

Dust and Shadow
Bonus Scene
Jo

I can't bring my feet to move, despite the fact I could be wrong. It could be a sandstorm, and I could be tempting fate. But somehow, deep in my bones, I feel it...

A shift in the air.

The hum of something new.

Moisture. It's a foreign, almost thrilling sensation, and I know it's rain.

"Jo—" Clayton steps up behind me, but I shake my head.

"Wait, just a moment longer," I murmur, my eyes fixed on the approaching clouds. They draw closer with each chilly gust. I can't remember the last time I was cold.

"Jo," Clayton says low in my ear. "We should go inside, just in case we're wrong."

I nod, but I can't bring myself to look away. "I know we should," I say, but as Clayton clasps my hand in his, tugging gently, I take a step away, willing him to stay. "But I don't want to."

The indiscernible conversations around me are drowned out by the wind in my ears, whipping my hair loose from its chignon, and I smell the scent of damp earth before a single droplet hits my cheeks. I smile.

Months we've been without water. We've been afraid and thirsty. We've rationed and stewed in heat, our most vulnerable people near death. But the instant the sky opens and the rain begins to fall, my eyelids flutter shut.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

It's a welcomed sensation. A strange one that seems to strip away the fetid stench of decaying life before now, bringing with it something promising and new.

I lift my face to the falling raindrops, welcoming the feel of them against my skin, and a giggle bubbles out of me. “Finally.” I breathe in a rush of relief. The drops are cool against my lips and I lick them away, only then remembering the town was prepared to flee from the storm.

When I glance over my shoulder, wide-eyed expressions surround me. The townspeople make their way out of doors, their murmurs and laughter a drone on the breeze.

Mrs. Cunningham and Isabel step out from under one of an awning, Isabel pulling her hand from her mother’s so she can twirl with Toby. Scarlet and Mr. Ashford inch their way out into the road next, and soon everyone is beckoned into the afternoon storm, grinning and hopeful in the cool gray.

“I can’t believe it.”

“Can this be real?”

“Finally!”

“Water! We have water!”

The chatter is deafening, but all I can do is stare up at the sky, watching the world darken around us and the rain fall with vehement promise, turning the sand and dirt at my feet to mud. “A reprieve,” I say to no one in particular.

Clayton steps past me, lifting his chiseled, wary face to the sky, blinking up at it. His damp hair clings in tawny tendrils to his temples, and he licks his lips. “So it seems,” he says reverently, as if he’s too unsettled to hope. With enough rain, our water supply would be one less thing for him to worry about, one less problem to find impossible solutions to.

As another gust of wind whips through the streets, the sound of everyone’s laughter seems to stir him, and as Clayton takes in everyone’s enthusiasm, the corner of his mouth twitches.

I lace my fingers with his, drawing Clayton's gaze to mine. The town knows the truth about his late father's misdeeds and still stands behind him. We are alive—our family and friends still breathe, despite Doyle's plans for Sagebrush. And now rain? The Choke, the drifters, enough water—so much uncertainty still shrouds us, but I smile all the same.

“It's a good day,” I whisper to him, but it sounds more like a reminder that there is hope in such an inherited, tangled mess. “We can do this,” I promise. Or is it a reassurance to him? To both of us?

Clayton's mouth settles into a small smile and his hand squeezes mine. “Yes,” he finally says. “We can.” He huffs a breath in disbelief and leans down. There's gratitude in his eyes, a sense of peace. And with the rain dripping off his nose and lashes, Clayton wraps his arm around me, pulling me into him. “I think together, Miss Mason, we can do just about anything.” A warmth floods through me, and when Clayton kisses me, I know that it's true.