

**AFTER THE WALL AND
THE WILD**

AN EPILOGUE

ERYN CARPENTER

EPILOGUE

Barstow licks my face and I wake laughing.
There's only so long I can let you sleep in on your birthday. His thoughts chuckle as he lies down on my chest, crossing his paws and looking at me with his dark brown eyes.

I stretch my arms above my head and heave my heavy dog off my chest.

Alright, alright. You weigh a ton. What have you been eating?

I shoot him a joking wink and sit up. I let a huge, slow, gulp of breath pull into my lungs and sit there while I close my eyes and enjoy the feeling. The scent of pine-tree sap mixes with a warm dirt-baking-in-the-morning-sun smell. I can feel warm late-summer air drifting under the door from outside.

I'm seventeen today. I open my eyes and think back to a year ago, when I couldn't wait until I reached this milestone age.

Is it weird? Barstow jumps off the bed and cocks his head at me.

I nod. Thinking of our days in the city makes my chest

tighten. It's been about half a year and I haven't gone back since. Others have. But I think I need more time.

I pull on pants and a clean shirt. Barstow and I walk out of our room into the main section of the Axiom tree. The place is teeming with animals of all species, sizes, and colors. There are more humans than there used to be, too. Not too many, but enough people felt the same as me about living in the city, so they came with. We nod to some, say hello to others, and wind our way out into the open air.

The sunlight pokes through the tree-cover in warm medallions of shimmering gold. I stop for a second and point my face up, squeezing my eyes shut, and letting the warm patches settle on my skin to wake me up. When I open my eyes, Barstow's sitting next to me, scratching his ear with his back foot. I laugh at the funny, pulled-to-one-side face he makes when he does this. He growls at me and then stands up, scooting his body into a full run through the forest.

Only a second behind, I tense my muscles and follow him. I know even my fastest run won't help me catch up, even with the definite limp he'll always have after being stabbed in the shoulder, but I love to stretch my legs in the morning. As we crash through the underbrush and dodge trees, a shape appears to the right, running alongside us. The dark horse easily passes me and Barstow. His body stretches long, his ears lay flat, and his tail flows behind him like a flag.

On his back, Eny crouches low, holding onto handfuls of mane, her own hair whipping behind and mirroring Banner's tail. Barstow and I pull up, give up. There's no way we're going to outrun Axiom's best courier pair.

Banner's muscles flex and he sticks his legs straight, bouncing to a stop on the soft forest pines. They turn

around and trot towards us. Eny's breathing hard, her cheeks kissed with the bright pink sting of wind whipping against her face. Banner's nostrils are huge, ballooned to bring in the most oxygen. His breath heaves in and out as he stands in front of us.

"Happy Birthday, Bro," Eny says with a smile.

I tip my head forward. "Thanks, En."

"I've got news from the city." Her words make my stomach clench together. The city. I'm constantly worried about what's going to happen up there. She must see my reaction because she ends with, "It's good, a part of your birthday present."

I settle. If it's a present, it'll be good. My shoulders relax. I hadn't even realized they weren't. I look up to my sister to hear the news.

She jerks her head behind her. "Piper and Thelo are right behind us." There's a sly smile playing at her lips as she tells me. Piper's always trying to race them, asking again and again even though she and Thelo lose every time. It's no wonder, though, with Banner's tall-as-the-Wall legs. He could get to the city in a matter of strides, it seems. "We'll wait until they get here."

The ground rumbles with the sound of more hooves. I turn around to see a white blur twisting through the forest. Piper's brown, wavy hair bounces behind her. Thelo does the same straight-legged bounce stop as Banner and they're standing, panting next to us, too. I run over and Piper swings off Thelo's back into my arms. She wraps her arms around me and plants a kiss on my lips that I'm sure makes the others look away.

"You're catching up." She winks and smiles. She turned seventeen a few months ago, ahead of me. Always ahead of me.

I shake my head and pull her closer. "I'll spend the rest of my life chasing you, Piper Zimney."

"Ahem."

We turn around. Eny, Banner, Thelo, and Barstow all wear fake impatience covering real smiles.

"Hey," I say, putting my hands up. "It is my birthday." We walk closer to Eny. "So what's the news?" I look between her and Piper.

Their excitement flashes white as their smiles glint with the morning sun. Eny nods to Piper. "You tell him."

Piper looks at me. "They elected Aden as one of the seven."

My lungs release the tightness they've been holding onto all morning. Good. Aden deserves it. He's worked hard. Heck, he came up with the idea of the elections and the idea that not just one person should run the city, but an equal group of seven. Each represent a section of the city and each law must be unanimous in order to pass. I don't know much about ruling, but I'm learning some things out here. Mr. Z kind of took over after Addrack and he seems to think I might want to do the same after he passes on.

We chat about the other news from the city as we walk back to the tree. The seven have voted not to tear down the Wall, but to keep the gates open indefinitely. The Advisor's apartment has been converted to a memorial to those who died during the revolution. They're starting up a different ration system that is not based on class, but on hours worked; it sounds interesting. Oh, and they released the prisoners last week. Piper stops and kicks the ground as she relays this one.

