



Forsaken (Broken City 2)

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Category: Fantasy, Young Adult

Description: After Reece, Ryder, and Blaise rescued me from the channels, I thought my imprisoned fate had changed. But during our journey back to the station, we're captured by the Forsaken.

The Forsaken are known for killing their prisoners, but a fate much worse than death is waiting for us at their camp. If we want to survive, we'll have to find a way to escape.

But the leader of the Forsaken won't let me out of her sight. She's convinced I'm a hybrid and is determined to prove it by forcing me to take a test. A test I'm not sure I can pass.

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Chapter One

Phobia

I've been out of the channels for almost a week now, and I'm discovering more about myself than I ever thought was possible: my likes, dislikes, preferences, and phobias. For instance, take heights. I utterly loathe them. Well, not necessarily heights so much as the idea of how easily I could plunge to my death from a high enough distance.

"Come on, Allura. You can do this," Ryder calls up to me from the trail below.

He made it to the bottom of the cliff several minutes ago, and I was supposed to follow. But halfway down, I panicked, and now I'm clinging on to an uneven ledge, too terrified to move.

"You only have about a hundred feet to go," Ryder adds, trying to be encouraging.

"A hundred feet?" My fingernails claw into the gritty cliff as I hang on for dear life.

Don't look down, Allura. Don't look down.

My gaze flicks up to Blaise and Reece, who are watching me from the top of the cliff. The sun blares down from the bleeding red sky, highlighting the concern on their faces.

See, even they think you're going to fall.

"Sweetheart, you're not going to fall." Ryder softly tugs on the rope cinched through the harness around my waist. "See? We've got you."

I draw in a breath before gradually sliding my foot down, but I make the mistake of letting my gaze drop to Ryder standing on the trail below and the seemingly endless drop off just behind him. My skin and fingernails scrape against the rock as I wrench my foot up and grip the ledge. A violent gust of wind blows up, and rocks tumble from the cliff and crash to the ground. I press my forehead against the cliff, shutting my eyes in shame.

"I'm sorry. I-I don't think I can do it." I feel so weak and useless. Just a handful of days ago, they risked their lives to rescue me from the channels and then saved me from a Tracker and from Maxx and Lucille, and here I am, unable to climb down a cliff for them.

You can do it. You can do it.

No! No! I can't.

The dry air nips against my sweaty forehead and cheeks; blood trickles from the open wounds on the pads of my fingers; and my limbs grow tired as the sun scorches down on me. Dehydration sets in. If I don't get down soon, I'll pass out.

"Allura, open your eyes," Blaise says, sounding close.

I open my eyes and suck in a breath. He's dangling to the side of me without a harness or rope, his fingers are gripping a small lip in the cliff, and his boots are planted firmly against the side.

"W-what are you doing?" I sputter. "Y-you don't have on a rope. You're going to fall."

"I'll be fine," he insists. "Let's just get you down."

"I don't think I can do it, Blaise. I'm so sorry."

"Yes, you can. And I'm going to help you. You have to trust me, though."

Trust him? Do I?

I take in his intense eyes, his blond hair shaved on one side, the metal barbells ornamenting his lips and brows, and the intricate tattoos on his neck. When I first met Blaise, I was afraid of him. His rugged looks and hard expression reminded me too much of some of the visitors who had passed through my cell. He's also insanely strong and may have killed Maxx and Lucille for hurting me. Yet, despite all of this, I trust him. He has never done anything to hurt me, only protected me.

"Here's what I need you to do." He keeps his attention fastened on me. "Let go of the rock with your right hand and wrap your arm around the back of my neck. When you get a good grip, bring your leg around and climb onto my back."

"But you're not wearing a rope. What happens if we fall?"

"You'll still be wearing the rope, so you'll be fine. That's all that matters."

"No, it isn't. I don't want you to get hurt or ..." I dare a glimpse below. "If you fall, you'll die."

"It's not that far," he replies nonchalantly. "I'll probably break a few bones, if that."

I gulp, glancing down again. "You'd splatter apart like a dropped watermelon."

His head cocks to the side, his forehead creasing. "That's a really graphic image you

just painted. I didn't think you could be that morbid."

"I think it's the height. It's messing with my head." I drop my forehead against the coarse rock. "I've been picturing myself splattering against the ground the entire time I've been stuck here."

"Then let's get you down," he says. "Come on, climb on my back."

I elevate my head to look at him. "You promise you won't fall? Even with the extra weight on your back?"

"You weigh practically nothing." He gives a long sigh. "But yeah, I promise I won't fall."

I weigh my options: climb down by myself, stay here until I die, or let Blaise help me.

Blaise tries to remain as patient as possible while I deliberate, but I can tell he's struggling not to just reach out and grab me.

Finally, I manage to pry a hand away from the cliff, but I instantly teeter backward. Anxiety slams through my veins as I throw my chest forward while reaching out and wrapping my arm around Blaise. I don't allow enough time to get psyched out, slinging my leg around him.

Once I've steadied myself, I lean my weight to the side and shift all the way onto his back, looping my arms around his shoulders and my legs around his hips.

"Good?" he asks, his voice strained.

"I think so." I press my forehead against the back of his neck. "Are you?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Despite his words, tension currents off him.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?"

"No."

I carefully wiggle around, trying to support more of my own weight. "Do I need to move? Am I too--"

"You're fine, Allura. Just hang on. I'm going to get us down."

I nod and tighten my hold. His chest puffs against my interlocked hands as he lowers his foot, keeping his body close to the cliff. He slips his other foot down, and then his fingers mimic the movements. Over and over again, he descends, scaling toward the bottom. He moves so flawlessly, so effortlessly I feel silly for not being able to get down by myself.

"It's not your fault," Blaise says as we near the bottom. "You're afraid of heights. I'm not."

How did he know what I was thinking? Can he read minds?

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sp; I shove the thought from my mind. No, if he could read minds, then he'd know I'm keeping a secret from all of them. A horrible secret that would make Blaise want to drop me and watch me splatter.

"We're almost there." He drags his hand downward, his fingertips leaving imprints in the rocks. "Ready?" Without warning, he throws his weight back.

For a horrifying instant, I think we're going to die, but we're only airborne for half a heartbeat before Blaise's feet touch the ground.

His fingers fold around my knees, securing me in place. "You good?"

My heart pounds so forcefully he can probably feel it against his back. "I-I think so." I calm my breathing before hopping off his back. "I'm so sorry you had to do that." My legs wobble as I step back, sweeping strands of my long, tangled brown hair out of my eyes.

He rubs his hand over the shaved side of his head. "I had to climb down it, anyway."

I undo the buckles on the harness and remove it from my waist. "Still, thank you. I never would've gotten down without your help."

He shrugs, taking the harness from me. "It's not a big deal," he replies, not looking me in the eye.

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His reaction fascinates me more than it should. I can't help it. Blaise has gotten nervous around me before, and I want to understand why. How can someone so rough and intense be afraid of me?

When he catches me watching him, he clears his throat. "You're okay, though, right?"

I nod then look away, wiping my damp palms off on the sides of my cargo pants. The open scrapes burn, and I flip my hands over, inspecting the injuries.

Blaise tracks my gaze, and then his mouth plummets. He reaches for my hands, but wrenches back as Ryder steps between us.

"Aw, poor baby." Ryder cups his hand underneath mine and examines the wounds. "How badly does it hurt?"

"Not too badly." I shiver as Ryder traces a finger around a particularly deep abrasion. "Some sting, but just a little."

He sucks in a breath at the sight of a torn off fingernail. "I think you're downplaying the pain." He draws off the hood of his oversized green jacket. "I tore off a fingernail before. It fucking hurt almost as badly as when I broke a finger."

"I've torn a few off before, too." My hands quiver as I recollect when a visitor used a gripping device to pry my fingernails off my hand. The pain sucked the breath out of me, and I nearly passed out. "This doesn't hurt as badly." I instantly regret what I said as sadness fills Ryder's eyes. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"Of course you should've." He brushes strands of his blond hair out of his eyes. "I want you to say whatever you're feeling whenever you're feeling it. You don't have to hold back with us."

"But what I said made you sad. And I don't like doing that ... to anyone."

"I'm not sad. I'm heartbroken over what you had to go through. But I never want you to feel like you can't talk to me about what happened. I want you to tell me everything whenever you're ready, okay?" He waits for me to nod then turns to Blaise. "Did you bring any bandages? I forgot to pack some."

"Of course you did," Blaise grumbles. "I put some in everyone's bag." He leans over to retrieve a tattered backpack from the ground. "I don't know why you can't remember to pack shit. You're lucky I'm on top of stuff, or we'd be fucking screwed all the time." He shoves the bag at Ryder, and then his eyes fall to the scrapes on my palm. "Make sure to clean those thoroughly. I don't want her getting an infection." He tears his gaze off my hand then steps toward the bottom of the cliff.

"I think he likes you," Ryder remarks after Blaise is out of earshot. "If it were mine or Reece's hands, he'd tell us to deal with it and not waste the bandages."

"Maybe we shouldn't wrap my hands then. I don't want to waste anything." I start to pull my hands away, but Ryder intensifies his grip.

"No way. We're taking care of these. I'll feel like an asshole if I don't. And Blaise would kick my ass." He lets go of my hand then hitches the backpack over his shoulder. "Once he cares about someone, there's no going back. He's an all-in or nothing kind of guy, so now he's going to protect you at all costs, even if it means going against his crazy, control issues, like his need to stretch our supplies."

I steal a glance over at Blaise. He's clutching the rope, making sure Reece doesn't fall

down the cliff. There's no way Blaise likes me more than Ryder and Reece. He barely knows me. And if he really knew me, he'd despise me.

"I'm sure he likes you guys just as much as me, if not more." I look back at Ryder. "Even if he does yell at you for using the bandages."

"Maybe." Ryder searches my eyes then sighs heavily. "Come on. Let's get you all fixed up."

Carefully holding one of my hands, he guides me down the dirt trail. When we reach a cluster of rocks, he releases my hand and drops the bag to the ground.

"Sit down so I can play doctor." He flashes me a mischievous grin then starts rummaging through the bag.

I lower myself onto a rock perfectly shaped for sitting and rest my hands on my lap. "I really am fine if you want to ..." I trail off as I flip over my hands.

Every single wound has healed, and my fingernails have grown back to a normal length. The only sign I was ever injured are the remnants of dry blood on my palms and fingers. I healed quickly back when I hit my head on the shelf and when I dislocated my shoulder. At first, I thought it might be that my injuries weren't as severe as Blaise thought, but then Mable tested my blood and discovered my blood is similar to that of the Grims.

I quickly ball up my hands. "You know what? I really don't think we should waste the bandages."

"Would you knock it off?" he asks in a playful tone. "We're fixing your hands up, and that's that."

My breaths quicken as I try to figure a way out of this. I don't want to be a liar, but if Ryder sees my hands, he'll know something's wrong with me.

"I-I think I might be allergic to bandages," I sputter.

He glances up from the bag with his brows knit. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Thankfully, my voice comes out even. "I just remembered one of the wardens saying something about the adhesive on bandages messing up my skin. I think it gave me hives and blisters." It's not entirely a lie. It happened because the bandages were left on for too long. When the wardens finally tore them off, layers of my skin came off, too.

He meticulously studies me, and it takes a lot of effort not to squirm.

"No, that's not it." He kneels down in front of me and places his hands on top of my thighs. "You don't need to be scared. Whatever it is, you can tell me."

I stare at his hands, unsure of what to say. I'm a terrible liar. I don't know if that's always a bad trait to have, but right now, it definitely is.

"I just don't want to bandage my hands," is all I can think to say.

He hooks a finger underneath my chin and tilts my head up. "If you don't want to, then I won't make you, just like I won't force you to tell me the truth. I hope you change your mind, though."

His kind, warm eyes draw me in, and I nearly break down and confess everything Mable told me. But then Blaise hollers that he needs Ryder's help with the ropes, and the moment shatters.

Ryder pushes to his feet. "I'll be right back." He starts to walk off, but then pauses. "If you change your mind, the bandages are in my bag."

I nod, and then he runs off toward Blaise and Reece. I keep my eyes on him until I'm certain he's distracted, and then I dig around in my backpack for the fingerless gloves I brought with me from the East City Post. I find them stuffed at the bottom underneath the blankets, clothes, food, and bottles of water and quickly slip them on. Then I contemplate what to tell Ryder if he mentions the absence of wounds on my hands. But not a single legitimate excuse comes to mind.

I stay on the rock while Reece, Ryder, and Blaise pack up the climbing gear. When my stomach grumbles in hunger, I grab a bottle of water and a snack out of the bag.

I'm just tearing into a piece of beef jerky when a scream echoes from somewhere along the cliffs. The noise triggers an unexpected flashback of m

e sprinting through a field with a growling animal chasing after me. I want to know what the animal is, but I'm too frightened to look.

The images fizzle when I hear the sound of thundering footsteps.

I look over at the cliff and see Reece, Ryder, and Blaise sprinting up the trail toward me with their guns out.

"Allura, pack up your stuff," Ryder shouts. "We have to go!"

I barely have time to shove the jerky and water into my bag before they reach me.

"We need to go. Now." Ryder reiterates, out of breath. He grabs his backpack then snatches my wrist and lifts me to my feet.

"Where do you think it came from?" Reece pants, his gaze skimming the cliffs.

Blaise checks the ammo in his gun. "My guess is from a lower trail."

"Let's hope that's it." Reece wipes sweat from his brow. "If they're down below us, it's going to take them longer to get up here."

Blaise glances at the gaping hole in the ground to the side of us. "Up or down, they're going to get to us quickly if they know we're here."

"Then let's go." Ryder starts down the trail, towing me with him.

"Would you wait a damn minute?" Reece snaps. "We need a plan before we just go running off."

Ryder slows down. "The plan's to get the hell away from here. We can't let them find us, especially Allura."

"Yeah, I know," Reece says. "But running off and hoping they don't track us isn't the best way to do this. We need to be cautious and careful, make sure our tracks are covered."

I open my mouth to ask what's going on, but another scream cuts me off.

"Shit," Blaise curses, aiming the gun everywhere his gaze roams. "They're fucking closer than I thought."

"Who's they?" I ask. "Is it another Tracker?"

"No." Blaise's eyes are crammed with worry. "It's the Forsaken, and that scream is their hunting call."

Chapter Two

Invisible Scars

Terror surges through me. Hunting call? We're being hunted? I've been hunted before. Now I'm being hunted again.

I don't have time dwell on my worried thoughts, because another scream rings across the desert and snaps me back to reality.

"Shit, we need to move. Now." Blaise circles the area, clasping the handle of the gun. He glances up, down, left, right, and then his gaze fastens on Reece. "What's our next move?"

Ryder looks at Reece with the same expectant look as Blaise. Blaise once told me they didn't have a boss, but Reece seems like the one in charge, whether intentionally or not.

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Reece rakes his fingers through his brown hair. "I think we need a decoy. One of us can lead them the other way while we get Allura to the caves. You know they won't step foot in those because of the curse."

"We're not going in there, either." The veins on Blaise's tattooed neck bulge. "Especially with Allura."

"Blaise." Reece's tone is calm, controlled, and carries authority. "The curses are just legends. You need to calm down."

"Tell that to my brother," Blaise mumbles under his breath, kicking the dirt with the tip of his black boots.

Reece sighs, slipping his gun into the holster that's underneath his grey, hooded jacket. "It's our only shot. If we can make it to the caves, we should be safe until sundown."

Blaise's jaw ticks. "This is the stupidest plan you've ever come up with."

"Do you have a better one?" Reece asks, glaring at him.

"Fine," Blaise grits out through his teeth. "Let's get this fucking show on the road before we end up gutted and left to rot in the sun."

My stomach churns. Gutted? Is that what the Forsaken are going to do to us?

"You want to be the decoy again?" Reece asks Blaise. "It'll keep you out of the

caves."

Blaise hesitates, his gaze flitting in my direction. "Maybe I shouldn't this time."

"We'll make sure she's safe." Ryder tightens his hold on my hand and pulls me closer to his side. "We're just as capable of protecting her as you are."

Blaise seems torn but backs away. "I'll lead them south for a while. Then I'll round back and head up the west trail."

Reece nods. "When we get Allura to the station, we'll head back for you."

Without saying a word, Blaise spins around and strides down the trail, leaving a cloud of dust behind him.

Reece hurries off in the opposite direction of Blaise and signals for Ryder and me to follow. "Keep to the side on the rocks so we don't leave tracks," he says, taking long, even strides.

Ryder gives him a thumbs up then tries to offer me a comforting smile. "We'll be okay. We know what we're doing."

Nerves bubble inside me. "But will Blaise be okay by himself?"

Ryder nods. "Blaise is an expert at being the decoy. You don't need to worry about him."

"I know, but ..." I peer at the trail behind me. Blaise is so far away from us now that I can barely make him out amongst the rocks and cliffs. "He seemed so upset."

"He's always upset. Once you've known him for a while, you get used to it." Ryder

speeds up to keep pace with Reece's superhuman power walk.

"That thing Blaise said about the caves ... about his brother ..." I stumble to match Ryder's lengthy strides. "What did he mean by it?"

Ryder tenses. "I'm not sure I should tell you right now."

"I'm sorry," I say quickly. "I'm always asking too many questions. I don't know why I do it."

"I didn't mean that I can't tell you." He glances at me from the corner of his eye. "I just don't think now's the best time. I don't want to scare you."

I gulp. It's too late for that.

"So, I was thinking ... When we get back to the station, you could take a few classes," Ryder says, gazing up at the sky.

"Okay, yeah." I think he's trying to distract me from what's going on, and while I'm grateful, my thoughts remain stuck on Blaise. Is he okay? What will happen to him if the Forsaken capture him? "What kinds of classes, though? I don't know very much."

"You know more than most," he insists. "And besides, that's what the classes are for. You'll learn more about the world, the Grim, and maybe you can even take some self-defense and general fighting classes."

"Blaise should just teach her," Reece chimes in. "He's better than all of the instructors."

"Yeah, but he lacks the patience," Ryder points out, maneuvering us around a crack in the trail.

"Well, I guess it would be a good learning experience for him, too, then." Reece glances over his shoulder at us. "He needs to practice his patience and people skills."

Ryder arches his brow. "Do we really want Allura to be the one he practices on?"

Reece studies me, considering. "You know what? I think she might be the perfect person for the job."

"Yeah, maybe," Ryder mumbles, stuffing his free hand into his pocket. "He does seem to like her."

"Yes, he does, which means two things." Reece counts down on his fingers. "One, he'll work extra hard to train her. And two, he won't yell at her."

Ryder shoots him a skeptical look. "You don't think he'll yell at her, huh? I know he likes her and everything, but this is Blaise we're talking about. Remember when he chewed out our instructor for teaching us what he thought was a wrong technique? Or the time he yelled at Rae because he thought she was drawing blood the wrong way? Or the time--"

"I know how Blaise is, Ryder. I don't need a recap." Reece silences him, holding up his hand. "But I don't think he'll yell at Allura. He's shown more patience toward her than with anyone else--well, except for maybe you and me."

"Still ..." Ryder scrubs his hand across his unshaven jaw. "I think we should let Allura decide. She's the one who's going to have to put up with his shit."

Both of them look at me expectantly.

"I don't mind if Blaise trains me," I say quietly. "I'm just glad I get the opportunity to learn."

"She's too nice," Ryder tells Reece. "She doesn't know what she's getting into."

"She'll be fine." Reece waves him off, facing forward again and ending the conversation.

"If you really want to do this thing with Blaise, that's fine," Ryder says to me. "But promise me, if he's mean to you, you'll tell me."

I nod, even though I can't really picture Blaise yelling at me. Sure, he has yelled at other people, but even on the cliff when I could tell my hesitation was frustrating him, he kept his composure. And I'd rather him teach me than a complete stranger. I just hope I'm not a terrible learner.

For the next half an hour or so, we hightail it down the trail, weaving around corners and dodging around rocks blocking the path. Reece stays a few feet ahead of us, his eyes roving the cliffs and the enormous hole skimming the side of the trail. Occasionally, a scream cuts through the air, but the noise dwindles the longer we walk.

"The screams are getting quieter," Ryder hollers up at Reece, wiping the sweat from his brow. "That probably means they're heading away from us and after Blaise."

Poor Blaise. He's probably out there all alone, being hunted by killers. I wish someone could've gone with him.

"Not necessarily. They could've split into groups and went after both of us." Reece halts in front of a sloped cliff carved with various size caves. "It's best if we lay low for a while, maybe wait until dark. It's a full moon tonight, which means they won't hunt."

"They won't hunt during a full moon?" I don't know why, but that seems strange to

me.

Ryder shakes his head. "The Forsaken are big on legends, curses, and all that shit. And they believe that, if you hunt during a full moon, the Grim will find you because their abilities are heightened."

My eyes widen. "Is it true?"

"No. It's just a legend that someone probably made up to scare everyone." Ryder brushes his knuckles across my cheeks, causing my eyelashes to flutter. "The Grim are equally as strong day or night, regardless of the moon."

Tell that to whoever started the legend of hybrids. I might be walking proof that some legends are true. A chill slithers down my spine. What other legends could carry some truth to them?

"You said the caves were cursed." I glance up at the caves. There are so many I can't even count them all. "Cursed how, exactly?"

Ryder's mouth compresses into a thin line. "I'd rather not tell you."

"But I kind of want to know what I'm getting into." Not knowing is eating away at me.

Ryder struggles with what to say, his lips parting and closing.

"One of us needs to climb up and make sure they're vacant," Reece announces, stepping beside us.

Relief washes over Ryder. "I can climb

a lot better than you two," he jokes, backing up toward the cliff.

"Just hurry," Reece says. "The longer we're out in the open, the more we're at risk for getting spotted."

Ryder salutes Reece then whirls around and takes off in a mad run toward the cliff. The incline is the perfect angle for him to easily maneuver up, using his hands to keep from slipping down.

"He kind of looks like he's running up a slide," I remark. When Reece doesn't say anything, I glance at him and find him studying me intently. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing." He gives a half-shrug. "I just think it's funny you know what a slide is when there's not a lot of them around. Most people don't know what they are."

I swipe away a few beads of sweat trickling down my neckline. "But you do?"

He nods. "Only because there's one at the station. It's the only one I've ever seen. When I first came to the station, Ryder had to show me how to use it."

"Oh." I rack my mind for how I knew, but all I see--or feel, rather --is a blinding pain in my left eye. Wincing, I slip my hand up through the glasses and press my fingers to my eyelid.

"Are you okay?" Reece asks with concern.

"Yeah. My eye just hurts. I think I got some dirt in it or something."

"Let me look at it." He removes my sunglasses and positions them on top of my head.

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The sunlight immediately stings my eyes, but the pain isn't as unbearable as when I first came out of the channels.

He leans forward to inspect my eye. "You look like you're having an easier time seeing without the glasses."

"I am." My breath catches in my throat as he splays his fingers across my cheek and angles my head to the side, aiming my face more toward the sunlight. Unlike Ryder and Blaise, Reece hasn't touched me more than once or twice. His touch throws me off, but not necessarily in a bad way. "Do you think I can stop wearing them? The glasses, I mean."

"Maybe." He dips his head to get a better look, and his breath dusts my cheek. "It's a little red, but I don't see anything in it." His thumb skims below my eye and a shiver rushes through me. "We can try to rinse it out with some water."

I will my voice to come out balanced. "I'll be fine. It doesn't really hurt anymore."

He nods, but he doesn't move away, sketching his thumb back and forth below my eye. I'm not sure what he's doing, but his silence is making me nervous.

I peek up at him, trying to read his expression. He looks lost in thought, staring off into empty space. I study him--the way his brown hair sticks up chaotically, the scars on his skin.

Before I even realize what I'm doing, I reach up and touch a scar just above his brow. His skin feels so soft, despite the scars.

"How did you get this?" I ask.

He blinks from his daze. "What?"

I graze the scar with my fingertip. "This scar, how did you get it?"

He seems thrown off by what I'm doing, so I decide to pull away, worried touching him is inappropriate. But he captures my hand, brings my palm back to his brow, and moves my finger over the prominent scar.

"I got this one during self-defense practice after Ryder knocked his elbow into my face," he explains. "He hit me so hard the skin split open."

"Ryder did that to you?"

"He didn't do it on purpose. He was only following our instructor's directions. It was my fault; I didn't block him properly." He brings my hand down to a thin scar on the bottom of his chin. "And this one was from a warden."

"That's horrible. How did it happen?"

"It was during a rescue mission," he answers with reluctance. "We ran into a bunch of them when we were trying to get a group of Nameless out of the channels, and one of the wardens managed to cut me with a knife."

I think about all the times a warden took their knife and sliced the blade across my skin. It seems like ages ago when I was trapped underground. How did time go from moving painfully slow to zipping by startlingly fast?

"You made it out, though," I say. "You must be really strong."

"Not strong enough to get all the Nameless out alive." Guilt floods his eyes, like invisible, unseen scars, and he looks away from me.

My heart aches for him, for all the Nameless who didn't make it out, for the ones still trapped in the channels. "But you got some of them out alive. Think about all the people you've helped."

His throat muscles move as he swallows. "Yeah, I know. I just hate that I can't save them all."

"Me, too." I remind myself to breathe as memories of being imprisoned crash over me. "Whenever I heard someone crying in the cells, I felt horrible that I couldn't help them. I tried to escape a few times, but I never made it very far."

