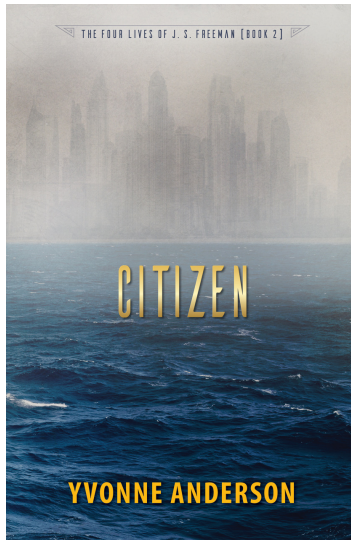




❧ Chapter 9 ❧

WAKING TO HORROR

THEY DUG ME out. Stabilized me for moving. “I called for evac,” a voice said.
Evac? This is a City installation. Shouldn’t help already be here?

I felt stupid. Disconnected. Disoriented. Why was the air hazy with smoke? What were all those explosions? Why the whining and whoosh of projectiles? If something was wrong, shouldn’t there be alarms going off?

“Notify her husband we found her.”

No, he’s here with me. Didn’t you see him? Aren’t you getting him out of that hole too?

They tore up my arm trying to insert an IV, thanks to my dehydrated veins and jarring from a nearby explosion. They threw themselves over me as debris pelted us.

“They know we’re here, right?”

“I called, and they acknowledged. That one must have been off course.”

“Slime, we gotta get out of here. They’ll be razing this place before long.”

What in the world are they talking about?

IV in. A short, noisy, earth-shuddering time later, sweet oblivion...

When I awoke, I wished I hadn’t.



REGAINING CONSCIOUSNESS IN Walpin Rush Military Hospital in Centre City was a little like when I was a girl, awakening to find myself strapped to the bed in the hospital at Coldclime.

As before, Jeriah was there. His worried face was the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes. He sat in a chair to the left of the bed, leaning toward me.

I tried to say, "Hey," but my voice didn't work. I swallowed and tried again.

His eyes were weary, but a smile radiated relief to the rest of his face. "Welcome back."

"Back?" I croaked. "Where've I been?"

"Oh, just hiding under a collapsed building and scaring the slime out of us."

As he spoke, someone took hold of my hand on the other side. I turned my head.

"Grey!" I glanced back and forth between them. "You're together? In the same room?"

Grey had tears in his eyes, and I wanted to wipe them away. "You're back too, then. You were with me. Most of the time." I turned to Riah. "You were there a little while. Then Seena left so the kids wouldn't be alone, and you went after her. You didn't want to be there with Grey."

Riah and Grey exchanged glances.

"You remember, don't you? You were there, weren't you?" I asked first one, then the other.

Riah shook his head.

Grey squeezed my hand. That's when I realized my other arm, the one on Jeriah's side, was immobilized.

Grey said, "I *wanted* to be there."

I frowned. "No, you were there. I was—" I paused, wrestling with my memories. "Out of my mind." I let out a long breath. "Did I imagine it?" I gazed at Grey, drinking in the sight. The reality of his presence, the feel of his hand around mine.

He nodded. "I'm afraid so."

"It was a pretty nice imagining."

Still holding my hand, he half-rose to kiss me. "I wish I could have been there for real."

Riah stood. "I'll leave you two. I just wanted to make sure you were going to be okay."

I wanted to reach toward him, but my arm was immobilized. "No, don't go!" My voice was a croak.

He took my pinned-down hand. The two people I loved most in the world, each holding a hand. I didn't want the moment to end.

"I can't stay." His words hurt. "I'll be in big trouble if I don't get back soon. I've been waiting for two days for you to be fully conscious, and I can't stay any longer."

Fleeting memories came back to me. I had been awake before, hadn't I? I'd thought they were dreams, but no. I'd been drifting in and out. Doctors and nurses had been doing things to me. "Two days?"

He bent and kissed my forehead. "I can see you'll be fine now. You don't need me."

I tried to hold onto him, but he gently pulled out of my grip. "It's okay, Jem. You've got your pigeonhead." He crossed the room but stopped in the doorway and turned to face Grey. "You're going to tell her, Standtall. Before she sees it on the newsfeed." It was an order, not a question.

Tell me what? And why didn't Grey bristle at the way Jeriah spoke to him?

Instead of being angry, he nodded. "I'll tell her."

"Good. Do it." Jeriah stalked out.

"What's good? Do what?" I spoke to the doorway he'd just passed through. "Riah!"

"Shh, Freeman. It's okay." Grey's low voice was soft, reassuring, near my ear, his hand on my head. "You're safe. We're all safe now."

I breathed deeply against a rising panic. "Tell me what, Grey? What do I need to know?"

His hand still light and gentle on my head, he kissed my forehead—not my lips—and sank into his chair. "I'll tell you. But not today. Rest now, and I'll fill you in tomorrow."

I let out a long breath and felt I was sinking into the bed.

When I awoke again, it was dark outside the window, and Grey slept in the chair.



IT WASN'T UNTIL the next day that I learned how the world had changed while I was buried alive.

The information was delivered in the soft, raspy voice and the precise, careful speech of the man I loved. But the words he spoke were repugnant. Horrible. Beyond belief.

Before he was done, I hated the words. Hated the man who spoke them while he fingered the bracelet that bound me to him forever. He told me of the near-simultaneous missile attacks in not only Suthfan, but eleven other cities as well. Places I knew, like Damabal and Kenta City, as well as others I'd never visited, like Stamabal and Firkip. They left Yrapit alone. Apparently they didn't think it worth the bother.