Marissa.

My stomach curls in like it does any time I think about

her and the terrible hold she had on me, if only for necessity. I stop, too and listen in.

Piper shrugs her shoulders. “They gave them food and supplies, then dropped them off miles away from the city.”

I scrunch my forehead together. We’re miles away from the city.

“In the other direction.” Piper winks. “Who knows, they might find one of the Outer Cities and—”

Eny’s laughter cuts Piper off. We look over. She wipes tears from her eyes then shakes her head.

“What?” we ask.

“Gresh told me she was still wearing her high heels. They kept sticking in the dirt and she rolled her ankle five times before he lost sight of them.”

Piper and I try to hide our smiles. My mind wanders, though, as we walk forward. Was it right to keep her alive? She’s free now, granted she’s been warned never to return to Antiarch or to search for Axiom, but still. Should I have killed her when I had the chance, when I had the knife pressed to her side?

If you had, I doubt you’d be the same Finn you are today, Piper says, in my mind. And I think back to when Gresh almost shot Marissa. It was ultimately Piper who stopped him. Even after she said she would kill her, even though she should hate her the most.

She’s right, you know, Barstow chimes in.

Always, I say and wrap my arm around Piper as she laughs.

“Well, enough about her,” I say aloud as the Axiom tree starts to come into our view. “We’ve got our own lives to focus on.”

“Yeah. Hey, you didn’t tell me you were starting in the

Lab,” Eny says. “I have to hear this news from Banner? Come on!”

I shrug my shoulders and smile. “I’ve always been interested in science. Plus, with Piper taking over as the new head of Axiom Security, I’ve got to keep myself busy doing something.”

Piper jabs me with her elbow. “Yeah, Uncle Bern still seems like he’s in denial about the whole thing. I think he wanted you to continue following him around so he has someone to tell all of his stories to.”

“I’m not saying I won’t ever want to take over, but I definitely don’t want to now.” I shake my head. “And who knows, maybe someone else will show they’re more worthy in the meantime.”

The girls roll their eyes at me and we continue into the heart of Axiom headquarters. I guess we don’t really need to call it headquarters anymore since we aren’t planning anything, just living. It’s more like its own city now.

We round a group of trees and the great table stretches before us. I’ve slept past breakfast, so it should be empty, but it’s not. People and animals gather around a cake. When they see me, everyone cheers, “Happy Birthday!”

I laugh. Mom and Dad are there, along with Conlon and Lauren, Piper’s family, plus human and animal friends I’ve made here at Axiom. Their warm smiles draw us in and I’m showered in hugs, slaps on the back, and congratulations. I don’t really know what I did to deserve congratulations, other than not dying, but looking back on the past year I guess that’s a pretty big deal.

Dad’s walking normally now, just like Piper. Most of the signs of our fighting are long healed, but the ones that remain are the animals and people missing altogether. I close my eyes and think of how Addrick would have stood

on his hind legs, put a giant paw on my shoulder, and pulled me into a warm, earthy bear-hug.

But even the not-so-large animals leave a huge hole. I'm sad that I never got to know the real Fritz. And those are just the main animals I knew. What about the scores I didn't know, will never get a chance to know? I open my eyes and take in the happy scene in front of me. All we can do is honor their memory and keep moving forward.

Piper's dad starts cutting the cake and passing polished wooden plates of it around the circle. It looks delicious, light, and fluffy. It's a true Wild cake, so I know it won't be too sweet, but Mom sprinkles a handful of summer berries on top of each piece before she lets them go.

"Baked in our new, solar power oven," Conlon says, wrapping his arm around Lauren's shoulder. She blushes. It's her design. Not that there wasn't energy or electricity here before, but Lauren's something of a technical genius and she's really streamlined a lot of what we do. Conlon's one to talk, he's helping animals learn how to speak aloud like Addricks did. But that's no surprise, he's always been the master of smooth talking.

We eat and chat around the table. The sun joins us, stretching fingers of light down through the trees and into our conversations. The river nearby rushes past, always on the move, constant. I excuse myself and walk over to one of the fires still burning from this morning.

I reach down into my pocket and pull out my Junior Enforcement armband. I've carried it with since I left the city, unable to leave it behind for some reason. The fear of things going back to that made me unable to accept that those terrible years are over. The cows that were left split themselves between Antiarch, Axiom, and some ventured off toward the Outer Cities. Aden's helping the city turn a

new leaf. Gresh is even helping form a new security force that's for the citizens, helping them and protecting their rights.

And now it's my turn to move forward. That's what I can give myself for my birthday. Barstow's feet pad through the pine needles and he sits next to me, looking into the fire. I chuck the armband into the flames and set my hand on his head. We watch the fabric burn, watch the Advisor's damage slowly undone, and I know that Antiarch will be okay. Axiom will be okay. We'll be okay.

ALSO BY ERYN CARPENTER

The full Antiarch Trilogy is now available on Audible! Go hear Zachary Johnson bring these characters to life today!

Want to listen for free? Email me at erynwrites.com and I can send you free codes for the audio in exchange for an honest Audible and Amazon review.