"You're a complete mystery, Allura." He shakes his head, looking more befuddled. "You go against everything I know about the Nameless. The way you act, the way you interact, how well you adapt. You're an anomaly."

"I ..." I'm unsure how to respond. Is that a bad thing?

"It's good that you're different. You're stronger. Braver. I've seen so many give up ..." A breath eases from his lips. "I just want to make sure I get you back to the station safely and that you ... you end up okay."

"I'm sure you will." I offer him a smile, hoping to reduce some of his worry.

His lips lift into a faint grin, but he promptly puts on a serious expression. "Good. I'm glad we're on the same page."

His exaggerated seriousness causes a giggle to sputter from my lips.

He cocks a brow. "What's so funny?"

"Sorry." I bite down on my lip, feeling a bit ridiculous for laughing over something that probably wasn't supposed to be funny. "It just looked like you were trying so hard to be serious, and I thought it was funny. I don't know why."

"You sound just like Ryder. He's always laughing at me whenever I'm trying to give a serious lecture," he admits with a grimace. "He says, one day, my face is going to get stuck in a permanent scowl."

"That doesn't sound very good."

"No, it doesn't." A hesitant, contemplative look crosses his face. "When we get back to the station, I think you should stay with us--"

"All clear," Ryder calls out from above. "Get your asses up here."

Sighing, Reece lets go of my hand. "Okay, we're headed up," he shouts back then glances at me. "Are you going to be okay getting up there?"

I eye the cliff, measuring the lengthy distance from the bottom to the cave Ryder is standing in front of. "I think so ..." I chew on my thumbnail. "It doesn't look as steep as the one we climbed down."

"It's not nearly that bad. We should be able to run up it if we keep a decent pace." Reece places a hand on the small of my back and inches me forward. "I'll stay behind you just in case you slip."

I nod, adjust my backpack, and then approach the cliff. I pick up momentum the closer I get, knowing if I slow down, I'll back out. When I reach bottom, I surge upward. Even with the clunky traction of my boots, I slip more than a few times, but

like he promised, Reece stays behind me and makes sure I don't fall. Before I know it, I've reached Ryder and the cave.

As I turn and look back at the ground below, a strange sense of pride squeezes at my chest. I made it all the way up by myself.

Ryder shares my feeling, grinning proudly as he slings an arm around my shoulder. "She's a natural, Reece. She picks up everything so quickly. I'm telling you, with a little bit of--"

"We're not talking about this right now," Reece says, hoisting himself up the last of the cliff. Brushing the dirt off his cargo pants, he stands beside us and gazes down at the cliffs and the trails that make up the fault line. "I think Blaise pulled it off. I don't see any sign of him or the Forsaken anywhere."

"Blaise is always a good decoy, just as long as it doesn't require him to interact with anyone." Ryder sneaks a smile in my direction. "He has some serious social issues."

"That's not his fault. You of all people should know that." Reece shields his eyes from the sunlight with his hand. "The sun won't set for at least three or four hours. I think we should get something

to eat and get some rest before we head out. I'll take first watch if you want to fix us some food."

"Sounds like a plan." Ryder heads for the cave with his arm around me. "What sounds good for lunch?" he asks. "I've got beans and jerky. Or beans and jerky. Or wait." He taps his finger against his lips. "Beans and jerky."

I giggle. "How about beans and jerky?"

"You have the most beautiful smile." A grin breaks across his face, and my cheeks heat from the compliment. He calls over his shoulder, "Don't you think so, Reece?"

"Yeah, she does," Reece answers distractedly. "And don't just feed her beans and jerky. She just got out of the channels. She needs more than that."

"That's all I have." Ryder stops just shy of entering the cave. "They're a good source of protein."

"I know that, but she also needs some fruits and vegetables," Reece says. "I think I might have a couple of cans of pears and corn in my bag. Open those and have her eat them."

"Yes, boss," Ryder jokes then steps into the cave, pulling me along with him.

I squint against the darkness, taking a look around.

"It's empty," Ryder promises. "I checked it out all the way to the back."

"It doesn't go all the way through?" I ask, feeling smothered by the darkness.

He shakes his head. "Some do, though."

"Where do they lead?"

He shrugs. "I have no idea."

"You've never tried to find out?"

"No. And I really don't want to. The caves ... They're not my favorite place."

My gaze travels along the domed ceiling and rock walls. "Because of the curse?"

"The curse is just a legend." But he seems less convinced than he did when we were outside.

I summon a breath to alleviate some of my anxiety, but the foul stench of rotten eggs nips at my nostrils, and I nearly gag. "What's that smell?"

"Sulfur." Ryder slips off his bag and heads deeper into the cave.

My eyes water against the unpleasant odor, and I pinch my nose as I endeavor farther into the cave. I keep expecting something bad to happen, like the roof to cave in or a wild animal to appear.

"Why does it smell like sulfur?" I wonder as he kneels down on the ground.

He doesn't answer, unzipping his bag and taking out a can of beans. "I wish I could heat these up for you, but building a fire would probably lead the Forsaken straight to us."

"I'm fine with eating them cold." I sigh, sit down on the ground beside him, and crisscross my legs. I'm trying not to get frustrated that Ryder won't straightforwardly answer my questions, but I really do want to know what's going on.

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Blaise once told me that Reece and Ryder sugarcoat the truth. I wish Blaise were here now. He would probably tell me about the curse and why the cave reeks.

"Can you check if there's a lantern in your bag?" Ryder asks, pulling out an oddly shaped silver tool from his backpack.

I shuck off my bag and search for a lantern. "There's not one in here. Sorry."

"That's okay. Reece probably has one." He sits down in the dirt, stretches out his legs, and balances the can of beans on his lap. Using the silver tool, he cuts the lid off then dips a spoon inside. He takes a bite of the beans before handing me the can and the spoon. "Eat up while I go get Reece's bag." He starts to stand up, but pauses. "What's that look for?"

I stir the beans. "What look?"

"You look like you're upset."

"I'm fine." I scoop up a spoonful of beans and stuff them into my mouth. "I think I'm just hungry."

"No, that's not it." He leans closer to me. "Come on, Allura, please tell me what's wrong, or I won't be able to relax."

I sigh, more at myself for stressing him out. Why couldn't I just let it go? He's just trying to protect me from being scared.

"It's nothing. I just wish I knew more about this curse and why the rocks smell like sulfur in here." I nibble on a bite of beans. "You seem more unsettled in here than you were outside, and I'd like to know why, even if I may get scared. I'd rather be scared than confused."

Heaving a sigh, he sits back down and opens his arms. "Come here."

I pause mid-bite. "Huh?"

His lips quirk. "I promise I won't bite. I just want you to sit on my lap."

"Oh." My heart skips a beat, which seems like such an odd reaction after everything that has happened. All three of the guys have carried me at one time or another, so sitting on Ryder's lap shouldn't be a big deal. Still, as I crawl over to him and sit down, I nearly choke on my ragged breaths.

"We should sit like this all the time," he says, urging me to lean against him.

"That'd be a little hard to do while we're walking," I retort nervously.

He chuckles, sweeping my hair to the side. Then he grows solemn.

"You really want to know about these caves and the curses?"

"I really do." I nod. "I know you guys think I'll get scared, and I probably will, but everything out here is scary. And I've spent so much time never knowing what's going on ... It's nice to have the option."

His expression wavers between worry and pity. "I didn't think about it like that ... I should've, though. Back when I lived on the docks, I didn't get to make my own choices. And everyone was so dishonest. They kept secrets from each other, and half

the people lied, cheated, and stole. And when we disobeyed ..." He trails off, gulping.

"Did they ...? Did someone hurt you when you did something bad?"

He clears his throat, collecting himself. "It doesn't matter. It was a long time ago. And I escaped." He rests his chin on my shoulder. "I need you to promise me one thing before I tell you about the curse."

I want to talk to him more about what happened on the docks, but I think better of it. If he doesn't want to talk about it, I shouldn't force him.

"Promise me that no matter what, you won't go running out of this cave."

"Why would I do that?"

His breath feathers against my ear. "Because after I tell you, you're going to be so damn scared you're going to want to run as far away from here as you can."

Chapter Three

Curse of the Caves

"Still want to hear about it?" he asks after a minute of silence ticks by.

I force down the lump wedged in my throat and nod, even though I'm not certain I still do. Ryder's clearly worried, and my anxious mind is coming up with all sorts of scenarios of what could be so frightening about these caves.

"Okay." Disappointment weighs in his tone. "But if at any time you want me to stop talking, just say so." He waits for me to nod before continuing. "I'm not sure how the legend first started, but the story goes that, when the Grim first showed up in our

world, a lot of people took to hiding in these caves. From what I understand, the fault line runs along nearly half of the land, and caves cover the hills. Some of them run so deep into the hills that you can get lost for days in them."

My gaze wanders to the back of the cave. "Is that why you picked one that has a dead end? So we wouldn't wander off and get lost?"

He slips an arm around my waist. "That and so I won't have to worry about someone or ... something showing up unexpectedly."

"Oh." I twist back around and relax against his chest. "Is that why everyone's so afraid of the caves--because they worry they'll get lost?"

"That's only part of the reason. There's way more to it than that."

"Does it have to do with the fact that this whole place stinks like sulfur?"

He nods. "It does."

"Does the sulfur have something to do with the Grim?"

He leans over my shoulder, capturing my gaze. "Why would you say that?"

I chew on a spoonful of beans. "I don't know. The channels kind of had the same smell, only more rotten. I thought maybe Grim are near these caves, and that's why it stinks."

"They're not in the caves. But you're right about the channels having a similar smell. And there's a reason for that. Do you know why the channels smell like sulfur?"

"I had a hunch it had something to do with all the dead bodies decomposing down

there." I set down the empty can of beans and rotate sideways on his lap. "The wardens used to tell me that, if I ever tried to run away, I'd get lost in the channels, and my body would never be found. I sometimes wondered if that happened to a lot of people, and that's why the air always carried the scent of death."

"It might be because of that, but that's not what the curse is about." He stares at the entrance of the cave where light filters in, tracing his finger up and down my side. "The Forsaken believe that the scent of sulfur means a Grim's spirit is close by."

"Their spirits? Like ghosts?"

"No, the Grim can't die. Their spirits aren't the same as human spirits."

I relax a smidgen, but I keep my guard on high alert. "Then what are the spirits?"

"It's kind of hard to explain." He chews on his bottom lip. "The thing is, we don't know a lot about the Grim. When they invaded our world, they destroyed a lot of our learning resources. Plus, we spend so much time running and hiding from them that it doesn't leave much of a chance to do research. But we do have a team at the station that spends most of their extra time trying to learn more about the Grim. The problem is, with all the rescue missions and attacks going on, no one has a ton of extra time."

"So, you don't know what their spirits are?"

"No, not for sure. But we have some ideas, one being that their spirits are just a discarded memory the Grim leave behind."

I think about my own resurfacing memories. All those years I spent in the channel and I couldn't remember much about the outside world. But the second I escaped, I began recollecting bits and pieces of a forgotten life.

"So they just discard their memories and what?" I coil a strand of my hair around my finger. "Does the memory float around? Can we pick it up and see it?" The thought makes my stomach churn. The last thing I ever want is to see what goes on inside a Grim's mind.

But you might be Grim, so maybe you already have.

He shakes his head, but then he hesitates. "Well, if they do float around, humans can't see them. At least, I've never heard of anyone seeing one. Some people believe there's a way to collect them and see the memories, but if you do, you lose your mind and go crazy."

I cast an apprehensive glance around the cave. If memories are here, could I possibly see them since I'm a hybrid?

"What are some of the other theories?"

"That a spirit is actually a part of a Grim."

"Like they replicate themselves? Because that sounds horrible."

"It does sound horrible, and honestly, I'm not a big believer in that theory."

He brushes a few strands of his blond hair out of his eyes. "But the spirit isn't an actual physical replica of the Grim. It's more like faded pieces of them, like shed skin left behind after they've used moonstone to recharge."

I make an appalled face. "You're making them sound like snakes ... and ghosts ... like ghost snakes."

He rubs his lips together, struggling not to smile. "And you're making this story way

more amusing than it should be."

"Sorry. I'm just trying to understand. It's so confusing ... and alarming ... and strange."

"I wish I could explain it better, but we're still trying to understand it, too." He reaches up and cups my cheek. "But to answer your question about the curse, the Forsaken believe in the latter. They think that, not only do the Grim shed their skin, but that shed skin can make physical contact with a human and sometimes can even slip inside us and possess our bodies."

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"So the Forsaken believe that these caves are full of Grim spirits?" I put two and two together. "That's why they don't come in here--because they think they'll end up possessed?"

Ryder nods, sketching his thumb back and forth across my cheekbone. For whatever reason, he seems pretty adamant about touching me. It doesn't bother me, but it does leave my mind spinning in confusion.

"The Forsaken won't step foot in the caves," he says, "which makes the caves a safe haven from the Forsaken."

"But Blaise was scared of the caves," I point out. "Does he believe in the legends?"

Reluctance crosses his face. "Kind of."

I shudder, wanting to spring from Ryder's lap and bolt from the cave. I manage to stay put like I promised, though. Still, I do lean closer to Ryder.

"Did something happen to his brother in the caves?" I ask, tracing circles in the dirt with my finger.

"Right before Blaise was brought to the station, his brother died in the caves. I don't know what happened ... Blaise refuses to talk about it. All I know is that the Grim were responsible for his entire family's death, and that's why he chooses to be out there, risking his life."

No wonder Blaise didn't want to come into the caves. I'm not sure if I ever had a

brother or sister, but I can imagine it would be heartbreaking to lose someone you care for so greatly.

A pain so great you never want to think about it ... like a piece of yourself has died, too ... a piece that will never fully live again ...

"You doing okay?" Ryder ducks his head to level his gaze with mine. "This is a lot to take in."

"Yeah, I'm fine." I direct my attention back to Ryder. "I was just thinking about how hard it must be for Blaise to be near the caves."

"I'm sure it is, but Blaise will never show it. We look out for him whenever he lets us." His palm glides down my cheek, and his hand cups the back of my neck. "That's part of the reason Reece suggested he be the decoy today--to keep him from having to come here."

"Maybe we shouldn't have come near the caves to begin with."

"They're all over the fault line, so they're pretty unavoidable."

"Oh." My frown deepens. "Well, I'm glad he didn't come here with us. Although, I'm worried about him being out there alone."

"He'll be fine. He has an excellent shot and some of the best fighting skills out of all of us."

He massages the base of my neck, and dear God, it feels so good, surreal and unlike anything I've felt before.

"You should get some rest so you'll be good to go when night falls. One of us will

stay awake so you don't have to worry about anything. We'll make sure you're protected forever."

Forever? Such a huge promise, one I hope he'll carry out.

"How about you set up a blanket, and I'll get a lantern from Reece and some fruits and vegetables so I can"--he rolls his eyes--"feed you properly? He's such a health nut."

Nodding, I hop off his lap and collect my bag. He gets to his feet and starts to leave, grazing his finger along my forearm as he steps past me. His expression sinks as his gaze lowers to the fingerless gloves on my hands. I expect him to tug them off, but he only sighs and walks out of the cave.

Up until a few seconds ago, I'd forgotten about my hands. Apparently, so did Ryder. I wonder if he'll ever ask me why I'm wearing the gloves or if he'll ask to check on the wounds. I have no clue what I'd do if he did.

Shoving my worry aside, I grab a blanket from my bag and spread it out on the ground. Then I lie down and try to get comfortable enough to fall asleep. But my mind is wired and spinning with thoughts of the Grim and their spirits. It's difficult to think about anything else when the stench of sulfur haunts the air.

I plug my nose, seeing if it'll help. It doesn't, and I flop down on the blanket with a sigh.

"Allura," a voice purrs. "I may not be able to get to you, but I know someone who can."

I start to bolt upright, but a cold rush of air passes through my chest, and I collapse back down on the blanket, gasping for air. The cold sensation rapidly disperses

through my arms and legs all the way to my fingers and toes.

"Ready for your punishment?" the voice whispers. "I told you not to run. Now you get to see just how much trouble you're in."

I open my mouth to scream for help, but my eyes close, and I tumble into darkness, instead.

Chapter Four

Obsession

I'm so damn hungry. No, starving. Savagely starving. I need to feed. Now. Only a feast will alleviate my hunger.

I march down the hallway of the channels with hunger pains searing inside my chest. I haven't fed in weeks. That's too long. But the fucking watchers have restricted the wardens' feeding time due to a food shortage. Of course, the food shortage wouldn't exist if they weren't so greedy. That's the problem with our society. All these stupid rules about respecting the watchers, but they're no better than us. They just think they are because they got us to this world. Now they force us to work in the channels, selling the food that we either create or capture. And we don't see an ounce of the profits. It all goes to them.

Greedy fucking bastards.

One day, they'll get what's coming to them. But for now, I'm going to take what's mine.

My boots thud against the dirt as I storm toward the Nameless's cell. She's the only one left in this section. The rest of the Nameless have either died or been taken to the

breeding section. The only reason she's still here is because she's supposed to be different. Visitors pay a steep price to feed on her, and I want to know why. What makes this frail, weak, pathetic human so special? What makes her as good as quercu?

I've visited her a couple of times to see if I could find out without breaking the laws and tasting her. But she's harder to read than most humans. I need to quit bullshitting around and get straight to the answer. And If I don't act now, I won't ever get a chance.

From what I understand, in a few weeks, she's going to be transferred to the Broken City to live with the watchers. Usually, prisoners die in the channels. They never get transferred to the city. There must be something special about this Nameless, something deliciously mouthwatering, I bet.

God, I can't wait to taste her.

My body yearns thinking about placing my hands on her chest and sipping the life from her veins. If she's as good as I've heard, I'll be stronger than I ever have. Maybe strong enough to finally go through with my plan to take down the watchers.

When I reach the door to her cell, I punch in the code in the keypad. The lights around the doorframe illuminate as the door glides open.

I immediately grin at the sight.

I've caught her in a vulnerable position with her body pressed to the floor and her limbs stretched. She was obviously trying to escape past the iron circle again. She has done it a handful of times.

Usually, Nameless are easier to break. This one won't give up, though.

The fact that her cuffs are stuck to the circle right now is going to make feeding a hell of a lot easier. And satisfying.

"Trying to escape again, huh?" I say from the doorway.

She visibly cringes at the sound of my voice. S

he knows who I am, knows my name, which is another rule I broke for her. Nameless aren't supposed to know names and languages or have any sort of intelligence. They're supposed to barely exist, always alive but veering toward death. We make sure of that, even if we have to beat the will to live out of them.

I was sent down here a few times to beat her, but that fire in her eyes still remains, even now as she glances up at me. Something about the look has always drawn me in, made me curious, made me desire her in the strangest way. I can't even explain it.

Normally, we don't look at humans as more than a source of food. But with her ... I've seen the desire in other wardens' eyes, too. And even visitors. They long for more of her. Maybe that is why I told her my name. Or maybe I've just been underground for too long and am getting bored. Whatever the reason, the damn girl should be grateful I broke the laws for her and told her my name. But she's not. There's still some time to break the appreciation into her, though.

"Little, helpless Nameless," I taunt her as the door shuts behind me. "You know, most of you hardly talk, let alone try to escape. You're different, though, aren't you? Number five-two-eight-seven. Just an ordinary number, yet I don't think you are." I stroll toward her, my hunger growing to a pulsating need, throbbing inside my body. "I'm not supposed to touch you. You're supposed to be for the visitors." I inhale her scent, my nostrils flaring. "But I want to know what the big deal is."

She shuts her eyes and bites down on her lip. "S-stay away f-from me, or I'll t-tell the

other wardens."

I crouch down, laughing at the fear flowing from her. "No, you won't. And even if you did, they wouldn't believe you." They won't, either. The only way they'd know about what I'm going to do is if they saw me on camera. But I momentarily disabled the system so no one will ever know.

I place my hand on her back and feel the life pouring from her body. Her scent overwhelms me, and my eyes roll into the back of my head. God, she smells so fucking divine.

"No one's ever going to know," I mumble as I slip my hand around her and press my palm to her chest.

She screams out in pain as the life slips from her veins and pours into me. My mouth salivates, and I let out a moan.

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God, she tastes so fucking good, better than I even expected. I want to devour every single part of her, own her completely. Maybe I will. Maybe I'll take her as my own and never let her go. But not right now. If I'm going to break that law, I need a plan, one where I won't get caught. Otherwise, I'll be executed.

"They were right about you," I moan as I drink more of her.

She screams again, and then her eyes roll into the back of her head.

I could keep going, but I'd drain her dry, and she'd probably end up dying. If I stop and give her time to heal, she might be strong enough for at least a hundred more feedings, if not more.

I can't pry my hand off her, though, so I continue feeding greedily. Her strength drowns me to the point that I feel so damn high. Pure ecstasy--that's what she is. I want more. Now. All of it!

I force my hand against her chest. More. More. More! I need more ...

The room suddenly starts to spin. Round and round and round. I've never felt anything like it before. My mind is buzzing. I feel so alive. Too alive. I think I might be taking too much, more than even my body can take.

Sucking in a breath, I yank my hand away from her and gasp for air. Then I stare down at her slackened body. She looks so helpless it makes me want to touch her again, but I fear my heart might give out from an overdose.

"I'm coming back for you," I whisper as I get to my feet. "Just you wait. One day, you'll belong to me and me only."

And I mean it. I always get what I want, no matter what.

Chapter Five

Kisses and Snowflakes

I gasp for air, struggling to get my bearings. Darkness smothers me, along with the stench of sulfur and death. The hard surface underneath my back is very familiar, and it clicks where I must be.

In my cell.

Ryder, Reece, Blaise--they were all a dream. The rescue, the East City Post, the fault line, the caves--it never happened.

Tears spill from my eyes and stream down my cheeks. I can't believe I'm still here. I can't believe the guys don't really exist. I can't believe everything I was feeling, the good and the bad, was a lie.

My heart thrashes as I lie in the darkness. What did Lex do to me to make me see through his eyes? Did he do something when he fed from me? He seemed so obsessed, so crazed, so hungry.

I shiver, replaying his thoughts.

He said I was powerful. How can that be possible when I feel so weak and broken?

"Sweetheart, are you cold?" The sound of Ryder's voice cascades over me like warm

water.

Oh, my God! He's here.

I squint through the darkness to the opening of the cave. Just outside is the night-kissed sky. Relief pours over me. I did escape. The post, the fault line, the caves--I did go to those places. The best part is that the guys are real. I didn't dream them up.

But if I'm in the cave, then what just happened with Lex? Was I dreaming? No. It was more than that. I remember the cold rush I felt before ... before I what? What happened after that? I'm not sure, but for some reason, I have a feeling it had to do with the legend of the spirits.

"Allura?" Concern laces Ryder's voice. "Are you ...? Are you crying?"

I dry the tears from my cheeks, but more continue to drip from my eyes. "Yeah, but it's okay. I just had a nightmare."

Ryder scoots closer, wraps an arm around me, and pulls me against his chest. "Do you want to talk about it?"

I snifle. "It was about L-Lex."

"The warden's voice you heard in the East City Post?"

"Yes. I was dreaming about when he came into my cell and fed off me, only I wasn't seeing it happening from his point of view. I could hear his thoughts and see how much he wanted to feed off me--no, I didn't just see it." I press my hand against my chest. "I could feel it ... He didn't just want to feed off me. He wanted to devour me until I was dead. But he stopped himself because he was worried he'd overdose. And because"--my voice cracks--"he wanted to try to steal me and keep me for himself."

The only good thing about that dream is that, while Lex knew I was different, he didn't suspect I was a hybrid. I get a drop of comfort from knowing that.

Ryder falls silent for so long I start to grow worried.

"What's wrong?" I ask, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand.

"It's nothing," he mutters. "I just think ..." He shifts, sitting up and lifting his arm off me.

An icy chill seeps through my skin all the way to my bones. Is Ryder afraid of me? Has he figured out what I am?

"I don't think you just had a dream," he mutters. "It sounded like you had ..." He doesn't finish, just shakes his head.

"Ryder, please tell me what you're thinking." I choke back the tears. "I'm scared ... that what happened"--I suck in a breath, steadying my shaky voice--"had something to do with the spirits."

"Don't be scared." He rocks me back and forth, something he has done a couple of times. "Everything's going to be okay." He finds my cheeks with his fingers and wipes away my tears. "We need to go and tell Reece what happened. He'll know what to do."

I'm starting to get up when his lips brush my cheek. I freeze, my breath faltering from my lips. The kiss is so feather light, so brief I wonder if I imagined it. But then he kisses my cheek again, and this time, his lips linger on my skin.

My eyelids slip closed, and I feel myself drifting ...

Snowflakes fall from the sky and dance around me. Music drifts from somewhere as I spin in a circle with my head tipped toward the cloudy sky. Silence fills the air except for the beating of my heart and the whisper of the snow kissing the world. I feel so at peace that I don't ever want to move. Maybe I won't. Maybe I'll live here, make this place my own snow globe where I can feel the snow whenever I want, where nothing bad can ever touch me again.

"I could watch you do this all day," a guy says, sounding close.

I smile to myself. I know that voice so well. It's a voice that has made me happy at least a thousand times. I just wish I could remember his name.

Footsteps crunch against the snow, growing closer, and my stomach flips in anticipation.

"So beautiful," he whispers, his hand finding my hips.

I stop spinning, but I don't open my eyes.

Snowflakes melt against my cheeks as I trap my breath in my chest. I wait, wait, wait, knowing, knowing, knowing something amazing is about to happen. Then I feel his lips against mine, and a warm sensation spills across my tongue and down my throat. I breathe the taste in, needing more.

