they lined the walls. Electric prods hung from their belts and several held guns.

Why would they need guns and prods? Just as the question entered his head, the beautiful woman in blue took the stage, smiling benevolently. She gestured with open arms and said, "Now that you have eaten and are relaxed, it is time for your true reward." On cue, doors at the end of the hall opened and they were once again divided into lines, two by two.

“Who do you want to see first?” Thompson asked.

*That’s simple*, Hayes thought. “My mother.”

Thompson nodded. “Me too. And my sister. She was Raised two years ago.”

They walked into a long hallway lined with steel. The floor was concrete. And there was a smell... it reminded him of something. The unease was back. He glanced at Thompson but she was still smiling. The floor tilted downward and they continued around a corner into another long hallway. *Chute*, he thought. *We’re in a chute*. He didn’t know where the word came from, just knew it was right. It raised the hair on the back of his neck. Guards occasionally prodded someone moving slowly and Hayes muttered, “Why are they hurrying us?”

“I’d run if I could,” Thompson replied.

*Run*, he thought? *But what are you running to?* Unease settled into dread. There was something wrong. Something bad.

There were two large steel doors at the end of the hall. The door opened a crack and two people were ushered in. The door closed. When it opened again, an odor filled the air and Hayes tried to identify it.

A scream startled them all. As if one, the 10 31’s stopped and the guards didn’t just prod; they electrified. More screams filled the air and that’s when Hayes realized what he was smelling.

Blood. The scent of blood filled the tunnel, *the chute*, he thought, *we’re in a chute* and that’s when it clicked and he realized the true meaning of being Raised. They weren’t being rewarded and Pro-H-Sel wasn’t just protein, minerals and carbohydrates. Hayes stopped. Beside him, Thompson looked up at him. “Cattle,” he whispered. He

could feel Thompson staring at him but he couldn't tear his eyes from the steel doors. Horror overwhelmed him and for the first time in his life, Hayes didn't show restraint. "DON'T GO IN!" he screamed. "WE'RE CATTLE!"

And then a guard hit him in the head while another used a prod and the world went mercifully black.

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