He told me of the Kentans declaring their independence from the City. A declaration of war.

War against the City? What were they thinking? That their goddess Striden had commanded it, according to Grey's understanding. The goddess had somehow told them it was time to break the City's constraints, and she would give them victory.

He told me of the hasty retreat to protect City personnel from the onslaught to come.

Of the retribution even now being delivered to every urban area in the new nation of Kentak.

I tried not to imagine the deaths. The utter destruction. The people I'd known—my stylist in Damabal, the clerk in the liquor store in Yrapit, the front desk clerk at the hotel in Kenta City. All of them, they and their families, were now piles of mangled bones and ash. Or worse yet, not quite dead but dying in agony, or mourning their loved ones who lay buried in rubble.

I wanted to be sick, but my stomach was empty. I wanted to cry, and did.

He told me that after the hail of bombs and rain of fire came the snow of parachutes carrying LAST troops—the elite Land, Air and Sea Tactical soldiers, like Mayne—including Mayne, though of course Grey didn't know about him. They dropped into the areas where the Kentans had their underground bunkers. With specially developed laser drills, and using the detailed coordinates I and others in the Division had provided, they drilled through the ground into those bunkers. Through the holes they made, they dropped small canisters of a gas which, when exposed to air,

burst into a flame that incinerated everything around and released corrosive fumes. If the people in the bunkers didn't die in the fire, their skin and lungs and airways would be eaten by the acid.

My sweet Mayne did this.

And I had provided some of the information that made it possible.

Worse yet, my grave, noble, and upright father-in-law commanded it.

But Grey wasn't finished. He then went on to tell me the City was drawing closed the net we'd laid for the collaborators in other parts of the world. All across the planet, many hundreds, including some CFCs, were arrested. When their interrogations were completed, they'd be executed.

Every vague prejudice that used to make me hate the Cityslimes was true after all. No, it was more than true. I'd never guessed how horrible they truly were. My former hatred had been based on legend and suspicion. The reality was worse. Far worse. My mind couldn't conceive of the horrors Grey was telling me.

"I want to see it," I said. "Where's the video controller? I want to see the newsfeeds."

Grey's voice was gravely, his face ashen and gray. "You don't want to see."

"Give me the controller. I want to see."

He rose, came around to the other side and opened a drawer of the bedside table. "You never watch television. You don't like the newsfeeds."

I snatched the controller out of his hand. "Give me that." I aimed it at the television and pressed the power button, but nothing happened. "What's wrong with this slotting thing?"

He pursed his lips. "You never watch television, so I didn't pay for the service. I can order it if you'd like."

"Order it? Haven't you ordered enough already?" Something rose within me, something terrible, something hateful. It hurt my chest. "Get out."

"What?"

"Get out. I hate you, Ashgrey Standtall. I never want to see your pigeon head again."

When he didn't move, I threw the controller at him.

He deflected it before it cracked him in the forehead. After a moment's consideration, he picked it up off the floor and handed it back to me. "I'll order the service. You may see it for yourself if you like." He bent, supporting himself on the bed rails, and spoke low and slow. "But do not blame me for what you see. You are as responsible as I."

The Thing within me started to growl deep in my throat. I felt it building, heard it coming, marveled at my powerlessness to stop it. It welled to a scream and came out sounding like, "Do you think I don't know that?"

Unfazed, he kissed my forehead. "I know you do."

He kissed my cheek. "If you didn't feel the way you do, I wouldn't love you so."

He kissed my lips. "This is difficult. For all of us. Very difficult."

He kissed me again. "But we'll get through it."

Another kiss. "However ugly the world is, I don't care. As long as we're in it together."

Two nurses appeared—male nurses who looked more like henchmen. “Information Officer Standtall, is everything okay?”

Oops, they’d heard my scream.

Grey unbent himself to stand tall. “Yes, gentlemen, thank you. We’re all right.”

They ignored him and looked at me, waiting for my response.

“No, it’s not okay. I’d like television service in here, if you could. And this bed rail lowered so my husband can sit beside me.”



THEY AGREED TO arrange for television service but were adamant about not allowing another person—not even my husband—in the bed with me. They did, however, bring a more comfortable chair for him.

We sat together and watched the reports.

It was worse than I had imagined. And I have a vivid imagination.

After a while Grey shut it off. “You’ve had enough.”

I’d had more than enough.

“You need to sleep.”

It was true, my eyes were heavy.

“I’ll see you later.”

I grabbed his hand. Put it to my face and ran the back of it across my cheek, then kissed it. “I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

“I understand.”

“I’m glad you do, because I don’t. I don’t understand anything anymore.”

He kissed me. “You need time to digest things. You were buried in a hole for three days and on strong sedatives for two more. How could you not be confused?”

“Don’t go until I fall asleep, okay?”

“Okay.”

I don’t think he had to wait more than a minute and a half. But the images of what I’d just seen filled my unconscious mind for the next several hours. I smelled the smoke. The burning buildings, burning flesh. I heard the screams of the dying.

But those images. One horrible picture after another chased through my dreams, blending into one another like molten plastic, like running blood.

I saw hands dropping a canister into a hole—they were Mayne’s hands.

I saw the Minister of Domestic Peace standing by a window, holding a steaming cup and looking out on the world. The carpet was lush, the window tall, the drapery heavy and ornate. He looked out at the world and said, “Kill them. Kill them all.” Then he took a sip of my uncle’s glaffcrim.

Outside the window, the world exploded. But the Minister had turned away.

This is an excerpt from:

Citizen – Book 2, The Four Lives of J. S. Freeman
by Yvonne Anderson

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