"I've wanted to do that forever," he says breathlessly. "I can't stop thinking about you. God, I want you so much."

God, I want you so much, too.

But then I feel a spark of hunger ignite inside my chest, and just like that, the moment dissipates.

No. Not again!

I stumble away from him and turn to run, keeping my eyes closed and never looking back, even when he shouts my name ...

I blink, an exhale rushing from my lips.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you," Ryder says in a panic, leaning away from me. "I just thought ..." He shakes his head. "I don't know what I thought. I just wanted to kiss you. That's all. But I'm sorry if it scared you. I should know better. You just got out of the channels less than a week ago. I'm sure you're already overwhelmed without me adding to it."

"You didn't scare me," I say softly, which is the partial truth. He did startle me in a surprising way. But the memory that tickled the back of my mind is what sent the jolt of fear through me.

"So ... if I did it again sometime--kissed you--maybe after we get to the station and you get settled in and you start to feel more comfortable with everything, you wouldn't mind?" His light tone doesn't match the tension in his body.

Would I mind Ryder kissing me? I'm not sure. I do like him, just like I like Blaise and Reece.

"You know what? Don't answer that right now," he says quickly. "I want you to think about it and answer when you're ready."

"Okay," I agree, although I'm not entirely sure what I'm agree

ing to. Another kiss? Or just that I'll think about it?

Ryder gets to his feet, pulling me up with him. "Let's go and talk to Reece. It's probably time to pack up and leave, anyway. And with what you just told me, it's probably a good thing we're leaving. I know I said I don't believe in these curses, but ... This place really fucking creeps me out."

I let him lead me to the entrance of the cave where Reece is perched on a rock, watching down below for any sign of the Forsaken. Before we step out into the cool night air, I dare a glance over my shoulder. For a heart faltering moment, I swear I see the outline of a tall figure with red eyes watching me from inside the cave, but when I blink, it's gone.

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Chapter Six

Captured

After I finish telling Reece about my dream, he orders Ryder to pack up our stuff. Ryder nods, seeming uneasy, and jogs back inside the cave.

"What do you think caused my dream?" I ask Reece as I stand a few steps away from the ledge.

The red sky has shifted to ash and the moon and stars are massive, exploding fireballs of lava, nowhere near as pretty as the glimmering night sky I remember. They give off enough light that I can clearly make out Reece standing next to me.

He crosses his arms, his eyes fixed on the trail below. "I don't want to believe it's what I'm thinking, but ... with everything you said ... It sounds like a spirit might've entered you."

I hug my arms around myself. "You said you didn't believe in the legends."

"Usually, I don't, but most legends are just stories with no actual proof. Something actually happened to you, though, and while you were only a few feet away from me." He rakes his fingers through his hair, releasing a stressed breath. "When there's actual proof, I'm more willing to accept stuff. And the fact that you could see Lex's thoughts ..." He shakes his head. "Whether it's a spirit or not, I think it's a good idea to get the hell away from these caves."

I tense. "If it is Lex's spirit, that means he got inside me."

"I'm not one hundred percent sure if that's how it works. And, like I said, I'm not completely convinced that's what happened," he presses. "But I'd like to do some studying on spirits when we get back to the station."

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. "If it was Lex's spirit ... can it ... Can he get inside me again?"

He throws an anxious glance at the cave. "I don't know, but we definitely need to get you away from caves just in case."

"Are these spirits only in the caves?"

"According to the Forsaken legends, the caves are where the Grim used to shed until they created the channels and took over the city. They believe a lot of the spirits still exist inside the caves because they feed off the moonstone laced in the walls." Worry creases his brows. "If you feel strange at all, let me know, okay?"

Goose bumps sprout across my arms. "I got really cold before it happened."

He shakes his head, his jaw set tight. "I feel horrible we didn't wake you up. We thought you were asleep ... That's what it looked like. I wish I knew some of the symptoms or at least what went on with your body if his spirit did enter you." He pauses. "If it's okay with you, when we get back to the station, I'd like to hook you up to Oblivion."

"What's Oblivion?"

"It's a machine that will allow me to see your thoughts and record your brain activity. If I can access a certain section of your mind, I can potentially find out more about

what went on during those couple of hours you were possessed."

I want to know more about what happened, but I'm uncomfortable with Reece having access to my thoughts.

"Do you just see the one thought? Or can you ... see multiple ones?" Like, for instance, when Mable tested my blood on moonstone. And what about all these other memories I keep experiencing? Would he see those, too? Because some of them, like kissing Ryder, I'm not sure I want anyone to know about, especially how I felt when the guy's lips brushed mine--starved.

"I'd only go into the one," Reece assures. "I'd never invade your privacy."

"Does it hurt?"

"It does a little, but I can give you a sedative so you won't feel too much pain."

While I'm nervous, I think I need to know what happened, so I agree.

"I think I want to do it."

"Good. It would be really beneficial. We know so little about the Grim, and if you managed to get into the mind of one, we could learn a lot through that. But, like I said, I won't force you to do anything you don't want to. We're not like the Grim. We'll never take away your freedom of choice. You can think about it for a while. We won't be at the station for at least five or six more days." He raises his voice, turning toward the cave. "Ryder, are you about ready? We've got about five hours before sunrise, and I want to get as far south as possible."

"Yep, just about done," Ryder shouts back.

I zip up my jacket as the wind picks up. "What's south?"

"It's farther away from Forsaken territory," Reece explains, turning back to me. "Some still live in the area, but the majority of them remain north because it's a greater distance from the city."

"Oh." I stick my hands into my pockets, my thoughts wandering back to Lex.

Even now, I can feel the hunger he felt when he looked at me. If he's that obsessed with me, will he ever stop chasing me?

"Reece, remember how I thought I heard Lex's voice while we were in the East City Post?" I ask and he nods. "Well, right before I passed out, I think I heard Lex tell me something was about to happen. Do you think maybe he's nearby?"

Reece swiftly shakes his head. "Lex is nowhere near us right now."

"How can you be so sure?"

He fixes his attention on the sky, the exploding stars reflecting in his eyes. "Because Blaise locked him up in one of the cells at the East City Post," he mutters.

Wait ... Blaise locked up Lex in a cell? The East City Post has cells?

"What? When?"

"A couple of days before we left the post." He looks at me with remorse. "We didn't want to tell you while we were close to the post, because we didn't want to scare you."

"But I ... But how?" I pause, attempting to compose my rattled nerves. "Blaise

captured a warden? A warden?" The idea ... I can't even wrap my head around it. I mean, Blaise does seem extraordinarily strong, but wardens are strong enough that they can break bones with a simple squeeze of their hand--I've seen them do it before. "How did he do it?"

"Blaise has his ways," he answers with a shrug.

Ryder said something cryptic about Blaise to me before when I asked him if Blaise had killed Maxx and Lucille. He told me killing them wasn't quite what Blaise did, but he never elaborated. Then he proceeded to say Blaise was a little different, though I'd have to wait for Blaise to tell me why.

I understand they're trying to protect me, but I don't like being lied to. Then again, I'm lying to them about what I might be.

I stare at the thin strip of land running along the opposing cliff. "So is Lex still at the post?"

"Yeah. He should be. He was when we left."

"But what if he escaped?"

"I doubt it with how heavily guarded the cell was."

I glance at him. "Does the post normally keep a lot of wardens trapped there?"

He shifts his weight, avoiding eye contact with me, and I get the impression he's about to, as Blaise put it, sugarcoat the truth.

"Please tell me the truth, Reece," I plead in a desperate move, clasping my hands together. "I know you guys are trying to protect me, but I want to know."

Indecision is written all over his face as he brings his gaze to me. "I don't want to worry you."

"I'm already worried," I point out. "At least, if you tell me the truth, I won't have to worry about what's really going on, and I can prepare for the worst."

"It's really difficult to say no to you when you put it like that." He lets out an audible sigh. "The truth is, Lex is the first prisoner the post has ever had. Not many humans are strong enough to capture a Grim, even in high numbers. So, I'm not positive how

long they'll be able to keep him locked up. He was still in the cell when we headed out." He reaches out to take my hand. "I'm sure he's still there. The post won't let him escape very easily after we offered them a great deal of money to hold him until we could pick him up."

My hands uncontrollably tremble. "Where will you take him after you pick him up?"

"To the station," he says then quickly adds, "I know it doesn't sound ideal, but if we can get him there and study him, we can learn more about how the Grim work. We could maybe even find a weakness."

I battle down my fear, knowing Reece is right. I lived with the Grim for what felt like an eternity, and the only weakness I saw is that they needed to feed. Nothing seems to hurt them. As far as I know, they don't bleed, and they barely feel pain.

"Have you ever had one at the station before?" I ask.

"Once, but he escaped about a day in." He grazes his thumb along the back of my hand in a comforting gesture. "I know this is making you nervous, which is completely understandable, but you'll be safe at the station. Lex won't be anywhere near, and you'll be protected at all times."

"I just wish it weren't Lex." I sigh, wishing I didn't feel so bothered by this.

"Me, too," he says. "I wish there was someplace else I could study him. For now, we don't have anywhere else set up with the proper equipment."

My brows shoot up. "You're going to study him?"

"Yeah. It's part of my job."

"But aren't you scared?"

He lifts a shoulder, shrugging. "I'm always kind of afraid when I'm near the Grim, but one day, I want to be able to live in a world where they don't exist. And the first step in getting there is learning more about them."

I mull over what he said, and guilt coils in the pit of my stomach. Maybe I should tell him I might be a hybrid. Then he could just study me. Can I trust him not to hurt me when he finds out? I'm not sure.

My lips part, but then close again. What's the right decision? I wish I knew.

"All right, let's get this show on the road," Ryder announces as he exits the cave, carrying three dingy backpacks. "Are we going to use the flashlights? It might help Allura have an easier time climbing down."

"I'll be fine," I assure him, but then my gaze drops to the cliff. "Someone will stay close to me, though, right?"

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Ryder threads his fingers through mine. "I'll hold your hand the entire time."

I glance to my left at Reece holding my hand and then to my left at Ryder doing the same. Safety blankets over me. But any amount of comfort dissipates as a scream pierces the night.

"Shit." Ryder whips around, looking behind us. "Did that just come from one of the caves above us?"

"I think so, but that would mean ..." Reece's gaze is locked in the same direction as Ryder's.

"That the Forsaken are in the caves. Fucking shit. Why the hell are they hunting right now?" He glimpses up at the sky. "It's a full moon."

"I don't know." Reece draws out his gun. "But I don't want to wait around to find out. Let's go. Now."

"I don't think we're going to be able to outrun them. They sounded close. Maybe we should try holding them off for a while," Ryder suggests, backing toward the ledge. "Although, I doubt we have enough ammunition."

Reece points his gun up toward the caves above. "They always travel in high numbers. We'd run out of bullets within seconds."

My heart thunders in my chest as I look around for the Forsaken, but I can't see anyone anywhere.

Suddenly, Ryder sprints forward, pulling me with him and yanking my attention off the caves. For a heart-stopping moment, I think he's going to jump off the ledge, but then he pauses right as his feet reach the edge.

"Hop onto my back," he says, bending into a crouch. "It'll be quicker if I carry you down."

I don't argue and hop on. He gives me just enough time to hitch my arms and legs around him before he takes off down the steep slope with surprising grace and balance. I'd be in awe over his ability to move so flawlessly if another scream didn't shatter through the air.

"Shit, shit, shit." Ryder's shoes scuff against the rock as he rushes downward, grasping onto my legs. "We're going to get out of this. I'm not going to let this happen."

I don't know if he's talking to me or himself. It doesn't matter, though. I can tell he's worried, and I have a horrible feeling this isn't going to end well.

No, I can't let my thoughts go there. I need to stay positive.

Reece runs just to the side of us, using his hand every now and then to keep from falling. He has a gun out and keeps shooting panicked glances up at the caves.

"If we can just get on the trail," he says. "We might be able to--"

Flames abruptly ignite across the base of the cliff, forming a fiery wall that illuminates the night. Ryder and Reece skid to a stop, flip around, and start climbing back up, but they immediately slam to a halt.

At least fifty people cover the cliff side above us. Some are tall, some are thin, and

some are bulky and strong. Young and old. Tough and frail. Some are decked out in leather and have piercings and tattoos, and all of them have guns pointed at us.

A shiver courses through my body. My mind flashes back to what Blaise said about the Forsaken gutting us and leaving our bodies to rot in the sun. Is that what's about to happen?

"I'm going to get you out of this," Ryder whispers to me from over his shoulder. "Just stay calm and don't say a word, even if they ask you a question. And whatever you do, don't let them see your number."

"Okay." I don't dare take my eyes off the Forsaken, even as the heat of the fire burns against my back.

At first, no one makes a move. They just stand there with their guns aimed at us. Then someone lets out a shriek, and the group parts, creating a path down the center.

A woman ambles forward into the glow of the fire. She's a few years older than me and beautiful in a fierce sort of way--tall and lean with blonde hair done up in several braids that connect to a single one that's draped over her shoulder. Rows of glinting metal studs dot the skin above her eyebrows, along her ears, and across her collarbones, and silver cuffs cup her upper arm and connect to chains that link to her fingers. Leather pants and a sleeveless top hug her body, and a holster wraps around each of her legs. Tattoos curve around her neck, and blood is splattered across her shoulders and arms. My thoughts instantly go to Blaise. What if his blood is all over her clothes?

"So, you're the idiots stupid enough to enter the caves and wake the spirits." Her voice is smooth as she eyes over Ryder and Reece. Then her lips curl. "Should've guessed you were from the station. Only someone from there would be stupid enough to come to the caves."

Reece and Ryder don't utter a word, their gazes never wavering from her. Reece has his gun tucked behind his back, his finger hovering over the trigger. What will happen if he shoots? Will they fire, as well? Is this where I'm going to die?

She tilts her head to the side as her gaze zeroes in on me. "And who do we have here? Now she doesn't look like she's from the station."

Ryder shifts one of his arms behind him to hold on to me. It's a protective move, one the woman notices.

She rests the end of her barrel against her lips. "Such possessiveness. Hmmm ... I'm guessing one of you is dating her, but I can't tell which one." She points the gun in mine and Ryder's direction. "He's the one carrying her, but"--she swings the gun at Reece--"this one looks like he's about to come unglued." She pauses as if waiting for an explanation. "Or maybe you're both dating her. That seems a little strange for someone from the station, though. They're so big on monogamy over there." She rolls her eyes. "I don't know how anyone could stand living there with all the rules and restrictions. I'd lose my damn mind." Her eyes glide over the three of us. "None of you have anything to say?" She waits a moment then shrugs. "Okay, if that's how you want to play, then that's the way we'll play."

She turns back to the group behind her and addresses a massively bulky guy dressed head to toe in leather with steel cuffs on his boots and wrists. "Wrath, take their guns, bound them, and then we'll take them back to camp and lock them up with the other one."

The other one? Does she mean Blaise? I want to ask Ryder what he thinks, but I bite the urge back, remembering he warned me not to speak.

"Dude, did she just call him Wrath?" Ryder mutters. "What kind of name is that?"

The woman who seems to be in charge twists around with a malicious grin on her face. "Break the rules, and you'll find out."

Ryder mumbles something about how she can go fuck herself, but she doesn't seem to hear him and starts barking orders to the other people looming on the cliff.

"We can offer you money." Reece dares a step forward. "Let us go, and I'll make it worth your while."

"Money?" She looks at him. "What good would that do us? We don't have any purpose for it." Her gaze lazily drinks Reece in. "You might have something else I'd be interested in."

While I'm not positive what she wants, Reece understands, and disgust creeps into his expression.

He scratches at the side of his neck. "If I did ... do it ... you'd let us go?"

She muses over his question. "No, but I might let you stay in my tent instead of in the hole."

Reece steps back. "I'd rather stay in the hole."

Her eyes blaze as brightly as the flames raging behind us. "Remember that when you're begging for me to kill you."

Reece doesn't respond, which only seems to enrage her more.

"Tie them up now! I want them bound tightly, too!" She glares at Reece. "And put the barbed wire on this one. I want him to bleed the whole way back."

Wrath nods with a sickening grin. "Of course, your highness."

Your highness? Huh? Wait. Is she their queen?

Wrath strolls toward Reece, retrieving a strip of metal wire from the pocket of his dark brown distressed leather jacket. Horror slashes through me when I notice the wire has sharp studs along it. They're going to tie him up with that? It seems so cruel, so tortuous, and makes me fear what else they'll do to us.

Wrath pats down Reece, takes his gun away, and forces him to put his hands behind his back. Then he winds the wire around Reece's wrists, making sure to pull on the ends with unnecessary force.

"It's going to be okay," Ryder whispers, but the strain in his voice i

sn't very reassuring.

I wish I could tell him the same thing, because I don't want him to be scared, but I know nothing about the Forsaken, and don't know the outcome of this situation.

After Wrath finishes tying up Reece, he eyes over his handiwork. The barbed wire is fastened so tightly blood drips from Reece's wrists.

"Get her off your back," Wrath commands, approaching Ryder and me with ropes in his hand.

Ryder slowly straightens his stance and uses his hand to help guide me down to the ground. Once my feet are firmly planted, he positions himself in front of me, shielding me from Wrath's view.

"Look, can't you just leave her untied?" Ryder offers in a desperate move. "She won't

go anywhere. She knows there's not a chance in hell she'd survive."

When Wrath doesn't answer, I dare a glance over Ryder's shoulder.

Wrath's gaze narrows on me, his eyes darkening. "I could leave her untied if she lets me carry her." He inches forward, his lips curling. "How does that sound? You want to be my little toy on the way back to camp?"

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My balled fists tremble at my sides. I know he's trying to scare me, but beneath my fear simmers the desire to lunge forward and savagely claw off his face. I want to hurt him like he wants to hurt me. Hurt him like the wardens hurt me. Hurt him for hurting Reece. I want to hurt him so badly I can barely stand it.

Panic briefly flashes in Wrath's eyes when he catches sight of my expression, but the look promptly vanishes.

"I dare you to follow through with that look," he says in a menacing tone.

I want to. God, do I want to, like I tried a handful of times with the wardens. I might have, too, if Ryder didn't enclose his fingers around my wrist.

His touch yanks me out of my trance and forces me to acknowledge the large group of people surrounding us. If I attack Wrath, then they'd attack us, and we'd all probably end up getting killed.

"That's what I thought." Wrath shoots me a toothy smirk. "I'm gonna have a lot of fun with you when we get to camp. Just you wait."

A ripple of anger vibrates through Ryder. "If you so much as put a hand on her, I'll fucking slit your throat."

I grab Ryder's arm as Wrath stalks forward, his eyes narrowing to slits.

"You better be careful who you threaten," he growls. "If it weren't for the sacrifice, I'd end you right now."

Sacrifice? What?

"Yeah, the sacrifice," Wrath says as if answering my thoughts. "It'll offer us protection from the invasion heading everyone's way. It's why we risked hunting during a full moon. We have to complete the sacrifice by tomorrow or else the deal is off. And we need the deal to go through."

A chill prickles across my skin. We're their sacrifices. That's why they haven't killed us yet.

"Beneath the new moon, I'll watch you bleed," Lex whispers. "And your blood will be like spilled ecstasy that I fully plan on drinking up."

I squeeze my eyes shut. God, no. Not now. Go away.

Lex laughs inside my head.

"Sacrifice?" Ryder says in horror, shuffling back like he's going to run.

"Don't even think about running," Wrath warns. "Or I'll make you watch as I gut her and leave her for vultures."

Ryder freezes, his fingers folding inward into fists.

"Good choice," Wrath sneers then grabs Ryder by the throat and forces him to turn around.

Ryder's gaze collides with mine, and the air gets ripped out of my lungs. I may have told myself to stay positive through this, but the hopelessness in Ryder's eyes makes me wonder if we're going to make it out of this alive.

Chapter Seven

Toxic Smoke

After Wrath removes Ryder's guns from his holsters, he bounds his arms behind his back. Then he orders me to turn around.

Panic swells in my chest. He'll be so close to my wrists. What if he sees my number?

"I said turn around." Wrath quickly loses his patience and roughly pushes me forward.

I trip to the ground, landing on my hands and knees.

"Fuck off!" Ryder yells. "Don't you touch her!"

Wrath ignores him and kneels down, positioning a knee on my back. My muscles groan in protest as he bears down while forcing my hands together. His fingernails stab into my flesh as he ties the rough rope around my wrist.

Before Wrath climbs off me, he leans close, breathing hotly against the back of my neck. "We don't get a lot like you," he breathes. "You reek of innocence. By the time I get done with you, you won't."

Memories surface of me being pinned down to the ground by someone else, and adrenaline rushes through my veins, causing my body to quiver.

Wrath lets out a laugh as he presses his chest against my back. I shut my eyes and mentally count to ten, imagining myself someplace else: in a field with flowers and trees where the air is clean and the sky is bright and I'm happy.

"Get off her!" Ryder growls. "Or I swear to God I'll kill you."

I open my mouth to tell Ryder to let it go, that I can deal with Wrath, but before I can get the words out, Wrath pushes off me.

He storms at Ryder with his fists clenched in front of him. "I ought to kick your ass for that." He lowers his fists. "No, you know what? I have a better idea. I think, when we get to camp, all three of us should go to my tent, and you can watch as I slowly peel her innocence from her bit by bit."

Please, Ryder, don't say anything. You'll only make this worse. I don't want you to get hurt.

By some miracle, Ryder keeps his lips sealed, even when Wrath latches onto my arms and yanks me to my feet.

"Such a pretty, little thing." He traps me against his chest. "Maybe a little thinner than I like, but she'll do."

The muscle in Ryder's jaw twitches, and a murderous look scorches in his eyes. If we ever do escape this situation, I'm pretty sure Ryder will try to kill Wrath.

"They're all secured," Wrath calls out to the woman he referred to as "your highness." Stroking his fingers across my head, he shoves me forward.

The woman leaves the group and walks up to us, holding her gun at her side. "Make them walk in the middle of us. And under no circumstances are they to be killed."

"But what if they try to run?" Wrath protests, tucking Reece and Ryder's guns into his holsters. "They're from the station, so you know they probably will. It's part of their protocol."

"If you shoot them, I'll kill you," she threatens. "We need them alive, at least until tomorrow night."

Wrath grumbles something then stalks off and joins rest of the group.

The woman faces us, tucking her gun into her thigh holster. "Just because I told them not to kill you, it doesn't mean I won't break your legs if you try to run." With that, she marches off, walking a line straight in front of the wall of fire.

The rest of the Forsaken swarm around us and begin herding us like cattle around the wall of flames. Ryder and Reece put me in the middle and stay close. Their presence gives me a drop of comfort. I just wish I could offer them the same thing.

Except for the occasional hushed whisper and the thudding footsteps, a distressing quietness chokes the air as we reach the trail. A mile or so down, Ryder inches toward me, keeping his attention focused ahead. Reece mirrors Ryder's movement, moving beside me. I can feel every time he wiggles his arms. I want to ask him if he's okay, but I don't know if I'm allowed to talk.

"How you holdin' up over there, Reece?" Ryder whispers, glancing back and forth between Reece and the people around us.

"I'm fine," Reece mutters, sounding exhausted.

"Are you counting the steps?" Ryder asks under his breath.

"I'm trying," Reece replies quietly. "But I'm getting a little bit lightheaded."

"That's okay," Ryder says. "I've got your back."

I glance back and forth between them. Counting the steps? Is that code for

something?

Ryder dips his head, locking eyes with me. "How you holdin' up, sweetheart?"

"I'm fine," I lie. I'm scared out of my mind.

"Don't worry," he whispers. "We're going to

get out of this."

I hope he's right. I just wish I knew what we were walking into and what Ryder and Reece's plan is to get out of this. Then maybe I could help.

"Stop talking to each other!" Wrath yells from behind us. "Or else I'll come and break her legs. Then I'll have to carry her."

I shudder. I didn't know he was back there.

We sink into silence as we hike for what feels like hours, winding up and down the trail, squeezing between narrow cliffs and climbing over large boulders on the path. Miles and miles pass by in a blur. Unused to being on my feet so much, my legs start to ache, and my footsteps grow heavier. But I mentally scream at myself to suck it up.

Do not show them how much you're affected.

By the time we slow down, the sun is rising and red bleeds across the sky like spilled paint in water. I'm just starting to wonder if maybe we're going to stop and rest when the trail opens up to a flat stretch of land hidden between mounds of towering, jagged cliffs. Enclosing the area are metal wires. It takes me a moment to figure out what it is--a fence. And just over the fence are countless large tents. In the center of it all, greyish purple rises upward and billows toward the sky.

"Everyone prepare to enter camp!" Wrath shouts as he thunders by us and up to the woman in charge. The two of them exchange some heated words, and then Wrath stalks off in a hurry toward the front of the group.

"Hey, Reece, remember that time we raided a channel and got swarmed by a bunch of wardens?" Ryder whispers when Wrath disappears out of sight. "Instead of fighting back, we hid in the channels until we could get a clear shot to get out, but the plan totally backfired because the wardens ended up forcing us out with dreamland smoke."

Reece bobs his head up and down. He looks tired, his skin is pale, and dark circles reside under his eyes. "Yeah. What are you getting at, though?"

Ryder gives a stressing look at the camp ahead. "Well, I'm not sure, but I think that smoke looks an awful lot like dreamland smoke."

Reece drags his head up and dazedly blinks at the smoke funneling up the sky. "Shit, I think you're right."

"You wouldn't by chance have any shade on you, would you?" Ryder wriggles his arms around, attempting to get out of the ropes. "Otherwise, we're about to go on a really bad trip in probably one of the worst places."

"I always have one on me for emergencies." Reece blinks a few times. "I can't get to it, though."

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Ryder leans around me. "Where is it?"

"In my right pocket," Reece whispers, his shoulders hunching.

"I think I might be able to get it." Ryder flicks a quick glance ahead. "But who's the lucky bastard who gets to take it?"

"Allura," Reece murmurs. "I don't want her to be vulnerable, especially with how interested Wrath seemed toward her."

A ton of questions burn at the tip of my tongue, begging to be asked. Like, what's dreamland smoke? And a shade? And what's going to happen to us when we get to camp?

"The smoke's toxic," Ryder explains, reading my questioning expression. "It won't kill us or anything, but it'll mess with our heads."

"Mess with our heads how, exactly?" I dare utter. "Like we'll have hallucinations?"

"Kind of." Ryder trades an indecipherable look with Reece.

"She's going to find out anyway, even if she uses the shade," Reece tells him with an exhausted sigh. "We might as well tell her now so she'll know what to expect."

With reluctance, Ryder nods. "Allura, when we inhale the smoke, we'll start acting out of our minds. And we'll eventually start seeing things that we normally dream about. Depending on what direction our minds go, we might say some stuff that's

weird and crude and crazy. You'll probably want to smack us a lot, but I promise you that we don't mean any of the stuff we say. You'll take the shade, though, so it won't affect you. But I need you to pretend you're out of it until they lock us up. They can't know you took the shade."

My mind races a thousand miles a minute. Dreamland? Shades? Toxic smoke? I've never heard of any of this.

"Will you guys be in pain?" I ask worriedly.

Ryder shoots another glance at Reece. "Possibly."

"Then maybe Reece should take the Shade." I look at the blood covering Reece's wrist and arms. "He's lost a lot of blood. I don't think he should have to deal with any more pain."

"I'll be fine," Reece attempts to reassure me, but then he stumbles over a dip in the ground and almost falls down. He manages to regain his balance, though, and gets his feet underneath him. "I'd rather you take the Shade, Allura. Just do us a favor and don't let us do anything that doesn't seem like something we'd normally do."

I nod, promising him I will, even though I don't think I know them well enough to know everything they normally do.

When Reece and Ryder trade another look, I lose any ounce of calm I have left. Why do they keep looking at each other like that? Is there something they aren't telling me?

Before I can ask, Ryder switches places with me and walks alongside Reece.

"Allura, keep an eye out," Ryder whispers as he presses his shoulder up against

Reece's. "Make sure no one's paying attention to us."

I peer at the people surrounding us. Most of them are concentrating on the trail ahead except for a group of girls around my age, who keep sneaking glances in our direction.

"Those girls keep looking at us," I hiss. "Ryder, I think--"

"Got it," he mutters, shuffling away from Reece. "Allura, I really hate to do this to you, but I have to inject the shade into you with a needle. I know you hate them, and if there were any other way ..." He trails off, unable to offer another solution.

Invisible fingers wrap around my throat at the thought of being pricked by a needle again. My arms are already covered with tiny white scars from where the wardens poked and prodded.

"I'm sorry, but we need to do this now," Ryder says with urgency. "Please give me permission."

Knowing I need to be brave, I smash my lips together and nod. Ryder inches closer until our shoulders touch. Then I feel a sharp pierce in my left arm. Whatever this shade thing is, it burns entering my veins. But the pain is bearable in comparison to some of the stuff the wardens injected in me.

Ryder tips his head toward me. "Feeling okay?"

I mentally tune in with my body, checking to see if everything feels fine. "I think so. My arm hurts a little, but that's probably from the needle."

"Good. Let me know if anything starts to feel funny," he says. "Sometimes, the shade can have side effects, but they're mild compared to inhaling dreamland smoke."

I nod, my attention drifting forward. We're about half a mile away from the camp now, and the air is becoming hazy with greyish purple smoke.

I check on Reece and Ryder to see if the smoke has affected them yet. They seem fine and coherent. How long will it take the smoke to do something? What am I in store for? Madness? Chaos? What about the Forsaken? Won't they be exposed to the smoke, too?

Right as that thought occurs to me, the woman in charge spins around and walks backward, facing the crowd. "Masks on!" she commands.

The people around us reach under their shirts and into their jackets. Each one of them pulls out a bizarre looking mask with a clear square on the top and what looks like a speaker on the bottom. They slip the masks over their faces, the clear square acting as a window, the speaker over their mouths.

A faint memory pushes against the back of my mind of my face being behind one of those masks, but I shake it away. Now's not the time to go down memory lane. I need to stay alert and keep an eye on Ryder and Reece like I promised.

"Brace yourself," Ryder mumbles as we arrive at the outskirts of the fence. Smoke floods the air, tickling my nostrils and the back of my throat. "Shit's about to hit the fan."

Once we reach the fence, we're steered through a small gap and into the camp. I frantically glance around at the people exiting the tents. All of them are carrying some form of weapon: guns, bows, knives. They stop to watch as we're herded deeper into the camp.

Silence clings to the air. Impending doom lingers, thick like the smoke. Something terrible is about to happen. I wish I knew what it was, so I could brace myself for the

impact.

My eyes are all over the place, my nerves on edge as I note several metal grates covering the ground. I'm just leaning over to peer down inside one when I hear it. A peculiar noise rises in the midst of the stillness. I think maybe someone's sobbing from inside one of the tents, but then I realize the noise is coming from beside me.

I stiffen, glancing over at Ryder.

Madness doesn't even begin to describe the scene unfolding beside me. Not only is Ryder laughing at absolutely nothing, but he's laughing so hard he can barely keep his feet under him. Every other step, he stumbles to his knees then hops right back up, bursting with laughter the entire time. Even when he cracks his head against a rock, his laughter never misses a beat. Seconds later, he begins to sob, his shoulders heaving.

Reece sighs as he watches Ryder lose his mind, at first not seeming too bothered by the smoke. But then a sharp laugh bursts from his lips and swiftly builds to an ear splitting cackle. By the time we reach the center of the camp, they've both settled into a fit of giggles mixed with hysterical sobs.

I reach a state of panic when we stop in front of a massive bonfire. Smoke snakes around me, and I instinctively trap my breath in my chest. Ryder told me I needed to pretend the smoke affected me, but I can't find the will to laugh. This place, this situation is so awful. And the people around me ... Now that the sun has risen, I can see the blood that stains almost everyone's clothes. Just how many people have they killed? That thought steals any hope of laughing away from me.

When the woman in charge shoves her way through the throng of people, heading straight for us, I try to force out a noise that resembles a laugh, but desperation grinds in my voice.

"Having fun yet?" She grins, stopping in front of me. In the sunlight, her eyes look even more feral.

I swallow hard, unsure how to respond.

Her scrutinizing gaze bores into me, and I mentally scream at myself to laugh.

Just laugh, dammit! Before she finds out you took shade!

A strangled, choking noise flees from my lips, and her eyes light up with pure glee.

"Huh, I wonder ..." Her arm shoots forward, and she seizes my wrist. Jerking me toward her, she yanks the sleeve of my shirt up. Cool air nips against my branded

flesh, and I wrench back. Her fingertips only dig deeper into my skin. "Well, holy shit, I didn't see that one coming," she says then aims her gun at my neck and pulls the trigger.

I hear a soft swoosh, and then searing pain shreds through my body. Stars pop across my vision as I collapse to the ground, landing on my face. I don't blackout. My eyes remain open, my ears taking every sound in while my body lies slackened and motionless.

"Dump her in the hole with the other one," the woman says over Reece and Ryder's laughter-filled sobs.

"What about the other two, your highness?" an unfamiliar voice responds. "Where would you like them?"

"After you get her locked up, take them to my tent." Her clunky steel-toed boots pass by the front of my face. "I'm going to have a little fun with them before I toss them in

the hole."

No! I promised I'd keep an eye on them!

I stab my fingers into the dirt and drag myself forward. But my legs, arms, head--almost my entire body--are paralyzed, and I barely make it more than a few inches before my fingers give out on me. What the heck did she shoot me with? It didn't feel like a bullet ...

My gaze drifts up my arm to my hand, landing on a small, circular scar about the size of a tiny button. A scar from a bullet. I remember. Being chased. All the time. Over and over again, I've been chased.

Chased.

Chased.

Chased.

Always ...

Chapter Eight

The Hunt

A large, furry animal with pointy teeth nips at my heels. Every once in a while, his teeth nick the back of my leg and draw blood. But I don't slow down, racing toward the thick forest about a mile ahead. I don't know who I'm running from or why they're chasing me, yet I somehow know the forest will protect me. Just like I know the men will kill me if I don't get to safety.

"Get her!" a man yells over the thunder of hooves hammering against the soil. "Shoot her if you have to! Remember, she can't die! She's one of them, so be on alert! She might try to retaliate! And we don't know yet what she can do!"

Bile burns at the back of my throat. Do they know what I am? How?

Sweat drenches my skin as I collect my lengthy black dress in my hands and pick up my pace, charging across the field faster than I thought I could run. How am I moving this fast?

The overly grown grass hisses at my legs, and pebbles in the ground tear at my bare feet. My long, brown hair fell from the pins about a mile ago, and strands blow in my face.

A heavy fog snakes from the trees, and a light mist haunts the wide river just to my left. I think about veering toward the river, diving in, and letting the rapids carry me away, but a horse gallops up and blocks my path.

Sitting in the saddle is a younger man wearing a wool jacket with pants tucked into leather boots. In his hand is a long-barreled gun.

"Just stop running, Allura!" he begs. "I don't want to shoot you, but I will if I have to."

I know this man and well. I just don't know how I know him. The memory is old and has faded with time, almost forgotten.

"Please, just stop running," he pleads in desperation. "It'll ruin me if I have to shoot you."

"If I stop running, then you'll shoot me!" I scream, a venomous rage bubbling inside me.

His eyes briefly widen, but then his expression contorts in disgust. "You look just like them right now."

"Like who!" I cry, legitimately having no clue what he's talking about.

"You know who." He shakes his head then kicks his heels, and the horse speeds up. "I'm sorry, but I know what has to be done now."

Tears sting at my eyes, and my heart splits in two. Whoever this man is, I think I may have loved him once. But now he looks at me like I'm the most repulsive creature on earth.

No! I can't let my thoughts break me. I need to focus on getting away!

I rip my attention off him and run as fast as I can.

Just get to the trees. Just get to the trees. They're my safe haven.

"Don't let her get to the trees!" another man shouts. "If she gets in there, we will lose her!"

I turn my head and look at the river again. The guy I loved is pointing his gun at me, ready to fire. A part of me withers and dies.

"Get ready, men!" a man shouts. "When I give the orders, we all shoot at once! We don't want to take any chances!"

My heart slams against my chest. Please, please, please, let me make it.

Just a little farther and then I'll reach the trees. When I get there, I don't know what I'll do, but right now, I can't think about it.

"Fire!"

Boom! Shots ring out and the bitter taste of gunpowder burns at my taste buds.

I dive, ducking for cover, and hit the ground hard. I don't move fast enough, and pieces of scorching hot metal pierce me from every angle, slashing through my skin and ripping through my muscles. Blood gushes out of the wounds and saturates the dirt below me.

I cough, trying to breathe, but blood spurts from my mouth. I want to give up, just lie down and die. My body and mind both feel so broken, but the will to live kicks in, and I claw my fingernails into the dirt and drag my body toward the trees.

No, I can't let them capture--

Fingers enclose around my shoulder and flip me over onto my back. The blue sky has turned a thunderous grey, and a mysterious silence has settled around me.

Am I dead ...?

I feel myself being pulled somewhere else.

"Allura, can you hear me?" a familiar voice asks.

"I know you." I cough through the blood. "You've saved me before, but you're not from this memory."

"Allura." His voice basks over me like a hot summer day underneath the sun.
"Answer me."

"I am." Why can't he hear me?

He sounds upset, and I want to comfort him, but I think I might be dying. I was shot so many times by those men on horses in a world I hardly remember, but that no longer exists ...

Wait. I'm only dreaming. I have to be.

"Squeeze my hand if you can hear me," the guy says, taking my hand.

I try to squeeze it, but my fingers feel numb. It's okay, I want to say. Don't worry. I'll be fine. I always am ...

Darkness rims my vision.

"Whatever you do, don't close your eyes," he whispers in my ear.

That's when it hits me.

Blaise. He's alive. He didn't die. He's here with me. But where is here? Where am I? I can't see anything anymore.

"Just hang on," he demands. "Don't go to sleep."

I want to hold on. I don't want to go back to that nightmare where I'm lying shot on the ground. I want to stay with Blaise, but exhaustion drags me down.

I hear him curse, scream in frustration, and then he cups my head in his hands.

"Just give in to it," he says, defeated.

"Give in ... to what ...?"

"The poison."

"What ... poison ...?" My voice fades, and I fade along with it.

Chapter Nine

Dreamland

When I open my eyes again, I'm lying in the dewy grass, gazing up at the stormy sky. Purple and silver bolts of lightning flash in the distance, illuminating the lofty trees and rolling mountains around me. Quietness has settled, the noises of horses, guns, and men shouting no longer haunting the air. The scent of rain fills my lungs as I take a breath.

"I tried to get it as close to what you described as possible."

Blaise's voice startles me, and I start to leap to my feet, but he snags my elbow and pins me down to the ground.

"Don't move," he warns. "If you do, you'll break the connection, and then I could lose you."

I turn my head, following his voice, then blink at the empty space beside me.

"Where are you?"

"Right beside you," he says. "You just can't see me."

"Why not?"

"Because you're stuck in dreamland, and I'm here in reality."

I drape my arm across my forehead, dizzy with confusion. "I don't understand. One minute, I'm getting haul

ed to a camp by the Forsaken, and then I'm in some place where people are trying to shoot me, and now I'm here ... and I can hear you ... but I can't see you."

He heaves a sigh. "You were poisoned by the Forsaken. Someone gave you a shot of dreamland, and now your mind is teetering between falling into your nightmares and trying to grasp reality. And the reality is you're just lying in the hole with me."

"So the stormy sky isn't real?"

"The sky's only there because I'm ... helping your mind rest. If I were to let you go, you'd probably tumble into whatever nightmare you were having before I grabbed you. You said you were dreaming someone was trying to shoot you?"

I bob my head up and down. "They did shoot me, and I was dying, but then I heard you, and now I'm here."

"Do you dream about stuff like that often?"

"I don't think I've ever dreamed that I was shot before, but I've had bad dreams ... ones where I was being chased by wardens. But I don't know if they're dreams for sure. Sometimes, I think I'm remembering stuff I forgot, stuff that happened a long time ago, yet ..." I trail off. Yet I'm always the same age.

A beat of silence stretches between us.

"When I was first brought to the station, after I ..." He lets out a rough cough. "But, anyway, I had a lot of nightmares. And a lot of them were connected to ... the shit I saw before I came to the station."

I wonder what kind of stuff he saw--what haunts his nightmares--but don't dare ask.

"Do you still have them?" I ask. "I mean, the nightmares?"

"No too much, thanks to Reece."

"How did Reece help?"

"He hooked me up to this machine called Oblivion and pinpointed the cause for my memories. After a lot of work and a lot of fucking pain, he managed to fade some of the memories causing the nightmares."

"Do ...? Do the Grim have a machine like that? Maybe they used it on me, and that's why a lot of my old memories are resurfacing."

"Not that I know of. Reece built the machine himself," he says. "But machines pretty much run the world--well, besides the Grim. So there could be another machine out there like it."

"Sometimes, I think I remember a world that doesn't have machines." I jolt as thunder booms and the ground vibrates. "Like the one where I was being shot at. Everyone was riding around on horses, and there were no cars or signs of the Grim. There were trees and a field and a river."

"That is strange," he murmurs. "I've never seen most of that stuff."

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I shut my eyes. "I feel like I came from someplace else, and maybe that's why I'm always so confused all the time. Maybe those burial places you guys talk about really do exist, and I lived there once." I open my eyes and stare up at the cloudy sky. "I don't know why the sky would be blue there and red everywhere else."

"There could be a lot of reasons for that. Maybe it wasn't the sky you saw, but a screen."

"What's a screen?"

I feel him shift beside me, his hands never leaving my head.

"We've found them in a couple of channels," he explains. "The wardens use them to give the illusion that the cells look like someplace else, mostly to mess with the minds of the Nameless. It's their twisted way of making them feel like they're going crazy. Still, those screens are really small, and the wardens usually use them to display horrible things. I've never seen one as big as the sky. And I didn't notice one in your cell or anywhere else in that section of channels."

"It's not just the sky," I say. "Sometimes, I dream of quiet streets and old buildings and trees and grass and flowers and dirt roads. I'm wearing these long dresses, and people around me are dressed differently, too."

"I wish I had some answers to give you, but I don't. Maybe Reece can get to the bottom of it when we get back to the station. He can hook you up to Oblivion and see what's going on inside your head." His fingertip sketches along my hairline. "How are you right now? I tried to fill your thoughts with the cloudy sky and the lightning you

told me about. I don't really know what they look like, so I hope I got it right."

I manage a small smile. "You did. It's so much like the place I pictured when I was trapped."

"Good," he says with a drop of relief.

"How long will I see the sky before I return to reality?"

"It all depends. Normally, the poison can take several hours to wear off, but with you, it might not take as long."

"Why would it take less time for me?" I ask then immediately want to retract my question. Deep down, I think I may already know the answer--because I have Grim blood in me and heal more quickly. But does Blaise know?

"Allura, your hands are completely healed and scarred over when, only twenty-four hours ago, they were scraped raw." He pauses. "Then there was your shoulder. I know it was dislocated, but now it's fine. And I'm pretty sure you cut your head on that shelf, but the wound healed before Mable could even get stitches in it."

My breathing turns ragged. Blaise has always known I'm a little different, but does he know about my blood? Will he ask me if I know what I am? How will I answer?

As if tuning in to my panic, the lightning picks up, blazing across the sky like a firework show.

"You need to calm down," he advises. "Or I won't be able to control where your mind goes."

"I'm trying," I croak between breaths.

His warm fingers spread across my cheeks. "Look, I know you're different. I've always sort of known. But it's not a bad thing. And ... I get it."

His words calm me down, and I breathe evenly again.

Reece and Ryder have mentioned Blaise is different. Maybe he understands what I'm going through.

"How are you doing this to me?" I whisper. "How are you keeping me out of my nightmares and letting me see this sky?"

"It's complicated."

"But it's because you're different?"

He takes a couple of breaths. "Yeah, because I'm different."

"Are you ...? Are you human?"

"Yes and no." A drop of rawness slips into his tone. "But you don't need to be afraid of me."

"I'm not afraid of you," I reply. How could I be afraid of him when I'm lying here under the cloudy sky that he somehow created in my head? "One day, will you explain what you are?"

"One day," he says, but I can't tell if he means it or not.

Deciding to drop the subject for now, I fold my arms across my stomach and gaze up at the sky. "So, now what do we do?"

"We wait for the poison to wear off."

"Then what?" A thought strikes me hard, like a kick to the gut. "Wait? Where are Ryder and Reece?"

"In the tents probably."

"What are they doing up there?"

"You probably don't want to know."

"Oh." My gut coils into knots, nausea setting in. "They told me to watch out for them, and I didn't. Whatever happens to them ... It's my fault."

He sighs. "It's not your fault. You were pretty much unconscious when you were brought here."

"But Ryder and Reece gave me the last shot of Shade, and I wasted it." I frown. "I never should've let that queen--or whatever she is--shoot me."

"The queen?"

"Yeah, the woman the Forsaken kept calling 'your highness.' "

"Oh." His confusion leaves his tone. "That's the Forsaken's leader."

"Yeah, like their queen." A bolt of lightning flashes right above me, so close I can feel the electricity flowing off it. "But she wasn't wearing a crown."

"Hmmm ... I think this might be one of those things that you remember that we don't."

"Oh." How many times is this going to happen? How many things do I remember that no longer exist? Will every revelation be disappointing?

I sink into the quiet, listening to the thunder grumble as Blaise restlessly shifts around. Every once in a while, his fingers tremble, and I find myself reaching up, wanting to comfort him. When my fingertips brush his scruffy jawline, he sucks in a sharp breath, and the tension pouring off him nearly doubles.

Confusion and curiosity swirl through me. Why does he still seem somewhat tense around me?

"Blaise, can I ask you a question?"

"I ... I guess so."

"Why were you afraid of me when we first met?"

"I wasn't," he lies.

I trace my fingers from his jaw to his lips and graze my fingers along the metal piercings. "When you carried me through the scanner, it seemed like you were. I could feel your heart pounding."

"I was worried we weren't going to make it out alive," he chokes. "Allura, what are you doing?"

I absentmindedly graze my fingers back and forth across his lips. They're so soft. "Huh?"

"With your fingers ... and the touching ...?" He's breathing so ravenously he's practically panting.

"I'm sorry." I lower my hand. "I don't know why I did that. You just seemed upset, and I was trying to comfort you." I feel ridiculously clueless about everything. Why can't I comfort them like they comfort me?

"You're fine." He sounds more at ease now that my hands aren't pawing at his mouth. "I just have a problem with being touched. It has nothing to do with you, though."

"Oh." Why? I wonder. But I don't think he wants to talk about it, so I don't ask.

"Where's your mind right now?" He changes the subject. "Are you still under that grey sky?"

I nod. "It smells really good here, like rain and fresh grass."

"Rain? Like water from the sky?"

"Yeah ... Please tell me it rains here."

"I've heard of rain, but I've never seen it. It doesn't happen very often."

I crinkle my nose. Hardly any rain. No blue sky. No grass. No trees. No nature. What a sad place the world is.

"Hold still for a minute," he mumbles. "Let me see what I can do."

I don't know what he means, but I remain perfectly still, anyway.

His fingers move, his fingertips tickling along my hairline. A soft hum fills my head, and I close my eyes and spread my arms out to the side, relaxing in the dirt. I'm so comfortable right now I could probably fall asleep.

"See anything yet?"

"No, but I feel--"

A droplet of water splatters across my forehead. My eyelids snap open right as another raindrop lands on my cheek. A smile graces my lips as another one splashes against my neck and rolls down my collarbone.

"Is it working?" he asks.

"Yes." I beam from ear to ear then open my mouth and catch a few raindrops on my tongue.

"You look so funny right now," he rema

rks, his tone lighter than it was moments ago.

Giggling, I stick out my tongue and lap up more raindrops. I hear the quietest laugh escape him. I don't think I've ever heard Blaise laugh. I wish I could see what he looks like with his eyes lit up and his lips curved into a smile.

"I feel bad," I admit after the rain dwindles to a drizzle.

"Why's that? Is it the dream? Because I can change it if you need me to."

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"No, it's not that." I tuck my arm behind my head. "It's just that I'm lying here, laughing, while Reece and Ryder probably aren't. Or maybe they are. They were laughing the last time I saw them and crying."

"The poison does that." He must be close to me, because his breath tickles my cheek when he speaks. "You were doing it, too, when they put you in here. At first, I thought you just breathed in the smoke, but then I saw the spot on your neck and guessed they shot you with a dart."

I move my hand to the back of my neck. "I thought she shot me with a gun. With everything you guys told me about the Forsaken, I figured I was dead."

"We all should be," he says bluntly. "I don't know why we're not. I think the Forsaken might have something planned. I heard a couple of them mention some sort of sacrifice, and I'm pretty sure they have more prisoners here than just us."

"I heard someone mention the same thing. Does that mean they're going to kill us eventually?"

"They may think they are, but they're not. I'm going to get us out of here." His confidence makes me almost believe him. "How did you guys even get captured? I thought you were staying in the caves." He says the caves with so much repulsion.

"We were, but something happened, and we had to leave." I wrestle back the images I saw through Lex's eyes. "Reece and Ryder thought we'd be okay because the sun was down, but then the Forsaken showed up. It was almost like they were waiting for us to step out of the cave so they could attack."

"They probably were," he says with bitterness. "They hate those caves. And they have every reason to."

"I know." I press my fingertips to my temple as my head pounds. "Ryder told me about the spirits. We think one of them--Lex--entered me. I saw all these things--his thoughts--and I--"

"What!" he shouts, his fingers shaking. "One of those disgusting creatures took over your mind?"

The sky trembles, casting multiple bolts of lightning across the clouds.

"Blaise, calm down. The sky--"

An alarming sound cuts me off, like air getting sucked through a vent. The ground begins to tremor, the grass and dirt caving in around me. I spring to my feet and search the area for a Tracker, but I can't spot one. My gaze impulsively travels upward, and my next breath gets lodged in my throat.

The grey sky has darkened to charcoal, and the clouds have solidified into funnels that gyrate and expand as they reach toward the ground.

"Blaise ..." My voice gets sucked away as a blast of wind nails me from behind.

Tornadoes. The word sears into my mind as my body flies through the air, straight toward the funnel of clouds.

"Allura!" Blaise sounds so far away.

"I'm right--" A tree collides with my body, and I go sailing sideways away from the tornadoes.

My body spins out of control, and I soar toward a forest in the distance. Not wanting to get hit by more trees, I spread my arms and legs out and try to change directions. But the wind kicks up and forces me forward, right toward a massive tree. With how fast I'm going, the impact will probably break every one of my bones. The only comfort I have is knowing I'll probably heal--well, hopefully. Since my ability is new and untested, I don't know if there are limitations.

I close my eyes and attempt to prepare myself for the pain. Blaise's face flashes through my mind, and I hang onto the image. I wish he were here with me. Or better yet, I wish I were there with him.

As if my wish comes true, strong arms enclose around me and a solid chest presses against my cheek. Even though I have no clue who this person is, I clutch the front of their shirt.

They fling their weight to the right, and I feel myself shifting directions. Moments later, the wind dies down, and I slowly descend until my feet touch the ground.

"The poison wore off." I breathe in relief. "Thank God."

"No," Blaise says, and my eyes pop open.

I tip my chin up and meet his gaze. He isn't looking at me, but at something behind me. I twist around and then my jaw nearly smacks the ground.

I didn't return to reality. Blaise entered my dream.

Chapter Ten

Monster

Blaise gapes at the torn up field, the demolished trees, and the rolling mountains that stretch as far as the eye can see.

"Wow, I didn't think I could do it." He lets out an unnatural sounding laugh. "Holy shit."

I pluck strands of hair out of my mouth, relieved to see that the tornadoes have vanished. "What's going on? Are we in dreamland? Are you real, or am I just dreaming you?"

"You're still in dreamland. I just managed to get in here with you. This is the first time I've actually physically enter someone's thoughts before. Usually, I can only mentally control what they see." He squints at the sunlight filtering through the clouds. "The blue sky."

I start to nod, but then pause. "Wait. You can control people's thoughts?"

His intense gaze glides to mine. "How did you think I was controlling what you were seeing?"

"I don't know. I guess I didn't really think about it." The idea that he can control thoughts is mind-boggling.

He crosses his arms, staring me down. "Are you afraid of me now?"

I shake my head. "No. It just seems so ... I don't know ... out there that you can do that. I didn't know that kind of stuff was possible."

"It's not for most people," he says with a simple shrug. "I'm just different."

"It's a really good thing that you are." I glance at a tree torn up from the roots. "Or

else I think I might have ended up with all of my bones being broken."

His expression softens as he looks around at the trees lying sideways, the branches scattered everywhere, and the large clumps of dirt now covering the land. "Yeah, what were those things?"

"Tornadoes."

"Tornadoes? What are those?"

"When warm and cold air meet ..." I wave myself off. "Never mind. I don't know where I'm getting this stuff or if I'm even right. Information just keeps popping into my head."

"Maybe there's a reason for that." He stares at me for a heartbeat longer before taking in the scenery. "I can see why you like this place. It has a ... calm way about it."

"Yeah, I guess it does." I can't seem to take my eyes off him. He can control people's thoughts, kick holes through cars, climb down cliffs without ropes. What else can this guy do?

"Allura, your staring is making me ... I don't know ... uneasy," he admits, fidgeting with a leather band on his wrist.

I force my attention elsewhere. "I'm sorry. I was just thinking about stuff."

"It's okay. It just ..." He cups the back of his neck, scuffing the tip of his boot against the dirt. "You kind of make me nervous sometimes."

"Oh. Okay." Why do I make him nervous?

"It's not bad. I'm just not used to ..." He grunts something under his breath then elevates his gaze from the ground, sweeping his hair back. "So what else is there to see around here?"

I practically get whiplash from his abrupt subject change.

"I don't know. I didn't really explore the area too much. Do we have time to?"

He shrugs. "Probably. I mean, I don't know how long you'll be under, but we can walk around until you wake up."

I nod then face the forest, preparing to endeavor into the trees. Then I hesitate.

"What's wrong?" Blaise asks, stepping up beside me.

"It's nothing. It's just that I've had a couple of memories of being in forests, and none of them are very good."

"Like what?"

I blow out a breath and tell him about the first memory I had of the man chasing me through the forest, a

bout the creature chasing me through the trees, and then about the men who shot me. I may not have technically been in the woods in that one, but I was headed there.

"This makes no sense. You've had so many memories of the trees and this world," he says after I'm finished. "Yet this place"--he motions at the land--"doesn't exist in the world we live in."

I bite on my thumbnail. "Maybe it does, but you just haven't seen it. The world is a

big place, right?"

"Yeah, but I've met a couple of travelers--Zaire's actually one of them--and they've never spoken of a place like this."

"A traveler?"

"The posts have a handful of them. They're the people who get sent out to find and trade food and supplies."

I massage my arm where a tree branch nailed me. "Oh. I think the docks have them, too. Or, well, they have people who go and find food."

His brows knit. "How do you know about the docks?"

"Ryder told me about them when we were at the post." When his perplexity increases, I ask, "Did I get it wrong? Are there no travelers on the docks?"

"No, there are ... Well, the people from the docks don't refer to them as travelers, but they're pretty much the same thing." He chews on his lip, sucking on the barbell. "It's just that Ryder usually doesn't talk about the docks with strangers."

I feel a sting of hurt. I'm a stranger? I mean, I know the guys don't know me that well and vice versa, but I don't consider us strangers. Maybe I was wrong, though. I don't know much about what makes a stranger become a friend.

"Shit, I didn't mean it like that," he hurriedly says, noting my hurt expression. "I just meant that Ryder doesn't talk about the docks a lot, so I'm just a little surprised he told you about it already. It usually takes him a while to trust someone before he opens up about that part of his life." He huffs out a frustrated breath, shaking his head at himself. "I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings. Ryder is always telling me I suck at

communicating."

I stare at the spot in front of my feet at a tiny, yellow flower sprouting from the grass. "It's okay. I get it. You hardly know me." Tears pool in my eyes. I don't even know why I'm crying. I just suddenly feel so lost and alone in a big, scary, unfamiliar world.

A slow breath eases from his lips. Then he threads his fingers through mine and pulls me to his side. I have a feeling the gesture means more than I can even comprehend.

"I completely understand if you don't want to go into those trees." His fingers tremble, but he doesn't pull away. "But if you want to go exploring in there, I promise I won't let anything happen to you."

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I glance down at our interlocked fingers and then at the trees. "Okay."

He almost smiles then steps toward where the sunlight meets the shade of the trees. "So, what's usually in this sort of place?" he asks as dry, crisp leaves float around us. "And what the hell are these things?"

"Those are leaves." I contain a giggle as he flicks a leaf off his shoulder. "They fall off the trees when it's autumn."

"Autumn?"

"It's a season. You know, summer, winter, spring ..." I trail off as he gapes at me. "Oh, there are no seasons in the red sky world?"

His lips quirk in semi-amusement. "Is that what you call our world?"

"I don't know what else to call it. Do you guys have a name for it?"

"No. We usually just refer to it as our world. And of course, the city is the broken city."

"I'm nervous to go to the city," I admit as we hike deeper into the woods, leaves and twigs crunching underneath our boots. "It sounds kind of scary."

"It is scary." He glances up at the sunlight sneaking through the branches above us. "But you won't really be in the city. You'll be in the station, and the station is probably one of the safest places there is." When my finger twitches, he looks down

at our interlinked hands. "You're scared? Why?"

"It's nothing." But my shaking hands say otherwise. "I'm just a little bit nervous that Lex will eventually be at the station."

He grinds to an unexpected halt, his head whipping in my direction. "Who told you about that?" His harsh tone sends a shiver through me.

"Reece," I answer nervously. "I'm sorry if he wasn't supposed to. It's really not his fault, though. I was asking him a bunch of questions."

He grinds his teeth. "I was going to tell you. I just wanted to wait until we were far away from the East City Post before I did."

"It's okay. I understand. Reece explained that you guys wanted to wait until we were farther away so I wouldn't get scared."

"No. It's not okay. I'm usually not like this." He rubs his free hand across the shaved side of his head, shifting his weight. "I've always been a blunt person. I don't sugarcoat shit. That's Reece and Ryder's thing, not mine."

"I know. You told me," I say, puzzled by his anger.

Is he mad at me, Reece, or himself?

"And you've been really honest about a lot of stuff."

"The last few days, I haven't. The last few days, I've watched almost every single word that's come out of my mouth." His forehead creases as if his own words confuse him. Then he blinks, erasing the look, and starts walking again, pulling me along with him.

I want to ask him why he's so upset, but I worry that will only add fuel to the fire. So, I keep my lips zipped and struggle to match his long, determined strides.

"I locked them in their own mind," he abruptly announces as we weave around an ancient oak tree smack dab in the middle of the forest.

Something about the tree sends my senses into a frenzy. I want to run up to it and breathe in the scent of the leaves.

"Locked who in their mind?" I ask distractedly.

What would happen if I plucked a leaf from a branch and ate it?

I shake my head at myself. What a strange, stupid thought.

"Lucille and Maxx. After they hurt you, I went back into that room and filled their minds with their darkest nightmares," Blaise says matter-of-factly.

My attention snaps from the tree to him. I don't know whether to be afraid or not. It seems like maybe I should be, yet I don't feel an ounce of fear inside me.

"How did you lock them in there?"

"Fear can be a powerful thing." He shrugs, staring at the dry leaves covering the muddy ground. "Put enough in someone's mind, and it can completely take them over."

"Will they ever escape?"

"Maybe. But I really hope they don't." His gaze shifts to me. "Are you afraid of me now? Do you think I'm a monster?"

I shake my head with almost zero deliberation. "No."

He searches my eyes for something. "Are you sure? Because some people are."

I easily nod. "Do you want me to think that way of you?"

"I don't know what I want." He scratches at his neck, squinting at the bark of the willow tree. "Wait. What is that?"

I track his gaze to a spot where A&P has been carved into the bark. Stepping forward, I lift my hand and place my palm over the inscription.

"Allura and Pierce," I utter as memories twirl in my mind.

"Now the whole forest knows I love you." A guy smiles at me as he tosses the knife onto the ground. Then he tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear, his gaze dropping to my lips. "You know that, right? That I love you?"

I smile at the engraving, but then my smile falters. No. I can't let him kiss me. I don't even know this man. Or maybe I do know him ...

I turn my head and take in his shaggy brown hair, his freckled nose, and his deep brown eyes that are lit up with so much happiness and love.

His smile vanishes. "What's wrong?" His eyes widen. "Oh, dear, did I misread you? I thought you felt the same way, but I ..." He looks away from me, trying to hide the hurt in his eyes.

I want to comfort him, tell him I love him, too, but I can't make the connection. Frustration builds inside me.

"I'm sorry. I don't--"

Gunfire yanks me back to reality--or dreamland, anyway. Shock instantly makes my body run deathly cold, like ice in my veins.

Blaise and I are no longer standing in the forest, but in a familiar field enveloped by trees. Men are shouting over the slamming of horses' hooves, and a thick fog hangs in the air.

No. No. No. No. This can't be happening.

But it is, and now I have to relive getting shot.

Another thought occurs to me, and my fear amplifies. Oh no! What if Blaise gets shot, too! Will he actually be shot? How does dreamland work exactly?

"Fire!" a man yells, and I instinctively lunge for Blaise, wanting to protect him.

But he grabs ahold of me and dives to the ground on his back so I land on top of him. He doesn't miss a beat, flipping us over and covering my body with his.

"I don't know what's happening. For some reason, I've lost control of the dream." Propping up on his elbows, he scans the tall grass around us.

"They're coming from the north." An icky feeling gnaws at me as I replay the outcome of this memory ... dream ... whatever this is. Blaise is going to hear the men yell those horrible things about me. What if he somehow puts two and two together and figures out what I am? "And there's one by the river, just east."

His gaze lowers to mine, his brows dipping. "How do you know that?"

"Because I've seen it before," I whisper over the gunfire. "It was the dream I was in right before you put the images of the cloudy sky in my mind. Only, this time, it feels different ... more vivid and real."

Tension ripples in his muscles. "This is the dream where you're shot?"

I nod. "These people are hunting me ... because I'm ... different."

Blaise stares down at me with a mixture of inquisitiveness and uncertainty. Worried he's going to abandon me, my fingers curl inward, and I grip the front of his shirt. Sensing my movement, he glances at my hands, and then his gaze resides on my face.

"Allura, I'm not going to leave you." He speaks slowly, stressing the importance. "I'd never do that to you, no matter what's about to happen."

I smash my quivering lips together, thinking of the man on the horse riding in the river. We knew each other, had feelings for one another, yet he shot at me.

"She has to be around here somewhere," a man bellows from nearby.

Blaise starts to raise his head, but then ducks down and lines his body against mine. His body heat is so suffocating I can scarcely breathe. I can't recall the last time someone was this close to me besides when Blaise and I were in the trunk of the car. Even then, he kept a little distance between us, unlike right now.

I wonder if our nearness makes him uneasy, as well. He told me that he doesn't like being touched, y

et we're practically touching each other in every way possible.

"Just stay calm," he whispers raggedly in my ear. "Nothing's going to happen to you."

I won't let you get shot again."

"Allura, we know you're out here, so you might as well come out," a different man speaks, his voice tugging at my memories and my heartstrings.

The man from the river. The man I think I loved once.

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A loud exhale falters from my lips as the footsteps grow closer.

Blaise rests his forehead against mine and places two fingers to my lips. "Sh ..." he whispers.

I loop my arms around him and quietly breathe through my nose. In and out. In and out. Just calm down.

"Over here!" a deep voice rumbles as a shadow casts across us. "She's not alone, either." A middle-aged man with jet black hair appears above us.

He leans down to snatch ahold of the collar of Blaise's leather jacket then yanks him off me and shoves him to the side. Two younger men step up and grab Blaise's arms, holding him back.

Irritation flickers across Blaise's expression, but he doesn't fight back, his eyes burning into mine.

"Just stay calm," he mouths. "I'll get us out of this."

"I don't know why you try to run." The older man steps in front of Blaise, blocking him from my view. He crosses his arms and stares down at me with pure hatred in his eyes. "You only make it harder on yourself. You always do."

Tears prickle at my eyes, but I suck them back, refusing to show weakness.

He hitches his thumb around his leather gun strap and slings his gun over his

shoulder. "If you would just stop running, this could all be over. But you run every time. You've spent an entire lifetime running and going back and forth to places you don't belong. Aren't you getting tired of it? Don't you just want to sit still for one second?"

When I don't answer, he wraps his fingers around my wrists and tugs me to my feet.

"It's always a battle with you, but I guess it's not your fault. You do have Grim blood in you."

I feel like I've been punched in the throat, my windpipe tightening and restricting my airflow. I look away at the forest, unable to bear the hatred and disgust I know are in Blaise's eyes.

"And now you've dragged this poor guy into your mess, just like you did my son," the man says as he drags me toward a large group of armed men.

Most of them are wearing trousers tucked into leather boots and wool coats. Some are holding guns, while others are grasping the reins of their horses. Everything from the grassy field, to the fog, to their outfits, to the open space feels outdated.

I glance down at myself, wondering if I'm wearing the long, black dress again, but strangely, I'm not.

"I tried to warn him what you are, but he's too damn stubborn, just like his mother." The man constricts his grip on my wrist, casting an annoyed glance over at the river where a guy is sitting on his horse.

The guy I thought I loved once ...

Pierce.

But the happiness and love that filled his eyes after he carved our names into the tree is no longer there. Instead, his face is twisted in agony, and when our gazes weld, that agony turns to loathing.

Tugging on the reins, he kicks the horse with the heels of his boots and gallops off toward a Victorian two-story house about a mile down the field. I watch him slip farther and farther away from me, the hole in my heart expanding.

"He knows what you are now," the man says, his fingernails delving into my flesh. "You were never supposed to exist, Allura. Human and Grim breeding was never supposed to happen." Anger flares in his eyes. "You, the rest of them--all the Grim--you taint the world. You go around, taking whatever you want and destroying everything in your paths. What you can do..." He shakes his head, his lips curling. "Something like you shouldn't exist. You're an abomination."

"I don't mean to destroy anything." I lower my head as a few hot tears escape my eyes. My legs tremble, threatening to give out on me.

"I honestly believe that." His harsh tone softens a smidgen. "But that doesn't change anything. As long as you exist, the world is going to perish. And if the Grim get ahold of you, our fate will be worse than it is already. We've spent years trying to destroy your kind, and I think I've finally figured out how. Your blood continuously heals you, but take that away, and you can't heal anymore. Bleed you dry, and you die."

He grips me so tightly I'd probably bruise if I were human. But I won't. The blood in my veins is already working to heal me.

I choke back a sob. "I'm sorry I'm this way. If I could change it, I would."

"Well, you can't. Wait. What's happening?" Alarm floods the man's voice. "Wait! No ... Goddammit, not again ..." His fingers leave my wrists, and I crumble to the

ground.

Tears stream from my eyes as I rock back and forth. I can feel the blood pumping in my veins, working to heal where the man gripped me. I want it to stop. I want to bruise. I don't want to be like the Grim.

I don't want to be a monster.

Chapter Eleven

Empathy

The next thing I become aware of is that I'm lying on a soft surface and dust fills my lungs. I don't open my eyes, though, even when Blaise utters my name. I can't bring myself to look him in the eye.

Mable warned me that, if anyone found out what I was, it could end badly for me. Clearly, she was right since those men seemed determined to kill me because of what I am. I just wish I knew who they were, how they found out about me, and how I became such an appalling creature. Was I always like this? Or was I created? It's hard to know for sure when I hardly remember anything about my life. And the bits and pieces I do remember don't make sense half the time.

But what I really wish for the most is that Blaise didn't know about the monster that lives inside my blood, a monster he has declared his revulsion for more than once.

"Allura, open your eyes please." He huffs an exasperated breath. "I can tell the dreamland's worn off because you're breathing normally again, so please stop pretending."

Guilt festers inside me as I open my eyes and sit up.

He's leaning closer than I expected, and I end up bumping my head against his chin. He curses, leaning away from me, while I scramble backward until my back slams against a muddy wall.

"I-I'm sorry." I press the heel of my hand to my throbbing forehead and force my gaze off the ground to see if he's okay.

He stares at me, rubbing his chin, an unreadable expression on his face.

Shame weighs against my shoulders. Ryder told me the Grim killed Blaise's entire family. How can he stand to be in this confined hole with me? He probably can't.

The silence between us seems to go on for hours.

Unable to endure looking him in the eye any longer, I stare at the curved, dirt walls around me and then at the metal grate above where the bleeding sky is visible. I saw a ton of grates in the ground on my way into camp. My heavy heart sinks even more. I'm underground ... again.

"How long have you been experiencing memories like that?" His firm voice shatters the silence. "Was that the first time it's been that vivid, or has it happened more than once?"

I keep my gaze glued to the sky, even when my eyes start to water. "I don't know. I mean, I've had some vivid dreams before and spaced out into some memories while I was awake, but what just happened ... that felt different. More real, like I was actually reliving it, only the events happened slightly differently. I think it's because you were there."

"It felt real to me, too. I don't even know how I lost control. Maybe it was because I was in there with you." His voice rises, his anger returning, and he quickly clears his

throat several times. "I just wish I knew what was going on. I thought I'd learned almost everything I could do, but apparently not."

I sneak a glance in his direction. "How long have you been able to do that? I mean, control people's thoughts."

"Since before I came to the station," he bites out. "I've been able to do a lot of weird things since I was about twelve, but I didn't really learn about my abilities un

til Reece came along and studied me." He rolls his tongue in his mouth, like he's fighting back something bitter. "When he hooked me up to Oblivion, he discovered I have abnormal brain waves and that I could control people's thoughts. It takes a lot of concentration on my part, and the person usually has to be unconscious or doped up. Reece told me I might eventually be able to do it without even touching someone, but I haven't been able to do it yet."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't seem to get my own mind to relax. Reece gave me more of an explanation than that, but he used a lot of big, scientific words, and honestly, I got bored and kind of tuned him out." He rests his arms on his bent knees, his gaze boring into me. But when he speaks, his calm tone doesn't match the intensity flowing off him. "I'm glad you're looking at me again. I was worried you weren't ever going to."

I stare down at my boots, feeling ashamed of what I am.

"I don't know why you'd be glad. You heard what they said ... about me."

"Yeah, I heard what he said, but it doesn't mean I believe it," he all but growls. "That's not the first time I've heard someone ramble about hybrids. Saying shit like that only stirs up riots. It's happened too many fucking times and caused too many

innocent people to die."

I draw my legs to my chest and rest my head against my knees. "But it could be true," I whisper. "I mean, we know something's wrong with me. Maybe my blood really is different, and that's why I heal so fast ... because I'm a monster."

"Stop that." His sharp tone causes me to jump. "Don't ever say that again. Different or not, you're not a monster."

His defending me only makes me feel worse. He has risked his life for me so many times, and he doesn't even realize what he's trying to save. I'm not just a Nameless. I have evil blood inside me, pumping my heart, keeping me alive.

Guilt strangles me by the throat, and before I can stop myself, I sputter, "That's not the only reason I think I might have Grim blood in me. Mable ... she said ... my blood is ... different."

When he doesn't say anything, I peer up between my arms.

He looks completely unbothered. I don't understand his reaction. Did he not hear me?

"I already knew that." He steadily holds my gaze. "I overheard Mable tell you."

My pulse quickens. "You overheard her? How? We were in a room with steel walls."

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His pierced brow arches. "I have excellent hearing, Allura. I can hear clearly, even through a steel door."

"Does Mable know that?"

"No. Only Reece and Ryder and Rae do. They're the only three who know what I am."

"Oh." I don't know how to process that. He's known this entire time, yet he still helped me down the cliff, ordered Ryder to wrap my hands, and then tried to keep me out of dreamland. "How can you stand to look at me?"

Empathy fills his eyes. "Even if you were one, which I'm still not sure you are, I wouldn't be afraid of you."

"Why not? If I were one, I could hurt you."

"I've had people hurt me before. You're not like that."

I hug my knees against my chest, recollecting the memory I had of dancing in a snowy forest and almost being kissed and then the hunger that rose inside me.

"How can you be so sure?"

He scoots toward me and brushes his fingers along the corner of my eye, a movement so quick I have little time to react. "Because I can see it in here. You're not evil. You're scared and worried and strong and brave. And for whatever reason, you care

about Reece and Ryder ... and me." He lowers his hand to his lap. "I saw you, you know. When the shots were fired, you jumped toward me to protect me."

"I didn't want you to get shot."

"I know. So how can I be afraid of you? And besides, how could I be afraid of you when you're not afraid of me?"

"I don't know." I shrug, still not fully understanding his reaction. I might be part Grim, and he hates the Grim, so why doesn't he hate me? "Do Reece and Ryder know? Did you tell them what Mable said about my blood?"

He shakes his head. "No. And we can wait to tell them until you're ready."

"Do you think they'll hate me?" I whisper.

He firmly shakes his head. "No, they won't."

"How can you be so sure?"

He stares at the wall to the side of him. "Because they don't hate me."

I assess him, trying to figure him out. If he's not a hybrid, what is he? I'm about to ask him--maybe now that my secret has come out, he'll share his, too--but he suddenly stiffens, his gaze shooting up to the metal grate.

"Shit, we have company," he says, jumping to his feet.

I stand up and hold my breath as the metal grate is dragged aside, and sunlight spills into the hole. The brightness isn't bothering me as much as it did when I first exited the channels, although my eyes do still burn and water. I rub my eyes and blink a few

times, trying to alleviate the burn.

"Glad to see you're up." Wrath appears above us with a wicked grin plastered across his face. "Now it's time to play."

Chapter Twelve

Legend of Hybrids

Blaise moves in front of me and backs me up until I'm trapped between him and the muddy wall.

"You're not touching her," he snarls, spreading his arms out to the side of him.

"Oh, you think so?" Wrath sneers. "And who's going to stop me?"

"Me," Blaise replies without missing a beat.

Wrath's laughter echoes through the hole. "Is that supposed to scare me?"

"It should." Blaise's threatening tone sends goose bumps across my skin.

"Like I'm afraid of you or anyone from the station, for that matter." Wrath laughs. "You guys think you're so much better than us simply because you were trained. Well, here's a reality check. Training and classes don't prepare you for the chaos that comes with real life. You're nowhere near as lethal as us."

"You think I learned how to fight at the station?" Blaise taunts Wrath.

"What? Are you saying you were once a Forsaken?" Wrath snaps. "Because if that's true, then you're a traitor and deserve a traitor's death."

"I wasn't a Forsaken," Blaise says. "I came from a place that taught me how to be much more lethal than you savages."

I can hear Wrath's heavy breathing from all the way down here. While I understand that Blaise may think he's protecting me from Wrath, I'm not sure angering Wrath is going to help the situation.

I lean against Blaise, pressing my chest against his back. "Maybe I should just go with him. I think you might be making him mad," I whisper. "I don't want him to hurt you."

"He can't hurt me," Blaise tells me. "But I'd rather him try than take you anywhere."

"I don't--"

"Sh ... Let me handle this." Blaise lowers his hands to his sides, but he remains standing in front of me as he calls up to Wrath, "Is that fear I smell?"

"Fear," Wrath growls. "I'm not afraid of anything."

"Then prove it," Blaise demands, crossing his arms over his chest. "Challenge me."

He laughs, but this time, the noise sounds more forced. "Challenge you? That'd be disgracing my name."

"Disgracing your name?" Blaise questions. "No, I think you're just scared."

"How dare you talk to me like that!" Wrath seethes. "You're the prisoner. You will respect me."

"I don't respect anyone without a reason," Blaise replies. "And right now, I see

nothing to respect."

A loud crash reverberates from above, causing me to shudder.

"Relax," Blaise hisses at me. "I've got this under control."

I want to believe him, but it's difficult when we're the ones trapped in a hole, and Wrath is above, completely free to do whatever he wants.

"Fine," Wrath roars. "If you want to challenge me, challenge accepted. You and I will fight to the death." Satisfaction creeps into his tone. "I'm sure Zinnia can live with one less prisoner."

Fight to the death!

"Blaise, you can't do this."

"Sh ..." is all he says.

Fear hammers through my veins, potent and toxic. I need to find a way to get Blaise out of this. I won't let him die because of me.

"In fact, I think Zinnia might enjoy watching someone from the station die," Wrath adds, trying to provoke Blaise.

"I'm sure she would," Blaise responds calmly. "Sucks to be her, though, since she won't get to see that happen."

"Who's Zinnia?" I whisper, clutching the bottom of Blaise's leather jacket.

"It's this group of Forsaken's leader, I think," Blaise says in a low tone.

This group? Meaning there are more than one?

"Wrath, what are you doing?" A woman's voice drifts from above. "You know you're not supposed to be near the prisoners."

"I was just chatting with them," Wrath snaps. "And besides, I'm supposed to be taking one of them to Zinnia."

"Are you sure that's all you were doing?" the woman questions. "Because someone reported that you were trying to collect the girl for yourself. And I'm pretty sure I just overheard you accept a challenge from the male one."

"He threw a challenge at me," Wrath grumbles. "I had to accept."

"You can't accept without permission from Zinnia," the woman reminds him. "And you won't be taking the female prisoner anywhere. Zinnia requested her presence."

I frown. I have to go and see Zinnia, their leader who--I'm guessing--is the woman who shot me with a dreamland dart?

Fear courses through me. Why does she want to see me? Because she saw my number?

"Blaise, this Zinnia woman saw my number," I sputter, "right before she shot me with the dart."

"It'll be okay. I'll figure something out," Blaise whispers, but he doesn't sound as certain as he did a few minutes ago.

"Why does she want to see her?" Wrath asks.

"I have no idea," the woman answers. "But that's not for you to worry about. Now go speak to Zinnia about the challenge you want to have with the male prisoner and let me follow through with my orders."

Wrath mutters something before stomping away.

"I'm going to throw down the rope," the woman calls down to us. "Have the girl climb up."

"She's not going anywhere," Blaise snaps, stepping forward. "I already told your friend that."

"Wrath isn't my friend." She sighs exhaustedly as she lowers a rope into the hole. "And she will climb up or else I'll be forced to fill up this hole with wat

er and let both of you drown. And I'd rather not have any more death on my hands."

Rage currents through Blaise. "You will not--"

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"Blaise, it's okay." I put a hand on his shoulder and step around him. "I can handle being with Zinnia for a little bit." I offer him a small smile, even though I'm scared beyond imaginable. "Besides, it's better than us drowning."

"I don't like this." He lowers his voice. "They know you're a Nameless. That's not good, especially here."

"I know, but we don't really have a choice. I have to go up there" Telling myself to be brave, I give him what I hope is a reassuring smile before I grab the rope.

Sucking a breath, I spring on my toes, pulling up and wrapping my legs around the rope. I begin to haul myself up, my arms griping in protest every time I lift my legs. Fortunately, the distance to the top isn't very far, because I don't have very much upper body strength. By the time I'm dragging myself out of the hole and onto the dirt, my muscles are throbbing.

I roll onto my back, breathing heavily as the sunlight blinds me.

"You're not from the station, are you?" The woman leans over me, giving my eyes a break from the sun.

I'm surprised by how young she is. She sounded older, but she looks around my age, and like the rest of the Forsaken, she's wearing leather pants and a jacket and has silver cuffs around her wrists and ankles. Her wavy black hair runs down her back with the top half secured in braids. Countless piercings decorate her ears, and her eyes remind me of the ocean. I realize then that, at some point in my life, I've watched waves crash against a sandy shore.

"So you're the one causing all the chaos with Wrath." She sizes me up, her head tilting to the side. "I don't really see what all the fuss is about. Maybe, if we cleaned you up, but I don't know." She extends a hand to me. "I'm Calla, by the way."

I hesitate, unsure if I should take her hand.

"Don't worry; I won't bite." She wiggles her fingers. "Come on. Hurry up."

Summoning my courage, I place my hand in hers, and she helps me to my feet. I stretch out my legs and brush the dirt off the back of my pants, noting that we're almost the exact same height.

"You're tall. I usually tower over most people." She eyes me over with her hands on her hips. "You can talk to me. I'm not as feisty and demanding as Zinnia or Wrath."

"Okay," I say, but I have no plans of saying anything. While she seems a bit more decent than Zinnia and Wrath, I know I can't trust her.

She sighs. "All right, fine. I get where you're coming from. But if you change your mind, I'd love to talk to someone who isn't from here. It gets tiring listening to the same boring stories over and over again. It's like no one ever wants to talk about anything else other than legends and sacrifices and hunting." She motions for me to follow her as she strolls down a flattened dirt path and toward a row of tents.

I shuffle after her, stealing glances at the grates in the ground. Most of them are dark and quiet, but every once in a while, I hear someone beg for help. What really makes my heart ache is when a child cries out for me to save them. The imprisonment is too familiar, like back when I was in my cell and listening to the cries of the other Nameless. I loathe the similarity.

Why can't this world be different? I want to open the grate up and free them, make

this world different. They deserve to be free. What would happen if I tried?

Unable to bear the cries any longer, I focus on the metal fencing around the tents and then the rocky, jagged cliffs on the other side. I'm not chained or handcuffed. I could attempt to run and escape. But how would I save Ryder, Reece, and Blaise? I can't just leave them.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Calla warns, noticing my line of sight. "They'd shoot you dead before you even made it five feet." She points a finger at a lofty wooden structure. It takes me a moment to figure out what it is--a lookout tower. "Those are all over the property. Armed guards are inside, and they've been instructed to shoot anyone who tries to sneak in or out."

"I wasn't going to run," I reply nervously. "I was just looking around."

She rolls her eyes. "I doubt that. You ran from the channels. I'm sure running from here is no different."

I tug at the sleeve of my jacket, concealing the number. "I didn't run from the channels."

"Technically, no, but you did escape." She slows down, matching my sluggish pace. "How long have you been out?"

Every one of my instincts scream for me to lie. "A while."

She studies me meticulously. "Maybe that's why you talk so well?" It sounds like a question, but for some reason, it seems like she already knows the answer.

"I was taught when I got out of the channels." My erratic pulse hammers, but thank God my voice comes out steady.

I can't tell if she's buying it or not. I hope so because I don't think being different right now is a good idea.

"You must be really brave to survive such trauma without being very affected." She flashes me a conniving smirk then barrels down the path, snapping at me to keep up. When we pass the fire pit, now filled only with embers, she says, "They put the fire out so you don't have to worry about slipping into dreamland. But if you get out of line, Zinnia may dart you again, so I'd watch your back."

She strides past tents, greeting and nodding at people. Most nod and say hello back, their attention lingering on me. Most of them look annoyed, others disgusted, but a few seem mildly curious. None of them approach me, and several shuffle away and duck back into their tents.

"Don't take it personally. They don't like outsiders." Calla veers between two tents. "I guess they have every reason to, though."

I hurry after her. "Why's that?"

"You haven't heard the story?"

"No."

She checks left then right then spins around, nearly causing me to run into her. "Because of the hybrids."

"Hybrids?" I feign dumb, but my voice weakly quivers.

She nods, tossing an anxious glance behind her. "We're not really supposed to talk about it. Zinnia thinks, if we do, then we're asking to be cursed by the Deorum."

"The Deorum?" I bite my tongue. Crap. Maybe I shouldn't have said that. Who knows if I'm supposed to know what that is already?

She angles her head back, staring down at the cracked dirt beneath her clunky, steel-toed boots. "The ones who watch us from below."

I glance at the ground then back at her. Is she talking about the Grim or a Tracker or what?

"Someone's down there?" I point to the ground.

"Not someone. The Deorum. They're the ones who take care of us now." When I continue to stare perplexedly at her, she sighs. "After the hybrid's killed off half of our kind, Zinnia made a deal with the Deorum. They watch out for us and protect us from the kind who can blend in undetected yet are infected with the thirst for lives."

My heart nearly stops dead. "You mean hybrids?"

She nods, evaluating my every movement as she reclines against the side of a tent. "It's almost impossible to tell a hybrid from a human. They don't have silver eyes like the Grim or translucent, pale skin, but they're just as evil and feed off humans."

"A few years ago, we made the mistake of letting a few into our camp. They said they wanted to join us and that they knew of a new location where we could get water. We're always looking for new water supplies, so we stupidly let our guard down and let them in." She clenches her hands into fists. "Never again was that supposed to happen. The Deorum are supposed to make sure of that. As long as we take care of them, they take care of us."

"And how do you take care of them?" I ask, though I'm pretty certain I know the answer. We were brought here to be sacrificed, and I'm betting the sacrifice is for the

Deorum, whatever they are.

Instead of answering, her lips twist into a grin. "You know, every hybrid has one thing in common." She straightens her stance and snatches hold of my arm. With a violent tug, she yanks me to her and slams me back against the tent. "They were all Nameless who just happen to miraculously heal from the trauma of being in the c

hannels." Her fingernail scratches across my number. "They come out, walking and talking as if nothing happened to them. They're perfectly fine when they shouldn't be, and you want to know why? Because they're not human. Their inhuman, cold, distant, cruel minds can get over the trauma without being emotionally, physically, or mentally affected." She puts her lips beside my ear. "I don't know if you're one of them or not or how you got past the Deorum, but we will find out. We have a way to test for hybrids now."

My throat tightens. A test? Like how Mable put a drop of my blood on moonstone?

Oh, my God! They're going to know.

"You smell like rain," she muses, stepping back. "So strange since it hasn't rained for years."

I don't say a word. I never should've spoken to her to begin with.

"Come along." She snaps her fingers at me and strolls forward. "Zinnia will be pissed if you're late."

I trail after her, worried about what awaits me when we get to Zinnia. Worried I won't pass the test. That we'll all end up sacrificed to the Deorum. But most of all, I worry that I am a hybrid. If I am, does that mean I'll eventually become a murderer?

If so, maybe I deserve whatever is coming to me.

Chapter Thirteen

Quercu

Calla doesn't speak to me as she hurries down a flattened path toward an enormous arched tent.

After we enter the tent, Calla waggles her fingers at me. "Have fun," she singsongs then skips back outside.

I turn in a circle, taking in the multiple lanterns strung across the ceiling and sheer black curtains across the farthest wall. A section of silver-trimmed chairs are set up in a half-circle around a large wooden trunk with nicked-steel trimming. A rustic lock hangs on the front of the trunk, and I have the strongest compulsion to bust the metal apart so I can get to whatever is inside.

"It's where I keep my quercu."

I whirl around, pressing my hand to my sprinting heart.

The woman the Forsaken referred to as "your highness" pushes through the curtains, carrying a pleased grin on her face.

"I told Calla to let me know when you arrived." She strolls over to the chairs and props her laced up boot onto the seat to unbuckle her thigh holster. "She's never been good at following orders."

I smash my lips together, remaining silent.

"I'm Zinnia, but I'm sure you already figured that out." She drapes the holster across the back of the chair then crosses the tent toward me. "From the second I saw you, I knew there was something different about you. I didn't want to say anything in front of everyone, but I think Calla might have caught on." She ambles past me and reaches into the top of her leather corset, retrieving a skeleton key. "I overheard her telling you about the test I'm going to give you. I should be upset. It's not as fun if you know what's coming, but I can't really blame her." She slips the key into the lock. "Her brother and sister were slaughtered the night the hybrids raided our camp." The lock clicks, and she raises the lid of the trunk.

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The scent of whatever is inside that trunk drives my body mad. My senses go wild, my blood pulsating underneath my skin, like little flakes of metal being drawn to a magnet.

"Hungry?" she baits me with a smirk.

I shake my head, even though my mouth salivates. I can taste the fresh scent of leaves and life, and my taste buds go crazy in anticipation.

"Are you sure?" She sticks her hand into the trunk and removes a small, leather pouch. "Because you look famished."

I shake my head again, but every bone in my body wants to rip that pouch out of her hand, even if it means stealing the knife off a nearby table and slitting her throat.

She unlaces the pouch and inches it toward my nose, watching my reaction closely. The smell is absolutely divine. I want to dive in, devour, feed the hunger pulsing inside me ...

Oh, God, I sound just like Lex when he was hungry for me.

The revelation calms me down enough that I can step back.

"That's not food in there."

"Maybe not for humans." She urges the pouch closer to my nose. "But for you, I think it might be really tasty."

I stab my fingernails into my palms. "No, thank you."

She scowls, lowering the bag from my face. "Fine. If you want to play this way, then we will." She chucks the pouch into the trunk and slams the lid closed. "I was going to make you all take the test, anyway. The others aren't marked with a number, but I won't take any chances."

Marching over to the entrance of the tent, she pokes her head outside. "Bring me the three who came with her."

She steps back inside the tent, letting the flaps close. "I'll admit, I was a bit jealous of you. The way the one guy--Blaise, I think, was his name--ran off, trying to lead us away from you and how the other two fought to protect you ... At first, I thought maybe it was because they were all in love with you. And maybe they are, but that's not the only reason they protect you, is it?"

When I don't answer, she snatches ahold of my arm and drags me toward the curtains. "I want to play a little game. Whether you turn out to be a hybrid or not, I want to have some fun. God knows it's been ages. And if you don't end up being a hybrid, I'll just use you to toy with that pierced guy of yours. I'll mess with him just like he tried to mess with us." She whisks through the curtains and shoves me toward a four-poster bed, the wood scratched and worn with age.

I land on the mattress with a bounce then hurry and flip over.

"I heard that he challenged Wrath." She strolls over to another wooden piece of furniture ... a dresser, I think, and glides the top drawer open. "And even though I doubt Wrath will need help killing the stupid bastard..." She glances over her shoulder at me with her brows raised. "That is, unless it turns out he's a hybrid. Then maybe Wrath will end up dead." She measures my reaction, which I hope comes off as indifferent, and then rolls her eyes. "Anyway, if I've learned anything, it's that a

good fight between men usually happens when a beautiful woman is involved." She rummages through articles of clothing piled in the drawer. "I'm making sure we have that so the fight between my Wrath and your pierced friend will be good and bloody and gory, just how I like it." She turns to me, holding a stack of clothes. "Even if it turns out you're a hybrid, I might hold on to that information until after the fight. No one is going to want to fight over a hybrid--well, at least not my Wrath." Not waiting for me to answer, she throws the clothes at me. "Now get dressed."

I expect her to leave, but she takes a seat in the chair, crosses her legs, and sits back.

I unfold the clothes she gave me and try not to pull a face. I've never seen such flimsy fabric. Does this even cover up anything?

"Hurry up," she orders, thrumming her fingers against the armrest. "I want you ready to go when they get here."

Forcing down the vomit, I push to my feet and slip off my boots. With fumbling fingers, I remove my jacket, shirt, and pants, but keep the gloves on. Then I put on the red dress.

The fabric is soft like velvet and slides over my thin frame. Long in the back and extremely short in the front, it makes me feel too exposed. The top section isn't any better, either, with an open back and slits running along the side.

"You have a lot of scars," Zinnia remarks. "That doesn't make sense. Hybrids are supposed to heal without scarring."

"That's because I'm not a hybrid." My fingers tremble as I zip up the zipper on the dress.

She purses her chapped lips. "Where were you born?"

I rack my mind for a lie to feed her. "The d-docks," I stammer the first place that pops into my mind.

"Really?" She pushes to her feet and yanks off my fingerless gloves. "And where are the docks located again?" She tosses the gloves on top of the dresser. "I forget."

"In lakes and in the ocean." I internally cringe at my off balance tone.

"And how did you escape the docks?" she asks, collecting a basin and washcloth.

I recount the story Ryder told me. "I jumped off and swam to the shore."

"How very brave of you." Her derisive grin suggests she's toying with me, playing a game like the visitors used to do with me.

She sets the basin and cloth down on the bed. "Funny. Your friend, the one with the blond hair, told me the exact same story."

"W-w live there together," I sputter in a panic.

"He never mentioned that. In fact, I think I remember him mentioning he escaped alone," she says. "So, my bet is one of you is lying."

"When did Ryder tell you about the docks?" That doesn't make sense. Blaise said Ryder hardly told anyone.

She soaks the cloth in the water. "He can be quite chatty when he's all doped up." She wrings out the cloth, her eyes narrowing on me. "I really do hate liars. I think they should be punished. But the question is, who was lying? Him or you? My bet is you."

Guilt clutches at my throat. There's no way I can let Ryder go down for this and get

punished.

"Me," I confess. "I don't know where I was born."

"I figured you were the liar. Most people under the influence of dreamland don't lie. In fact, they can be pretty truthful." Anger sparks in her eyes. "Too truthful sometimes. It takes the fun out of my game when they don't want to play with me." She begins cleaning the dirt off my arms, scrubbing so harshly my skin turns red. "I can't figure you out. You scar, yet the place where the dart struck your neck healed within seconds. You're from the channels, but you don't know if you born there. But all hybrids are born there. Maybe you're lying. Maybe you were born there. But if you weren't, then what are you?"

"I'm human." Liar. You're not even close, and deep down, you know it.

"Doubtful. You heal too quickly." She moves the cloth to my neck, and I focus on her knife collection spread out on a trunk, anything other than her touching me. "We'll soon find out if you're one of them. If you are, then I'm going to tear you apart."

"And if I'm not?"

"Then I'll tear you apart and feed you to the Deorum." A merciless smile spreads across her face. "No matter what you turn out to be, your outcome will be death." She rolls her eyes at the sight of the tears pooling in the corner of my eyes. "Death isn't as bad as everyone makes it out to be. The world is only for the strong. If you're weak, you'll get broken again and again. It's just how things work out here. It's why our kind thrives in the murder and chaos--because we understand that, in order to survive their evil, we have to be equally as evil as the Grim." She drags the rag down to my collarbone.

"You don't seem strong, but the other hybrids didn't seem strong, either. It was all an

act, though." She stares off into empty space, her eyes overflowing with undiluted pain. "I'll never make that mistake again. The sacrifices make sure of that."

Her gaze cuts to me. "At first, I questioned how you got into our camp. If you are a Nameless, how did the Deorum betray us and let you in? But you're different from the other ones. Maybe that's why." She dunks the cloth into the basin again. "Or maybe you're something else. Either way, I'll be doing the world a favor by eliminating you. The last thing

this world needs is another strange, unknown creature wandering around. It's what started this whole mess. A single creature that selfishly dropped from the sky and brought an army of Grim with them. Just one creature started the destruction of mankind."

Her words slice through me. An unknown creature started this whole mess? No one seems to know what I am. What if ...? No. It can't be. I'd remember something like that. Or would I? I'm only beginning to realize just how many memories I've forgotten.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot most don't know about the legends." Zinnia grins, misinterpreting my horror-stricken face. "Sucks to be you. Knowledge is power, something the station doesn't understand. They're so dead set on trying to find that object that supposedly contains the world's history because they think it holds the answers to the Grim. If they'd just believe in our legends, their lives would be so much easier."

So many questions burn at the tip of my tongue. What was this creature that caused the destruction? How did it cause the destruction? Where did it come from? And where is it now? But when I open my mouth to ask, she places a finger to my lips.

"Nope. I never tell outsiders our secrets, especially ones who could be hybrids." She goes back to cleaning me.

With every swipe of the damp cloth, my stomach churns. I don't know how many times I've been touched without permission, but it's definitely been too many. I want to shove her down and run, but I keep thinking of Blaise, Ryder, and Reece and how they've never abandoned me, even when things got intense.

After Zinnia finishes washing me, she adds a few silver cuffs to my neck and wrists. Then she combs my hair and puts a mess of braids down one side. By the time she's finished, I feel like a doll all over again.

She drops the brush onto the bed and steps back, admiring her work. "I think that should do. You look good enough to get some male testosterone flowing. Although, you look like you could use some food and water." She reaches back behind her, picks up a tin cup and a bowl, and thrusts them at me. "Eat and drink up."

I recall Blaise's rules of survival, particularly the one where he told me never to eat or drink anything I didn't prepare myself.

"No, thanks. I'm not hungry." But my stomach grumbles in contradiction.

She snatches the cup from me and shoves the brim against my lips. "You will do what I say and will be grateful for every bite of food and every sip of water. We don't usually offer our prisoners such luxuries, but I'm making an exception right now so you don't faint before I have my fun." She tilts the cup and forces the water into my mouth.

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I choke as the water slips down my throat and drips down my chin and neck. After she has emptied the cup, she throws it aside and then stuffs bits of charred meat between my lips. When she turns around to grab a knife off the dresser, I spit the food onto the ground then step forward to hide the evidence under my feet.

She turns with a knife in her hand and points the tip at my pulse. "Your heart's pounding. You're afraid. Hybrids aren't usually afraid." When I say nothing, she lowers the knife from my neck. A few droplets of my blood dot the blade. "Come on. I think they're already waiting for us."

She steps inside the main area of the tent, and I follow, feeling sickened over every word she spoke to me, every touch she stole from me. But the feeling alleviates when I spot Ryder, Reece, and Blaise sitting on the floor near the chairs. Their clothing and faces are smudged with mud, but I can't see any scrapes, cuts, or bruises on their skin. And they're awake and not giggling and sobbing like the last time I saw them.

"I brought you a present." Zinnia shoves me forward.

I trip over the train of the dress and stumble in the dirt. Ryder leaps to his feet, his arms circling my waist to steady me. I rest my head against his chest as all the fear, worry, and self-disgust bottled up inside my chest crash over me. I want to cry over being touched by Zinnia. I want to scream at myself for not being a better liar. Most of all, I want to warn them of the Deorum and the sacrifice and how Zinnia is going to test us to see if we're hybrids.

"Ryder, I have to tell you something." My voice wobbles. "They're going to kill us. They're sacrificing us to the Deorum."

Every single muscle in Ryder's body stiffens, but he traces his finger up and down my spine. "Sh ... I've got you. You're safe now. We'll protect you."

"This is what you all wanted, right?" Jealously rings in Zinnia's tone. "What you begged for instead of me? Honestly, I don't get it. I mean, I know everyone at the station tries to preach about compassion, but how can you possibly care for someone who might be part of the thing that ruined your lives? It's disgusting."

Ryder's fingers stop moving. "What are you talking about?"

Oh, God, she's going to tell him she thinks I'm a hybrid.

"I'm talking about her being a Grim," she says, her tone frigid. "Or, at least, half-Grim."

"You're lying." Ryder breathes fiercely. "How dare you say she's one of those monsters. You're just bitter because no one wants you."

"How dare you disrespect me!" she shouts. "I should have my guard's shoot you dead right now."

"Do it," Ryder taunts. "You keep threatening the same thing, yet you never follow through. And you want to know why? Because you can't. You need us and every other prisoner you've got trapped beneath the ground."

"For a sacrifice," she fires back. "But you know what? I'm starting to think I might have more than enough prisoners. I could easily eliminate a few."

"Do it, then," Ryder goads, his hands splaying across my lower back. "I dare you."

"Ryder," Reece warns. "That's enough. You're only making this worse."

Ryder's fingers fold inward, but he stays quiet.

I tilt my head and glance at Zinnia, wondering what she's about to do.

She gives me a look that could kill before glaring at Ryder. "You're going to regret ever rejecting me. And when I prove you wrong, when I prove she's one of them, I'm going to make you watch as I kill her," Zinnia snarls then spins toward the entrance of the tent. "Wrath! Bring me the handcuffs!"

Wrath enters the tent a split second later, dressed head to toe in leather and carrying four sets of rusty chains, each linked to a set of metal cuffs. They're definitely not like the magnetic handcuffs I'm used to, but they look equally as uncomfortable.

"Sit down. All of you." Zinnia hauls me away from Ryder and pushes me down again.

I land on my hands and knees with a grunt and quickly crawl over beside Blaise. Sitting down beside him, I cover my legs up with the train of the dress, trying to cover as much of myself up as I can.

Ryder takes a seat on the other side of Reece, looking as if he's one step away from wringing Zinnia's neck.

Zinnia huddles with Wrath and whispers a few words, causing Wrath's expression to harden.

While they're distracted, Blaise leans toward me, his shoulder grazing mine "Are you okay?"

I nod, but I can't look him in the eye. How can I after what Zinnia said about the foreign creature who led the Grim to this world? What if I am this creature? Blaise

may have been okay with me being different, but I doubt he'd be okay with that.

"Don't worry," Blaise whispers. "We have a plan. A few more minutes, and we'll be out of this mess."

My lips part to ask him what the plan is, but Wrath stomps up to us, and I snap my mouth shut.

"No talking," he barks, dropping all but one of the handcuffs down on the ground. Winding around me, he seizes my arms behind my back and buckles a metal cuff on each of my wrists. Then he deliberately drags his finger up my spine and puts his lips close to my ear. "I can't wait until I get to kill your friend," he whispers. "You're the prize. And I never lose."

I slant forward, recoiling, my hair spilling over my shoulders.

He laughs then moves on to Blaise, grabbing ahold of his arm. With a twist of his wrist, Wrath bends Blaise's hand in the wrong direction. I hear a snap of bones breaking, and Blaise's face contorts in pain.

"I'm going to fucking kill you for that," Blaise grits through his teeth.

"Maybe I should break your other hand, too, then," Wrath sneers, his knuckles whitening as he grasps Blaise's good arm.

"Don't." Zinnia steps up in front of us, holding the leather pouch she waved in front of my face earlier. "I can't have him completely incapacitated."

Wrath's lip curls as he scowls at Zinnia. "Whatever you want, your highness."

Zinnia orders him to finish handcuffing Reece, Ryder, and Blaise. Wrath does what

he's told then drags a chair over to the center of the tent and takes a seat to watch the show.

Terror lashes through me as Zinnia opens the pouch and reaches inside. When she withdraws her hand, she's holding a handful of dry, brownish-green leaves--quercu. I'm not sure what I expected, but definitely not leave. Still, those leaves call to me, beckoning me to taste them. The intoxicating scent sends my body into a mad frenzy.

"No. No. No. You can't eat them, or you're done for," someone says. "Then it can't be undone."

My head whips around, and for a fraction of a second, I swear I see someone race across the tent. But when I blink, they're gone.

Zinnia waves her hand around in the air, and the crisp smell of the leaves catches in the air.

I breathe in deeply, and my mouth waters, a moan escaping my lips.

Blaise's gaze darts to me, alarm flooding his eyes.

My stomach turns. Look how appalled he is. He knows how much you want it.

Zinnia approaches Ryder first. "Open your mouth."

Ryder glares at her with his lips fused together.

"Open your mouth, or I'll break your jaw," she snaps.

Glowering at her, Ryder unhitches his jaw and opens his mouth. Zinnia reaches forward to put a flake on his tongue, but at the last second, she draws back and sets

the leaf on her lips. Then she slants forward and presses her mouth to Ryder's.

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Ryder cringes, and Zinnia's eyes wander in my direction as she shoves the leaf into his mouth with her tongue.

I recollect the memory I had where I was almost kissed and how I ran away, afraid of the hunger rising inside me. I then look away, unable to stand the sight of them. I hate that he's being forced to eat quercu by Zinnia. But something else is also bothering me, something I don't fully understand, and quite frankly, it makes me want to crawl over and claw Zinnia's face off.

"Where the hell did you get quercu?" Reece asks, shocked. "That stuff is practically extinct."

"I bought it off a traveler," Zinnia replies, smacking her lips. "You'd be surprised how often it comes in handy."

Hearing her voice means she's no longer kissing Ryder, so I turn my head and look at them.

"What do you do with it?" Blaise shakes his head in disgust. "Make trades? Because the only things that want that stuff are the Grim, and if you're trading with them, then that makes you a traitor."

"A traitor to whom?" She raises her brows in speculation. "Everyone at Leviter Station? Because one might say that entire place is full of traitors."

"No one there is a traitor." Blaise's eyes snap cold. "We help people, not try to kill them, unlike the Forsaken."

"Oh. You think so?" She inches toward Blaise. "Then tell me, when your team shows up here, will they or will they not try to kill me?"

"Why would a team show up here?" Reece asks. "They don't know where this camp is."

"They didn't know until you told them." She crouches down in front of Reece, still cupping flakes of dried leaves in her hand. "You guys are smarter than I gave you credit. Counting the steps from the caves to our camp and then finding my radio transmitter to send out a code. But how did you find the transmitter while you were so doped up? You shouldn't have even been able to think about anything else other than your nightmares."

"Your dreamland is weak. Whoever you got it from screwed you over. My bet is you probably killed a wanderer and stole it off them," Reece accuses. When she doesn't deny it, he shakes his head. "You deserve what's coming to you."

She leans forward, getting in Reece's face. "You think just because some rescue team is coming, that you're saved? You forget how savagely we fight. We don't need computers or machines to protect us, unlike you."

Reece carries her gaze, refusing to lean back. "If that's the case, then why do you have a radio transmitter, Tasers, an electromagnetic pulse activator, a scanner, and a broken chaser hidden in the dirt underneath your bed?"

"Zinnia, what's he talking about?" Wrath asks, his fingers curling around the armrest. "We don't have those kinds of things at this camp."

"It's your highness," Zinnia tells him without taking her eyes off Reece. "And that's none of your business."

"None of my business?" Wrath starts to rise to his feet, fuming mad. "The whole point of our way of life is to exist without the machines the Grim created and used to bring violence to our world!"

"The Grim didn't create all the machines. Humans had their own machinery and weaponry." She reels around. "And there was violence in our world before the Grim came along. That's the problem with humans. We turn on our own kind, which is why I have all that stuff--to protect us from our own kind."

Anger simmers in Wrath's eyes as he steps toward her. "We don't need that stuff to protect us. We've been doing just fine without it."

"Yes, we have, but things change." Her fingers fold inward, crunching the quercu leaves. "The Grim put bounties on not only Nameless but humans. Any human could turn in an escaped Nameless now." Her gaze flicks in my direction. "Or an unbranded human in exchange for immunity."

"No human would be stupid enough to fall for that shit." Wrath straightens his stance, his head almost clipping the ceiling. "The Grim would never give anyone immunity. It's probably a trap. They probably capture the people stupid enough to fall for it and get double the prisoners."

"Of course that's what they're doing," she snaps. "But that isn't going to stop people from believing them. And I'm not about to let us be susceptible simply because we refuse to steer away from the old ways. Yes, I understand that machines aided in the destruction of mankind, but we also need to be able to protect ourselves from the violence."

He eliminates the space between them, towering over her. "Those old ways make us who we are. Without them, we're just as bad as everyone else."

"Those old ways were created by our ancestors who had no clue what the outcome of our world was going to be," she says. "I've already heard rumors of human hunters grouping together to track down humans. We need protection and not just from the Grim anymore."

"The Deorum will protect us," Wrath growls, his nostrils flaring. "We have a truce. We give them ten lives every month, and in exchange, they protect us."

"The Deorum protect us from hybrids, not the Grim or humans." She stands toe to toe with him. "We already have a hard enough time making that quota."

"Then we will find some other way." He leans in, his face inches from hers. "We don't need to use transmitters and electromagnetic pulses. That's not how we do things."

"That's not your call to make." She pokes him in the chest, and he staggers back. "You're severely out of line by speaking to me this way."

Metal snapping draws my attention away from their argument. I glance to my right to find Blaise unshackled and rotating his broken wrist ... or what I thought was a broken wrist. By the way he moves it, the bones don't appear to be broken. Either that or Blaise has rapid healing abilities, too.

He puts a finger to his lips, indicating for me to keep quiet. Then he reaches behind me and bends the cuffs until the metal gives way.

"Hold still until I get Reece and Ryder's handcuffs off, okay?" he whispers.

I nod, keeping my hands behind my back as Blaise shifts toward Reece. He works quickly, snapping the cuffs off them. By the time he's finished, Zinnia and Wrath are still yelling at each other.

"Should we run?" Ryder whispers to Reece. "Or try to take them out?"

"We need to take them out." Reece massages his wrists, his eyes trained on Zinnia and Wrath. "If we don't, they'll warn everyone, and we won't make it very far."

"Yeah, but people at the station are coming for us, right?" Blaise asks, wiggling his fingers on his should-be broken hand. "What Zinnia said about the transmitter, that's true, right?"

Reece frees a stressed breath. "I sent out a signal, but I never got a reply. Zinnia's transmitter was outdated. It might run on a different frequency."

"Shit." Blaise rubs the back of his hand across his forehead, smearing a trail of dirt across his skin. "So, what? We just snap their necks then try to slip out of the camp?"

"They have guards in lookout towers," I whisper. "And there are towers all over the place."

All three of them glance my way, their brows arched in surprise.

"How do you know that?" Ryder leans around Blaise and lowers his voice. "I didn't notice any when we came in."

"You were kind of out of it when we came in," I say quietly. "And I didn't even notice them until Calla, the girl who brought me to Zinnia, pointed them out. There's one on each corner of the fence."

"They have torches set up around the fence, too." Blaise shoves the sleeves of his leather jacket up, revealing the tattoos on his arms. "My guess is they light them up at night so they can keep watch from the towers."

"So we blow out the damn torches." Ryder crosses his arms defiantly. "No light means they can't see for shit."

"How the hell are we supposed to get the flames out?" Blaise hisses. "Just walk up and blow them out, hoping they don't see us first?"

"Or we don't do any of it and just make a run for it when the Deorum show up," Reece suggests. "It offers the perfect distraction."

I steal a glance in Zinnia and Wrath's direction, making sure they're still distracted, before scooting toward Reece. "You know what the Deorum are?"

"Not exactly." Reece tugs his fingers through his brown hair. "B

ut I know the word means gods."

"I'd rather not find out what they are, at least not while we're being offered as a sacrifice," Ryder says, glancing at Zinnia and Wrath. "We need to get out of here fast."

"I think we should just run," Reece contradicts what he said earlier. "On the count of three, we all bolt?"

Ryder and Blaise nod in agreement, and my confusion increases. Are we running or fighting? I'm so lost.

I put my hands to the ground and shift my weight to the balls of my toes, preparing to jump and either fight or run. Either way, I'm not sure if I can make it. Being in the channels for so long has made me so uncoordinated and slow, like I forgot how to use my body.

"One," Reece whispers, exchanging a look with Blaise.

Blaise nods his head once, as if answering a silent question.

"Two." Reece glances at Ryder then reaches for the chain behind him, and Ryder mimics him. "Three."

I spring to my feet, but Blaise grabs the back of my dress and drags me into his lap. Then he scrambles backward toward the chairs, kicking up dirt.

Zinnia lets out an untamed laugh, reeling toward us with her knife out. "You think you could plot your escape right underneath my nose?" She strides toward Reece with the knife aimed at his throat. "How stupid do you think I am?"

"Pretty stupid, since we weren't ever going to try to escape." Ryder grins sweetly at her then lunges at Wrath, swinging the chain like a whip.

Blaise wraps an arm around my waist and tows me with him as he continues to move toward the back of the tent. A revelation strikes me. Reece, Ryder, and Blaise must have known Zinnia was listening to the plan, and somehow, they made an alternative plan without actually verbalizing it. How, though? Did Blaise get into their thoughts somehow? But that doesn't make sense. He didn't touch Ryder and Reece, nor were any of them relaxed or unconscious.

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Zinnia lets out a feral shriek. "You'll die trying to escape!"

Reece barrels forward and crashes into her. They both slam to the ground as her knife flies from her hand, and the quercu scatters across the dirt like fallen snowflakes. My eyes roll into the back of my head as the scent of fresh, thriving leaves saturates the air.

I'm so hungry. I'm so hungry. I need them. I need them.

"Come on, we have to go," Blaise says, lugging me backward.

"No, I have to get them." I throw my weight forward with a shocking amount of strength, and his arms slip from my waist.

"Allura, don't, please," Blaise begs, reaching for me. "We have to go--"

Wrath appears in front of us, grabs my arm, and yanks me to my feet as if I weigh nothing.

"Let her go!" Blaise savagely growls, jumping to his feet.

Wrath flips me around and jerks me against him, aligning my back to his chest. "Why? You lost the challenge, right? Which means I own her."

Where the heck did Ryder go? I turn my head, searching for him, and ice fills my veins. A man and woman have him pinned to the ground and are beating him bloody with the chain and their fists.

"Help Ryder," I plead with Blaise. "They're going to kill him."

Blaise doesn't seem to hear me, edging forward with his eyes trained on Wrath. "Lost the challenge. You didn't even fight me."

"You tried to run like a coward, so you lost." Wrath trails his finger along my jaw, across my lips, then down my neck. "And now I get to rip her apart bit by--"

In the blink of an eye, Blaise lunges forward, grabs my hips, and moves me to the side. Then he lets his fist fly, and his knuckles bash against Wrath's jaw.

Wrath staggers back, stunned. "You're not normal."

"And you're going to die," Blaise says then lowers his head and charges at Wrath again.

Wrath dodges out of the way, shrugs off his jacket, and chucks it to the floor as Blaise swings around. "If you want to play, then let's play." The muscles in his enormous arms bulge as he cracks his knuckles then flashes me a devious grin. "Winner takes--"

Blaise rams his head into Wrath's chest and pushes him back into the tent wall. The lanterns above us shake as Wrath picks Blaise up by the throat and throws him across the tent as if he weighs nothing. Blaise crashes into the chairs just a few feet away from me but recovers, leaps to his feet, and sprints across the tent at Wrath. Wrath skitters out of the way, whirls around, and punches Blaise in the side of the head. Blaise drunkenly staggers, his shoulder knocking against the side of the tent. Wrath then hits Blaise in the head again, and this time, he draws blood.

"No!" I cry, rushing for Blaise.

Blaise collapses to the dirt, clutching his head, and Wrath grins as he strides toward me. I turn around to run, but he snags the back of my dress.

"You aren't going anywhere," he breathes, slamming his chest against my back, His fingers delve into my waist as his teeth graze my earlobe. "I'm going to--"

I whip my head back against Wrath's face, and his fingers leave my waist. He trips backward as I stumble forward, dizziness overcoming me.

I need ... something ... something that will help make me strong.

I trip over my dress, staggering toward the quercu.

"Allura!" Blaise sounds so far away, like an echo. Or maybe I'm just moving extraordinarily fast.

I make it to the leaves before I can even take my next breath and pluck the flakes from the dirt.

Oh. My. God. I want them so badly.

I lift my hands to my face, my nostrils flaring, ready to devour.

"No. No. No. You can't eat them, or you're done for," the voice whispers in my ear again. "Then it can't be undone."

"Look at her! She's about to feed!" Zinnia says, her voice muffled. "She's one of them! Can't you see what you're trying to protect? She's evil!"

I jerk back as if burned and drop the quercu.

What am I doing? I don't need to do this. I'm not like this.

But I'm so hungry. Famished. As if I haven't been fed in ages. And all that healing. I can feel it taking a toll on my body. I need something, but I don't understand what.

"Yes, you do," the voice whispers. "Just lie down and shut your eyes. Then you'll be stronger and can help them."

I glance at Reece as he struggles to hold the chain around Zinnia's neck, at Ryder who's enduring merciless punches, and at Blaise rushing toward me, blood dripping from his hairline. I want to help them, so I listen to the voice and lie down on my stomach and press my face to the ground.

Blaise shouts my name again as my eyes close, ready to give in. But as a cold rush of air whooshes through me and my nostrils are blasted with the stench of rotten eggs, fear pulses through my body.

No. No. No. Not again.

What have I done?

Chapter Fourteen

The First

"What's happening?" I murmur with my eyes closed.

Did Lex's spirit take over my body again?

I crack one of my eyelids open, and for a heart stopping instant, I swear I see a pair of red, glowing eyes staring at me. When I blink, they're gone.

Taking a few uneven breaths, I peer around the tent, relieved to be looking through my own eyes and not Lex's. All relief erases, though, when I spot Blaise and Wrath pummeling each other.

Blood drips from Blaise's nose and covers the front of his shirt and unzipped jacket. On the opposite side of the tent, Ryder is pinned to the ground, enduring blow after blow. Beside him, Reece is strangling Zinnia with the chain, but Zinnia has her hands clasped around his throat.

I want to run to them, but I don't. I feel too ... different, like I don't really exist.

I rotate my arms in front of me, noticing the translucency of my skin. "What's happening to me?"

"Goddammit!" Blaise's scream pulls my attention to him.

He uppercuts Wrath in the chin, and blood gushes from his mouth. But Wrath just laughs, flashing a bloody smile. Then he cranes his blood-soaked fist back, ready to strike. Blaise veers to the right, jumps over a broken table, picks up the trunk, and hurls it at Wrath. Wrath's eyes widen for a flash of an instant b

efore the trunk smacks him square in the face. The contact makes a sickening sound, and then Wrath drops to the floor like a bag of bricks.

Blaise doesn't miss a beat, dashing toward a body on the ground.

I lean over, trying to see who the person is. My breath catches in my throat. It's ... me.

Blaise drops to his knees at my side and presses his finger to my pulse. He curses, leans down, and puts his ear next to my parted lips. Another curse leaves him, and then he positions his hands to my chest, and his arm muscles flex as he pumps my

heart.

"Come on, breathe, dammit," he growls. "You can't die on me now."

My body lies motionless, my skin is pale, and my lips as red as the sky. My long, brown hair is sprawled out across the dirt, and flecks of quercu surround my head. I look hauntingly still, and if I had to guess, my skin is probably icy cold.

"Come on, Allura," Blaise pleads as he places his fingers to my temple. He closes his eyes, his forehead creasing in deep concentration. He mutters words under his breath, growing frustrated, then withdraws his hands and lowers his lips to mine.

I rub my eyes and blink a few times, watching Blaise try to breathe life into me. "How can this be possible? Am I ... dead?"

"No, you're recharging using the moonstone hidden underneath the ground. No one knows it's there, or I'm sure they never would've built their camp here." A woman about five or six years older than me materializes by my side.

Her raven black hair is matted, and she's dressed in a ratty shirt similar to the one I used to wear when I lived in the channels. Her transparent skin makes her face and body look boney and sunken in.

"You're a Grim." I skitter away when she steps toward me.

She freezes. "Not entirely."

I reach to grip the last chair still intact, but my fingers slip through, and I fall flat onto my face. I scramble to my feet, breathing wildly. My hands shake as I elevate them in front of me.

"What just happened? How did I do that?"

She takes a cautious step toward me. "You did it because you're a spirit right now. Just like me. You're stuck, a faded memory, never to be found."

"No, I'm not." I shake my head in denial. "If that were true, that means I'm a Grim."

"No, you're a hybrid." She extends her hand toward me. "Just like me." Her fingers brush my arm, her touch warm. "God, it's been ages since I touched anyone. Since I died here, actually."

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"Since you died here ...? Wait. You're one of the hybrids who killed the Forsaken?" I sidestep away from her, bumping into the wall of the tent, and her hand falls from my arm.

"We didn't mean to kill them," she replies sadly. "We were provoked, just like you were."

I rub the spot where she touched me. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, if you would've tasted that quercu, it would've unleashed the Grim monster living inside you." Her gentleness turns harsh.

I stare down at the leaves on the ground, remembering how desperately I wanted to taste them. "And if I don't? Then what?"

"Then you stay in control." Her shoulders sag. "I wish I could have. Then maybe I wouldn't be buried in the ground. Then again, maybe I still would. People aren't fond of those who are different, and you and I are about as different as they come."

"Are there ...? Are there a lot of us?"

She wavers. "A few, but you're different from all of us."

Shock scorches through me.

"How?"

She fiddles with a hole in the hem of her shirt. "Because you're the first."

"The first what? Hybrid?"

She hesitates, chewing on her bottom lip. "I don't know."

I don't understand.

"How can you know I'm the first something, but you don't know what that something is?"

"Because I can feel it." She presses her palm to her chest. "In here."

She's making no sense, but before I can ask her to explain herself better, Ryder yelps in pain, and my concentration darts to him. Wrath has woken up and now has Ryder turned onto his stomach and is stabbing him in the back with a small knife.

"No!" The strangled scream comes from my own lips. "Somebody help him!"

Blaise jerks his head up, and he scans the tent, looking confused.

Did he just hear me?

"Help Ryder!" I shout, getting right into his face.

His brows shoot upward, and his head snaps in Ryder's direction. Cursing, he bounds to his feet, sprints toward Wrath, scoops up a broken piece of chair, and clocks Wrath in the side of the head with it.

Wrath drops to the ground hard, and Blaise kneels and carefully turns Ryder over onto his back.

"I'm good," Ryder croaks, trying to smile, but it looks wrong. Everything about Ryder does. His kind eyes are dull, and that vibrant spark he carries with him is fizzling.

More Forsaken rush into the tent, armed with knives and guns. Chaos haunts the air, along with the foul stench of blood.

"How do I help them?" My chest constricts as I whirl toward the woman. "The voice--your voice, I'm guessing--told me this could help me save them. That if I lay down, I could save them. How do I do it?" I think about what Reece told me about spirits and how Lex possessed my mind when I was in the caves. "Can I possess one of them?"

She shakes her head. "Only a pure Grim can do that."

"Then what can I do?"

"The only way to help them is to let a memory go and return to your body."

I squeeze my eyes as Ryder lets out an agonizing groan. God, I can't bear to hear any of them in pain.

"Okay, how do I do that?"

"You need to think about this," the woman says. "The memory that you have to let go is probably going to be an important one."

"I don't care. You told me if I lay down and shut my eyes, I could save them."

A scowl etches her face. "That wasn't me." She straightens her back and looks around at the torn walls of the tent, the broken fragments of wooden furniture all over the ground, and the knocked down curtains. "I don't think we're alone."

Ryder groans again, and her words barely register.

I inch toward her, deathly afraid but refusing to reveal my fear. "I don't care what's going on. Y-you know how to fix this. Now, please, just tell me how to do it." I'm crying so hard I can barely breathe.

"I can't ..." She swiftly shakes her head, backing away from me, terrified. "You can't forget stuff. It's too important."

"I won't ..." I crumble to the ground as two men seize Reece by the arms and drag him toward Zinnia, who has managed to escape the chain.

They viciously shove him down, and his jaw clips the edge of the cracked trunk. He staggers before collapsing to his knees. The taller of the two men reaches inside his leather jacket and retrieves a gun.

"No!" I shout as the man aims the barrel at the back of Reece's head.

"Not yet," Zinnia groans hoarsely, rubbing her neck, her skin red and raw from where Reece choked her with the chain. "We need three of them for the sacrifice."

"Fine." The taller man turns the gun around in his hand and clocks Reece over the head with the handle.

Reece groans as his body slumps to the dirt, face first, and blood trickles from his temple.

The man turns and points the gun at Ryder lying on the ground. "This one, on the other hand, is already dead." His finger hovers over the trigger.

"No!" I rush forward, my heart thundering in my chest.

All I can think about is getting to them, stopping Ryder from getting shot, waking up Reece, helping Blaise fight the three men and two women trying to pin him to the ground.

Power surges through my veins, loading my body with raw, magnetic heat. For once, I feel strong, alert, hungry with the need to protect. I let the hunger consume me as I surrender to the silent whisper, begging me to let something go so I can reunite with my body. I feel myself tumbling. Slipping, slipping, slipping closer to present and farther from the past ...

Chapter Fifteen

Destruction

I bolt upright, gasping for air, trying to figure out how I got on the ground. The last thing I remember is Wrath and Blaise fighting and me head-butting Wrath.

I bring myself to a crouch and look around the tent. Any warmth is abruptly ripped from my body when my eyes rove toward the entrance of the tent.

Ryder. On the ground. Blood. So much blood. And a guy is about to shoot him.

I feel like I've missed out on moments leading to this point, but I act instinctively and sprint at an alarmingly fast pace. Strength pumps through my veins and fuels my body as I slam my palms against the guy pointing the gun at Ryder. A loud zap crackles through my body, and the man cries out in pain.

Just how Lex stole life from my veins, I feel myself doing the same thing. I want to drink this guy dry, feed the monster inside me.

"Don't do it," the voice whispers. "You can't ever let that hunger get control of you."

My body goes rigid. Who said that?

"Then what do I do?" I ask aloud.

"Fight."

Prying my hands off his back, I jump up and hitch my arms around the guy's neck. He chokes out, begging me to let him go, while Zinnia screams at everyone to stop me. I only squeeze more tightly, choking the air out of the man.

Blaise moves up and snatches the gun from the guy's hands. Blood is splattered across his face like raindrops, and bruises and welts cover his face, but the bruises have already yellowed, quickly healing.

What is he?

Blaise catches my gaze, and not a speck of remorse haunts his eyes as he aims the gun at the guy.

"Allura, get off him," he demands, his finger sliding over the trigger.

Confused, I lower my feet to the ground and back away.

The guy heaves for air, hunching over. "You shouldn't have done that. Now I'm going to kill her and make you watch--"

A shot rings out, and I cower to the ground, covering my ears. The air buzzes, hot and metallic. Another fire. Then another. I flinch every single time, not daring to look up. I hunker down, close to the ground and crawl my way over to Ryder.

His eyes are closed, his hand pressed to his chest, and every time he takes a breath, he

coughs up blood.

"Ryder," I whisper, wanting to help him but unsure what to do.

His eyelids flutter open, and his eyes are glazed over. "Hey."

I brush his hair out of his face. "What can I do to help?"

He slips hi

s fingers through mine, his thumb skimming my palm. "There. Much better." His forehead creases, and he turns my hand over to examine my palm. "The cuts ... They're gone." He looks at me. "How?"

I shake my head, tears burning in my eyes. "I just ... I can't ..." How am I supposed to tell him that I'm not what he thinks I am? That I can heal myself?

My eyes close. God, I wish I could heal him like I do myself. If only I could... if only ...

A few tears escape my eyes and stream down my cheeks, but I quickly wipe them away and open my eyes to inspect his chest.

"There has to be a way to stop the bleeding."

"Blaise can fix this." He squeezes my hand, his voice hoarse. "Don't worry. We just need to get out of here."

I glance over my shoulder at Blaise. He has his gun pointed at the Forsaken, and they have theirs aimed at him and Reece. They're all throwing threats at each other, but it's clear who the outnumbered side is.

I return my attention back to Ryder. "How can he help you?"

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The corners of his lips pull into a tired smile. "He'll stitch me up and give me a shot."

My brows dip. "Oh."

"You were thinking something magical, weren't you?"

I nod, feeling silly. "I kind of was."

"That's okay." He coughs, his shoulders heaving. "It's understandable, considering."

I swallow hard. Ryder saw me trying to eat the quercu. Did he see the monster living inside me? Does he know?

"It's okay." He squeezes my hand again, his grip weakening. "I know you're not like them."

My lips quiver as I battle back the tears. "How can you stand to look at me?"

"How can I not?" His gaze drifts over my shoulder.

"What do you think you're doing, cowering on the ground like a coward?" Calla asks from behind me.

I turn around, ready to fight, but mid-turn, a knife jabs through my chest in the center of my heart. A whimper flees my lips as I press my hand to the bleeding wound.

Calla clutches the bloody knife in her hand, staring at me with utter hatred in her

eyes. I can't entirely blame her after she lost her whole family to hybrids and thinks I'm one.

"You deserve this," she says, "for being what you are."

Part of me believes her, believes I deserve to die. But the stronger part of me refuses to give in.

Fight! Allura! Fight!

And just like when I was in my cell and fought to give up, I fight not to die.

"Allura!" Blaise runs toward me, winding around a few bodies on the floor.

I wonder if they're all dead or if some of them have just passed out. Did Blaise kill all these people?

When Blaise reaches us, he rips the knife from Calla's hand with murderous rage gleaming in his eyes. Calla spins on her heels and dives for him, but Blaise's swiftness is no match for her.

He easily dodges to the right and moves to slice the blade across her throat.

"No!" I skitter between them with my arms spanned out. "Don't kill her. There's already been too much destruction." Destruction that would've never happened if I didn't exist.

Guilt clenches at my chest, making it difficult to breathe.

"I don't need your help," Calla seethes from behind me.

Blaise barely stops right before the knife spears my chest, and he wrenches back. "Are you crazy? She stabbed you ..." His jaw ticks as he stares at the blood dripping from the hole in my chest. "She deserves to die, Allura, so move out of my way."

I hug my arms around myself, shivering from the cold consuming my body. Something's wrong. Why am I not healing?

"Blaise ..." I set my hand on the open wound in my chest. "Something's ... wrong ..." I teeter sideways, woozy and disoriented.

Blaise's rage evaporates and turns to worry. He drops the knife to catch me in his arms and lowers us down to the ground.

"We're going to get you out of this." He places his hand on the hole in my chest, and blood coats his fingers. "Why aren't you healing?"

"I don't know ..." I wheeze. "You keep saying ... You're going to get me out of this." My lungs burn as I struggle for oxygen. "But maybe ... it might be better ... if I ... just die--"

"No." His sharp tone silences me. "I won't let you."

I gasp for my next breath. "But you saw what I did ... You saw me try to ... eat the quercu. And I wanted to."

He brushes my hair away from my damp forehead, his fingers trembling. "I don't care what you tried to do or what you are. You just saved someone who stabbed you. There's not a bad bone in your entire body."

I don't agree with him. I've wanted to hurt people before. Wanted to feed off them. Like the guy whose neck I almost broke and in the memory when the guy tried to kiss

me. I'm a monster, always have been. Or have I?

A memory prickles at my mind.

"You're the first."

I think I've been told that before, but I can't remember when or what it means.

I open my mouth. "Blaise ... I think I--"

A series of sirens fire off, and then an unnerving silence clutches the air. I move to sit up, but my lethargic body refuses to budge.

"Allura," Blaise hisses, his arms stiffening. "Don't make any sudden movements."

I suck in a painful breath as I angle my head and look around. Every Forsaken has frozen and turned toward the open flap of the tent.

"They're here," an older woman whispers, her hand shaking as she puts her knife into her holster.

"What is it?" I ask Blaise. "Why did everyone stop fighting?"

"I'm not sure," Blaise mutters, drawing me closer to him.

"The Deorum are here," Zinnia says with pure glee. Droplets of blood speckle her face and hair, and she has a gun pointed at Reece's chest. "Now, this ends."

Reece has his hands in the air to the sides of him. "What ends?"

Zinnia's eyes dance with excitement. "You'll soon find out."

Ryder gives Blaise an inconspicuous glance, and I have the feeling they're nonverbally making another plan.

Blaise nods once then scans the tent. "We need to get you out of here."

"What about Reece and Ryder?" I fight the drowsiness threatening to pull me under. "We should help the other people in the grates, too. There was a child in there."

Blaise straightens his legs and pushes to his feet, lifting me in his arms. "Reece will get Ryder, but Allura, we don't have time to free everyone--"

Loud thuds rumble through the tent, like the marching of a thousand warriors. The earsplitting noise claws at my eardrums, and my stomach churns, ready to hurl.

"What is that?" I ask, but my voice gets lost in the thumping.

"We have your sacrifices!" Zinnia calls out with her arms spread wide, the gun still in her hand but no longer aimed at Reece. "But before we make the exchange, I need to know how you let her into our camp. She's one of them. She's plagued with the hunger for life. I've seen it with my own eyes."

"She's not a hybrid. Don't blame this on us." The low voice is startlingly close.

Blaise reacts, jumping to the side, just as a handful of figures file into the tent and surround us.

My lips part in shock at the sight of them. Tall, broad, and dressed head to toe in black, metal armor, and concealing their faces are masks that look similar to the ones the Forsaken wore when we first entered the camp. They aren't carrying weapons, but they're wearing packs on their backs that blend with their armor. I have no idea what they are. Grim? Human? Machine?

"Shit," Blaise mutters under his breath, backing away from them. "Where the hell did they come from?"

"The ground," I whisper, and he gapes down at me. "Calla, the girl who brought me to Zinnia, told me they live in the ground."

"If she's not a hybrid, then what is she?" Zinnia asks, approaching the group of Deorum pushing their way into the tent. "Is she Grim?"

"No," the one standing at the front of the group answers. His voice is deep and sounds male. "She's something else."

While I can't see his eyes through the mask, I can feel his

gaze boring into me. I have the strongest urge to look away, but I can't seem to take my eyes off him. What the heck is he?

He shakes his head and turns to address Zinnia. "We can't take her."

"What do you mean you can't take her?" Zinnia asks. "She should count for three people if she's that different."

"Taking her would mean choosing to go to war with the watchers. They'd kill to get their hands on her." He crosses his arms, his arms clinking. "We will not choose war. Our kind has been at war with the Grim before, and we suffered for centuries. We won't do it again."

"Really? The Grim want her?" Zinnia's brows rise. "Maybe I should keep her then and offer her to the Grim."

"If you do, you'll be breaking your truce with us," he warns. "And we will no longer

offer you any protection."

"Maybe I'll risk it." Zinnia stares him down defiantly. "The Grim are more powerful than you, anyway. They could offer us better protection."

He laughs hollowly, slanting toward her. "Like they would ever offer you protection. You're pathetic. Look at you, offering your own to us just so you can spare a few lives of your own kind." He motions around at the tent filled with Forsaken. "You hate hybrids because they murdered your families, but you do the same thing to others by stealing their children, their mothers, their fathers, and offering them to us."

"How dare you insult my people!" Zinnia's expression turns savage as she steps toward him. A few of the Forsaken match her movement, closing in on the Deorum. "You know nothing of our suffering." She dares another step closer. "And at least we stay up here and fight, unlike you who hide underground like a bunch of cowards."

"Don't you dare speak of things you do not understand. You have no idea what my people have been through," he snarls, refusing to back down.

The Deorum behind him take measured steps forward, and the Forsaken do the same. An impending fight lingers in the air, heavy and potent. Blaise must sense it, because he starts inching his way toward the side of the tent, taking small but calculated steps.

I search the tent for Reece and Ryder, but an image surfaces in my mind and completely blinds me.

The darkened sky crumples like burned paper, raining onto the ground where figures cry over the loss of their loved ones. I can't see any of their faces, just shadows of figures dressed in heavy metal armor. The Deorum?

How would I know this? How do I know anything?

I strain my eyes, desperate to see more, but the images fade away like a dimming light.

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"You know a lot more than you think," a voice whispers. "A lot more."

More images press against the back of my mind of a land filled with blood instead of water, but shouting and gunfire jerk me back to reality. The Forsaken have opened fire on the Deorum, but the bullets have little impact, dinging against the metal and falling to the ground.

Blaise runs for the door, hunkering down. Bullets zoom beside us, and more blood paints the dirt and tent walls.

I want to make the death and murder stop. All this pain, this hate, all the blood spilled ... I close my eyes, wishing I could do something.

My head begins to pound and blood trickles from my ears as a bullet pierces my neck.

"Keep your head down," Blaise murmurs, hugging me closer to his chest. "I'm going to get you out of here, but you need to hold still."

"But Ryder ... and Reece." Dizziness consumes me, the world spinning round and round. I feel like I'm drowning in my own blood.

Too weak to fight, I let myself slip under.

Chapter Sixteen

Escaping

"Stay with me, Allura," Blaise begs, his feet hammering against the ground.

The temperature has dropped to a chilling degree, and the noise of gunfire has dwindled.

I crack open my eyes to look around. The night sky stretches above us. The moon is absent, but the exploding fireballs of stars offer an adequate enough amount of light that I can make out the wire fencing just a small distance in front of us, lit up with torches.

We're still on Forsaken ground.

"Where are Ryder and Reece?" I croak, my throat as dry as the air.

Blaise's muscles twitch. "They're coming," is all he says.

I can't tell whether he's being truthful or not.

I crane my neck to look over his shoulder. A few tents are lit up, and I can hear the faint sound of gunfire overlapping the desperate cries from the people in the grates.

"Blaise." I grasp his arms as I'm jarred around. "We need to free the people in the grates."

"We don't have time." He charges toward the fence.

"Just go back and unlock the grates," I plead. "Give them a chance. It won't take very long. I can still hear gunfire, so everyone's probably still distracted."

Blaise shakes his head. "I can't do that. It's too risky. We need to get you out of here."

"Please," I beg. "There's been too much death already ... I need to help them."

He glances down at me, torn. "If I can get you somewhere safe, I'll try to come back and unlock all the grates. But only when you're safe."

The last thing I want is for him to wander off by himself. I want to beg him to turn around now so we can free the prisoners together, but he unexpectedly slams on the brakes.

"How the hell did you get out here?" Blaise growls, his arm muscles tautening.

"I took a shortcut," Calla answers. "When I saw you run, I figured you'd end up here."

I turn my head to look at her. She's leaning against the fence with a bag slung over her shoulder and blocking our escape route.

"Get out of my way," Blaise warns in a low tone. "Or I'll make you move."

"While I'd love to see you try," she sneers, straightening her stance, "I didn't come here to fight. I came here to help."

Blaise trades an unsure glance with me, and I shrug. I have no idea why she'd want to help us since the last time I saw her she stabbed me in the chest.

Blaise warily eyes Calla over. "How do we know we can trust you?"

"It doesn't really matter if you do or not." She slips the bag off her back and tosses it at Blaise's feet. "There's some food, water, and medical supplies in there. The guards abandoned their posts to join the fight, so you should be able to make a run for it without too many problems." She walks by us, heading back across the desert land toward the tents. "If I were you, I wouldn't come back for the prisoners, but it's your

call."

Blaise turns, shouting after her, "Why are you doing this? It makes no sense."

She stops, half-turning. Her gaze flicks from me to Blaise. "She saved me, so call us even. I hate being in debt to people." With that, she hikes off, vanishing in the dusk.

Blaise hesitates, looking back and forth between the camp and the fence. "Why do I have the feeling there's more to it than what she said?"

"I don't know," I say. "But she might really just want to help."

"You give her too much credit." Blaise eyeballs the bag Calla left. "I have a feeling this is going to come back and bite me in the ass."

Still, he sets me down on the soft dirt so he can slip the bag onto his back. Then he bends the wire fencing, creating a wide gap, before scooping me into his arms and slipping out into the night.

"How are you feeling?" he asks as he tears up the bumpy path toward the cliffs.

"Okay." I touch my hand to my chest. "A little tired, but I--"

A sharp, cold object slashes into my ankle.

"Fuck." Blaise skids to a stop then spins around. "What was that?"

"A ... dart..." Numbness swims through my body, dreamland poisoning my veins.

"I'm not letting you get away!" Wrath yells. "She's going nowhere. She's way too valuable."

"Why won't he just fucking die?" Blaise mutters. He dithers, moving forward then backward as if deciding whether to run or stay and fight.

I don't get to find out what his decision is as the dreamland pulls me under.

Chapter Seventeen

Guilt

"You want to see what I can do?" the visitor whispers in my ear. "Close your eyes, and I'll show you."

I shake my head, skittering back until my back bumps into the moonstone wall of my cell.

The visitor trains his silver eyes on me as he stalks forward. "Come on, don't be shy. I'm hungry and want to play."

I shake my head, flattening my back to the wall.

If only I could run ... if only I could get past the iron circle ...

"You're scared." He crouches down in front of me and clasps my arms. "You probably should be." He leans forward until his lips hover over mine. "I have a feeling you're going to taste amazing. At least, that's what I was told."

"Why are you doing this?" I whisper, trembling. "I didn't do anything."

His brows rise to his hairline. "You speak?"

I swallow hard, forcing down my nerves. Maybe, if I talk to him, I can convince him

not to hurt me?

"I do, yes."

"I've never met a Nameless who could talk before." He deliberates something, seeming torn.

A spark of hope surfaces inside me.

Maybe he won't hurt me.

But then his eyes narrow, and his fingernails cut into my wrists. "You're not supposed to talk," he growls, his eyes flashing silver. Then he smashes his lips against mine.

I jerk back, my head slamming against the moonstone. No. No. No. I don't want to do this.

But he climbs over me and forces me to lie down. I try to scream, but his lips come down on my mouth again, smothering the noise.

I don't want to be here.

His hand slides up my leg.

"Allura, wake up."

Tears fall from my eyes as he slams his palm against my chest.

I don't want to be here.

But I deserve to be here.

I am a monster.

He wraps a hand around my throat, strangling me as he steals the life from my veins.

"You taste better than any of them. But is it you or the moonstone in your walls?" he whispers against my lips. "I've never seen moonstone walls in any other cell. What's so special about you?"

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I'm not special. I'm a monster.

"Allura, wake up! Please!"

A sob wrenches from my chest, and he laughs, drinking more of my life.

I want to die.

I want this to end.

"Allura! Dammit! Just open your eyes."

My eyelids drift shut ...

When my eyelids snap open again, my eyes are swollen fr

om crying. I'm no longer stuck in the memory of being in my cell with the visitor. I'm lying in the grass, bits of cotton float from a tree and whirl around me, and my hair whips in the gentle breeze.

Sitting up, I rearrange my dress and soak up the sunlight gleaming from the crystal blue sky. As I stretch out my legs, my toes dip into the pond, and the warm water soothes the fear the memory instilled in me.

I hate remembering what the visitors did to me, but those images are branded into my

mind like my number. They were always forcing me to do stuff, and so many always commented about the moonstone walls in my cell. I never thought too much about it before, but what if there was a reason?

Another memory pokes at the back of my thoughts of me lying down in Zinnia's tent with my face pressed to the ground. But the images cut off after that, like a broken clip in a movie.

Sighing, I rest back on my elbows and let the calmness of this place settle over me. My chest has completely healed, and my red dress is no longer soaked with blood.

What happened, exactly? How did I get here?

The last thing I can remember is Wrath shooting me with a dreamland dart ...

Oh. I'm in dreamland. But then, why is this place so serene? Has Blaise entered my mind?

I look around, wondering if he's out there somewhere, but all I can see are high-peaked hills.

I face the pond again, combing my fingers through the grass as the water ripples and the lily pads float toward the muddy shore.

"I think I like this place even better than the tree one." Blaise appears in front of me with his arms folded.

I scoot back, startled. "You scared me."

"Sorry." He uncrosses his arms and lowers his hands to his side, glancing around at the land.

He looks different from the last time I saw him. His black leather jacket, grey shirt, and cargo jeans are no longer filthy and stained with blood, and the cuts and bruises on his face have healed.

"You're not hurt anymore," I say, tucking my legs to the side.

His gaze falls on me. "I heal quickly."

I rest my hand on my chest. "Like me?"

"Not quite." He hikes up the shallow hill and plops down on the grass beside me. "I'm glad you do. I don't think I could handle it if you ..."

If I what? I'm dying to know, but another thought occurs to me.

"Did Ryder and Reece make it out okay? Are we okay? Did Wrath capture us? Did you free the prisoners?"

He blinks at me. "Which question do you want me to answer first?"

I pluck at the grass. "Sorry. I didn't mean to ask so many."

"It's okay." He stares at the water. "Ryder and Reece are okay. Ryder wasn't hurt as badly as we originally thought, and we were able to stitch him up. I had those antibiotics Mable gave me, too, so he shouldn't get an infection." He pauses to take a breath. "Wrath is dead. I managed to make it back to the camp and unlatch all the grates, but I didn't have enough time to make sure they all got out." He grows silent for a moment. "And we did escape, but I really need you to wake up, because I'm pretty sure the Forsaken are going to try to come after us, and we need to get to the station as quickly as possible."

Guilt clenches at my chest. "They're chasing us because of me, because of what they think I am." Even though I don't want to say what I'm about to say, I think I have to. "Maybe you should just leave me--"

"Don't say it." Blaise's rough voice sends me cowering back. He snags ahold of my arm and pulls me toward him. "We're not leaving you behind."

"But the Deorum said I'm different. What if I'm dangerous--"

"I don't care what the Deorum said. We don't even know what they are. For all we know, they could've been lying."

I wet my dry lips with my tongue. "But they could've been telling the truth. Some of the stuff I see and do ... I'm not normal, Blaise."

"Neither am I." The raw emotion in his voice catches me off guard. He quickly clears his throat, collecting himself. "When we get to the station, Reece is going to hook you up to Oblivion, and then we'll figure all this out. But until then, I need you to wake up so we can get to the station."

I nod, but inside, I'm frightened, not just of the world, but of myself. Something isn't right about me. I long to sip life from humans' veins and bask in the taste of quercu. I can heal quickly. I remember strange things that don't seem to belong in this world. And everyone who crosses my path declares that I'm different. One day, I know it's going to catch up with me, and when that happens, I have a feeling the people around me might suffer.

"I'm kind of afraid to wake up," I admit.

He catches a piece of cotton in his hand and inspects it. "Why?"

I lower my head in shame. "Because they saw ... Reece, Ryder ... you... You saw me try to eat the quercu. They're probably afraid of me."

He hooks a finger underneath my chin, tipping my head up. "Reece and Ryder ... We all care about you, more than we have anyone in a very long time."

"But I'm a monster."

"You're not a monster." He looks away, his chest rising and crashing with each breath. "If anything, I'm a monster. I've hurt so many people."

Shaking my head, I reach out and cup his cheek. "You're not a monster. What you did in the tent was done to save us."

When he lets out an unsteady breath, I remember he doesn't like being touched and pull away.

He stares down at my hand, his brow furrowed. "I want you to come back with me." He blinks, focusing on me. "I know you're afraid, but you don't need to be." He offers me his hand. "So, will you come back with me? Will you wake up?"

I feel like there's so much more to his question. Will I wake up? Will I face my fears? Will I accept my guilt and move on? Will I be brave?

Or will I stay here and hide like a coward as I've been doing.

He's giving me a choice. I've never really had that before, and I want to make the right one. So, I nod, agreeing to go back with him.

"All right, Blaise, let's wake up."

He nods once, and then I feel myself being dragged away from dreamland and back into reality.

Chapter Eighteen

Home

When I wake up again, I'm lying on a hard surface, and the sky above is half-bleeding as the sun starts to wake up. There are fingers pressed to my temple, but they quickly move away.

"We're making a plan," Blaise whispers, "so you have a few minutes, okay?"

I nod, grateful, and remain lying there with my eyes closed. I count each beat of my heart, giving myself a few moments before I take a deep breath of dry air, sit up, and glance around. I'm sitting on a boulder to the side of the dusty path that zigzags between the jagged cliffs. Just beyond the rock, Blaise, Ryder, and Reece are huddled together, speaking in a hushed tone.

"I know where we are," Reece says. "I counted the steps."

"You were pretty out of it, though," Ryder says. He's standing upright, awake and alert. The only evidence that he was injured is the blood stains on his jacket and a gash on the side of his neck.

His miraculous recovery confuses me. He was on the brink of death, and now he's suddenly okay? Can he heal, too, like Blaise and I? Perhaps. Or maybe he just wasn't as injured as I thought.

"Can we please just pick a way to go?" Blaise rubs his hand over the shaved side of his head, staring down the path. "If we don't get out of here soon, they're going to

catch up with us."

"We need to find the quickest route." Reece draws the hood of his worn jacket over his head. "We have very limited supplies. We're going to get severely dehydrated before we make it back, and we have maybe two meals total."

Blaise adjusts the bag Calla gave him higher onto his shoulder. "We can figure all that out on the way back. We just need to go."

"Maybe the team got your signal," Ryder tells Reece. "And they'll send out a rescue team."

"Maybe." Reece appears doubtful, though. "Blaise is probably right. We should go and figure stuff out on the way."

"Okay," Ryder agrees. "But what are we going to do with Allura? Sh

e's not awake yet. Someone is probably going to have to carry her."

The three of them turn their head toward me. Surprise flashes across Reece and Ryder's expressions, while Blaise looks ... well, kind of proud.

A smile instantly replaces Ryder's shock, and he hurries toward me. "Hey, you're up."

I force a nervous smile. "Yeah."

He stops at the side of the rock and extends his hand to me. "Are you ready to go? I can carry you if you want. I'm sure you're really tired."

I glance from his hand to his face. The kindness I saw in his eyes when he first rescued me is still there.

"I'm fine. I-I can walk." I stand up, take his hand, and let him help me off the rock. When I move to slip my fingers out of his, he constricts his grip, holding on tightly, and then guides me over to Blaise and Ryder.

"Are you okay to walk?" Reece's gaze sweeps over me. "After you were hit with two dreamland darts in less than twenty-four hours, you should probably let one of us carry you so your body can rest."

I shake my head, tucking strands of my tangled hair behind my ears. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Reece asks, rubbing a cut running across his forehead.

His worry confuses me. So does Ryder's hand in mine. They saw me try to eat the quercu. How can they be okay with that?

"I'm fine," I repeat, unsure of what else to say.

Reece lets his arm fall to his side. "If you change your mind, let one of us know. I don't want you wearing yourself out."

When I nod, Blaise drops the bag to the ground and retrieves a pair of boots and a leather jacket along with a bottle of water.

"These were in here." He hands me the items. "I think the shoes might be a little big, but it's better than walking barefoot."

I take the clothes and shoes from him and slip them on. My legs are still exposed to the dry air and sun, but whatever damage they do to my skin will probably heal.

After I get the jacket zipped up, I chug a few swallows of water, but stop myself before I down the whole bottle. If we're low on supplies, then I need to go easy.

I twist the cap back on and hand Blaise the water.

"Are you sure you drank enough?" he asks without taking the bottle from me.

I nod. "I know we don't have a lot. I'll be fine for a while."

He reluctantly takes the water from me and sets it in the bag. "If you get thirsty, tell me, okay?"

I nod, feeling Ryder's gaze on me. When I glance at him, he's staring at my legs and rubbing the back of his neck.

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"There's no pants in there?" He tears his eyes off me and turns to Blaise. "Her legs are going to fry."

Blaise shakes his head, zipping up his bag. "No. Only a couple bottles of water and some canned food."

"I'll be fine without pants." My hand trembles in Ryder's. "Even if the sunlight burns me ... I won't ..." I can't bring myself to say the words aloud.

"Promise you'll tell me if the heat starts to bother you," Ryder says, tracing the folds between my fingers.

"Why?" Blaise cocks a brow at him as he slips the strap of the bag onto his shoulder. "What are you going to do? Take your pants off and give them to her?"

Ryder shrugs, amusement playing at the corners of his lips. "Maybe."

Blaise rolls his eyes. "Whatever." Then he stomps off down the trail, barking at us to hurry up.

We jog after him, Blaise takes the lead, Reece the middle, and Ryder and I stay at the back. Blaise keeps ordering everyone to hurry up, and I get the strangest sense of déjà vu.

An abrupt laugh bursts from my lips, and I slap my hand over my mouth, shaking my head at myself. What a completely inappropriate time to laugh, Allura.

Ryder nudges me with his elbow. "What's so funny?"

"It's nothing." I lower my hand from my mouth and sigh. "It's just that you guys are acting so ... like you were before."

His blue eyes sparkle in the sunlight. "Are we supposed to act differently?"

I fiddle with the rusty zipper on the front of the frayed jacket. "I don't know ... I mean ... Doesn't it bother you?" I fix my eyes on the ground.

"Does what bother me?" He seems genuinely perplexed.

"What happened back in that tent." I shrug, gazing up at the top of the cliffs. "I thought you guys would be afraid of me."

He tugs his hand from mine, and I think he's pulling away, but instead, he drapes his arm around my shoulder. "How could we be afraid of you?" he asks. "You've done absolutely nothing except help fight to keep us alive. You jumped on that guy's back when he was going to kill me. And you even saved Calla, which is the only reason we have a bag of supplies right now."

"I know, but ..." I duck my head, letting my hair veil my shame. "What if I'm one of these hybrids?"

"Then you're a hybrid." He cups my cheek in his hand and angles my head up, forcing me to meet his gaze. Only kindness shines in his eyes. "But I don't really think you are."

I frown. "Zinnia seemed pretty certain I was."

"Sweetheart, you're too good and kind to be like those hybrids Zinnia talked about. You're different from them. I know you are." He smiles warmly at me. "Now, let's

hurry up before Blaise bites our heads off for walking too slowly."

And just like that, he accepts me for what I am.

I just hope he isn't making a mistake, that I'm everything they think I am. That I'm not like Lex and the rest of the Grim, that I'm not like the hybrids the Forsaken spoke of. That I'm not a monster. That I don't end up hurting anyone.